

*2021 West Virginia
Young Writers Contest
Anthology*

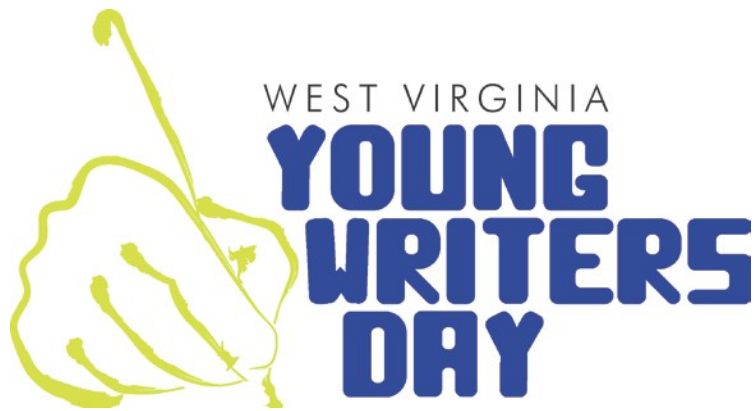


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Introduction

We proudly present the anthology of the 2021 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 37 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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West Virginia Department of Education
Marshall University College of Education and Professional Development
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With assistance from West Virginia Books*

Acknowledgements

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Penny the Penguin's Problem

Sophia Boggs

Big Otter Elementary School, Clay County

Teacher: Amanda Douglas

West Virginia State Winner

First Place, Grades 1-2

Penny wants to catch a fish for her mom's birthday. She knows it is her favorite food. Penny knows it will make her mom very happy to have a fish for her birthday. Penny can't find a fishing pole, so she uses a jar. She looks in the kitchen and finds a glass jar. Penny goes in her backyard where her pond is. There are a lot of fish in her pond. She sticks the jar in the water and moves it around, but the fish are too far away for her to use the jar.

Her big sister Peggy gives her some advice. "You can use a net with a long handle," Peggy says. The two sisters go into Peggy's room to get a net from her closet. Penny goes back to her pond. Penny tries to catch a fish with the net, but the fish are too fast for her to use the net.

Paul, her big brother, sees Penny outside and goes to see what she is doing. Penny tells him about her problem. Paul lets Penny use his fishing pole. They go to his bedroom and find his fishing pole leaned up against his door. Penny and Paul go in the backyard. He teaches her how to use the fishing pole, by using a rubber fish on the end to teach her how to cast. Penny then puts a hook and some bait on the fishing line. She casts the fishing line into the pond and waits. Penny feels a tug on her line and begins to reel it in. There is a fish on her line! She catches a fish for her mom's birthday. Penny's mom is very surprised Penny did all that work to catch a fish just for her!

The Joys of Baking and Cooking

Kara McKinney

Welch Elementary School, McDowell County

Teacher: Elizabeth Scott

West Virginia State Winner

Second Place, Grades 1-2

The sweet smell of cinnamon made the house smell good. The heat came over my face as I opened the oven door to show my first batch of snickerdoodles. Small balls of sugary cookies were in there baking and they smelled great. I smiled as I thought of the joy these cookies would bring to my friends and family. They like to say to me that I am the witch on Hansel and Gretel. Joking that I am fattening kids up then forget to eat them. I don't love being in the same category as an evil witch. But I enjoy seeing my friends and family happy when they eat my baking.

There is something about a kitchen filled with the smell of baking that makes me feel relaxed. I find joy in sharing these sweets with friends and by giving to people around me. The smile that people have when they eat my sweets makes me happy and feel good.

For as long as I can remember, baking has always been a part of my life. Time spent in the kitchen with my family, mom, and aunt is what made me want to bake. Baking helps me when I have had a bad day or something is wrong. Some of my funniest memories is with my mom in the kitchen baking. We would sometimes put a little icing on each others noses. Baking makes me happy cause it makes the people around me happy they try my sweets.

They say that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach. But to me that's the way to anyone's heart! The time that I spend in the kitchen with my mom and family and watching everyone happy when they eat my sweets. Is what makes me happy..

The View From Above

Corbin See

Romney Elementary School, Hampshire County

Teacher: LuAnn Walker

West Virginia State Winner

Third Place, Grades 1-2

Long ago, there was a guy named Captain Joe Wild. He was the captain of the country soldiers called the Bascars. One winter day in January, he rode his horse over the hill. He was angry because the city people below had different lifestyles. They had different clothes, cars, and houses. Captain Wild walked into the city and told the mayor he declared war. The Empires were the city people. They prepared their weapons for war with Captain Jake Liberty.

The Bascars only had a few days to make the battlefield and build their forts to attack the Empires. They tamed bears and trained them to take into the war to help guard their forts with pitchforks. The Bascars made their crossbows and forty arrows for each soldier. The Empires bought blasters to blast ice balls at the bears and the Bascars. Some of the Empires had ice blasters and others had snowball launchers.

The war took place on January 25, 1936. Some of the Empires hid in the bushes around the field to try to get in the Bascars' forts and defeat them. The other Empire soldiers were following Captain Liberty's orders to blast snowballs and ice balls as much as they could. The bears began to attack the Empires with the pitchforks. The Bascars started to fire their crossbows. After a month of war, all of a sudden, the mayor set free a herd of buffalos on the battlefield. The Bascars and the Empires had to work together to defeat the buffalos. By working together, they learned that they were a team and needed to fire the mayor. The judge said the captains should be the new mayors together. The new mayors were ready to combine their lifestyles.

Reflection in The Mirror

Sophia Lowther

Leading Creek Elementary School, Lewis County

Teacher: Athena Morris

West Virginia State Winner

First Place, Grades 3-4

Into the mirror she ponders as she stretches her long limbs. She sits, sleek hair, dark as midnight, and stares out of eyes with golden flecks at the reflection in front of her. She squints her eyes and tilts her head as she wonders who it is that stares back at her. She daydreams of playing on warm summer days, riding a bike, and swimming in the lake, evenings of hide and seek in the woods. Of going on vacation to the beach and building sandcastles in the sand beneath a clear blue sky as she listens to the waves gently brushing the shore. So many different things she could do! A new pair of jeans that fit just right, a summer dress in a flower print of blue or perhaps green, with earrings to match. All these things she daydreams about.

Within the mirror she can see herself climbing up on the school bus, wondering what new adventure she'll find. At school, something catches her eye as she walks along the hallway. A dust ball floats on the breeze. She chases it, starting and stopping quickly, pouncing at the last minute, trying to capture it, and failing. It floats down the stairs and she follows, grabbing and snatching until she snags it, getting peculiar looks from her friends and teachers as they pass. But, she goes on about her day without a care.

When she arrives home, she runs inside and talks about her day. As she talks, she wonders what tomorrow will bring. She sees in the mirror her other self, answering the phone to talk and giggle with a friend. Or maybe dinner with her family in a restaurant. She could order a nice fish dinner, her pink tongue licking her lips. These thoughts are making her hungry. She closes her eyes and imagines playing chase in the field with her brothers and sisters, picnicking under a shade tree as they laugh and torment each other. She smiles at these thoughts as she stretches and walks away.

With one last glance at the mirror, she says goodbye to the reflection she sees. “Oh,” she thinks, “if only I was a human, instead of a cat names Dorie. Meow, Meow!”

Unwanted

Ellie Burns

White Sulphur Springs Elementary School, Greenbrier County

Teacher: Heather Hefner

West Virginia State Winner

Second Place, Grades 3-4

I did not ask for the squawking. I did not ask for the name calling, nor did I ask for him.

