

*2018 West Virginia
Young Writers Contest
Anthology*



Introduction

We proudly present the anthology of the 2018 West Virginia Young Writers contest. It displays the writing of eighteen 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 West Virginia state winners of first, second, and third place in each grade level category.

The West Virginia Young Writers Contest has honored excellent writing by our state's students in grades one through twelve for over 30 years. The contest is an initiative of the Central West Virginia Writing Project at Marshall University and the West Virginia Department of Education. The contest is supported with funds from the state of West Virginia.. The University of Charleston graciously provides invaluable support by hosting Young Writers Day. A Steering Committee, under the leadership of Dr. Barbara O'Byrne, contributed invaluable support and advice.

The mission of the Central West Virginia Writing Project is to improve the teaching of writing and learning in West Virginia schools. To learn more about our professional development programs, visit the website listed below:

www.marshall.edu/cvwp

Sponsors

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Acknowledgements

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Judges are fellows of National Writing Project sites in West Virginia.

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The Talking Frog

Zoe Fasouletos

Kingwood Elementary, Preston County

Teacher: Debbie Royce

West Virginia State Winner

First Place, Grades 1-2

Have you ever heard of a talking frog? There was a frog who could talk. The frog did not want to talk.

He asked his friend, "Do you know how to get rid of my voice?" His friend told him to swallow seaweed. So, that's what he did. His friend said, "Did it work?" He sadly said, "No."

The next day he thought who to ask next. Then he jumped up and said, "I will ask my dad." So, that's what he did. His dad was swimming in the pond. The Talking Frog swam to him and asked him, "Do you know how to get rid of my voice?" He said, "Eat mud." "Okay," said the Talking Frog. He ate all kinds of mud. His dad said, "Did it work?" He sadly said, "No." His dad said to ask the wizard. He knows everything.

The wizard was two hours away so he took the Caterbug Express. When he got there the wizard was ... not there! The frog screamed and cried. Then the wizard came down from a ladder and said, "How can I help you?" "Do you know how to get rid of my voice?" said the Talking Frog. "There is only one thing that can get rid of your voice, a magic spell," said the wizard.

Before he could cast the spell the talking frog said, “Stop! There is smoke coming from the window.” The wizard said, “The trees are on fire! Talking Frog, you need to warn the other frogs!” The Talking Frog ran and said, “Everybody, the trees are on fire!” So, all the frogs put water on the trees.

Then the Talking Frog realized that talking is good for something. He kept his voice. He was perfect the way he is.

Snowman Adventure

Emma McNeely

West Chapmanville Elementary, Logan County

Teacher: Erica Keck

West Virginia State Winner

Second Place, Grades 1-2

It snowed yesterday and I made a snowman. After I made him, I started to wonder about what he might do while I am asleep at night. I decided to find out. After everyone in my house went to sleep, I snuck outside. I found a good hiding spot and watched him.

First, he started to sparkle and he came to life. He started walking down the street to find his friends. He had a lot of snow friends. I was shocked!

Next, all of the snowmen started having a snowball fight. There were snowballs flying everywhere over my head. I had to stand behind a tree so I wouldn't get hit.

Then, the snowmen grabbed sleds and started sleigh riding. They were wrecking into each other and crashing into things. It was so funny because they kept losing their body parts!

Last, the snowmen started to get tired. I could tell because they were all moving slow and yawning. I followed my snowman home. He yawned the whole way. As soon as we got home, he fell back asleep. I went inside to my bed and fell asleep too.

My night following my snowman and his friends was an adventure. I never knew snowmen could have so much fun.

A Fish Named Bob

Jessen Baxter

Ronceverte Elementary School, Greenbrier County

Teacher: Deborah Johnson

West Virginia State Winner

Third Place, Grades 1-2

A long time ago there was a fish named Bob O'Brien. Bob was lonely because he didn't have any friends. He just swam around the river all day and played by himself.

One bright, sunny day a little boy came to the bank of the river. Bob popped out of the water and cried, "Will you be my friend?" The boy said, "No!" and ran away. Bob was sad again, sadder than he had ever been before. The following morning Bob hung out around the edge of the river, in hopes someone else would come by and sure enough someone did. This little boy didn't look any friendlier than the first so Bob didn't even bother to talk to him. Bob started to swim away when he heard the boy say, "Hey fish, come back! Will you be my friend?" Bob swam back and replied, "Yes!" Now, he had a friend. They swam and played for hours in the water.

Later that day another boy came along holding a fishing pole. Bob knew the boy meant him harm, so Bob hid in the algae until the boy went away. Several days later another boy came by the river carrying a bowl. He put the bowl in the water and asked Bob if he would like to go home with him and be his pet. Bob was excited about having another friend and a new home. He swam into the bowl and the boy carried him to a pet store where he bought Bob fish food and colorful rocks for his bowl. The boy took Bob home and found a really nice place on the kitchen counter to put his bowl. The boy and Bob became best friends. Even a boy and a fish can be friends.

Back in Time

Molly Sullivan

Scott Teays Elementary, Putnam County

Teacher: Jeanette Ellis

West Virginia State Winner

First Place, Grades 3-4

Eliza crawled into bed as her mother turned off the light. "Good night Mom," Eliza said. "Good night honey," her mom replied. As her mom shut the door she cuddled into her purple and white comforter and slowly fell asleep.

Eliza was woken up by the words, "One day little black boys and black girls will join hands with little white boys and white girls as brothers and sisters, I have a dream today!" Eliza recognized this as Martin Luther King Jr's, "I Have a Dream" speech. She noticed that there was light coming from her window. She walked to her window and looked outside. Eliza was shocked to see that the usual view of Dallas, Texas from her apartment was replaced with a sky view of the Washington Monument. Eliza had seen a video of the speech at school, so she knew what it was. Hundreds of people cheered, clapped and yelled. MLK Jr. stood behind the stand waving proudly. Suddenly it all faded away and went back to normal. Eliza turned to go tell her parents what had happened, but when she turned around she saw something shocking!

Sitting on her bed was a tall, African American man with a warm smiling face. He looked oddly translucent. "Oh my Gosh, you're Martin Luther King Jr!" Eliza exclaimed. He nodded. Shocked, Eliza awkwardly told him that he was supposed to be dead. MLK Jr. told her that he was dead, but that he came back to make sure that people remembered him and what he stood for. There was a long silence before MLK Jr. told her that he wanted her to

meet a friend of his. Suddenly she was transported to a bus. Everyone there looked old timey to Eliza. She didn't know where she was or where MLK Jr. was. She decided it would be smartest to stay and watch what happened. In the seat beside her, a tired-looking African American woman was sitting when a white man stepped on the bus. Slowly it dawned on Eliza what was about to happen. She backed toward the window and away from the aisle of the bus. As Eliza watched with wide, horrified eyes, the man commanded the woman to give him her seat and she refused. People on the bus yelled and argued, Eliza just sat quietly. Then, as quickly as she came she disappeared back into her room.

"That was Rosa Parks!" Eliza yelled when she came back, expecting MLK Jr. to still be there, but he was gone. She started to climb back into bed, but then her mom came and said it was time for school. Eliza was inspired by MJK Jr. She grew up and became an activist, she stood up to bullying and fought for everyone to be treated the same regardless of race, gender or religion. In 2038, she became president. She never told anyone about the ghost that had visited her, but she never forgot it either.

