

*2020 West Virginia
Young Writers Contest
Anthology*

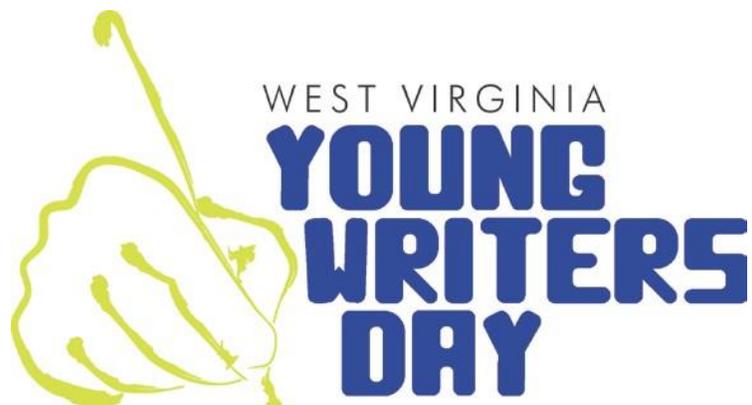


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Introduction

We proudly present the anthology of the 2020 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 36 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 preciously provides invaluable support by hosting Young Writers Day. A Steering Committee, under the leadership of Dr. Barbara O'Byrne, guides the contest and prepares the events of Young Writers Day.

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/cwvwp

Partners

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With assistance from West Virginia Books*

Acknowledgements

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Lydia Withrow

Sophie in Trouble

Libby Greene

Paden City Elementary School, Wetzel County

Teacher: Susan Flesher

West Virginia State Winner

First Place, Grades 1-2

Hi, my name is Sophie. I am a fluffy white dog with lots of energy and this is how I like to spend my day at home. Please do not tell my human parents but, when they leave home, I have a bonetastic time!!

First, I run to each room double checking that no one is around. Next, the fun begins!! I find myself some new chew toys. These yummy toys are from the humans' closet. I love leather, it makes my teeth so pretty! Then, all that chewing makes me hungry. I run to the kitchen and look in my bowl, it is empty. That is ok because the trash can is sitting out. I jump at it till BINGO it falls over. There is a food buffet laying on the floor. I eat till I need a nap. My bed is on the floor it is not very comfortable. I decide to hop into a human bed instead. Man, these things are soft and comfy. I sleep like I never have before. I wake up stretch and decide I'm ready to play again. Ooh...Barbies, I love to chew on their arms. After some time chewing, I get bored, so I have a fight with a stuffed animal. I win!!

Finally, I hear a voice "Sophie, we are home." Oh No, I am going to be in BIG trouble. I look around to see white fluff all over the room, Barbies with missing hands, shoes with holes, and the kitchen floor is covered with food. Maybe they won't notice? I decided to hide just in case. I hear yelling. I think they noticed. I hear, "Sophie, you are in trouble!!!" I think I will hide a little longer and think about what I should do tomorrow.

Grace and Her New Piano

Sophia Rebholz

Cheat Lake Elementary School, Monongalia County
Teacher: Kelly Wadsworth
West Virginia State Winner
Second Place, Grades 1-2

Grace was a seven-year-old girl. She loved her grandmother's piano. Every weekend she played a new song. Her birthday was coming up and her grandmother promised her that she would get her a grand piano. It was the day before her birthday! Grace was so excited! She could hardly wait! Even though it was time for bed, Grace did not want to sleep! The next morning, Grace got up and got dressed. Then she ran down the stairs. Her mother said, "Happy birthday!" So did her father. It was almost time for her party. All of her friends came over with gifts but her grandmother had a huge gift! After dinner and cake and everything was done, it was time to open presents. She got all kinds of cool stuff and then she opened the biggest gift of all. It was a grand piano! She loved it so much!

A few weeks later... her grandmother died. At her funeral Grace was very sad. She would never get to play a song for her! "I miss her so much," said Grace. After the funeral, Grace played a song that made her sad. The song was called "Love is With You".

Sometimes in the spring, Grace felt like her grandmother was with her. Even one winter day when Grace got sick, she could feel her grandmother's hug so she felt much better. From that day on she would just play that song.

Eventually, she played a lot of songs. Grace grew and grew and now that she is an adult, she lives in an apartment and has a husband and two kids, too. She is very famous and still writes many songs but none of them mean as much as "Love is With You".

Secret Room

Seneca Boddy

Maysville Elementary School, Grant County
Teacher: Vicki Kitzmiller
West Virginia State Winner
Third Place, Grades 1-2

It was a sunny morning. Ava had invited her friends Megan, Bethany and Sadie for a sleepover. They were going to stay at Ava's uncle's house. His name was Johnny. When they arrived, Johnny greeted them. The girls were excited because they had never spent the night together. Johnny showed them around the house. He told them about a special room that they should never go in.

That night the girls watched a movie and told scary stories. Finally, they all went to sleep except Ava. She just pretended but was really wondering about the room. Johnny was also awake waiting for one of the girls to sneak in the room. He was hoping he could scare them, so they never come back for another sleepover.

When it was quiet, Ava crept to the room. She slowly turned the handle and entered. She could see around because the moonlight was shining in the window. Everything was dusty and covered with old sheets. Ava got scared and tried to get out. When she turned the handle it was locked! She began to see things walking towards her. Ava grabbed the sheets. She saw creepy statues under them.

Ava tied the sheets together and one end to the window lock. She dropped the end out the window and climbed down. When she looked back, she realized the statues weren't moving at all. She must have imagined it. When she got to the ground, she went and told her friends what happened. They were scared and said they would never come back again! The girls left early in the morning. When Johnny got up, he looked in the room. They were gone. He laughed and went to eat breakfast. He knew his plan had worked.

The Little Black Box

Brielle Lyons

Berlin McKinney Elementary School, Wyoming County
Teacher: Autumn Lusk
West Virginia State Winner
First Place, Grades 3-4

This is a true story about a happy family who possessed a special little black box.

One Saturday, Merle found a doll Cindy wanted to play with. He picked it up and Cindy yelled, “Mommy!”

Mother was in deep conversation with other children and didn’t look up. Automatically she yelled “Stephen!”

“Okay Momma,” Stephen replied.

Later that night, Stephen, was going to pull a prank on Lou. Then he heard the front door open. *Daddy must be home, he thought. I should go see him. I’m supposed to be sleeping. I’ll just have a glance. They won’t see me.* He eavesdropped behind the door.

“This coal mine job provides us less money every day,” Father said.

Mother replied hopefully, “I know dear. We must keep praying. Everything will be okay.”

After Stephen heard this, he ran back to bed. Father gloomily walked to the children’s rooms. Stephen pretended to sleep as his father prayed over each one. When father finished praying, Stephen wondered if he should tell his siblings what he had heard. *They deserve to know; I will tell them tomorrow.*

Early Sunday morning, the children awoke to the smell of mother’s delectable cooking. Stephen confessed what he heard to his siblings.

“Really?” Sharon asked.

“I’ve never lied to you. Okay I lie sometimes...but not now. Please listen to me!” Stephen pleaded.

Judy said, “Okay, everyone get into a line.”

They marched in unison down the stairs. Their mother raised her eyebrows in surprise.

“Stephen heard you guys talking last night. Are we really poor?” Stephanie sadly asked.

“Yes, we’re poor, but we must have faith,” Mother replied.

“But what happens if we run out of money?” Linda asked.

Mother led them to her bedroom and explained, “This little black box is precious. It contains everything we need to see us through any dark time. If we need money, we will go to this box.” She looked up at the clock. “Go eat your breakfast, get dressed, and rehearse your song.”