That dumb, annoying parrot. Apparently, Grandma has been teaching it to say some unkind words. Mom says to keep it in my room so it can't run away, but I *want* it to run away. I would be pleased to see it fly away, to hear quiet when I sleep. I've argued with my parents many times, but it's always settled with "take care of it for now." We all know that means forever. It *is* pretty. Its red, blue, and yellow feathers gleam in the sunlight. When there is no sun, his feathers dull.

Today, against my better judgement, Mom said to take it outside to play in the snow.

Sigh It felt like a T.A.S.K. (Mom's way of saying chores.) I was so hesitant. Reluctantly I brought him out. I instantly sighed. Then gasped. I was amazed. Who knew he was so beautiful in the snow. He immediately started rolling in the white, fluffy, blanket of snow. He made a snowman that was shaped like a parrot. I started to question why I hated him so much. He was so cute there, in the snow. I put on his little scarf and hat I made for my doll a day ago. Now, he stopped shivering and made 10 little snowmen. I will Not confirm that I helped him. I will always deny it. Even now, I could see that I was starting to grow to like him. Even... Love him.

The days went on. I loved him so much more than I ever had. We made snowmen and read together. I even taught him basic math and science. At night he would fall asleep on the bed. He loved me and I loved him.

One, sad, blustery Friday, he flew away. I cried. I wouldn't get out of bed on Saturday or Sunday. As 20 days passed on, his little snowmen began to melt. I cried then too.

5 years passed. I nearly forgot about my parrot (I named him Sam.). I heard some scratching behind the door. It was him. “Sam!” my 16-year-old self-cried. This happy, blustery Friday was the best one yet.

The Oak Tree

Eliza Canter

French Creek Elementary School, Upshur County

Teacher: Christine Hull

West Virginia State Winner

Third Place, Grades 3-4

For the past several years, I would visit with a neighbor often, during the summers, on their farm. Very often they would invite friends and families to join together for a picnic under their oak tree. I was told the oak tree is 60 feet tall and 60 feet wide and provided a nice shade for outdoor gatherings. There was a nice swing hanging from the oak tree branch and us kids, and some parents, really enjoyed swinging, it was so relaxing. The food dishes that was prepared and shared by everyone tasted so good. We all were happy to try new and different food, of course the watermelon and desserts were the favorite. The area was set up to spend most of the day playing crochet, horseshoes, cornhole toss, and volleyball. Some would bring their balls and gloves to practice throwing and catching. The oak tree made it very nice to just be there.

The oak tree was planted in 1941 by the neighbor's mother. Because of the size and long life, oaks are a symbol of "honor, nobility, and wisdom". The oak tree is approximately eighty years old now and it is every ones favorite place to gather for picnics and to spend time together. The branches of leaves are thick and beautiful and on a hot summer day you can depend on the cool shade it gives you.

During the late autumn months the leaves turn shades of orange, red, yellow, the colors are so pretty you visit it as often as you can. Always planning another picnic before the weather gets too cold.

Acorns from the oak tree provide a food supply to a variety of animals and birds. Blue jays and woodpeckers stock pile for winter food. The mice, wild turkeys, raccoons, black bears and squirrels all eat the acorns. I have watched the squirrels gather a mouthful and scamper away.

I will always look forward to joining friends under the oak tree each summer reconnecting, sharing our food and becoming more experienced with our games. I like bringing a large container of water and squirt guns. Whatever we plan to do is great as long as we have it at our favorite place under the oak tree.

The Life of an ER Nurse

Kamryn Buck

Warm Springs Middle School, Morgan County

Teacher: Chuck Walker

West Virginia State Winner

First Place, Grades 5-6

Beep, Beep, Beep. The alarm goes off. She climbs out of bed and into the shower. It's 1500hours, or 3:00p.m. She works the nightshift, so this is her morning. Her eyes look tired and her movements are slow. That doesn't stop her though. She cooks us dinner and makes time to do some crafts with me before she returns to work. She puts on her navy blue scrubs and her nurse's cap to cover her long blonde hair. She kisses us goodbye and says "I love you, I'll see you in the morning" as she does every evening before leaving. She is an ER nurse. She is my mom.

She pulls into the parking lot at work and puts on her simple face mask before walking into the hospital. The sign on the door now reads that no one is permitted inside the hospital without a mask covering their face. It's 18:30 hours, 6:30 p.m, she swipes her badge to clock in. As she walks through her emergency department to her locker, she is seeing every stretcher occupied with patients and some even in the hallways waiting for beds. She glances up at the isolation signs on many of the doors. Covid precautions, another covid precaution, and several more covid precautions signs hang on the doors. Her heart sinks in her chest a little. She's worried for her patients. She's sad for their families. She's nervous that she might bring the virus home to us. She's an ER nurse. She is my mom.

Back at her locker, she grabs her bag full of supplies. In her bag is a N95 mask, goggles, and a face shield. She places on her personal protective equipment, also known as her PPE, and out into the department she goes. She is ready for whatever the next 12.5 hours may throw at her.

She's ready to fight for complete strangers. She's ready to fight for you and me. She's an ER nurse. She is my mom.

Next, it is time for her to receive report on her patients. Her dayshift coworkers start to list each patient, their complaints, their test results, and their plan of care. She quickly ranks the patients in her mind, sickest at the top. This helps her plan her next move, who she will need to see first and who will require the most support. Many of her patients today are covid positive or probable covid positive. She tries to cluster the care of those patients in an attempt to prevent unnecessarily using the scarce PPE that is available. She quickly starts going to each room, one by one, carefully placing on the required PPE and also carefully taking it off as to not have a break in her PPE and possibly expose herself. She is an ER nurse. She is my mom.

She talks loudly so that her patients can hear and understand her through her thick N95 mask and her face shield. Behind her mask, she still smiles at them in hopes that they can see the smile through her eyes. She provides them with not only the medical support that they need, but the emotional support as well. Due to the covid restrictions, many patients can't have any of their family at the bedside. She tries to comfort them with her touch, through her gloved hand, because she knows that a nurse's touch may be the only touch they feel in the coming weeks. She's an ER nurse. She is my mom.

She assesses their vital signs. She checks their mental status. She listens to their lungs, their heart, their abdomen. She's carefully looking for any abnormality or anything that may cause the patient to decline. She places them on the cardiac monitor. She inserts intravenous lines into their arms. She draws their blood to be sent to the lab. She hangs their intravenous fluids. She administers the medications that are needed. She continues to monitor them, watching and hoping for even the slightest improvement. She is an ER nurse. She is my mom.

It's almost 1900hrs, or 7:00a.m. It's nearing the end of her shift. A weight is lifted off of her shoulders. This shift was better than most of her other shifts. There were no cardiac arrests. No ones heart has stopped. No one has stopped breathing. In the life of a nurse, this is a good shift. She gives report to the dayshift nurses as they come into the unite. She removed all of her personal protective equipment, changes into clean clothes, clocks out, and jumps in her car to head home. She walks in the door, gives me a huge hug, then drives me to school. She is an ER nurse. She is my mom.

I Am A Patriot

Brayden Collins

Ashton Elementary School, Mason County

Teacher: Alison Townson
West Virginia State Winner
Second Place, Grades 5-6

My name is Patriot, but it hasn't always been that name. I am the most smart, handsome, protective, and courageous friend I know. Well, that is what my best friend tells me anyway. My eyes are blue, like ice on a snowy winter's day. I have medium-length, rough-coated, brown, and black fur. What? You didn't know? I am a border collie and I am a patriot.