Peyton's Sea Turtle Adventure

Brooklyn Miller

Emerson Elementary, Wood County

Teacher: Don Stansberry

West Virginia State Winner

Second Place, Grades 3-4

Do you like the beach? I love the beach. My name is Peyton, and I live in Tampa Bay.

The beach is my favorite place to go. One day, I was riding my bike to the beach, and I saw a turtle that lost its family. That's the day that changed my life forever! I wanted to learn more about sea turtles and become a marine biologist.

The next day, I told my mom that I wanted to go snorkeling.

She told me, "Your brother, Lukas, is at the beach. Go meet him."

I hopped on my teal bike and rode to the beach as fast as I could. As I was riding, I could taste the salt in the air and anticipate the hot sand on my feet.

When I arrived, my brother seemed impatient waiting for me.

He said, "Gear up fast, and jump in the water!"

The snorkeling gear was heavy and awkward. Once I got in, we went deep into the ocean. We saw many beautiful and colorful coral reefs. We also met many different types of animals like starfish, pufferfish, and, my favorite, sea turtles! I felt anxious but so excited when I reached out and touched a turtle's shell. It felt bumpy and rough.

Then, after we went snorkeling, my brother took me to where he works, Clear Water Marina. The tour guide taught me a lot about turtles. He explained they lay their eggs on land, what they eat, and how some have become endangered due to humans.

The next day, I went back to the ocean and went snorkeling again. The ocean is my calm place, and turtles are now my friends. As I was looking around, I could see many spectacular and magical sea turtles. I saw them dive down after getting a breath of air, eat things on the ocean floor, and swim and frolic with their friends. Some were as small as a fifty cent piece, as medium as a dinner plate, and as large as a computer.

Clueless, a little baby turtle followed me back to shore.

I thought, "What should I do?"

I tried to get it to follow me back to the water, but it was headed toward the road. I decided to pick it up and put it in the basket on my bike. Then I rode to Clear Water Marina. My brother was there, so I took the turtle to him. He took the turtle to the biologist.

He said the turtle's fin was broken, and she would have to stay in a tank. He also told me I could watch the turtle and name her! I named her Peyton. I visited her every day and even got to feed her sometimes.

When it was time to release her, I got to go with the team and set her free. I felt sad but overwhelmed knowing I helped a small creature.

Every time I go snorkeling now, I hope I see her!

Luna

Kyra Stiles

Kingwood Elementary, Preston County

Teacher: Debra Zigray

West Virginia State Winner

Third Place, Grades 3 – 4

As I was walking home from school on a Friday, I felt as though I was being followed. I began to slow down and glance behind me every couple of minutes. I noticed this little gray ball of fluff behind me. Every time I stopped, it stopped. I slowly turned around and came face-to-face with my stalker. It was a little gray, fluffy kitten! I took a step toward the kitten but it took a step back. It was very scared. I slowly sat down on the sidewalk and began to softly talk to it. I held my hand. It inched toward my hand and brushed against my fingers.

As the kitten became braver, it climbed onto my lap and let me pet it gently. I could tell it was a girl. She had no collar and was skinny. She looked to be about ten weeks old. She was extremely sweet and purring loudly. I figured she must be a stray. I decided to take her home, and pray that my parents would let me keep her.

She rode home on my shoulder like a parrot. She purred the entire way. Once we got to the house, my parents weren't home from work. So, I took the scrawny kitten to the kitchen and gave her some warm milk. She lapped it up like she was starving. I decided to give her a handful of my other cat's food. She was so hungry!

Mom got home from work around 5 o'clock, and found me in my bedroom with the kitten sleeping on my bed. I told her about finding the homely kitten on my way home from school. She told me that if dad gave permission for me to keep her, that I would be responsible in taking care of her. You see, Dad never tells me "NO."

Dad told me that I could keep the little kitten. I decided to call her, Luna.

The next day, Mom and I went to the pet store and bought all the supplies she would need. Mom made her a vet appointment for the next day to be examined.

Luna is the sweetest kitten. She is so happy to have a loving home. She loves to sleep on my soft fluffy blanket. She follows me all over the house and loves to ride on my shoulders. I'm so glad she found me that day walking home.

Terrors Below

Amelia Kuraeva

South Middle School, Monongalia County

Teacher: Jacob Staggers

West Virginia State Winner

First Place, Grades 5-6

The thin membrane coated the cobalt streaks in a frosty layer, thickening at the intersections. The colors varied; they could be a mix of warm or cool tones. A pinprick of pain could make them leak a drop of crimson, warm, wet, and mesmerizing, after the initial shock subsided. While the sight of blood could transfix you in morbid wonder, the vision was ruined once the pain kicked in. The view ended quickly because liquid quickly thickens, turning viscous and clogging up the tear in the skin, turning the color from red to burgundy. Unrelenting, the leaks stayed a vivid scarlet while they were runny, never the cool blue hues they appeared to be. Under scrutiny, the flow of blood might be spotted, moving swiftly through your body. In the winter, it may seem to move a fraction of a second slower, as if the fluid was congealing. Although, if there's anything you should know about blood, it's that looks can be deceiving. If you had a superb nose, you might even smell the coppery, piquant scent, a trademark of the metallic composition. The darker your skin, the harder it is to pinpoint the tangled network of veins. When they're split open, however, they are blocked from your view by the very thing inside it: blood.

The rich, red fluid escaped rapidly from ragged edges of flesh on my arm, floating upward into a now-lavender surface until it dispersed into the surrounding water. Overwhelmed with dizziness, I allowed myself to sink even further into the murky expanse below me. Tendrils of thick, wavy hair drifted around my face, tickling my nose and leaving streaks in the water after it. I flailed my arms in a desperate attempt to propel myself

upwards, only to flinch at the excruciating pain in my arm. Despairing, I dropped the dead weights attached to my shoulders back to their assumed position at my side. Once again, I cast a teary glance upwards at the light shrinking and fading, and felt the pressure pop in my ears. If only I had not resisted the swimming lessons that I was offered!

A bubble of air escaped from my blue lips as I let loose a short, mirthless laugh at the irony. Salty water flooded my mouth, and I choked back the instinct to breathe unsuccessfully. I watched, my eyes stinging, as more orbs of precious air followed suit to the surface that provided me with a distorted vision of the world above. If I could have swum up, I would have, but lack of oxygen had wiped all rational thought from my mind. Faces of loved ones swam before my eyes, their faces twisted into uncharacteristically gloating grimaces at my unfortunate fate. Then there was only darkness surrounding me, cold and foreboding. It took me a few seconds to register the increasing severity of the ache in my lungs. I wanted desperately to take a breath, but what rushed into my lungs was salty water. I found myself feeling extreme vertigo, and what had first seemed like cool, caressing fingers was now an unrelenting, vice-like grip. I writhed against the water, not caring about the agony in my arm or the fatigue throughout the rest of my body, before my diminishing vision went black.