At church they sang “Amazing Grace.” Their voices sounded like beautiful angels. Their clear harmonies were beautiful to hear. Since their father was the preacher, he preached his eloquent sermon and the family went home. The children never worried about money again because they had their little black box to help them through tough times.

Years later, after both parents passed away, Stephen took over his father’s church. The grown children were at their old house collecting their cherished belongings. They began to reminisce over their childhood years when they were poor. As the children cried together, Brenda saw the little black box from their childhood years. The siblings opened the little black box. They found absolutely nothing inside but love, faith, and hope in Jesus. The siblings saw their tattered old family Bible beside the little black box and noticed a verse that was marked.

They read together, “But my God shall supply all your needs according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.” Phillipians 4:10.

The Fish Who Wanted to be a Shark

Patience Fletcher

West Liberty Elementary School, Ohio County

Teacher: Brandy Lackie

West Virginia State Winner

Second Place, Grades 3-4

“HaHa! You a clown? ‘Cause you sure look like one!” Copper’s bullies teased him. Clown-face, as his bullies called him, was a clown fish, the smallest one in the school. “I wish I was a shark,” Copper mumbled to himself. “Then who would be laughing Sharktooth?” He said the name Sharktooth like it was a bag of rotten worms that was soaking in salt water for five days.

Mr. Tigerfish, the principal of the school, tried to settle things between him and Sharktooth. He and the other fish still kept at it! Copper wished and wished he could be bigger, but it never happened. It was still terrible at the school. Sharktooth was still mean. The older Copper got, the more Sharktooth picked on him!

After a few more years of getting picked on, someone threw a wish-bone into the ocean, and it landed in Sharktooth’s fins. “Ohhh!” Sharktooth said to his friends, “I’m going to get a wish!”

“Not if I can help it!” Copper thought. He swam to Sharktooth as fast as his fins could carry him and grabbed one side of the wish-bone. The wish-bone snapped in half between their fins, sending Copper flying backwards!

Copper looked up in a daze, wondering who had gotten the bigger half of it. He looked into his fins and realized he did! He rubbed it with his tiny fin, and a fish emerged from his half of the wish-bone. A lot of smoke came out with her, dirtying up the ocean.

“I can grant you a wish,” she said in a spooky voice that made Sharktooth whimper, “if you are worthy!...Ok let's get down to business!” Sharktooth and Copper exchanged a look of confusion. “You are

the lucky winner! You have the bigger half, so here are the rules,” she spit out, talking as if it was a sports game, “you get two wishes. And well... that's all!”

Copper was amazed. “I want to be a shark!” Almost instantly, Copper went from puny to gigantic. “Yes! I’m free! Sharktooth who is the big one now?” Copper swam away going towards the boats. “Now!” said a voice above him, “That's the one! He will give us a feast!”

Nets came down on Copper, pulling him up out of the ocean. The fish lady with the power popped up beside him. “It’s the life of the shark,” she said. “I could save you, but you have to wish it.”

“I want to be a fish again! I want to! I don’t want to be food!” Copper whined. He could hear the sailors confusion as he slipped through the net and drifted into the ocean.

After that it went back to normal, even though Sharktooth was scared of him, and looked at him like he would burst into flames. Nobody spoke of Copper as a shark again. Copper became vice principal for Mr. Tigerfish, then became head of the school. After his ordeal though, he was fearful anytime he saw a boat

My Uninvited Guest

Jake Davis

West Taylor Elementary School, Taylor County

Teacher: Stacie Himes

West Virginia State Winner

Third Place, Grades 3-4

Have you ever had a dream and when you woke up you couldn't find out if it was real or not? I have had a dream like that, and I know it was real. One night about 3:00 in the morning I heard a noise close to my house. It sounded like a plane landing. I felt a tap on my shoulder and looked over. There stood Amelia Earhart.

I was so amazed that for a second, I thought my mind was playing tricks on me. I said, "I thought you were dead."

She replied, "I am, but I came back to show you that you can do anything you want to. I want you to go back in time with me to see me at an air show."

Suddenly I was at a plane show. It looked like young Amelia Earhart and her father at the plane show. She was loving the show so much. She told her father that she wanted to be a pilot too. Her dad and other people stared at her.

Her father said, "Only boys can be pilots, and besides a nurse is the only job for a girl. I've talked to you about this. Girls can't be pilots."

Young Amelia said, "Girls can still be pilots too! Boys aren't better than girls. Everyone is important."

Then I was back in my room. I said, "I don't think it's right at all. Why would your father say that to you? Why are boys only allowed to be pilots?"

Amelia said, "Back then people thought boys were better than girls. The Bible says we're all his creation, and God's creations are very important to him. I have another place I want you to travel to with

me.” I was suddenly at an airport with Amelia. Another Amelia climbed into a cockpit of a plane with a crowd watching her.

I said, “I thought you were not allowed in a plane.”

Amelia answered, “I had made a decision that no matter what anyone said it wouldn’t stop me. That’s me there climbing into the cockpit, that’s the time that I made a record for first girl to fly solo from Hawaii to U.S mainland, it was very fun!

I was suddenly in my room with Amelia Earhart. She said she had to go, so I said bye to her, and she said bye to me. Then she disappeared. She really inspired me to be anything I wanted to be. When I grow up, I also want to become a pilot just like Amelia Earhart.

The Colder War

Aedan O'Quinn

Athens Elementary School, Mercer County

Teacher: Donna Ball

West Virginia State Winner

First Place, Grades 5-6

One polar day in mid-January, Marcus was trying his absolute hardest to ignore his frostbitten legs and keep pushing forward. Just twenty more yards, he hypothesized, and he'd be safe. Suddenly, he heard footsteps. He started spurting ahead, bit by bit. Unfortunately, the bullies were gaining on him! His breath came in puffs of steam. Small snowflakes landed on his extended tongue. They tasted sweet in a way, which gave him energy to reach his house. "Let me in," He shouted!

"No can do, buckaroo," said a middle-aged man from the window. His lackadaisical father, Cooper, was locking Marcus out. Marcus didn't argue, perhaps because of the fact the bullies had caught him! The cold bit at his nose. He tried to run, but the lead bully, Thomas, snagged him by the shirt collar. Luckily, one of Marcus's friends named Lisa got the bullies back! This was the beginning of a war. The colder war!

Thomas's gang of two, Arthur and Emma respectively, knew that to win a war, you need a base. They started working immediately! "Get the left flank," Emma yelled. She was the tactician for the bullies. On the other hand, Lisa was the tactician for Marcus' clan. Anyways, Lisa's friend, Logan, came to the rescue! He came with heavy artillery. Round after round, each sided launched their weapons. Arthur, one of the sheer people in the battle, bailed out. "I'm going to get some hot chocolate," he said. He never returned. Lisa also chickened out. "I'm going to get supplies," she said.

"Okay," said Marcus, "Don't be long!" Both sides were down to two people. Suddenly, Logan got hit! He lay on the cold, hard, ground. "I think I'm done," he nonchalantly said. Marcus coolly replied

“Okay, that’s fine with me.” Logan walked away to his red house, just down the street. It was up to Marcus!

The instant that Marcus looked ahead, he saw the bullies sitting at a table, creating a strategy. “Perfect,” exclaimed Marcus. “If I can hit them when they’re not looking, then I could win,” he believed. He knew that he had to get the throw just right. If he missed, he would be a sitting duck! He had to think about the shot carefully. Since they were only about twenty yards apart, Marcus chose the heaviest snowball. Aligning his arms and twisting his feet, he took aim, then fired! He hit the bullies, so he thought he won! Suddenly, the target fell! It was a trap made of cardboard, just to catch him off guard! Abruptly, he heard ammunition hitting the ground! Emma laughed, “We’ve got you now!” The bullies were after him!