Today is a scorching, 98-degree July summer day, and I am starting to regret having such handsomely thick fur. I can hear myself panting loudly like the day I saw a cunning squirrel. He was trying to invade the homeland. "Attack!" I barked as I ran toward the intruder like a B-52 fighter jet. I snap out of this thought from the instrumentation sounds blaring "O say can you see by the dawn's early light what so proudly we hailed at the twilight's last gleaming..." I open my eyes and jump to attention. I can see my boy standing in the middle of the yard. It was like I was seeing Francis Scott Key from the War of 1812. He is standing tall, chest out, right hand raised to the corner of his eye, and proudly he pays tribute to those who are fighting and have fought for our freedom. I quickly march toward him, and lift myself to stand on two legs. I stand tall, chest out, right paw raised, and I pay tribute to those who are fighting and have fought for our freedom. I glance toward my boy because he makes me so proud. The national anthem ends, and I immediately drop down on all fours.

Now, let me tell you about my boy. He is tall, slender, smart, handsome, and courageous. He has dark brown fur that is slick to his head. I find him quite funny-looking because his entire body is bald. He kind of looks like one of those fancy 4-H goats. The ones where they shave their body, except their head. I think they are called show goats. He has blue eyes that match the color of my dog bowl. His name is Brayden, but that hasn't always been his name.

"Come on, Boy!" calls Brayden.

I bark "Race you!" and I immediately take off running towards the woods. I look back only to see Brayden gaining on me. Brayden yells, "Bang! Bang!" I stop and fall over dead. The second of many tricks that I was taught. My boy Brayden army crawls over to me to scratch my belly. Oh, how I love it. He leans into me. I growl, "Operation Rolling Thunder!"

We both leap to our feet and into the jungle.

Quietly, we sneak through the tall trees and high grasses. We are careful not to be spotted by the enemy. The North Vietnamese are communists and we are there to help the South Vietnamese, ordered by President Johnson.

"Look over there" sneered Brayden.

"Grrr, the Enemy!" I growled. Brayden gestures for me to stay low until the soldiers move past. Brayden remarked, "let's flank them." I snapped, "That's what I said!" I stayed put as I watched Brayden climb the tall mountain in front of us.

It seemed to take forever. I found myself drifting off and dreaming about when I was a young pup. Brayden wasn't always my boy. I had another boy, but he was a much bigger boy. He had a little more fur than Brayden on his body, but he was funny-looking too. You see my big boy's name was Sergeant. Well, that was what everyone called him. One day he explained to me that he had to leave and fight some very bad people in a place called Afghanistan.

"Take care of the homeland 9-11," called Sergeant.

I whimpered "yes sir!" and began licking the single salty tear that ran down his face. Months went by and two uniformed servicemen holding a neatly folded flag knocked on the door. Sergeant was killed in battle. I howled for weeks and would search for Sergeant through the window. On a crisp fall morning, I spotted a boy walking to school. I pressed my warm wet nose to the window to get a closer look. He looked my way and stopped. I watched him stand tall, chest out, and raise his right hand to his eye. He saluted the American flag that had been lowered to half-staff several weeks before. For the first time in a long time, I could feel my tail start to wag again. I watched as the boy turned and continued walking past the house. I spent the next several months watching the boy stop and salute the flag in my yard. My mind began to race,

and every day I looked forward to seeing him. “What was his name?” I pondered. I will call him Patriot. Eventually, I made my way to the yard so I could introduce myself. As patriot walked closer, I could feel the excitement bursting inside. My tail was wagging so fast, I thought it would grab wind, and I would hover like a helicopter! Patriot stopped as I knew he would. When he went to salute, I lifted myself up on two legs and saluted. The first of many tricks I was taught. Patriot asked my name and I barked, “9-11.”

“What’s your name?” I barked. “My name is Brayden,” he said. I repeated, “Brayden. Hmmm.” he then asked, “Who taught you to salute?”

“You did” I replied anxiously.

Brayden knelt down beside me, rubbing behind my ears as I jumped all over him. I began licking his face. He giggled uncontrollably. I was the happiest dog in the world. Brayden had to continue to school, but he told me he would see me soon. After school was over, I could see Brayden walking toward me in the distance. I couldn’t control myself. I began to run at him like a Boeing X-37. Just as I got to him he yelled, “Bang! Bang!” I plowed straight into him. He laughed and said, “You are supposed to fall over and play dead.”

“I will remember next time!” I barked. Brayden announced “I’m going to call you Patriot.” I liked the name.

Finally, I awoke from my slumber to the sound of my boy Brayden. He was yelling “Attack!” No one messes with my boy. I ran toward the enemy barking, growling, and snapping. “The enemy is eradicated.” I growled. Brayden declared, “The war is over!”

We ended our game by honoring those who lost their lives. I watched as Brayden lowered the flag to half-staff. We stood tall, chests out, and saluted. I looked toward my boy, Brayden, and was so proud. He is a patriot.

24 Hours of Le Mans

Isaac Cook

Rivesville Elementary/Middle School, Marion County

Teacher: Kelsey Offutt

West Virginia State Winner

Third Place, Grades 5-6

“Hey!” yelled Mitch. “Good luck nut job!” he shouted with a grin from the back of the pit.

Mitch is my boss and coach.

“Tom Kristen to the starting line please,” said the intercom. I followed instructions and bolted to my car. I was driving a TWR Porsche WSC. The car had a roar like a brave lion. I got to the starting line and I could hear the murmur of the crowd. “How you feeling?” asked Mitch on my com. “The first race can beat you up in France.”

“Yeah, the terrain beats you up even more.” I replied.

He laughed and said, “*Voor de overwinning.*” *Voor de overwinning* means ‘for the win’ in Dutch.

Finally, the light turned red... 3...2..... 1.... and blinked to green. “*VRAAA,*” roared the engine. The Porsche took off.

“Remember, newbie is in last place, you’ve got to make your way up *fast.*” said Mitch in my ear. I swerved around a McLaren and made my way to 4th gear. All I wanted to do was make it to first in my class. There are classes for different cars, and I’m in the LMP class. I am racing for Joest Racing GmbH with two other drivers. If you win in your class you get honor, but if you beat all classes... you go down in history.

Hour seven was rough. One of the other drivers from my team took over, lost six places in total, and ended up last for our class. When I took over, I tried to get ahead, but a BMW was killing me. I hit 3rd gear and tried to go around him but I just *couldn’t*. Finally, we hit a turn. The adrenaline in my body shot to my foot and I stomped on the pedal, went into 5th gear and passed him. I was second in my class at this point.

“Hey, Marc is coming up on you,” Mitch urged. Marc was a driver for Courage and was good at what he did. I was going 150mph and was still coming. Luckily, he got behind someone and was trapped. I hit the pits and let Stephan take over for a while.

Hour fourteen: I was driving and felt pretty good, other than being tired and achy. It was 10:00pm,

and I was holding myself in first place for my class. “Hey Mitch,” I said. “We have a big problem.”

“Oh lord, what?” he asked.

“It involves number two.”

“What do you mean? You’re in fir...oh dear,” he said. “YOU JUST PASSED THE PITS!”

“You gotta go when you gotta go.”

“Okay, whatever... just speed through,” he said. I finally got to the pit, ate some pizza and waited for my next shift. 10 hours left, power through.

Hour seventeen was *hard*. The other cars were gone, all DNF’s (did not finish). By 1:00 in the morning we were all tired; drivers were crashing from exhaustion. I was incredibly sore, but only seven hours left.

“TOM, WATCH OUT!” screamed Mitch on the coms. A Nissan swerved in front of me and crashed, smoke billowing out of the engine. I swerved left and skimmed the wall. I signaled to see if he was okay, but he was fine so I got moving quick. I kept driving and realized something was wrong...the shifter was weird. I stopped by the pits and let the mechanics see it. It wasn’t that bad but was certainly not good.