Later, I would be fished out of the water, drenched and shivering, to a garishly tiled poolside. I recall little due to blood loss and hypothermia, and while people underestimated the effects of my condition, calling the slice on my arm a mere paper cut and the water depth a measly six feet, I know better. Nobody saw the horrors I did, lurking beneath me. All sorts of ghastly things, like crusty band-aids and dead insects and other unmentionable objects. My stomach churns just thinking about all the atrocities I experienced. They told me I hadn't

inhaled salt water, like I assumed, but chlorine instead. From what I know about my unsympathetic family, who scoffed at determination, they will pass the story of my collision with a diving board around for years. At least I won't be forced to see my Aunt Bertha in swimwear ever again.

Imagine

Kelcie Carte

Ansted Middle School, Fayette County
Teacher: Brandon Gerwig
West Virginia State Winner
Second Place, Grades 5-6

She meant the world to me. A cheery, bubbly girl, who beamed every time I saw her. I knew, deep down, that I once meant the world to her, too.

Things were simple when I first met her. Her audacious self marched up to me and told me to play in the mud with her. She was so bold and bright; how could I say no? We rolled and splashed like it was the last time we ever would. I think it was that moment that I fell in love with the child.

The girl talked and played with me ever since. We held tea parties, imaginary sword fights, and little adventures. She would drag me to her room and complain about anything. Her parents, what she ate for dinner, even how her bed wasn't comfortable. I gave her comfort every single time, patting her back, distracting her, complaining alongside her. I did everything I could to make her happy.

I knew I shouldn't have gotten attached to her lovely smile. I knew one day she wouldn't remember me. I knew we couldn't have adventures or mud for long. I knew, I knew, I *knew*. But she kept me alive. She was my everything, but we were *both* certain I had to give her up soon.

When my joy turned seven, she became a different person. I don't know what changed. Maybe school, or friends, or maybe she just thought she didn't need me anymore.

What I *did* know was that I was getting the cold shoulder, and I was upset. I yelled and cried and argued at her every time I looked at the face I loved so dearly. "You betrayed me!" "I thought you'd never leave!" "I loved you! Did you ever feel anything!?" She told me to leave her alone.

So, I did. I hid every day. I avoided her for almost a year, actually. Looking back, it makes me think about how pathetic it was, how pathetic *we* were. But she hadn't forgotten about me, because if she had, I wouldn't be here, moping around, wallowing in my sadness. I honestly wished, *longed*, even, for her to just forget I existed. I wanted to disappear. It was torture.

One afternoon, for the first time in what felt like an eternity, the girl looked in my direction. Her eyes drooped, her face stained with tears. She asked me to follow her to her room. I felt a strong gleam of hope pass through me. Maybe she wanted to complain to me about school, or parents, or anything at all, and things would go back to normal. But I knew she didn't, she looked too sad, too sluggish to want to play or complain. I followed and sat myself down on the familiar bed. *I missed it.*

We sat in silence for a while. It felt peaceful. The feeling didn't last as long as I wanted, as she suddenly told me she wanted to forget about me. She went on about how she was growing, how she didn't need me anymore, didn't *want* me anymore.

Her speech fell on deaf ears. I couldn't focus. I felt myself becoming lighter, fading. Were my hands always this pale? I felt my grasp on reality growing weaker, and everything looked like a blur. I heard her words, saying she wished I was real.

I often forgot I was nothing more than the girl's imaginary friend. It's painful, even thinking about it today.

I could see my hands evaporating like water. I was vanishing. But I could clearly remember how much I wanted to make this child happy. I kissed her forehead, and told her I'd miss her. And as I faded from her view, I saw tears rolling, but she wasn't sad. She was relieved as I went.

I can't remember blacking out, but I know when my eyes opened, I was staring down at a young boy. He asked me to play. You wouldn't believe my wide grin. Sure, I met hundreds of kids as an imaginary friend, but I'll never forget the cheery, bubbly girl who beamed every time I saw her. She meant the world to me.

A Long Story's End

Sara Hendricks

Summersville Middle School, Nicholas County

Teacher: Rachel Shoemaker

West Virginia State Winner

Third Place, Grades 5-6

I lay in my small hand-made cotton bed as the warm fire creates a gust of heat onto my gray fur. You stroke the back of my neck, whispering quietly and soundly as I purr loud. The nighttime is sweet tonight while tiny snowflakes are visible from all of the windows in the house. No one could put out the blazing fire in the red brick fireplace, no soul could take away the peace of this wonderful night, and absolutely nothing could break the bond with you and I. Suddenly, a drop of rain tickles my nose, jerking me awake from my deep sleep. A tear rushes down my wet face as I try to cover my head into my paws. They say cats don't have feelings, nor do they cry, but what do they know? Ever since *that* day, nothing but cries have been in my meows. Why did you leave me? Where are you? Will I see you again?

I don't understand. Those men... They just barged in the front door and took you away while you were asleep. I was trying to wake you up, but they lifted me up with their unsteady arms and threw me in a carrier! You never did anything like that to me. Yowling in panic, I scratched at the cage and tried to escape, but it was no use. The men carried you out of our house while you were still sleeping. Why didn't you wake up? I was terrified and screaming in that cramped crate as you were loaded into the back of a weird looking van. How were you still asleep after all of this? Your sleeping pills must've been really strong...

Then there was this confusing party that a young woman brought me to, but everybody was crying. You were in a giant white box in front of a whole bunch of people, *still* sleeping.

The lady who was holding me wouldn't let me go, but I scratched and clawed to get loose. Her shivering hands kept me captive as my sharp claws tore into her silk black dress. I mewed as loud as I could, but you still wouldn't wake up. Why were none of these people trying to help you? Were you ever going to wake up?

Running. I was running as fast as I could, through the dark, damp woods and through the shallow, muddy creeks. I couldn't stand to watch as they buried you under the ground, so I scrambled out of that lady's arms. She tried to chase me down, but I was already hidden into the outside world. As I ran, every memory and moment with you faded away with my tears and flew into the muggy air. My little feet left tiny paw prints pressed into the soft mud below. Just as I finally decided to slow down and stop, the loud crash of thunder echoed through the tall trees, followed by raindrops that poured down hard in this night of darkness. The stars were not shining, so they could not leave their sparkle in the black sky. On nights like this, you kept me inside where I was safe and warm. Here, I was all alone, without you to guide me.

Now, a whole different storm awakens me in the deep wild. This is when I realize that it is time. My paws drag against the ground as my old body stretches its muscles. My bright blue eyes glimmer as they shake off the sights of the delightful dream I had of the past. I have remembered, and I will surely never forget. My brain is like a movie theater playing every memory over in my head as I trudge inside an old, hollow tree trunk with soft, damp moss inside. It is not easy to let go, but I know that I will be with you. You were the best part of my life, quite possible my *whole* life. The tree trunk was bare, but just right for my final rest.

I curl up into a fuzzy ball like I have for years, making it perfectly comfortable. Then, I close my eyes for the last time.

The Voice

Halie Swallie

Summersville Middle School, Nicholas County

Teacher: Rachel Shoemaker

West Virginia State Winner

First Place, Grades 5-6

The house was eerily quiet when I woke up. I shifted, hearing a quiet voice in my ear. “Wake up, sleepyhead! It’s time to wake up and get to work!” I hated that voice. The owner of the voice was someone who looked almost exactly like my shadow, except with red eyes and tendrils of shadow draped around her entire body. The figure had a voice of honey, but words like sandpaper.