He rushed ahead, hoping to outrun them. “Who am I kidding,” Marcus thought, “They’re two grades ahead of me!” That gave him an amazing idea. Since they were longer legged than him, he could duck right under them while they were running! He stopped swiftly, which sent the bullies streaming right by him. He launched a barrage of ammo right at them. He heard a loud “Yowch!” It was Emma! It was down to two, Marcus versus Thomas. He ran, knowing that Thomas would be right on his tail. Marcus heard his breath before he saw him. Marcus grabbed a snowball, turned around, and launched it at him! Marcus connected on his throw. That meant Marcus had won the colder war! His dad had finally come to tell him to get inside. Marcus whined, “Five more minutes... please!”

“Okay,” replied his dad, “but *only* five more minutes.”

“Works for me,” conceived Marcus. He could have another war another day. After one polar day in mid-January, Marcus had won the war. The colder war!

Phillip the Cat

Tabitha Goldizen

Maysville Elementary School, Grant County

Teacher: Janie Pool

West Virginia State Winner

Second Place, Grades 5-6

This is the story of my cat, Phillip. Phillip is a Korat cat. He has a dark gray coat and emerald green eyes. Phillip is a sweet cat, but is a bit shy. "I'm not shy." protested Phillip. "Phillip, be quiet," I replied. I'm trying to tell the story here.

As I was saying, Phillip is a bit shy. Phillip likes pretending that he is brave and kills snakes. The snakes aren't real snakes. The snakes he plays with are just plastic drinking straws. He likes to play with Stella and pretend that he is her protector. Stella is a little white kitten that has yellow eyes with flecks of green in them. Stella always wears a cute little collar around her neck. He goes on adventures with her. For example, he will attack the mighty dragon named Gus.

Gus is a pom-chi who looks like a miniature fox and is about the same weight and size as Phillip. But in Phillip's imagination, he must protect Stella from the evil and deadly Gus. Likewise, he must slay the poisonous snakes that may bite her.

On one adventure, Phillip attacked and slew the mighty super dragon, Harmony. Harmony is a rabbit beagle who is about twice the size and weight of Phillip. She is very lazy and only leaves her bed to be petted, go outside to use the bathroom, or to steal food from the kitchen table. She and Gus even stole a part of a pizza from the kitchen table when my dad and his friend forgot to put it away after eating some of it. "See, I told you she was a super dragon with wings who can fly about the skies," said Phillip.

Phillip loves begging for treats. He jumps up on the sink in the utility room and climbs onto the top of the dryer to beg for his treats. "I do not beg," replied Phillip. "Only a peasant would beg for treats," he added. "I am a mighty prince with a vast empire that includes a very large treasury," stated

Phillip. “Just look at my treasure chest that is full of jewels,” he boasted. “The treasure chest is really my mother’s jewelry box,” I thought.

Phillip loves to stare at the fish tank and watch the fish swim about it. He even tries to catch them sometimes by dipping his paws into the opening through which they are fed. “I do not dip my paws into a fish tank,” objected Phillip. “I only fish in the royal pond that is stocked with trout and salmon,” he added. “Be quiet”, I replied. “I’m the one telling the story here not you.”

In Phillip’s mind, he is the mighty knight and prince of the house. He is the only one in the kingdom who can slay the dragons and snakes and keep the peace among his subjects. Without him, the kingdom would fall into disrepair and the snakes and dragons would rule.

Monsters Are Real

Kylie Cline

North Jefferson Elementary School, Jefferson County
Teacher: Allison Bivens
West Virginia State Winner
Third Place, Grades 5-6

Every Tuesday, I looked forward to going to ballet, not because I wanted to dance, but because I wanted to see my good friend, Rachel. Rachel does not go to my school, only to my ballet classes.

Rachel and I had many good conversations, but one really made me think. A conversation when Rachel told me monsters were real.

“What do you mean?” I asked. “My parents have always told me monsters are not real.” Have my parents been lying to me all these years? I thought to myself.

“I mean, the ones that made my mom go away,” she replied.

We stopped talking because it was time to go work on ballet. On the way home, I kept thinking. “Monsters? Why does she keep saying monsters are real?”

All throughout dinner, I was thinking, “Are monsters really real?” I couldn’t even eat my dessert. Later that night, when I went to bed, I couldn’t fall asleep. I kept having thoughts in my head, “Are monsters really real?” I was too scared to get out from under my covers and check my closet for monsters, so I remained tightly tucked under the blanket until I fell asleep.

A few weeks went by, then a few months, and still no Rachel at ballet. Then one day Rachel returned to ballet, but this time her grandparents drove her there instead of her mom. She didn’t act herself either. She was really quiet and seemed sad. She really didn’t talk much not even to me except for saying hi and asking me how I was doing, but not much more. I really wanted to ask her about what she

had said, “Monsters are real,” but I could tell it really wasn’t the right time, so I didn’t bring it up at all. I knew Rachel would talk to me when she felt up to it, but until then I remained silent.

A few weeks later my ballet class had dress rehearsal for our big play that was approaching. We had a little more extra time and more time to ourselves. That was when Rachel decided to share with me what she really meant. She explained to me how her mom started to get sick. She would sleep longer each day. She eventually stopped going places like the grocery store, work, even her best friend's house. She didn’t make breakfast, lunch, or dinner for Rachel. She didn’t even help Rachel with school. She stayed in her bedroom or the bathroom with the door locked. Then one day her mom just disappeared. Rachel came home from school that day and her mom wasn’t there, but her grandparents were. They were very upset and had been crying. They tried to be brave for Rachel, but Rachel could tell something was wrong. Rachel asked her grandparents where her mom was. They didn’t answer right away, but when they did, they told Rachel the same thing that Rachel had told me.

“Monsters are real.”

“I don’t understand,” Rachel told them.

Her grandparents had been telling her that the world is full of monsters that make people do things they never would have imagined doing and monsters took over her mom and everything changed her into one of them. The monster had taken over Rachel’s mom so bad that she went away forever and was never coming back. That’s why her grandparents had to take her to ballet class now. I left ballet that day a little confused. I still don’t understand everything Rachel had said or meant, and I don’t think Rachel did either, but that didn’t matter. I must say after that conversation I always had my eyes open for monsters in disguise.

Years passed and Rachel and I grew up and grew apart. We didn’t see each other as much, but Rachel’s story stuck with me for many years. I would hear my mom and dad’s conversations about

someone they knew that passed away from drugs. I saw television shows and movies about the drug problem in our area and people dying. Then, one day, I understood Rachel's story, Monsters Are Real so please make good choices and stay away from monsters.

The Final Goodbye

Jacqueline Melia

South Middle School, Monongalia County

Teacher: Erica Rodeheaver

West Virginia State Winner

First Place, Grades 7-8

Someone once said, “The only time a goodbye is painful is when you know you’ll never say hello again,” and little did I know how painful it would be.

The hallways of the Alzheimer’s unit in the nursing home had never seemed so dull - the beige paint and white trim, giving the impression that memories made within these walls will never be happy. None of them, I thought, were. Each of the doors that stretched down the hall were white - some had big bold letters marking the patient’s room and others had light purple lettering - making the brown-beige carpet pop. My hands, clammy and cold, shook violently as we neared my grandfather’s room. The door read “Mack Kendall”, a name forever etched into my soul. I noticed the nurses, normally cheery towards us upon entry, were nodding and showed a great deal of sympathy - something I was not expecting.

“He is still in his room,” reported one of the nurses, “He hasn’t moved for a couple of days.”