“Come on, guys,” I tried to rush them. Fifth place went shooting by. “COME ON!” I yelled. I saw sixth place’s headlights and the mechanics weren’t done. They finally finished and Michele (a French driver) hopped in and took off to sixth place in total, second in our class. “I’m gonna catch some Z’s,” I said. I thought long and hard about the race, then fell asleep.

The last hour was 7:00am. I was taking my shift when Mitch said on the coms: “Hey Tom...”

“Yeah?” I replied.

“You’re gonna have to finish this,” he said. “Michele and Stephan are all worn out,”

“Okay, *laten we dit doen*.” I said. That means ‘let’s do this’ in Dutch.

Last minute, I was tied in laps with Anders. He was right behind me and the whole world was in slow motion. We went around the corner to the final stretch; it was a drag race. I hit sixth gear, put the pedal to the floor and hit the finish line a second earlier! I stepped out of the car and could hear the announcer. “And our 1997 Le Mans winner is Tom Kristen for his first Le Mans race.” The whole world was a blur. When I got out of the car my team was at the top of the podium.

Wilting Flowers

Lucy Lambert

Mountaineer Middle School, Monongalia County

Teacher: Heather Swanger

West Virginia State Winner

First Place, Grades 7-8

I watched the others mill around the old, mossy yard, chatting idly in an attempt to cover the silence brought by the night. Large trees towered over the entities, blocking out the drizzling rain that threatened to soak every animal, person, and thing to their cores.

Though drenched and heavy, the Spanish moss waved in the wind, hanging from thick branches of a tree of which I didn't know the name. It made me wonder to whom the plant was waving. Did the moss have friends outside of the gate? Why did it wave throughout the day and night, during the sun and rain? Did it wave to the night-walkers and day-walkers who stalked the paved roads, just like I did?

A low, mournful song rang through the yard as two lovers tried to calm a whining baby. Their lullabies were in a language I didn't recognize, but I listened along with everyone else, as the lovers' quiet voices crescendoed off the trees and gate and stones, echoing the endless song of mourning and loss. Though the others listened to the sad tune, they still tried to talk over it, to cover the dreariness with nostalgia and memories, but this place was a breeding ground for tears and dread, and its effects couldn't be overcome.

Two sisters played old schoolyard games, clapping and chanting, hopping about. Their smiles didn't reach their eyes.

Two boys drew in the dirt with sticks. One of the branches snapped, and the boys couldn't find a new one.

A woman and man talked, but they couldn't hold a conversation, so they fell quiet.

Even though the gated plot was filled with talking and singing, movement and activity, the night never felt so cold and lonely.

I sat on my stone, listening to the murmurs from the friends in the crowd. I never joined in on the conversation, though, and neither did the boy that always sat next to me. Instead, we watched quietly, observing those who remembered and retold stories of their lives. They recounted their tales every night, as they never really could spin new ones. The boy and I had no stories to tell.

The boy next to me sat on his stone, his head tilted as if trying to listen in on a specific discussion, but he looked away when it grew dull. His emotionless eyes found mine. Neither of us smiled or began an exchange. We did not know each other or share a past. We were both alone together, tucked into the corner of the gated plot.

I looked down at the stone he sat upon, filthy and bland, identical to mine.

Nobody bothered to wash off the grime and algae that held our gray rocks because why would they? Our rocks were not pretty like the others. Ours were not in the shape of an angel or a spire. Ours had no pretty engravings, no lovely carvings that made people look. Ours had no words that held meaning. We had nothing, and we never would.

No one cried, gave us flowers, or shared small stories carried on hushed breaths to our stones as they did when visiting others.

Night-walkers started to retreat to shaded homes as the day-walkers emerged to bask in the warm sun rays. The rusted iron gates were opened to the walkers.

A few walkers came and left, roaming around and leaving gifts for those sitting on their stones. Some of the stone-sitters cried as the family they hadn't seen in years approached to whisper or cry or just stand for a few moments before leaving.

I was not envious of these people. Why would I be? I did not remember my own family or even my last name. Why should I miss something I don't remember having?

I was expecting just another day of watching the day-walkers flit about and stone sitters crying, but my suspicions were proven wrong.

A small girl with what appeared to be her parent approached the low iron edging that bordered our stones and read a small plaque that I couldn't see at my angle. Whatever it said usually deterred the reader from walking further and looking at our stones.

The girl glanced at her parent and murmured something, to which they agreed. The girl and parent were crying, but smiling, which wasn't an uncommon sight here. What was an uncommon sight was the small child stepping beyond the plaque.

She held a bouquet of flowers from which she pulled two, burgundy and white, and presented them to our stones, before turning and running back to her guardian.

Though I knew the flowers would wilt, like everything here did, I couldn't help but smile softly at the child who could spare a gift for an unmarked grave.

Zombies

Claire Johnson

Huntington Middle School, Cabell County

Teacher: Leann Haines

West Virginia State Winner

Second Place Grades 7-8

Alone, sleeping soundly, a young girl rested. Not far from her bed lay a broken clock, its screen smashed, and its plug pulled. Long hours the girl lay, sleeping soundly without the screaming of the little clock. All was quiet in her little house, silent without the voices and footsteps of her parents, who had left for their jobs long before. The girl didn't like it when her parents left; she felt alone.

Entertain yourself, her parents would say. But she knew the kind of entertainment her parents meant. The kind that started with a screen and ended with despair, detachment, and a pounding headache. She'd much rather explore, read, and create. Boredom was a more vigilant parent than those who had conceived her—boredom, at least, taught her lessons, and roused her creativity. *Why can't you be like the other children?* Her parents would ask. *They are all perfectly happy with their devices.* But the little girl didn't want to be like the other kids. She didn't want to be a zombie.

She stumbled down the stairs, rubbing sleep from her eyes. Her house was perfect: every surface was spotless, not a single thing out of place, as if no one lived in the house at all—which she sometimes felt was true. She grabbed her coat off the hanger, and stepped outside into the crisp, autumn air. She enjoyed the outdoors, to her parents' great displeasure. *You'll track mud through the house*, they would scold. *I know you like to go outside, but why don't you just watch a nature documentary instead?* The little girl didn't understand her parents, and they didn't understand her either.

She gazed at the trees lining their grassy field. She enjoyed the park, but it always pained her to see it. Every person sitting on the benches, enthralled in the virtual lives they desperately

threw themselves into. She would watch from afar, noticing little details. She was very good at that, noticing details. Her parents called it a nuisance, annoyed that she paid more attention to other people than her screen. *Your device teaches you things much more important than observation.* The little girl disagreed.

She walked along the stream watching the ducks chase each other in circles, longing for the ignorant bliss she was sure they felt. Moving down the street, she entered a small cafe. The little girl always enjoyed the small cafe, drinking her tea out of mini teacups. While she waited in line, she observed the people in front of her. The one at the front seemed to have headphones on, bobbing his head to a bass beat audible ever so slightly to someone listening closely. No one but the little girl seemed to be listening closely, too entranced by their ex's new girlfriend, or, at least the girl sitting at a table nearby was. She scrolled and scrolled, her eyes narrowing every time her ex showed up on her feed. The little girl looked away. She knew when she was invading someone's privacy.

Finally, when it was her turn, she walked up to the cash register. She simply pointed at the menu, her finger barely reaching over the counter for the cashier to see. He nodded, slipping his eyes back to the computer screen in front of him.