I drug myself out of bed. The day had already started and the figure was getting louder. She narrated every point in my life and pinpointing every little mistake. She hated me, and I hated her. She insulted me day in and day out.

“Pick out some clothes. But don’t pick out anything skimpy, you’re too fat for that.” The voice cackled and I shrunk back, hurt from the remark. She enjoys hurting me. I hate her.

“Well, it’s true. Look at you! You’re an absolute whale! We’re going for a jog today, and a long one.” Five minutes of being awake, and I was already about to cry. Why couldn’t the voice leave me alone? I don’t get it. Why me?

“Okay, you actually look decent. We’re making progress!” The figure smiled sweetly. I wanted to punch her. But I smiled back and nodded. I was getting better at hiding my real feelings.

I headed out the door for my morning jog. I knew I wasn't the thinnest person, but I was comfortable with my weight, well, until she appeared. I let my mind run along with my legs, and one phrase was repeating over and over in my head. "*I want the voice to go away.*"

"Dear, do you *really* think you can get rid of me? I'll never leave you." The voice sounded enthusiastic, but her tone took a sharper edge in the last sentence. I was terrified of her. I finally had gotten to my destination, with tears forming in my eyes, but I won't let them run. Not in public. She would tell me off for hours. I don't think I could handle it.

"Look at that guy over there. He's looking at you! Look back at him and smile." I don't want to go near that guy. He looks greasy.

"Was that denial I just heard? Get. Out. There." The voice was trying to bully me to talk to this guy. I couldn't do it. He's staring at me and smiling creepily. He's scaring me. I wouldn't move. The voice sighed and shook her head. Disappointment radiated off of her, and I was scared. She would most definitely yell at me later. But I would not talk to that guy. I refuse.

"Let's go home. You missed lunch, and you aren't going out to eat." The shadow sighed. I could tell she was trying to control herself in public, though no one could see her but me. I started to trudge back home when she piped up.

"Come on sweetheart, hustle! You can't lose weight by dragging your feet!" So I ran. I ran the entire way home. I was dead tired by that point and ready to collapse. I decided to eat and go to bed early that day. The voice was more than furious.

“Really? First what happened in the park, now you’re wasting the rest of your day? Honestly, I can’t even believe you right now. This is beyond selfish. You could be out there, making a better life for yourself but no, you have to sleep. I think I can finally see why you have no friends or a life.”

I had enough. I clawed at the shadow, the shadows around her dissipating. She was getting smaller. I kept attacking while she was screaming for me to stop, that I didn’t know what I was doing. That I need her. I kept clawing.

When she was gone, so small I couldn’t see or hear her, I relaxed. I was free! Then I heard another voice. My heart rate jumped, and I whipped around. Another me was there, radiating pure, beautiful light. She smiled and her voice sounded like a gentle breeze. “Hello, I’m Confidence! Nice to meet you!”

Once Upon a Biography

Samara Looney

Geary Elementary Middle School, Roane County

Teacher: Staci Moore

West Virginia State Winner

Second Place Grades 7-8

Everyone has secrets; whether it's crushes, collections, or laboratories under houses with illegal alien experiments incubating within. Okay, not the last one, but you see my point. Mine, however, is quite bizarre. I can summon characters from stories and bring them to life as ghostly figures. I am not sure how I got this ability, but I assume I was born with this "gift." The characters return to their book by having them place their hand on the cover of the book, and, strangely enough, their transparent bodies seem to fade into the pages and I simply put the book back on the shelf. My name is Connie Index, and this is my story.

Monday, the worst day of the week. Groaning, I roll out of bed and change into a blue hoodie and black skinny jeans. After I pull my long black hair into a ponytail I head downstairs and meet my mom in the kitchen, "Good morning Connie, how did you sleep?" she asks, putting creamer into her steaming cup of coffee.

"I could've slept longer," I reply, taking a bowl out of the cabinet.

"I suggest my favorite fourteen-year-old hurry up. The bus will be here in ten minutes." she says, glancing at her watch.

I scarf down a bowl of cereal, brush my teeth, glance at my pale reflection and run out the door to catch the bus before the driver's patience is exhausted.

Once I am at school, I turn on my inner autopilot and continue with my day until my least favorite class, history. Miss Smith assigns everyone a research paper on "one of the

founding fathers." Although I'm dreading this assignment, I figure I should start on the paper as soon as possible to get it out of the way. I swing by the library and check out a few books for my paper. I decide to do my research paper on Alexander Hamilton, as he was not one of the more prominent political leaders that the majority of the class would be focused on, and the main character of my favorite musical.

That night after dinner, I retreat to my room and start looking through the books on Alexander Hamilton. Since the subject matter was a bit dry, I spice it up by summoning Alexander Hamilton to my room to talk about his journey in American History. This is the really weird part...when I "summon" the characters from the book, I simply rub my hand over the photo and their ghostly images appear in front of me. As I rubbed my hand over the page with Alexander Hamilton's photo his image literally jumps off the page out in front of me. He says, "My name is Alexander Hamilton," and toke a small bow.

I reply, "My name is Connie Index. How do you do?"

Most of the characters that I have summoned in the past have been good spirits and willing to help in any way necessary; therefore, I knew that Alexander would be as helpful as the characters before him. (I tend to stay away from Horror and Sci-Fi characters, for obvious reasons).

During our conversation about his background and accomplishments, I took some notes and began to formulate a plan for my research assignment. I thank Alexander for his time and willingness to help me with my research paper, walk toward him, he places his hand gently over the cover, but nothing happened. I look at him, worried, but he kept a calm expression on his face, tries again gives a friendly smile, and succeeds in slowly fading back

into the book. I shut his book and place him with the others. I type out my research paper and cite the appropriate sources, leaving out that Alexander came to life.

When I meet these people, I feel a closeness to the character that many fail to have. I enjoy the connection I feel with the characters of my books. Some may think my gift is odd, but I find it is very helpful because I can truly see things from the characters' (or in this case person's) point of view.

Bait

Noelle Wonsettler

Mountaineer Middle School, Monongalia County

Teacher: Kathy Elliott

West Virginia State Winner

Third Place, Grades 7-8

The air was cool and thick with fog. It was the perfect day for fishing, overcast and quiet. I had my tackle box under my arm and was dragging my fishing poles behind me. No one else was at the pond, but it was probably because it was early. I set up my gear, carefully pushed a new roll of line into the pole, and got out my tackle box. I had many items in there, but it mainly consisted of bait; finding the right kind for fishing was key. I attached a large worm to the hook and cast it, throwing it out by the rocks. Perfect. I began to wait, “This won’t take long,” I told myself. But by noon I hadn’t made a single catch, which was definitely weird, but there was still time.

The day became hot and muggy. The water was still and only mosquitoes swarmed. My shoulders burned from the blaring sun, and I was becoming tired. I picked out a new worm, *they have to like one of these*, I told myself as I changed it for the hundredth time. I took a step forward and cast it out, and as soon as I did, the line began to jerk and pull. I yanked it back. Cold water splashed as a beautiful, massive bass jumped. *That fish had to be mine*. I took another step forward and yanked again. It pulled on the line, but I was powerful. I took a step back, the fish pulled and I tumbled forward; I guess I wasn’t that mighty. *I am not about to lose this*. With determination, I took another step back, and the line snapped in half. Great, I had lost my only chance.