My mother nodded towards the nurse, “Thank you.” Her hand gripped the bronze door handle, and I felt as though I was being held under the water, gasping for a breath I knew would never come.

The door slowly opened, revealing only the end of the hospital bed. My mother ushered us inside the cramped room. My heart shattered on the floor, spilling over him. I could see death pulling at his soul. His face was sunken in revealing the outline of bone, and his tousled head lay unmoving on the pillow. His eyes which opened only partially, weighed down by visions of death, were absent of all color and light. His tall and masculine frame was smaller, shriveled like a flower left alone in the dark. Light groans would escape his parched lips occasionally.

Although I tried valiantly not to believe it, everything in that moment had shown death holding his hand, pulling him into the unknown vacancy it holds. As it slid down my cheek, the warmth of the tear hinted that the pain one can inflict upon another by leaving, was greater than any physical pain I would ever feel. My heart hung as heavy as the full moon in the pitch black of nightfall.

“May I have a minute?” I mumbled.

“Of course,” my mother whispered as she and my sister left the room. I shuffled over to the brown chair resting beside his bed and took his hand in mine. It was not like I had remembered. It was not the same hand that had picked up mine as he kissed it goodbye, or the one I had yanked down the front porch steps at his house on Cherry Hill, proud of the scene I had made in the empty flower bed. Even though it was still his hand, it wasn't...

Tears fell so fiercely like a waterfall after a rainstorm. I closed my eyes, “I promise I will not forget you like you did me. Gramps, I love you with all my heart.” I knew I had one last thing to say, but felt an undying sadness tied to the word that was so commonly spoken.

My mother entered the room, “It's time to say goodbye.” Her face, blotchy from crying, peered around the corner. My little sister followed suit immediately, saying her goodbyes almost robotically. It took every ounce of courage left in me to even stand up from that chair. They left the room once more, and I knew it was my turn to say goodbye.

In spite of the fact that my heart contained gaping holes, that I felt my knees weaken, and that my eyes were on fire, I managed to look at him the same way I once had. The same way I did when he cracked stupid jokes, or when we sat at the dinner table telling stories. I gulped, “Goodbye.”

Seashore

Catherine Camenga

South Harrison Middle School, Harrison County

Teacher: Shannon DeWitt
West Virginia State Winner
Second Place Grades 7-8

Wish, Wash. Wish, Wash.

The waves splash against my faded pink back. Seagulls chirp somewhere in the distance.

Wish, Wash. Wish, Wash.

The sand is squishy and grainy underneath my curved hollow stomach. The foam from the sea washes up on the shore, getting in my face.

Wish, Wash. Wish, Wash.

Low tide is the best time. The risk of being jerked around by waves or pulled away from the beach is gone. I hope that I'll stay here for the same reason every seashell hopes to stay. That we'll be chosen. Every day, kids come down to the beach here in North Carolina, and every one of them choose at least one seashell to be their own.

The sun rises higher and higher in the sky. As the soft peach turns into a bright blue, a couple comes walking, then a jogger, then a family of early risers, and on and on more people arrive.

Later, like the heavens smiled down upon me, two families come walking along, and each seems to have five kids. They run around, splashing, building sandcastles, suntanning, and, most importantly, picking seashells. One by one, shells are raised from the sandy ground below into the glorious heavens above, or child's hand, whatever you prefer.

As I watch the kids run and play, I feel a slight *tug*. With the hopes of being chosen still very much present in my mind, I don't give it a second thought. Once the *tug* turns into a ferocious *yank* though, I am pulled out of my trance and put back into reality. Apparently, said reality wants to get rid of me as soon as possible because, and to my total and utter horror, it's high tide.

High tide.

Wish, Wash. Wish, Wash.

The waves sound violent, vengeful, and determined to take me away from shore. The seagulls squawk angrily, like I had done them wrong.

Wish, Wash. Wish, Wash.

The sand feels prickly and pointy, as if someone had sharpened each individual grain just for this moment. This horrifying, life-threatening moment.

Wish, Wash. Wish, Wash.

Suddenly, I am swept into the waves. They thrash around, throwing me up and down, up and down, again and again for their own self-pleasure.

Wish, Wash. Wish, Wash.

Everything is black. I open my eyes, but all I see is darkness. I hit a giant, jagged rock, and I feel some of myself chip away.

Wish, Wash. Wish, Wash.

The waves, after beating me up, decided that it'll be fun to tease me. To do this, they push me forward, just far enough that I see a dim light from the sun, then pull me right back out again, into the depths of an unforgiving ocean, where I'll slowly chip away into nothingness.

Wish, Wash. Wi-

As I start to lose hope, with my eyes tightly shut. Prepared for the end, I feel the water fall away, the waves are cut short, and the sun's shining on my face.

When the idea of heaven's in my mind, I open my eyes. What I feel, hear and see is not what I expected. I feel the soft, warm skin holding me in the air. A child's palm, I realize, and I hear the sounds of midday beach activity. Shrieking kids, laughing adults, the occasional bark of a dog, and so much more.

But what I see surprises me; two big brown eyes, a mess of dirty blonde hair, and an expression of pride! This little boy saved my life!

"Hey, Mom! Look Mom, look, I found one, I found a seashell!"

“Nice Abel,” his Mom said, examining me. “This is a good one.” I blushed.

“Can I keep it?”

“Sure, kiddo. C’mon, we’re goin’ home for pizza!”

“Pizza!”

Abel bounced, following his Mom. He studied me for a moment. “Seashore.” He said, nodding.

“Yeah, I’m gonna call you Seashore. Let’s go home, Seashore. Pizza awaits!”

Seashore? Pizza? I have so many questions, but... *I was chosen. I have a kid. I have a home!*

A home.

Wish, Wash. Wish, Wash.

The waves got quieter and quieter. Seagulls chirp somewhere in the distance.

Wish, Wash. Wish, Wash.

I’m going home.

Purpose

Lexie Wikel

Mullens Middle School, Wyoming County
Teacher: Leslie Garretson
West Virginia State Winner
Third Place Grades 7-8

My life had purpose. I knew it.

You may regard me as simple-minded, but I know you regard me with respect- even the most cynophobic of humans are aware of my service to their kind.

I am called a police dog. My handlers and my master address me by “Bullet.” I adore hearing my name called by my master.

Currently poised beside my master, my amber eyes settled fixedly on the heavy-set male a distance from she and I. His body appeared to be concealed in the padded black suit I recalled from my training sessions as a juvenile dog. Inwardly, I yapped with amusement.

I waited for my master’s voice.

A flick of her hand, and I was gone. Long strides devoured the distance between the fleeing man and me. The final obstacle was a dauntingly tall, plastic wall held up by two people that I had to clear to reach the runner. I narrowed my eyes.

With a monumental leap, I soared over the wall, slamming into the guy with ceaseless momentum and taking him to the ground quite roughly. I snapped powerful jaws around a section of the suit, thrashing my head violently as my sharp teeth sank deeper into the thick material. He squirmed vainly underneath me, but he wasn’t going anywhere on my watch.

A shrill whistle, and I swiftly released my once unyieldingly grip on him. I returned to my master’s side and gazed up at her with my tongue lolling pinkly.

What's next? I blinked up at my master.

She crouched to meet my gaze, beaming elatedly. "Good dog, Bullet."

...

The big van came to a screeching halt, and my limbs strained to keep me from face-planting into the floor. An officer- my master! - opened the door for us. I descended to the ground warily, as a metallic odor burned inside my nostrils.

Blood.

My master led me to the apparent scene of the crime.

My hackles raised as we approached the large building- a school. My master was wary, too- her fear-scent was strong and competing with the blood-scent. At last, we reached the entrance of the building. Slowly, stiffly, we entered.