After several moments, a young-looking boy in an apron handed over her mini teacup, and the little girl took a seat in the back. She liked the back of the little cafe—it gave her a clear shot of everyone in it. Once she was finished, she left out the door she came, flashing a rare smile at a woman on her way in. The woman was too busy with her screen to notice.

The little girl walked the inner streets of the city, her least favorite place to be. The sidewalks were teeming with people, but somehow it was the place she felt most alone. Everyone walking to and fro, head buried in their screens. The little girl was often knocked around by a distracted pedestrian, too focused on their own virtual life to notice a lonely child. That's what got to her the most, the reason she was most tempted to pick up her screen and pretend to enjoy the despair and headache it brought her: the feeling of belonging, the feeling of acceptance in a society that would never otherwise accept her. *Those thoughts are much too grand for someone of your age,* her parents would complain. The little girl agreed.

She wandered alone through the city, tears marking the anguish she felt; alone, quiet, suffocated by

the walking zombies surrounding her. Slaves to their own devices.

Two Ravens and a Window

Kaydence Monti

Buckhannon Upshur Middle School, Upshur County
Teacher: Sherry Hardy
West Virginia State Winner
Third Place Grades 7-8

Day after day passes, no more significant than the last. With nothing to do, nowhere to go, I stared out my window. The dull, dreary, grey sky, stretching on, with no end in sight. The bare trees, naked with no trace of color. The pond, once crystal clear and full of life, is now soiled and brown. No color, no flora. The outside is a sea of grays and browns. Turning away from the window, I sigh. The outside has offered no avail to my already low spirits. I feel no motivating force, no reason to get up. And so, I lay, in what has become my prison. These four walls have trapped me. I am no better than a criminal, encaged in this hollow cell. A ghost of what once was a home. Time keeps ticking, days pass, weeks pass. Still that relentless sense of despair and grief keeps me anchored to my bed. It's begun to get colder, so I go to get another blanket. In my closet there is an old wooden chest, full of spare blankets, and pillows. Opening the chest, a flash of red catches my eye. A large homemade quilt embroidered with the design of ravens. I had received it before the pandemic. Made by my Grandmother. I feel my heart clench. My grandmother was one of the millions of victims of this raging disease. I clutch the blanket and crawl back to my bed. Clinging to the blanket, sleep claims me quickly. The next day I look out the window to see a layer of white, coating the hillside. The stark contrast of the bright snow against the somber landscape I've become accustomed to is foreign to me. The dark clouds are still covering the shine of the sun. As I'm staring out the glass, I notice my cell phone. I can see the lavender case reflecting in the window, from under my bed. I remember, weeks ago, the last time I used it. Picking it up, I see the missed calls and text messages. I know they're worried, but I can't dig up any feelings to care enough. No guilt. No shame. Just sadness, fear, and desolation. I'm almost numb. A walking zombie. An empty soul. A shell of my former outgoing, extroverted self. I feel as if I'm a time bomb, ticking and ticking. Just biding the moments, I have left, until it's my turn to meet the end. It's like I'm being slowly crushed by a boulder. Whenever I feel like I might get out, might be saved, it crushes

down even harder. The dread has gotten worse, since seeing my grandmother's quilt. It reminds me that I too, will soon join the list of names. The list of lives that have perished due to this plague.

As the sickness gets worse, it comes to the point where I'm unable to even sit up. I truly have become a prisoner, shackled forever to this spot. Never to see the light of day, have children, do all those things I once planned to do. I pray death claims me soon and swiftly, as I can no longer breathe on my own, a machine does it for me. The machine has a humming noise that keeps me up. I wasn't ready for this disease. I wasn't ready for my life to end so soon. Everything happens for a reason they say. Why? Why do all these innocent people have to suffer? I ponder these questions, day after day questioning life, and what happens when you die. Is there heaven? Will I be welcomed with lush gardens, and pools of light? Or will I be trapped forever in a fiery hell? Weeks pass, and I remain unable to breathe myself. I turn my head to try and see out my window. Oh, how I used to love my window, love the views. Now I just seek distraction from my looming rest. I've accepted my days are now numbered. Glancing out I see two ravens sitting on the fence post, looking at me. Remembering the old myth of ravens being harbingers of death, I stare back and smile at them.

The Hairbrush

Carmen Donnelly

Harman School, Randolph County
Teacher: Kelly Teter
West Virginia State Winner
First Place, Grades 9-10

Before I can even remember, I was obsessed with my appearance. At the ripe age of eight, my nails were painted bright, luscious red, my hair was combed, and my clothes were clean as a whistle. When the third grade came around, I had encountered my first mean girl. “Why do you look like that?” She would sneer, all while biting into her golden delicious apple, her hot pink nail polish always chipped. I thought to myself, “Who let her go out looking like that?” With her greasy hair hanging low down her back, her jean shorts way too high, and her belly sticking out of her shirt.

Whenever I had finally made it to middle school, I discovered makeup. I thought I was absolutely gorgeous as I rubbed it all over my face, hoping I ended up looking like a beauty queen. Instead, the end result had me looking like a drag queen, but I did not care, I felt beautiful. That feeling was enough for me to strut down the halls acting like I owned them. Although one thing was missing from my beauty brigade. I needed my hair done.

I tore through magazines, skipping over the hot gossip I could not even understand, clear to the back page. I worshipped those models like they were God himself. I wanted to look just like them, I wanted to be them. The things I would have given to be called “gorgeous” as I walked down the street, or out to the playground in my situation.

My bright, red hair was suddenly plain to me. I needed to have that beautiful, blonde hair that I envied. I needed to feel beautiful again. Not only was my hair that stupid red but, it was straight. Those models had beautiful, curly hair, and I needed those curls.

I jogged to my bathroom and dug through my vanity drawers, smiling like a mad man when I had fished out my round hairbrush. This was not just any hairbrush, no this piece of plastic, was utter torture. It was bright purple with a black handle, and bristles that felt like they were made of nails. There was a reason why it was always shoved in the back of the drawer.

I had researched the proper way to have natural, bouncy curls, but I had no idea how to start the oven, how could I possibly use a heat styling tool? Nonetheless, I picked up my trusty hairbrush and got down to business.

In all of the magazines I had read, and the videos I had watched, the instructions seemed simple. Roll your wet hair in the hairbrush and blow dry. That seemed easy enough.

I took a quick shower, too excited to notice that I did not use conditioner. As soon as I was done, I was ready for my bouncy curls. I wrapped my now wet hair around the hairbrush. It said to roll it, right? Or did it say to comb it through? Oh well, I am sure it would turn out fine.

Until, it didn't. The hairbrush, wound so tight it was touching my scalp, was not moving an inch. I began yanking violently thinking that would free the hairbrush from my tightly wound hair. Starting to tear up from utter panic, I started trying to untwist the tangled strands from the brush.

I ran as fast as my neatly painted toes would carry me, straight to my sister, thinking she could give some justice to the situation. She voiced her disdain at my sudden appearance in her room, my fear written all over my face. "It's stuck!" I yelled, "Elena, it's stuck!"

She came barreling towards me, throwing a few insults at the fact that I had disturbed her, but at that moment, my focus was on the horrid piece of plastic stuck in my hair. "Look what you did, Carmen, how are we going to fix this?" She began trying to unravel the bird's nest that was supposed to be my "stunning" hair. We both knew it was too late to fix it. We had to get back up, we had to tell the giver of nightmares, the one who shall not be named, the one - well you get the point. We had to tell dad.

With so much adrenaline and fear flooding through me, I am surprised I did not throw up, as I ran to his room. Praying to God that this rat nest atop my head could be saved. "Dad, please help, I got it stuck, it won't move!" I cried, grabbing his arm, begging, praying, he wouldn't be too upset.