I watched the sky turn orange and red as the sun began to set and a group of bats flew overhead. *Just a few more minutes* I thought to myself, *I will catch that fish.* The sun quickly set, and I felt my heart sink; I hadn't caught a single thing. I picked up my tackle box. "Stupid bait," I muttered. "What good are you?" I dumped the bait onto the ground and squashed it. "Why do I even try?" The moon reflected off the pond and I sighed slowly. I picked up my gear and opened the gate. Unexpectedly, a splash of water erupted from the pond and hit me. What a sight! His tail shimmered in the moonlight, as it hit the water hard. He was ready; let the game begin.

I baited my pole carefully, pulled it back, and threw the line forward, watching it land in the perfect spot. Within seconds the fish was back. **Hiss.** The line rubbed against the pole. **Hiss, hiss.** I pulled back the line and watched the water splash aggressively. I was yanked forward and I tumbled onto the bank. *It was getting away! Not again, I was not giving up without a fight!* I stepped onto the muddy bank and jerked the line back. "I got him!" I yelled. I took another step into the water and yanked again. The fish moved my way. I took a larger step into the water again. Now it was up to my thighs. Suddenly, my phone began to ring, I looked back, my mother. A million things began to run through my head. *She would kill me if I stayed out any longer, it was already pretty later. Should I stay or should I go? I'm so close!* Hesitantly I took another step into the water, it would just take a minute. I reeled and reeled taking more steps forward. The water settled. Then the fish came around the side, its big, black eyes, yellow, torn fins, and worst of all sharp teeth. He was a smart fish and he had set up the trap, using his size as bait, as a lure. Then with a sinking sensation it all came together; it was a trick. I didn't bait the fish, the fish baited me.

Roses

Mary Carr

Tucker County High School, Tucker County
Teacher: Barbara Zimmerman
West Virginia State Winner
First Place Grades 9-10

The smell of roses wafted through the open window of the farmhouse. Evangeline took a long deep breath and sighed. She loved the sweet, dark, pungent smell of roses. Whenever she ventured through the town market, the townspeople would stop to smell the rose that was Evangeline. She carried the smell of roses on her wherever she went. It was even carried on the breath that escaped her lips and it coated her existence.

Evangeline was alluring. No man in town could deny her beauty. Her hair was the color of the depths of the ocean; her eyes the color of freshly made honey. She was full of youth and life. She walked with an elegance that the simple men in this town could not comprehend. Although she had the attention of every man in town, she wanted none of it. The only thing Evangeline desired were her roses.

Roses of every color blossomed to life each spring in Evangeline's garden. Royal purples, midnight blues, pale pinks, sunshine yellows, sunset oranges, bone whites, tar blacks, and blood reds. When Evangeline would look out into her garden her soul would float among the clouds; she could soar with the angels. The plethora of dazzling colors mesmerized her heart. The roses of Evangeline's garden would forever hold her heart in their hands.

Women, children, and men alike, would tread delicately into the countryside to glimpse Evangeline and her garden. Never would they dare pluck a rose from the soil it had sprouted. Never would they dare dishearten Evangeline from her garden of roses.

Evangeline did not mind the spectators' eyes on her and her garden, as long as they did not touch a thing. The children would wander closer to the fascinating array of colors, not noticing Evangeline hovering silently nearby. She would cry softly as the children ambled their way toward her lovely roses. One tear would chase another down her sorrowful face. She would not let her magnificent flowers be destroyed. Scared of what Evangeline might do if they remained in her garden, the children fled. Eventually the children stopped coming to gaze at the display of colors and Evangeline.

The men in town were not so easily persuaded into leaving Evangeline unattended with her roses. None of the men were interested in Evangeline's garden, only Evangeline. They would wait around for hours just to watch Evangeline tend her garden. Men would stroll through rows of her perfect garden, not considering the fragile roses to be of any importance. She would begin to sob when the evil men would violate the garden. Many men tried to comfort her deafening sobs, but none would succeed. Their efforts proved to be futile, for they had crushed her heart, along with her roses.

For hours upon hours, Evangeline would sit among the roses and ponder their beauty. She would brush her fingertips across the tender petals and feel the velvety softness. The pads of her fingers were constantly sore from the pinprick of thorns. Although, her fingertips and the pads of her fingers were raw, she did not mind. She enjoyed the pricks of thorns from her marvelous roses. It meant that she had succeeded in raising her roses to flourish.

The roses filled Evangeline's being. They filled her to the point that Evangeline could love nothing but her roses. Roses were the children she never longed to have. And she had her preference. Evangeline had a fondness for the royal purples scattered around her splendid

garden. She would always show a special sensitivity towards the purple roses that covered part of her portion of the Earth.

Even though Evangeline was young and spirited, she was not in the best of health. At times, her body would be so weak that she could not rise from her bed. No matter how much agony she was in, she was only frightened for her roses, for she could not get up to care for them. She took comfort in the smell of her roses that drifted through her bedroom window. A feeling of serenity would pass over her when smelling the delightful roses.

Her heart had been born into the garden of roses. Her soul had been purified in the rain that fed the roses. Therefore, her existence, her life, was a rose. No person in the universe could fathom the rose that was Evangeline. She perplexed anyone that would glance her way.

Evangeline sat among the roses, admiring the beauty they held within. A dull aching pain had started to absorb into her heart. She fell back into a bed of roses; the thorns dug into her back, and she savored the pain. Slowly, painfully, she lowered her eyelids until they were sealed shut. She exhaled a whisper of breath and a single tear rolled down her cheek. Since Evangeline had been born into the roses, she would die with the roses as well.

The Time Mistress

Emma Beatty

Valley High School, Wetzel County
Teacher: Margaret Arianne Schupbach
West Virginia State Winner
Second Place Grades 9-10

The deputy led the suspect into the dismal interrogation room. She took a seat across the room, facing the door. Her query of removing her handcuffs fell on closed ears as the deputy closed the door. Detective George Marlin, a slightly older man, entered. This suspect had been on the Most Wanted list for decades. No one could figure out how this woman had stayed forever young. Every mention of her was surrounded by death. The case was currently in the possession of the New York City Police Department.

“Well, Miss, you’ve been the topic of many conversations here at the station,” Detective Marlin said while opening the manila envelope he had been guarding. He poured the contents onto the metal table. “I need you to tell me how it’s possible that you’re in every picture. The detective leaned forward in his chair, leaning against the table. The female examined each picture before answering. She was undeniably present in all of them.

“I am Aoki. I have no idea what you’re talking about,” her honeyed voice filled the room. It was obvious that George didn’t believe her. Aoki took notice before speaking, “Maybe if you remove these handcuffs, I’ll tell you something you want to hear.” George reluctantly removed his keys from his belt and freed her.

“Explain these photographs. I’m not asking again,” George demanded. He knew Aoki’s words were potentially untrustworthy, but his boss implored him to retire this case. She picked one from the pile and examined it intently before responding.