Master's voice boomed against the empty halls as she uttered a quick demand. No human response met her words. Only a great, suffocating silence.

A desperate scream met our ears. I barked in acknowledgement before pounding down a hallway after the noise. My partners trailed me, peering into every classroom along the way before following me again. I soon found myself alone in the labyrinth that once brimmed with the laughter of children.

I turned a corner to find the cry's owner, a young girl battered and bruised. Her shiny eyes rounded at the sight of me before she buried her teary face into my fur. I emitted a small bark, just enough to echo for the others to locate me. They eventually did, and the girl was taken hastily away to a safer place.

Now, to find the bad man that did this.

His scent was strong, and it drove my senses mad. Master noticed my tense posture, and we both turned our heads.

A silhouette against sterile lights, the man hastily drew a weapon I'd laid eyes on many times. My master withdrew hers as well. Both stood deathly still.

Abruptly, the man turned and fled down another corridor and some stairs. Master yelled in surprise and exasperation before chasing him, but not as fast as I was on him. In a flash the man and I were tumbling down the stairwell, snapping and striking the whole time. I decided I'd had enough of this and found a hold on his exposed neck. I bit down, hard, just before I felt a metallic touch just above my eye.

Bang!

White-hot agony seared the flesh, while my skull felt bound to shatter with horrible pressure. My vision flashed a pristine white before being engulfed in maroon.

I'm falling, I'm falling, I...

What is my purpose? Why am I here?

I know.

To live for someone. To love someone. And to die for someone.

My life had purpose. I knew it.

I am Still Here

Emma Whetzel

Philip Barbour High School, Barbour County
Teacher: Heather Halfin
West Virginia State Winner
First Place, Grades 9-10

On the day of the funeral, the skies wept for my loss. I appreciated the sentiment but didn't enjoy walking home wet. My sister, on the other hand, seemed to be trying to make up for the sun's absence by being even more perky than usual.

"Think of this as a new beginning," Blair said beside me. "You don't have anything holding you back from your future anymore. I hear Virginia State is taking applications for the fall semester."

"I'd rather stay in my bedroom forever, watching sad movies and eating ice cream to drown my feelings, like my cat just died," I mumbled back to her.

"Wait, we have a cat?"

"That's not the point." I pulled out my keys and unlocked our apartment door, turning on the light as I stepped inside. And then I saw all the things I wanted to forget.

I quickly started picking up the extra blankets, water bottles, and trash bins to shove in a closet. Eventually, I reached the pill bottle sitting on the kitchen counter. *Proven to ease the effects of chemotherapy and improve quality of life.* Bullcrap. My eyes finally leaked the tears I'd held all day as I threw the bottle across the room and sank to the floor.

"It's going to get easier every day that passes, Scarlett. I know how much your heart's hurting right now, so why don't you borrow mine for a while? Then you can give it back when you're ready to piece yourself together again." Blair sat by my side into the night, listening to the choke of my sobs and whispering what I had left to appreciate.

Leaving out what I'd never get back.

I woke on the living room couch, under one of the blankets I discarded yesterday. Although my phone said it was already noon, I had no desire to get up and face the world. Everything brought back memories I'd rather forget, including the sound of Blair tinkering in the kitchen.

"I made lunch," Blair said in a sing-song voice as she entered the room with two plates. She set a sandwich down in front of me and opened the blinds to let in sunlight, causing me to shield my eyes from the glow. "I think we should go out today, and get you some new clothes or a haircut."

"Did you read that in a *How to Handle Grief Guide*? '*Reinvent yourself and it'll be like your loved one never existed,*'" I mocked in a salesman's voice. "'Who needs sadness when you can get your nails done?'"

"Haha. But seriously, I think you need to focus on yourself and starting over. Being a caregiver took all of your time, so let's do something for you." She grabbed my coat and threw it on my lap, swiping her car keys as she went. "Let's go."

I had to admit, I did feel better after picking out some new clothes and getting my raggedy hair trimmed. It was also the first time I'd been anywhere but a grocery store or hospital in months, let alone with Blair by my side. The feeling didn't last long, and guilt took its place when I got back into my sister's car.

I expected to go home, but Blair passed the turnoff and continued down the highway. "Where are we going?" I asked her when she made no comment about our destination.

"I told you Virginia State was taking applications, so I scheduled you a meeting with the dean last week. I figured you'd be hesitant to do anything after the funeral." She handed me a letter addressed from the school, telling me I have an appointment today. It was dated a week before the funeral, so I could only guess when Blair had scheduled my meeting.

My heart rate spiked when what I was about to do sank in. “I can’t do this, there’s no way I can talk to someone,” I rambled at Blair to change her mind. “What if he doesn’t like me? What if they think I smell?”

“You smell fine. And I promise it’s going to be fine. You will tell him how you’ve always wanted to be a nurse and take care of people. He’ll admit you immediately.”

“Use the ‘*my only patient just died card*,’ got it.” And with that, I got out of the car to start my life again.

It seemed wrong to be doing new things without her in my life, almost like I was betraying her memory by moving on. Even though I held my college acceptance letter in my hand, my emotions threatened to tumble out of me and spill across my bedroom floor.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” Blair put an arm around my shoulder.

“Everything is just so.... messed up. How am I supposed to do any of this? How am I supposed to replace her?” I’d always been the average one, someone unremarkable and ordinary. She was the one everyone had cared about.

“I think it’s time you live for yourself instead of other people. It’s going to suck and sometimes you’ll have to scream into your pillow at life. But it’s not going to get better until you realize how much I love you and want you to move on.”

“You really mean that?” I looked up at her. “You want me to keep going?”

“Of course I do. I think it’s time you give me back my heart and start putting yours back together on your own. I’ll be there every step of the way, cheering you on.”

“Just don’t sing, you’ll make me go deaf.” I put my head on Blair’s shoulder and stayed there until sleep overtook me. When I woke up, she was gone.

I didn't see Blair again after that conversation, although I guess that was to be expected. I had just attended her funeral the week before.

Wedged Between the Words

Kaylan Hope Phillips

Preston High School, Preston County

Teacher: Renae Davis

West Virginia State Winner

Second Place, Grades 9-10

Tikka-tap-tikka-tap. The strange melody played as I drummed my fingers roughly on my stained wooden desk. What to write? What to say? How can I drive this story onward? Shall I take the expected path or another? Stay with my original plot or derive a new one? Should my protagonist rise or fall? Sad or happy? How shall I end this blasted book?

My fingertips thumping turned into frustrated pounds from writer's block. I started to type random words, sentences and sayings trying to spark my imagination; as that did nothing I scrolled back and read the cleverly crafted phrases. Where'd my talent go? I've been sitting here for an hour and I have written squat diddly! I leaned back in my chair and back pains crept through my spine. You can do this. Just write something. Suddenly, a rush of adrenaline pumped through me and I jumped forward like a pianist ready to play his final piece. I took a deep breath, then slammed my head down in defeat. Useless brain, I've got nothing! Random letters and numbers quickly filled the page and I groaned. I wish I could just experience what I want to say. Ugh. . . random thoughts that didn't make any sense!

A crackle whipped through the air and I jumped back as my computer sparked with lightning. A bright light surged through the room periodically blinding me. I rubbed my eyes and when I opened them, I was standing in the middle of a cobblestone street. Tall lanterns flickered with light and illuminated the eerie avenue. Why do I feel like I'm about to be murdered?

"You'd think you could get away from me that easily, Doc? Well, think again." I whipped around to see the blandest man in the whole universe. He was dressed in a fancy Victorian suit, but that was the most interesting thing about him.