“Carmen, what have you done?” He sighed, his hands grazing my new “hairdo” with fever, trying to come up with a plan to save my precious hair. “Come on, we’ll fix it.” He dragged me to the bathroom, the mess on my head looking even worse in the light.

He began pulling out combs, picks, anything that could help this monstrosity. As he began picking out piece by piece, the first comb broke. Followed by a second, and then a third. With each comb breaking, I began to lose hope. Until, he pulled out something from my nightmares.

Scissors.

I watched as my hair began to fall, along with my tears, touching the cool, tiled floor. I suddenly began to grasp this new concept, that beauty was work. Too much work. As soon as he was done, I grasped the mirror in horror. A new chunk of missing hair had replaced the hairbrush. I thought my life was officially over. This is where it would end, surrounded by my poor hair and broken pieces of comb. Except, it wasn’t. This was something I could make it through.

So, I combed what was left of my hair, and tucked myself into bed. The hair on my head was not a problem, because I still felt beautiful on the inside.

A Redemption of My Self-Worth

Morgan Reed

Oak Hill High School, Fayette County

Teacher: Jennifer Kirk

West Virginia State Winner

Second Place, Grades 9-10

Throughout the entirety of my life, I have attempted to keep my spirits high with an air of confidence. Regardless of whether this confidence was legitimate, my sense of self-preservation has pushed me through many difficult chapters. As I have grown older, however, I have come to find that said confidence is quite difficult to maintain. Time and time again, I have been made to feel as if I am not worthy enough because of one singular thing; my size. Constant taunts, harsh words, and laughs at the thought that anyone would love me because I was larger than the people around me plagued my daily life. Often enough, I ignored these taunts, or even laughed alongside them. I have been so complacent with the fact that these things are said to me that I don't even pay them mind anymore. In reality, words like those begin to work at you and your self-esteem, until there is nothing left. A flamboyant and over-confident child has been turned to a silent and overly complacent woman, and I have no one else to blame for that other than myself. For too long I have let the words of those who wish to insult me harm me, and only when I begin to realize that they are no better than flies buzzing around my head will I see that child that I once knew. Those who have belittled me must learn that it is in no way acceptable to speak such harsh words to anyone, regardless of their circumstances.

I can account my loss of confidence to certain instances in the past. These instances include things such as taunting me with food, offhanded comments about my weight, and blatant rejection because of the fact that I was fat. All of my life I have been viewed as lesser than because of the fact that the number on my scale was higher than what others saw on theirs. One particular instance has stuck with me through the years, which occurred in seventh grade. I was sitting in the auditorium, minding my own business, when two boys beside me decided that I was their best choice for entertainment. They had picked up food off the auditorium floor and began waving it in my face, continuously asking if I wanted it. After several attempts to decline their offer, I figured it was hopeless and turned my face away. One seemingly meaningless

instance drastically affected how I viewed myself in public. Just because I was larger and eating food, those boys had decided that it was acceptable to taunt me like I was an animal in Barnum and Bailey's circus. Some other minor incidents include people telling me that no one would see me as loveable because I was fat, and even a person I consider my friend making offhanded jokes about my weight. Slowly over time, these instances began to build up in my head. Suddenly, I was not a happy, flamboyant, carefree child. I became overly self-conscious, even to the point that I refused to eat around my closest friends. Jokes that people had made without a second thought, affected me in a way that I cannot begin to express.

On a surface level, I cannot blame people for thinking and joking about me in such ways. I am overweight and not conventionally attractive, and I cannot deny those facts. However, to make such offensive and crude observations about my surface level appearance would simply be unjust. People are so much more than what we can view with the human eye, and to assume that all people are is just a sum of their physical appearance would be incorrect. You cannot determine someone's self-worth, and no one can determine yours. I absolutely refuse to spend my life bent over someone's perception of my physical appearance. I am a living, breathing, human being, not someone you can point out and laugh at with your friends. I am worthy of love, and I am worthy of respect. I have every right to love, and to be loved. I have every right to eat food without the judgmental eyes of those who have deemed me lesser than them because of the way my jawline is not razor-sharp, or the way my body is not completely firm when I move. The words of those who wish to belittle me and tear me down will no longer have any effect on my self-worth. My worth is not measured by a number on a scale, rather it is measured by the quality of my character. I am unapologetically in complete and total control of my self-worth, those who wish to damage me can no longer hold that power over me.

It is imperative for those who have said such harmful things in the past, not specifically to me, rather than to those who are in situations similar to mine, to make appropriate adjustments to their very own quality of character. Words are a man's mightiest weapon, and we all must be mindful of how we wield it. I must take the criticisms I have received throughout my lifetime and move onward, looking to a future in which I will no longer allow mean spirited words to rule my life. My worth absolutely has never, is never,

and will never be determined by my weight or what people perceive on the outside. Although it has taken me quite some time, I have come to realize that I cannot live for other's vain love or admiration, rather I would wish to live for the love of those who will cherish me based on their perception of my character.

Words of those who wish to insult me fall on deaf ears, as I will no longer allow the likes of such to control my life. I live for those I love, and for fulfillment of myself. My worth will be determined by the love I provide and life that I live, and absolutely nothing else.

Museums Aren't Just for Dinosaurs

Alexus Vance

Chapmanville Regional High School, Logan County

Teacher: Jennifer Trump

West Virginia State Winner

Third Place, Grades 9-10

I walked through the towering museum doors glistening in the sun as they opened. The smell of cleaning products made my eyes water ever so slightly like raindrops dripping from leaves. “Oh boy you’ll never catch a cold from this place,” I thought to myself. Everything sparkled through the facility’s large front windows. The floor, the metal shelves, the art pieces themselves, all on display by the sun’s rays. Though this place definitely seemed fancy and it appeared to have everything you could think of, one thing was missing. Where the heck was the Dinosaurs?

The environment itself seemed friendly, people consistently walked in and out the large glass doors embedded into its even bigger metal frame. As you walk in and out, a man standing behind a counter at the front gives you a quick crinkly-eyed smile. “He seems nice,” I thought to myself. Bored, like every young child so easily gets, I began to wonder. I skipped around twirling my barbie pink poofy skirt with every step and to be honest, I think everyone who saw it wanted one too. They all smiled as they walked past me. Jealous much? I continued my march and noticed a special item on display... It was an art piece I had never seen before. It was small and rectangular in shape. It was painted a shade of yellow so bright it was just begging for me to bask in its glory. It had subtle red accents. “I bet this is an art piece taken straight out of an Indian cave,” I told my American girl who at the time went everywhere with me.

I soon began to notice how colorful this art display was. Surely they set this one up within interest of those who loved the rainbow. A larger piece soon caught my eye. I just HAD to ask my mother to get it for me. It was a tall slender bag-shaped item with joyful-looking fruits on it. “JOEL LI RAN CHUR,” I sounded out in my head the title of that display. “Hm, that’s one fancy name for one fancy artist.” Although as eye-catching as these pieces were... where were the Dinosaurs? I decided to get back on track and continue my DI no search. On my adventure, I noticed many people were grabbing the art displays from

their shining shelves and taking them to the man up front. "I thought you weren't supposed to touch artifacts," I inquisitively thought? Then it hit me, this isn't a museum. IT'S AN ART SHOW!