“This one is Lincoln’s assassination. Mary had invited me to go to the play with them. I never would have imagined being invited. I held the belief she hated me,” she paused. “Oh, it was such a marvelous show! The ending wasn’t too great though.” George stared at the mystical woman who sat before him. Her accent had magically appeared and was thick in her words. “I will never forget that gunshot. It was louder than any I have ever experienced.” Aoki stopped abruptly, completely enthralled by the memory.

George cleared his throat, signaling to her that they should move on. Aoki’s sapphire eyes stared into the detective’s as she reached forward to select one of the photos at random. She held it in front of her as if presenting it to Heaven. She began to explain in as much detail as before.

“Mr. Kennedy’s assassination was another unforgettable one. I stood on the sidewalk at Dealy Plaza. Lee had told me he was going to kill Kennedy but I didn’t believe him,” her new southern accent hung in the air. It appeared that she changed with her memories, like a chameleon. “They had no idea it was coming. The people of Dallas just wanted to give the Kennedys a magnificent send-off. After the shooting, Jackie was adamant about letting the assailants see what they had done. She refused to change out of her Chanel suit or wipe the blood from her face. I, later, thanked Lee for his service,” she recalled, leaning back in her chair.

“You thanked the man who killed our president? You said you were friends with the Kennedys. Why would you do that?”

“It’s a secret, darling. Let’s continue.” Her accent had disappeared. George collected the scattered evidence.

"I need you to tell me more about yourself now. I've noticed most of these photos take place in the States. Have you traveled other places?" George inquired.

"I'm very well-travelled, sweetheart. I follow the drama no matter where it leads me. It's my job."

"What kind of job? Are you a journalist?"

"I'm something much darker than that. Plus, I'm a terrible writer," Aoki joked.

"Where are you from?" George's question struck a nerve. Aoki's shoulder broadened and her demeanor became solemn.

"If you could even begin to comprehend where I've come from, you would be scared of me," her voice had taken on a serious tone compared to her previously light-hearted one. The detective shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "I can show you, but remember my warning." George nodded, and Aoki took his hand in hers. The room around them faded away and a new world took its place. They were standing on the edge of the universe. Complete darkness blanketed the duo. Aoki's voice echoed from every direction. "I'm a reaper. I collect souls and deliver them here: the Afterlife. I've never killed anyone. I just appear when the deaths occur. That's why I'm in the photos."

"Why are you here now?" George felt as if he already knew the answer to the looming question.

"I'm here to collect your soul, George," said the woman as the room slowly turned back into the crumby interrogation room. George gazed frantically at the woman who was now crossing the room to him. He avoided her eyes as he raised from his chair.

“What did I do? I can’t die yet!”

“Your time is up. I don’t control who dies. I only show up where my boss tells me.”

“Who is your boss?”

“My boss is my father: Death. Death follows me wherever I go, and I deliver the souls to him. He’s here now.” George felt a sharp pain between his shoulders. He looked to Aoki in disbelief. “It’s a heart attack. Don’t worry. It’ll be over soon.” George said a small prayer as he sank to the floor. In a few seconds, he was gone. Death’s daughter picked up the envelope and left before more officers could enter the room.

After a week, the autopsy reports came back and showed that the detective had died of a heart attack. This was believed by many due to the fact that he was quite old and not of the best health. Others kept their belief in the mystical woman who disappeared after killing the lead investigator in her case. If you look closely, you'll find her in pictures of the deceased, lurking and trying to find the next soul to take.

Last Thoughts: Yitskhok Rudashevski

Xandria Wilcox

Wheeling Park High School, Ohio County

Teacher: Jordan Schrebe

West Virginia State Winner

Third Place Grades 9-10

I am wondering how it can only be October if such a cold is settling into my bones. I am being forced forward, my Uncle in front of me and the rest of our family far behind, closer and closer to embrace of Death's cold hands and perhaps God's forgiving grace. We are slogging slowly through the mud of the forest floor, and I wish fervently that it would swallow me up before I must dig my own grave and watch my family lie in it with me. I remember writing once that I would never come here, the Ponar Forest, but those words mock me now. I can hear the shovels now, I can see their wielders. Others like my family, stripped of clothing and any dignity they had remaining, digging a hole large enough to fill the clearing in the trees. I pause for but a moment and the butt of a Nazi Rifle hits me suddenly and painfully in the junction of my shoulder.

"Move along!" The older boy growls. It is a wonder to me how someone, maybe not even two years my senior, would shoot me and my family with no hesitation. How he, a boy certainly no older than eight-teen, would kill me without remorse, then bury me gladly with nothing but the mournful silicon of a Death Forest to mark our mass grave. Murder, at it's finest. No, not murder, for to them I am not human, am I? But a slaughter.

Genocide.

I do not listen immediately, anger broiling n my gut and foolish fancy influencing my thoughts. But the rifle comes down once more, this time into my face, and breaks my nose with a sickening crunch and my own cry of pain. I swear, and the older blonde boy spits in

my face contemptuously. “Move along, Jewish filth,” he repeats. And this time, I walk. I stagger, I should say, slowly and torturously to my own death, to my grave.

I have heard the old gossips in the Ghetto say that Death is grim company, but at this moment, I selfishly wish for even his cold skeletal touch. None of the others dare come near me, even to check on my nose, for fear they too will be beaten. Perhaps even to death. Beaten or not, however, death is not far off for any of us here. I was once a very proud person, but now I have been brought low—they force a shovel into my hands and push me towards the hole; I stumble as my feet slide down the side. In surprise, I gasp, and the metallic taste of my own blood makes me gag.

“Shut up!” Another boy hisses from beside me. “You’ll get us both killed!”

“Killed?” I hiss back, “We’re already digging our own grave, what difference does a few minutest make to your mind?” But soon, anger leaves me, and all that is left is child-like fear.

Ignoring me, he continues digging, and I follow suit. We dig for hours. I wish the sun was not blocked by clouds. I wish this war had never started. I wish Hitler—the filth!—had never been born. I wish for a lot of things. But soon I hear the shots, startled screams. I dare not turn, I dare not stop digging. Bodies fall, I hear my father swear before he is abruptly silenced. I hear people begin to cry, I hear someone being kicked down the sides of the hole. A body falls beside my feet and the shots continue. Tears fill my eyes. I will be next, I know. Will it hurt? Will I feel it at all? God—god why is this happening to me? To us? What have we done—oh god there’s not many left—dare I even ask for your forgiveness? I’m sorry! *Yitgadal v’yitkadash sh’mei raba. B’alma di v’ra chirutei,*

v'yamlich malchutei, b'chayeichon uv'yomeichon uv'yomeichon uv'chayei d'chol beit

Yisrael, baagala uviz"man ka—

There is pain.

I lose my breath.

My knees hit the ground.

There is silence.

Seeing You in the Negative Space

Ashley McCann

Hurricane High School, Putnam County

Teacher: Rhonda Moncada

West Virginia State Winner

First Place Grades 11-12

Katie's father had decided that their annual New Year's Eve Party was of enough importance to warrant the good china. The good china had not been used in years, had idly collected dust in the basement since Katie's high school days, and their New Year's Eve Party had in the past consisted of Chinese takeout and a haphazard collection of board games. And yet, this year her father inexplicably insisted that their family would be disgracing some unspoken social etiquette if they didn't use the right cutlery. Katie wasn't sure she'd ever fully understand her father. Or really, people older than her in general. But she loved him, and hated to see the way age had begun to affect him, hated to see him struggle with physical tasks he had once found simple. So she was honestly happy to go downstairs and drag out the unnecessary china for him.