"Hello, strange man. Am I dead?"

"Your tricks won't work this time, Elijah."

“Ah, I see your confusion. I am Ronan, not Elijah.”

The man pulled out a small pepper-box pistol. It was a classic with a wooden handle that had metal carvings heading towards the barrel. “I, Henry Jyde, will have my revenge.”

Sweet Edgar Allen Poe! I know where I am. This is my book! Wow...I need to work on describing my characters better, maybe give him a nasty scar.

My inner thought was interrupted from the clicking of a bullet in a barrel. Oh no. . .

“Look, Henry before this gets too far, I need to clear something up. I am not the man you are looking for.”

“You think me a fool. You look just like him.” I sighed in frustration; this is the last time I’m basing a character of my own devilishly handsome looks!

Jyde raised his weapon and aimed for my head. I frantically patted all my pockets and felt something round, the bounce ball I found this morning. Taking the small ball, I threw with all my might hitting him square in the forehead making him stumble back and fall. Woah, I actually hit him!

I spun around and dashed down the stone street. This is so cool, but quite terrifying! The thin fog grew thicker and thicker till it was like running through whipped cream. Random things that I typed whizzed by as I continued to run. Playing cards dancing the macarena, a floating pizza with a top hat, and the Cookie Monster eating broccoli. I’ve made a world of madness! If this is what I was last typing, then I should stumble upon those head-slammed letters and numbers any secCcOoONnD!

The floor fell out beneath me and I landed on the hook of a J. I clung to it as I looked down into an infinity of white that had a continuing stream of numbers and letters. Behind me huffed an angry Henry Jyde, who was covered in green looking snot. Good thing I didn’t run into that. He took his gun and pulled the trigger, but nothing happened; the snot must have jammed it. Thank you, disgusting substance. Henry leapt forward and landed behind me. I screamed like a manly little girl, then fell and landed on the hump of an H.

Jyde swung down and when he landed his foot slipped and he fell backward into the white void. Well, that was anti-climactic, but what do I do now?

“Hello, strange forces that got me in here! Can I leave?! The bad dude is gone!” My answer was complete silence. Okay, Ronan, we’re trapped in a book and don’t know how to leave. Great.

I leaned back and studied the things around me. Maybe I could use these letters and try to get out of here. Let’s see what I can I work with. I studied the letters that my forehead landed on. Okay, over their we have some G’s, T’s, and Y’s. That’s not going to do much. I looked down and saw some R’s, F’s, M’s, and 8’s. I can work with that.

After, some dangerous movements I had successfully pushed an F and R together and had a lonely M. I had decided to try to slice the 8’s into E’s, but how to do that was beyond me. I tried kicking, weird karate moves and sayings. Nothing. I had swung a T upside down and was jumping on it and it managed to break through the 8, then I fell and was dangerously dangling on the edge of a letter. One down, one more to go.

FREE ME. The words pierced through the endless white and I stood there waiting for something to happen. Then, I heard the pulse of a heartbeat. It started out soft then it grew into a roar.

The bright white emptiness shifted to tiled ceilings. I looked around and realized I was in a hospital. My sister sobbed over me saying I had been in a coma for months.

Beauty

Brooklyn Rood

Wirt County High School, Wirt County
Teacher: April Petrovsky
West Virginia State Winner
Third Place, Grades 9-10

On a crisp summer morning, an old man sits on a small rowboat. The water beneath it is still, liquid glass reflecting all that surrounds it. The hull of the boat cuts through it easily, barely making a ripple. Birds chirp in the morning sunlight. Spiders crawl over their webs nestled between blades of grass. Swans lead the way into the water, their children following after.

The man looks around with glassy eyes. Everything is so, so dark to him, but he can sense the light. Sight needn't be required to see beauty. His hearing tells the stories of that surrounding him. One for the birds. One for the spiders. One for the swans as they splash in the lake. One for the water. One for the trees. One for the sun and the light streaming from it. Stories of beauty, heard and written, in the mind of a blind man.

Telling these stories is easy for him. They're like children's stories. Without the sight to see reality, one starts creating their own. Almost like a dream. Our subconscious releases our aspirations and wishes into our dreams, and thus so does the mind of a blind man. When reality turns dark, our imaginations turn bright.

To look is to gaze, to have clear distinction of what's ahead. To see is something else entirely. To see is to comprehend, to understand. A man can look at a flower, and see it as a flower. A man can truly see the flower, as something full of beauty. It doesn't take a man with working eyes to see beauty. If he can truly see, then he can feel it all around him.

Even the eyes of a blind man can sense it. The man sitting in the rowboat envisions the world around him. His imagination is his new reality. The samples he's seen become his tools. His mind is his medium. With his experiences as paints, he creates the world he sees in the blankness of his own eyes.

Like a quill pen on parchment, it sinks into his mind. It fills every part of his soul. Beauty. He senses it, and sees it, like no other.

He takes a deep breath, breathing in the scent of fresh morning dew, trees, and cool water. The old man builds the scenery in his mind. In his reality. Trees full of chirping birds, each singing their own stories. Golden leaves providing caterpillars with enough food so that, one day, they too will see true beauty. Dew drops trapped in spider webs, blanketing over the grass. Deer and rabbits sniffing at foliage, deciding which to consume.

“Grandpa!” A soft voice echoes across the lake. A small girl stands on the dock, a teddy bear in one hand. She smiles a half toothed smile. “It’s time for breakfast grandpa!”

The old man turns in her direction, smiling. He has made a story for her too. That’s all his mind is now: stories. He glances around, sensing the beauty all around him. It’s a shame to be leaving it all, but he’ll be back tomorrow morning. He makes a promise to the wind rustling the leaves, and to the sun warming the water. He’ll be back. It will not have to go unappreciated. This thin hands grasp the paddles, beginning to row himself back to shore. The small lake is a map in his mind. He knows where everything is located. He knows the number of steps it takes to get from one point to another. He’s observed, despite not being able to see.

His papery hands grip the rough wood of the dock. Small hands hoist him up. He smiles, imagining the blonde-haired, blue-eyed child before him. He imagines her mother in her place, and the days they spent on the lake’s surface. Beauty. He sees it in this child.

“I’m coming dear,” he croaks. His voice is like sandpaper, rough and ancient. He hears her giggle as she slides her small hand into his. As she leads him home, the old man is conscious of every pebble beneath his feet. Even through the soles of his boots, he can feel the earth beneath him.

His senses reset, preparing themselves for his welcoming home. Instead of grass, he smells freshly chopped wood. Instead of water, he smells warm bread baking in the oven. His stories switch. They switch from that of the great outdoors, to something more domestic. The old man imagines swirls of

steam drifting into the air, escaping from a fresh loaf of bread. He imagines a roaring fire, and the crackling of freshly cut wood in its flames.

He feels the earth beneath him turn to rough wood as he steps onto the porch of his cabin. The smell of bread and warmth are stronger now. Strong enough for him to know, he's home. The little girl pulls him forward. He hears the door creak, imagining the living room laid out before him.

The old man imagines couches covered with homemade quilts. Rugs layering the floor so that the young one's feet may not get cold. These images aren't new to him. He knows them, because he's seen them. Long before he lost his sight.

He lived in this cabin. He helped his wife knit the rugs beneath his feet and the quilts heavying the couches. He wrapped their children in them on cold winter nights. He sang them lullabies and told them stories.

Now that's all he's stuck with: stories.

He feels the small girl tighten her grip on his hand. The old man smiles, thinking of the story he has for her. The one he'll tell her at midnight. A story of the world around them. A story of beauty.