Oh, it just made me that much more elated to realize I could purchase some of these pieces, or maybe even have my own art put on display. I was still on my search for the dinosaurs my mother briefly mentioned on the car ride over here though. Surely I wasn't looking in the right places considering this wasn't an immense sized building. I studied many of the products, sounding them out one by one in my head. "DOOR I TOES," said one item. "CHEE X MEEEX," said another. The most popular item though was a white bag with the self-portrait of an angry looking man. Everyone seemed to be buying one. "BIG LEE ChOO," was written in a crimson comic font. Obviously, I decided to grab a bag too.

I brought the art to my mother and asked her kindly if I could have it. She couldn't say no as I batted my freakishly long eyelashes over my almond-shaped eyes. I followed her as she walked to this four-person line at the front.

"Mom?" I asked.

She looked down as if I startled her when I said it, "yes?"

"Where're the dinosaurs?"

"I'll get them for you, one second."

It was finally our turn, my mother handed the man my art and he shot it with a laser gun. "BEEP!" After sticking my item in a small plastic bag he asked, "Is that all?"

"I'd also like the dinosaur lottery ticket and twenty in gas on pump 3 please."

Aquiline

Anna DuVall

Bridgeport High School, Harrison County

Teacher: Amy Lohmann

West Virginia State Winner

First Place, Grades 11-12

The girl is slumped on the steps of the majestic church looking half-dead. She's mousy and wearing a slimy army-style coat three sizes too big. The concrete steps are even colder than the frosty morning and her bony legs shiver, clicking together rapidly like a pair of skeletal knitting needles. Eyes half-lidded, she watches dozens of shoes hurry by—shiny, tall, old and ragged—but no matter the make and condition, none pause beside her.

At this point, her age is indistinguishable because her cheek bones are sharp, almost serrated, but the eyes set in her thin, waifish face are childlike. As the tips of her fingers turn blue, the sun peeks behind the clouds and smog that's always suffocating New York. This isn't her usual spot but the bench two blocks away is taken by a large homeless man who smells like hand rolled cigarettes and talks to himself.

A cold dime bounces off her brow bone and clatters loudly to the concrete steps. As fast as she possibly can, half-frozen she claws it towards her with broken fingernails caked in dirt. Her lungs rattle and wheeze as she pulls in air so cold it burns like acid running down her nose and throat. The rain-coated cardboard sign is propped up beside her feet shoved in the brown utility boots she stole from the shelter. She can't even remember what the sign says anymore, since it's been more than a year since she scratched her pleas onto it with a green crayon that had lay abandoned in the subway.

A pair of red, pointed shoes, Jimmy Choos maybe, step over her to reach the church doors; they catch a couple strands of mangy hair and rip them from her scalp with a small pronation of the fancy heel. The girl winces at the sudden sharp pull and the embarrassment of being stepped over as if she were a used napkin. No amount of time begging on the street can numb that basic human emotion: shame.

Uncurling from the fetal position, her bones creak and complain, almost too cold to cooperate. Now seated with her legs curled underneath her, she burrows into the only warmth she has, the coat which frankly smells of ammonia and dirty feet. She's not sure who the man she knicked it from was; he had been

bluish-grey and stiff, frozen to death. She can't help but wonder as the sun rises how long it will be until she ends up dead on a sidewalk, too.

She snaps from her reverie to go over her extremely busy schedule for the day: at eight she will unfold from her post and do a circuit. The perimeter is about six blocks, and she walks it every day to smell the fresh coffee and pet the stray dog that hangs around where people cash their welfare checks. The routine is automatic, and she feels like a sentry or soldier of sorts, "make way for the knight of 32nd Street, our hero in shining rags!" At least she hasn't lost her sense of humor. Nine she'll probably duck under the subway bar that moves when you pay and get on the first train that's leaving the station. This has to be her favorite way to people watch: a pair of teenagers engaged in some pretty intense tongue action, an old man in a fedora completing a crossword, a family of tourists arguing over a map, and her, the designated vagrant. It seems to be New York law that every train car has to have at least one homeless person to keep the rest of the passengers in check. She wonders if they know she can feel them *not* looking at her. People always say the "weight of many eyes," but she can feel the avoidance in the air. It's tangible, like if they make eye contact with her, she's now a person they have to acknowledge.

After coasting on the subway for an hour or two, she goes scavenging in garbage cans. Today is trash day for her usual spot, and she's so hungry it feels like the sides of her stomach are touching and shrinking. Spoiled milk, ratty blanket, fast food bags, and there it is a half-molded loaf of white bread. With an iron stomach and an even stronger will, she nibbles the cleanest slices. It's not long until the shop owner runs her out, red faced and panting, with an aluminum baseball bat. It must be around eleven-thirty; he's never late to threaten her away from his trash. The bat is a new upgrade, though; usually he swings a broom and shoos her away like some disease-infested rat.

Once it's well into the afternoon, she starts her long trek to the cracked overpass where someone is waiting for her. Like the main character in some wild adventure novel to reach her destination, she'll have to tiptoe past the shaking addicts, over the dead-eyed prostitutes, across from the loud gang of boys carrying glocks, AKs, and automatics until she arrives. Unlike in a fairy tale, there's no Prince Charming waiting for her at the end but a gap-toothed old woman named Maggie. Maggie is in her sixties and is about two notches

past crazy, her hair is grey and falling out in patches, she's missing a few front teeth, and her hands are gnarled from arthritis. She wouldn't say she and Maggie are friends, but Maggie is the only person who would notice if she just dropped dead one day and vice versa. The two women push along Maggie's old shopping cart and most of the time they're silent, but sometimes Maggie will tell her stories. If she had to guess, probably ninety-five percent of the stories are made up, but it's a nice break from reality. To escape her world of hunger, disease, and pain to imagine far off places, steamy affairs, and the trials of the rich and wealthy.

Eventually when night starts to fall, they go their separate ways without a goodbye or a wave because they both know it's pointless. She scampers back to her usual squatting ground; the bench is open tonight and she lets out a sigh of relief. The breath leaves her chapped lips, and she remembers when she was a child and used to blow the hot air and run around head up as if she were a train. As the girl slumps onto the bench, she turns her face into her jacket in childlike hopes that if she can't see the world, it can't see her either. She uses her pinky nail to scrape away the faded advertisement for a realty company as the cold sinks into her bones and joints. Her curved nose, the kind you used to find in old Roman paintings, is red and runny. She doesn't bother to wipe it away as it runs down to her thin white lips and slowly dries crusty to her cheeks.

Reminisce

Richard Rose

Princeton Senior High School, Mercer County
Teacher: Laura Presley
West Virginia State Winner
Second Place, Grades 11-12

When I reminisce upon my childhood, the most prominent memory that emerges is that of sharp edges of gravel tearing into the soles of my feet as I sprinted across my neighbor's unpaved driveway dressed as the Green Power Ranger for what seemed like the thousandth time that week. As the sun set and the streetlights overhead flickered on, bulging blisters and embedded pebbles ached with each and every step on the impossible journey to the glorious summit that was my front door. I would never learn from the night's gaping wounds and the tears that soon flowed as a result. Instead, I would immediately rush to my room to begin choreographing the next heroic episode of my Power Ranger odyssey.

Ever since, I have valiantly worked toward forgetting the blisters and cuts that wreaked so much havoc over ten years ago in an attempt to create a pure memory that is no longer corrupted by incredible discomfort. But as I dig deeper to remove these weeds, the more I realize that they are intertwined with the very roots of my identity; they even find their place in my very first conscious memory.

My first memory hazily places me, a three-year-old child, standing at the edge of a gravel street staring at the streaks of blue revealing themselves under a withering red coat of paint on my grandmother's dilapidated mobile home. My mother was in her trailer snoring, and a powerful rumble of hunger forced me outside to search for the only beacon of stability I knew: my grandmother. I stepped from the soft, damp grass and onto the jagged gravel that instantly pushed itself into my delicate feet. With the determination of a lion and the agility of a newborn giraffe, I stumbled across the street alone and found myself at the bottom of the towering steps leading to my grandmother's front door. Before I could even step foot on the first step, I seemingly grew wings and soared to the very top of the stairs and into my one and only refuge.