But she was short. And he had given only the vague direction of, "It's in the basement pantry, on the top shelf." So, she dragged a stool over to the closet and stepped onto it. Still, the shelf wasn't quite at her eyeline. She felt around the boxes for one whose weight could roughly equivocate to a heavy stack of plates, silverware, and dust. Eventually she decided on one that seemed roughly right-ish. She wrapped her hands around the edges and pulled. It slid out too fast and Katie stumbled to catch it as it crashed to the ground with a deafening thud.

It had not been the china. Which, while probably for the best as the china would

have surely not been able to survive the fall, meant that she now had to deal with the scattered contents of her mistake. The box had been apparently filled with photo albums. Pictures spilled out across the carpet. They were time-stained and weathered by the years. She bent down and carefully picked one up. *At the Park #4* it said, under the serene image of a preening duck caught in perpetual evening on some long forgotten lake. Her heart stopped. That was her mother's handwriting. Yes, she was sure of it. Katie had seen it only a couple of times, in a couple of preserved letters or notes that her father could not bring himself to part with, but each time she had hungrily scanned the lines, tried to memorize each letter, desperately searching for some insight into her mother somehow laden within the curve of the penmanship.

Her mother. Her mother had loved photography. Which was why Katie had felt it unfair that there were no photos of her. Well, she couldn't say *none*, not technically. There were three in her father's house; a wedding photo, her mother's back to the camera as she swayed with Katie's father to a silent song, a photo from her college days, her mother laughing from behind the pages of a textbook she held, only her grin visible and a photo her father always kept in his wallet that Katie had only seen a handful of times. Her mother in the hospital, gaunt-faced with baggy eyes and a tired smile, offering a subdued wave to the camera. But still in none of those photos, or the ones friends or family had offered Katie, was her mother the subject, her mother truly visible. In photos, her mother ducked out of frame, waved her hand fast enough for the image to blur, or craned behind someone taller to avoid being seen. The things Katie did not know about her mother were infinite, but that particular detail had bothered her her whole life. Her mother had been loved, had been beautiful. What demon was so

ingrained in her that it prevented her from leaving any visible passing trace that she'd been alive?

Because she had been truly beautiful. Katie couldn't be sure of this herself- the memory was too far gone, too faded- but it was something everyone who knew her mother felt the need to mention. *So beautiful, so young, so awful what happened but do you know Katie you may look a lot like your father but you definitely have-* her eyes, her smile, her nose, her ears, her laugh. Everyone thought that Katie had inherited some singular feature that linked her to her mother. They just had not agreed on a consensus to what that feature was.

The idea that maybe there was a complete image of her mother somewhere within stacks of photos came to her. It knocked Katie's breath away momentarily. She struggled to control her rapid breathing and her racing heart as she began to frenziedly search through the pictures. She shifted without pause from one photo to the other, checking desperately with wild, uncontrollable hope. There was a bridge overlooking a glistening lake. A tiny ballerina excitedly showing off her *plié*. An old woman on a park bench, stroking the head of a large black dog. A violinist halfway through propping open his instrument's case. The extended petals of a blue flower. A starry night.

The basement door opened with a groaning squeak, and Katie slammed the album closed as if it had burned her. Across the front her mother had written *Works-in-Progress*. Her stomach lurched. How fitting. A collection of the unfinished. Was not she herself just another incomplete chapter of her mother's life?

"Katie?" her father asked, gripping the stairwell.

She thought it must have been a pitiful, childish sight. Kneeling in the pile of the photos, Katie swallowed a surge of shame.

She tried to come up with an explanation. “These photos. They’re beautiful. I don’t- I don’t get why she wasn’t satisfied with them.”

He smiled faintly. “She was a perfectionist. Always thought she could have done it professionally if- well, if things had turned out differently.” Katie had a feeling that her father would never stop thinking about what her mother’s life could have been if things had been different.

He frowned. “What are you doing, Katie?”

“I don’t know. Found these photos and I- well. I guess I was looking for something in them.” Something they couldn’t give her. Because she had thought that maybe even if the photos did not contain her mother, they must have been able to contain some *idea* of her. Shouldn’t she have been able to at least feel her mother through her work? Had she really failed at getting at least that?

He turned his back to her. “Come up when you’ve found the china.”

With a nod Katie began to return the photos to the box. Then one caught her eye. She jolted in surprise. There in the photo was *her*, all pink-faced and blotchy, crawling through the open grass and, given her contorted screaming face, hating every second of it. Her mother’s shadow fell over the tiny Katie within the photo. She could see the curve of her shirt, the frizz of her hair, the length of her sleeve. One of her mother’s fingers were even visible- the nail painted a vibrant pink. The picture was labeled *Katie Outdoors #1*.

She stared at it for a long moment. Then smiled. And tucking the photo into her pocket, Katie once again crept onto the little stool in search of the good china.

I Was Convinced

Julie Green

River View High School, McDowell County

Teacher: Deborah McNeil

West Virginia State Winner

Second Place Grades 11-12

I was confident I was born in the wrong time. My imagination had me convinced. A visit to my Grandma's house thirty minutes from Washington DC did not concern an exciting shopping day. For me, it meant a visit to the Civil War Battlefield of the first and second battles of Manassas. It meant at eleven years old I went to a reenactment and attended in my best Civil War attire; reenactor or not. It meant playing cowboys and Indians at every bonfire and chasing each other, glow sticks in hand. I reenacted "The Secret Garden" and surrounded myself with all the potted plants in the house to create my own mansion's garden.

It meant I thoroughly enjoyed my tenth grade US history class and how engagingly my teacher repeated the facts and stories of long ago. It also meant the beauties of the Civil War, the West and other situations I dreamed of living in faded. The times I saw only in daydreams became a different picture to me. Suddenly, the horrors of war, the rugged lifestyle of the West and the sorrows of years before became real and true realization came. My devotion for those eras did not disappear but refocused into appreciation for the foundation those before me were constructing.

I was convinced I should have lived in England where I could speak properly and enjoy hot tea every afternoon at 4 o'clock. A true English accent was so appealing to my young ears and my cousin and I often carried on conversations in butchered dialect. Tea parties were an important occasion. Now, being privileged enough to be born in America means the world to me. She may not be number one in every aspect, but the freedoms we

exercise subconsciously mean life or death to someone else oppressed in another part of the world. The few tears that well up at the playing of Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the USA" are so insufficient when we look at the debt we owe. Every wave of our flag and wisp of wind that catches a corner and cascades it into the air is precious when you realize we are faithfully protected and are spared from conflict within our borders.

I was convinced my name should have been Beverly, Lorena and Lane. How many people had my name? I felt like Beverly represented the beautiful woman with strong character I hoped to one day be. Then, realization came and my thoughts went to those who call my name. They are the ones who make my name mean something. If those you hold dear are proud to call that name because of who it represents, then that is all we can ask for.

I was convinced that I should have had red hair and green eyes. An Ariel Disney Princess wig was as far as I got. As I grew older, I still adored red headed girls, but now I would never trade my dark brown hair that falls past my knees.