Breaking the Block

Elizabeth Pearson

Washington High School, Jefferson County

Teacher: Ann Gentile

West Virginia State Winner

First Place, Grades 11-12

“Come on brain, think of things

Come on brain, think of things

Come on brain, be so smart...”

—Lin-Manuel Miranda

Leah was, for lack of a better term, in a slump. (She liked the word slump—for some reason it made her think of melting snow and lumps of sugar, so she put it on her mental list of BEST WORDS in between *malarkey* and *guru*.) She stared at the computer screen, and the depressingly blank Word document stared back at her. “I know what you’re doing,” she told it, narrowing her eyes. “And I’m not going to let you beat me—you stupid, disgusting—” She swore at it for a while, before finishing with a venomous, “...*writer’s block*.”

Ah, writer’s block! The bane of authors everywhere. It made Leah want to cry and shout and generously stuff her face with chocolate and ice cream and occasionally chocolate ice cream, if she was feeling particularly frustrated. The beginning of a novel was always the worst, because she could never decide how she wanted to start it. (That made it sound like she’d actually finished a novel, but in reality, she’d never gotten past the half-way point of writing a manuscript because she’d lose the will to write or get an even better idea...that she would never really finish.)

“Come on come on come on...” She groaned, pulling at her hair. Maybe if she begged her brain enough, it would take pity on her and give her an idea. Before that useless sack of meat and nerves could give her anything useful, her alarm rang, and she sighed. It was time to get back to real life.

The starving artist stereotype was not quite Leah’s style, as she preferred to eat three meals a day with a generous helping of snacks and junk food in between, and that required money. As did Wi-Fi,

electricity, water, and other essential things for life that a functioning adult (did she count as one?) required. So by day, the infamous (and unpublished, but she didn't want to think about that) L. K Morgan worked as...secretary Leah Tse. Her company didn't even have the decency to be as entertaining as Dunder Mifflin, or to have a super-secret government agency using them as a cover, so she sorted through paperwork and organized meetings and other things that children wanted to avoid doing for a career. But it paid the bills, and it was only a fifteen-minute walk from her apartment, so that was a plus.

Leah shrugged on her coat and slipped on her shoes before briskly walking out the door, Chanel handbag swinging on the crook of her elbow. She wasn't nearly rich enough to own a designer purse, but she found it in a bin at a thrift store and it made her feel fancy, so she bought it. Plus, she liked the word Chanel. It was on her ever-growing BEST WORDS LIST, which she would look at whenever she couldn't get past her writer's block and needed to fish for ideas. *Fandango, epiphany, bemused...*

She passed the bakery that made the *best* blueberry bagels and cannoli, and she could smell the delightful scent of freshly baked goods wafting out the door. Cannoli was another great word...maybe she could write about a bakery that sold souls instead of pastries, or maybe the food could be made of crushed dreams or something equally morbid. She toyed with the idea for a moment, before tossing it into mental storage when she saw the laundromat. She was not overly fond of the word laundromat, but the smudged windows and roaring washing machines made her think of a superhero's alter ego (and there was another awesome word—*alter ego*. Even if said word was technically two. She would put it in between *interloper* and *panache*).

Maybe she could write about a superhero who worked out of a laundromat to defeat the evil bakers who made doughnuts out of lost souls and muffins out of crushed dreams. She was kind of tired of watching movies where the superhero was obscenely rich, so she could write about a hero that struggled to make ends meet and wondered if they would be evicted because they weren't making much cash on account of their superhero shenanigans—yeah, she liked that idea. She liked it a lot.

She walked into the lobby, smiling at the receptionist and making the necessary pleasantries that society defined as polite, but the idea of her dirt-poor hero dogged her steps to her desk and around the office for the rest of the day.

Her name is Avery, she thought as she sorted through paperwork, her mind wandering through clouds of ideas and wading through waters of inspiration. Avery...last name something Polish, but not Kowalski. She's totally from a Polish family, they came across the pond during or after World War Two. She grew up in a nice-ish neighborhood, but she wasn't very good at school, (even though she's smart) so she never went to college and ended up running a laundromat...

On her break she looked up lists of Polish names—Bosko, Filipek, Ryba...Sadowski. She liked the sound of Sadowski, and apparently it meant garden or orchard in Polish. Avery Sadowski had a nice ring to it.

Leah wondered if Avery Sadowski kept a list of words in her head to ponder on and roll on her tongue to see if she enjoyed the taste of them. Was she dramatic? Did she understate things? What thoughts raced in her mind—or did her thoughts crawl, or fly, or swim? If she did have a list, what would her words be? *Uncanny, duality, plebian, smirk...*

Such thoughts filled her mind as she walked home, hands shoved in her pockets to protect them from the evening chill. *Avery Sadowski*, Leah thought with relish. A superhero who dressed in worn-out camouflage and a ski mask because spandex was stupid, and Kevlar was expensive. One who went to her son's track meets and stressed over making ends meet and keeping the streets safe and her business running and kicking the butts of evil bakers that dealt in stolen souls and broken dreams...

Avery Sadowski never thought she'd amount to much, Leah typed when she got home, finally ridding the computer of its depressing blankness. Words swirled in her head, and she thanked her brain or whatever ghost that whispered inspiration in her ear for thinking of something to break the block.

The Snail in the Snapdragon

Trinity Rollins

East Fairmont High School, Marion County

Teacher: Dina Hudson

West Virginia State Winner

Second Place, Grades 11-12

On a particularly sunny morning in mid-March, when the winter had just turned to spring, a single snapdragon stood tall and mighty in the middle of an otherwise barren flower bed. Barren, that is, if one did not consider the weeds and the miniature life forms that roamed the soil between them.

Among the ladybugs and butterflies lived a much different garden dweller. Mostly different due to his lack of legs, the lowly garden snail slowly but surely made his way to the base of the snapdragon and prepared himself for a tiresome climb. This practice had become a routine for the snail, at least when it had rained the night before as it had on this specific morning. He wished to make his way to the raindrops still resting on the flower's leaves before the sun took them all away. Where else was he to get such a refreshing sip of water?

On this day, the snail was running rather late on his climb. Perhaps he had slept in too late, but whatever it was that caused his delay must have been fate. This day was the first day on which the garden snail witnessed the dazzling petals of the snapdragon spread wide for all to see. He had always been too early to be able to enjoy the flower's glorious wake-up call. On his hefty trek up the trunk of the snapdragon, the snail was so mesmerized by the beauty before him that his usual leafy pit-stop completely slipped his memory. He kept ascending until he was able to crawl inside one of the beautiful blooms of purple, leaving a faint trail of slime on the petal behind him.

The snail settled down, lying his face between the soft petals of pastel. When he gazed out from the flowery hideout, the snail saw a view of the garden he found almost as marvelous as the snapdragon herself. This flower had struck a feeling within the snail that he'd never felt before. He was inspired by her strength and might, and in such admiration of her boldness and delicacy. If it were not for his thirst,

the snail decided he would have stayed in the clutch of her petals for an eternity. Feeling a bit melancholy, the snail made his way back down to his usual leaf, leaving the blooms behind him.

From that day on, the snail ran late on his upward journey so often that it became his norm. It was no accident, now. Day after day, the snail visited his lovely flower. He no longer minded the length of the trip, for he could never grow tired of the sight of her lavender elegance. He would curl up in her middle, occasionally drifting off to sleep in the gentle cradle her petals provided. Some days he would stay for such a long time that the two would watch the sun set into the horizon together. The once lowly snail felt larger than life when in his floral penthouse. It was not of difficulty for the other garden dwellers to see that the snail had fallen in love. His eyes were held higher, and his shell seemed to gleam brighter than ever before. Yes, he was as in love as a snail could ever imagine to be.