I was convinced that I should have been born African American. To don a darker complexion seemed like the place I belonged. The voices some have are magnificent and I can sing along but longed to really sing. Then, with age I still would not mind, but I am content as the color I am.

I was convinced I had no friends. I was convinced no one understood. Then, I got into trouble. My knees led me first to my best friend. Hands reached to my aid from every direction. Faithful parents and irreplaceable brothers and a sister were instantly at my side. When I came to my senses, I realized I would never have any troubles with the true friends I had close by.

I was convinced that being older was better. Planning and imaging my life as a high schooler was exhilarating. I even planned for my life after marriage. I loved going to Lowe's and getting all the paint samples my dad would allow. Telling me to pick something out to buy meant we purchased a Lowe's Dream Homes house plan book. I had determined that my dad, brothers and husband would build the brick home on page 177 with the balcony over the living room I dreamed of. My great collection of paint and Formica samples were written on to indicate which rooms they would cover. A little girl's wedding plans, graduation marches through the living room and playing with baby dolls all represented times to look forward to. Now those times in my life are closer than ever but are now viewed with a cautiously excited attitude. A child's eyes fail to see the great responsibility embedded in each of those life decisions. Now I do not mind when it seems like growing up will take a lifetime because in all reality, it does. Then, it is over and we do not understand where it went.

Now I would not want to be anyone except the seventeen year old girl living in West Virginia that I am, the one with the greatest support system in the world by those who I call friend. I would not want to change the troubles and sorrows I have experienced for that is the key to all great successes. Not by hardships alone do you become the person you desire, but by the thankfulness you face them with each day. So ...I am convinced I could have no better life.

How I Learned to Blow My Nose

Tristen Nichols

Herbert Hoover High School, Kanawha County

Teacher: Kelly Plutro

West Virginia State Winner

Third Place Grades 11-12

I couldn't have been older than three, maybe four. I was in preschool, and I was finally getting into the swing of things. My parents were relieved to see that I was amassing hordes of infantile friends. We would play with blocks, pretend to read books, and tell each other stories day in and day out. Life was good. I felt like I belonged in this colorful swathe of diversion.

I had a friend, and we'll call him Charles, for the sake of the anecdote. Charles wasn't my closest friend, but we kept tabs on each other. Small conversations on the swing set were about as thorough as our monosyllabic interactions went. However, one day, after countless hours of playing, I noticed that he had vanished. Maybe he had stayed home with the flu. God knows that these rug rats can spread a cold like the Bubonic Plague. Nevertheless, Charles was not integral to the hyperactive lifestyle of a toddler, so I paid no attention to his absence.

That afternoon, my mother sat me down to have "a talk." Though I can't remember much verbatim, I remember that she told me about Charles. At this point, I thought he was kidnapped, or worse. However, she marginally lessened my worries when she told me that he had to be rushed to the ER. She said that Charles was okay now, but that things could've been dire. Being the nosy brat that I was, I asked why he had to be taken to the hospital. The response was something I never could have predicted, not in my wildest dreams:

“He stuck a rock up his nose.”

Immediately, tears welled in my eyes from sheer hilarity. I laughed and cackled until my belly ached. A rock? That dunce actually shoved *a rock* up his nose? My mother, after joining in on the laughter for a while, elaborated: Our playground was littered with small pebbles. This was long before the era of rubber mulch, and even before the Wood Chip Renaissance. I was all too familiar with these rocks. I would run my fingers through the miniature stones incessantly, like raking a Zen garden. It was a sort of comfortable spot, a happy place.

Contrastingly, these pebbles landed Charles into a hefty hospital bill. One fateful evening, after a multitude of trips down the slide, Charles returned home with a small surprise. He had found one of the pebbles, smaller than a dime, in his clothes. Now, I can't speak for my associate's ignorance, so I'm still not sure why he put that stone in his nostril. I never asked.

No matter the reason, the outcome was obvious. This puny pebble was stuck, and it wasn't going anywhere. Panic ensued, forcing his family to make a late-night visit to the emergency room. Of course, my mother tried to turn this story into a moral lesson for me. Although, I'm still unsure of the story's intended takeaway. After all, “don't put things up your nose” is a bit obtuse when it comes to philosophy. I shrugged off the story and went back to doing whatever preschoolers did. A few days later, Charles came back to school. Needless to say, he captivated crowds of drooling preschoolers with his heroic tale. I, for one, was less enthralled with “*Charles v. Rock: Fight of the Century.*” Thusly, I went about my business, leaving interactions with Charles for another day. Some time passed, but not

much changed. The difference between a few weeks and a few months is negligible to a child. The stories about Charles died down, and new tales blossomed.

One specific afternoon, I returned home. My mom worked at the preschool I attended (though we both agreed that she was never to teach me), so I was able to come home with her. She asked me about my day, and I gave the half-hearted answers you could expect from a four-year-old. We pulled into the driveway, and I rushed upstairs to play with my action figures. I changed my clothes, put on pajamas, and was ready to put on “comfy socks.” Then, I saw it.

It stared at me. With the pulling force of a ravenous storm, it beckoned me. This thing lured me with the cacophonous taunting that Harpies lure sailors with. It longed for me, and I wanted it just as insatiably. All-encompassing, all-consuming; there it was.

A rock.

It had fallen out of my shoe, and it was perfect. It was elliptical, pewter gray, and smaller than a jellybean. This was not the first stray stone that was lodged in my shoe, and it wouldn't be the last. My ineptitude for properly tying shoelaces left me vulnerable to my sedentary foe. However, something was different this time. My mind wandered, thinking of Charles. *That fool!* He seriously saw a rock, just like this, and rammed it into his sinuses with no further quandary? He got what was coming to him.

Despite all of this, I could see the appeal. I mean, the thing looked almost perfect for a nostril. Circle goes into the circle hole, plain and simple. After all, I was proficient in

picking noses at this point, so retrieving a small stone would be child's play! On top of it all, I get to directly contradict my mother without her ever knowing. It was the perfect crime!

I rolled the pebble in my open palm. The smooth, but dusty façade of the rock called me one last time. It was now or never. I gently placed it on the rim of my nostril. It stayed in place, but didn't travel. Ha! Take that, Charles! No ER for me.

The fun and games were over, and I craned my finger up my nose to retrieve the rock. However, I slipped, and the rock traveled further up my nose. So I tried again. Then I tried a third time. *Panic.* Tears streamed down my face as I screeched for my mom. *How could I have been so stupid? I did the only thing she asked me not to do.* My mother arrived right on cue, with an expression that showcased a frightened bewilderment. I explained the situation behind wails and sighs, and she reluctantly agreed to help me fix the problem. I asked her what to do, and her response seemed simple.

“You're going to have to blow your nose,” she explained.

Blow my nose? I didn't know what that even meant! She eventually elaborated by saying

“It's like breathing, but harder and faster.”

I spouted as much air out of my nose as a youngster could muster. Slowly, I could feel the stone travel throughout my nose again, mocking me between every onslaught of snot. Then, in a spectacle of blood, the stone had left my nostril. Mom gripped me tightly, thanking her lucky stars that I was okay. However, after clambering through the trials and tribulations of sinal discovery, there was one thought on my mind: I didn't even need to go to a hospital. I was better than Charles.