The snail continued to meet with the snapdragon for several more weeks. Together, they watched the spring turn into summer. Her petals transformed into a gentle shield from the fiery sun.

However, the summer did not last forever. On his daily returns, the snail began to take notice of some unsettling changes in the appearance of his lover. With each passing day, her color seemed to diminish into nothingness. As the temperature stooped, her petals followed suit. The lavenders changed to browns. Her gentle plumage became rough and brittle. The snail became fearful of climbing her stalk, for he did not wish to injure her. She had only fallen ill, he believed. This would soon pass, and she'd again be able to guard him from even the harshest blizzard. If only the snail's fantasies held true.

The snapdragon's condition continued to worsen. Her browning blooms sank heavily to the soil floor. Never had the snail seen her look so forlorn. Her emotion was contagious, and caused the snail to mope about, his own head practically dragging the ground. The day he could see there was nothing left that he could do, the snail curled up at her fragile base and did not exit his shell for the rest of the evening despite how frigid the air grew in the night.

He grew exhausted of waiting for what he realized would not come, and the frost caused his body to ache. Though some part of him was still hesitant, the snail burrowed far beneath the topsoil and fell into a deep slumber until spring dared to show its deceitful face again.

And show its face, it did. When the snail awoke from his final dream of his violet enchantress, he slowly ascended to the surface. He couldn't help but be reminded of his past journeys up the snapdragon's stem. The thoughts of her did not so much excite him anymore, but rather brought him a rather gloomy feeling. Little did he know what awaited him above ground.

As his eyes adjusted to the sunlight, the snail was happily greeted by several insect friends, new and old. He then made his way out from dim shade of the weeds to feel the true sunlight warm his shell. Taking in his mostly familiar surroundings, the snail noticed only one thing out of place.

Where his darling once stood tall and proud, there was a stout green sprout in her place. At first, the snail was unsure of this supposed replacement. He avoided the sprout for many days, much like the rain avoided the flower bed. From afar, the snail could see the sprout growing thirsty, just as he'd been all those months ago. Struck with a pang of sympathy, he nudged a particularly dewy leaf over to the sprout, pouring the water onto its roots.

It was then when the snail noticed the wee buds of purple hiding throughout the sprout's foliage. His love was coming back to him, for she was reborn! The snail continued to collect dew-filled leaves, doing whatever he could to assist the babe's growth.

A week went by and the snail could rest under her leaves again. Two weeks, and he could practically lounge in her flower. Six weeks, and it was as if the two had never spent a day apart. What was lost had been found, and many a summer sunset awaited them.

Ma Vita Nuova

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The first day, there will be something about it that takes your breath away. There's a quality to that day that seems almost magical, unbelievable, something that makes you know in your soul of souls that it is special. You feel the start of something new and that makes your veins pulse with live blood. Your stomach twists into knots that even a Boy Scout could not undo. Friends are texted and mothers are gushed to, reveling in all the small details of how they asked you out or the nuance of the way his hand moved towards yours at the lunch table (almost imperceptible, perhaps, but you noticed). Everything is excited and alive. The world burns with a fire that only you can see, the sun shines a little bit brighter, and the phone in your pocket buzzes a lot more often. Suddenly, you are no longer alone. Your person is at your side, ready to take on the world with you. It fills you up with flowers and rainbows and glitter. You are warm.

The 61st day, you celebrate. Instagram posts and Snapchat stories flash through memories of two months of you. Not "you two", not "you guys", *you*. You share private moments, stolen kisses in stairwells and hand squeezes in the middle of class. Friends coo over how great you are together and how perfectly you fit into one another like puzzle pieces. You don't need to be told; you already know. He glances at you and you at him, and faces grow flushed. Ears and cheeks burn, and you turn away. For a second, you swear you saw his eyes spell out love. They grew lighter, and his smile was tender and curved in that oh-so-right way. Your own mouth curves upward of its own accord, a product of the jitters that have yet to fade away. You are warm.

The 156th day, you have your first fight. It's angry, and ugly. There was another girl sending him messages, and he had the audacity to reply. Of course he did; he's just like the others anyway. Tears fall hot and heavy. He tries to hug you and you push against his chest, fighting desperately. You don't want

this love; you don't need it. It isn't worth the inevitable heartbreak. Don't you remember last time? As his arms grow tighter around you, the warmth of his body spreads and you melt like chocolate. You're gooey and messy, collapsing into a puddle of yourself against him. He promises never again, and though you've heard it a million times before, you take it in as if it were food and you were starving. That reassurance is enough, for now. There are words spoken, but you don't remember them. You don't need to, because it won't happen again. (Right?) You think you feel warm.

On the 313th day, he mentions marriage. It's casual, just as if he assumes it's going to happen. The word is thrown into a conversation about college and futures. He mentions you two getting married in among these other concrete plans that he has made, and your heart skips several beats. You break into a cold sweat, but a good one. It isn't nervousness or trepidation, though they are present. It's excitement and a feeling of knowing you're wanted. Someone wants you around for the rest of their lives, in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer, till death do you part. There's a security in it, something that tells you to relax. You smile at him, and when he asks you why, you say nothing. Perhaps he doesn't realize what he just said. But you did. And that makes all the difference. You feel warmer than ever.

On the 365th day, you graduate. Donned in your cap and gown, you feel more grown-up than you ever have. You see yourself, for the first time, for the adult that you are about to become. Childhood is over. Here is the rest of your life in that tassel and that diploma and that handshake. You sit together on the football field, sharing in the experience of shedding what you know for something entirely foreign. You hold hands through the speeches. The closest friend you have turns around and waves at you. You wave back at him. There is a sharp pressure to your hand, enough to cause pain and leave your tendons stinging. You gasp and meet your other half's glare. Timidly, you put your hand down, giving your friend a faint smile. He's right; there will be time for socializing after everything is said and done. Diploma in hand, you walk with him to his car, spinning your promise ring. You're not sure how you feel.

On the 1,081st day, he hits you for the first time. You never saw it coming; there's no way you could have. You had moved in together and everything had gone fine. At least for a few weeks. Today, there was yelling. From him, cries of rage and harsh words that left brands on your skin that you felt like

everyone could see. *Stupid. Ungrateful. Not good enough.* His hand makes contact with your cheek and you stumble against the kitchen counter, stunned. Tears well up in your eyes as you touch the skin, feeling it radiate heat and anger. He radiates the same rage as the mark you bear, storming away from you. Between sobs, you call your mother. She takes you home and cradles you until you no longer feel the burning handprint you know is there. It is the last day. For the first time, you feel cold.

The 4,567th day is the day you finally feel warm again. Your daughter runs around the kitchen in her bare feet, cookie dough smeared on the apron your mother sewed for her. You smile, and wipe some batter off of her face. She always wanted to be a chef, just like her mommy. The road to that moment, that precious contact between a mother and her child, had been rocky and filled with potholes. There was therapy to reverse the damage that *he* had done. (You don't say his name anymore. It isn't worth your breath.) It brought you back, restoring you to a version of your former self; you are simply more weathered, broken in. There was self-discovery, for the first time in your adult life. You were able to realize yourself without another twisting around you, pulling you to the depths of who they were and making you no more than them. You had been made into a weed, an insignificant flower with no sunlight or water. You blossomed in the years after, becoming the woman that had been trapped inside. She is fierce and independent and honest and kind, and you think you might just love her. Then along came the new him, and her, and a house of your very own that looked nothing like the apartment you left behind. The smell of freshly-baked chocolate chip cookies wafts through your kitchen and you smile. You are warm because you are happy, and nothing could be quite so good as that.