I did not grow wings. Instead, it was my grandmother who picked me up and brought me into her home to feed and clothe me. That was the day my adoption process began.

Much like the pebbles that I ripped from my wounds, I find myself attempting to get rid of this

memory and the emotional turmoil that accompanies it. At sleepovers when asked about my first memory, I would hastily fabricate one filled with pure happiness and joy. Perhaps, I would speak of a nonexistent memory from Christmas in which the gravel was replaced with soft, glistening snow but never the truth.

I also found this toxic tendency transcending beyond this single memory and repressing several other aspects of my identity. When engaging with people who came from other places in the world, my accent faded, and I denied my rich roots in Appalachian culture. If I was in a room full of strangers, I grew weary of my effeminate gestures and imprisoned my heart to never reveal the supposedly abominable emotions I felt. This repression weaved a dark blanket to conceal all aspects of who I truly was.

However, I have stopped digging so deep to rid myself of all the weeds, for I brought myself to the surface to realize they were elegant roses this whole time. I now embrace my difficult upbringing in Appalachia as a crucial aspect of my life that sculpted me into the persevering and resilient person I am today, and I advocate for my community to ensure no child drowns in fear and self-resentment simply for who they love. The aspects of my identity I so arduously worked to eliminate now serve as the kindling for my passion to change the world and reveal to everyone the unique and elegant roses that grow within them.

Though, I now stand at the edge of yet another unpaved road. Only now, my grandmother's home no longer stands before me. Instead, it sits behind me, the windows illuminated with the bright smiles of family and loved ones. I look to my feet to see formidable calluses in the former place of the excruciating blisters and cuts.

The path ahead of me remains consumed in a thick and daunting fog no matter how determined I prove to be in looking beyond my immediate journey. My mind helplessly resorts to the same mindset I possessed in this exact position as a child. Feelings of dread and trepidation quickly invade my mind, and I find myself defenseless in my efforts to fight them away. I tense in anticipation of my succumbence to the overpowering mental conquest. I close my eyes.

Suddenly, a blinding light penetrates my eyelids, and the suffocating fear soon disappears. I open my eyes to mysterious, bright beams encompassing my entire body. I frantically glance around to identify their source, and I discover they are emanating from the windows of my home. I realize they are comprised of overwhelming sentiments of love and support from my loved ones. They embrace me tighter and tighter until

I look ahead to find my path illuminated by the glow of the beams.

I hesitantly step onto the gravel that once sliced into the soles of my feet to only feel nothing. The radiance that surrounded me served as a cushion between my soles and the treacherous mountains of rock below me. I step again, and again, and again...

I continue to retain ignorance of my ultimate destination, but regardless of where my path leads me, I know my confidence in my identity and support from my family and loved ones will remain constant.

I take another step.

Blooming Vengeance

Mia Pino

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West Virginia State Winner
Third Place, Grades 11-12

The overwhelming scent of vomit and decay wafted through the dimly lit room. Screams of babies mingled with cries of older children, their noise almost drowned out completely by the commotion occurring directly overhead. Their holding place was small, too small, and the women and children practically trampled each other upon any attempted movement. Besides the screams of children and the noise made from their captors, not a sound was uttered. In the instance a person wanted to speak, the sour taste in the air combined with the smell of sweat and human excrement prohibited elongated conversation. The prisoners could not remember the last meal that had crossed their lips, and the poorly cleaned water they had been provided left many ill. The rock of the waves against the ship lulled them into a daydream, far away from the nightmare they were living.

The trapdoor above the room was slung open with such force that the infants stopped their crying from the shock of the noise. A man dressed in fine black leather climbed down several rungs of the ladder before jumping carelessly to the deck below. No one dared to move as the man challenged them with his eyes.

“Jovie Gladiolus?” the man called across the sea of blinking eyes and fidgeting hands. No sign was given that anyone had even heard what had been said. “I am seeking Jovie Gladiolus. Step forward this instant.” Once again, it was if the bodies in the room had been turned to plaster.

Suddenly, a small boy was plucked out of the arms of his protesting mother. The boy could not have been more than 5 years of age, and he cried out immediately before he was struck roughly in the cheek. The guttural sound that left his mother was heart wrenching, and yet the other women restrained her, in an effort to preserve her own safety. Like a turning tide, every pair of eyes that had been

previously looking anywhere but up stared like daggers into the eyes of the man.

“Good,” he started with a low chuckle that made stomachs turn, “I finally have your attention. Let me repeat myself once more, and if my wish is not granted this sorry excuse of a lad will pay the price.

Where is Jovie Gladiolus?”

She took a deep breath. Slowly, almost cautiously, she flexed each of her fingers individually. She composed herself as she had been taught by her mother. Her mother. The great Marjorie Gladiolus; teacher, patriot, hero, and the greatest fighter the country had ever seen. The flashbacks overtook her as she took her first steps toward the man.

One step. She is twelve years old, finally blossoming into her own identity. She is wild and free, and she feels she has the whole world at her feet. Her dreams consist of fairytale endings and perfect princes. She realizes now how stupid that girlish notion was.

Two steps. She is fifteen, sneaking out of her chambers late at night. She holds a flickering candle in her hand as she moves swiftly towards the sound of hushed whispers and papers turning. As she peeks through the door of the room, she sees a strange assortment of people she has never seen, with her mother at the head of a table. As they have their attention focused intently on the maps laid out before them, she looks with wonder at this side of her mother she has only heard about. Hot wax from the candle hits her arm and she hisses, earning startled glances from every pair of eyes in the room but one.

Three steps. At seventeen she knows her mother’s newest mission. She has become an integral part of the plan. She understands how much bigger this is than herself, and she is willing to risk *anything*. Or so she thought until she heard the shrieks in the dead of night. Frantically throwing off the bedcovers and sliding down the halls she reached her mother’s quarters just in time to see the spine chilling toothy grin given by the man as he jumped from the window. Frozen in shock, she watched in horror as they mounted their horses and took her mother into the inky darkness.

She stood squarely in front of the man as he gave her the same smile he had given her that night in her mother’s room. The boy was harshly shoved in the direction of his mother, and a sigh of relief was

heard from every mouth in the crowd. The man glanced her over from head to toe, recalling the same scene that was playing over and over like a broken record in her mind. She was taller than he remembered, but not extraordinarily so. Her unkempt blond hair hung in filthy tendrils around her sunken face. She was clearly malnourished and dehydrated, and was showing the early signs of scurvy. Her clothes closely resembled the rags worn by the women surrounding her, plain colored and tattered. She still stood apart from the group however, as her piercing blue eyes held a fire that was untraceable in the eyes of the others. As well as this, she had a small gold ring sat daintily on her right index finger. No other person in this dingy cabin space had any jewelry remaining, however Jovie managed to retain this elegant ornament. With a twisted gold band and a small, teardrop shaped diamond in its center, it was clear the ring had sentimental value to its wearer. She noticed his eyes catch on her hand and quickly clasped her hands behind her back.

“I am here; I am Jovie.” The words seemed to echo off the walls and bounce back inside her own head, but she gave no appearance that she was bothered. The man rubbed his hands across his beard; vexation fracturing his careful façade of calmness.

“Alright then,” he continued with his eyebrow cocked, “you are coming with me. Do not speak unless spoken to, do not attempt to run or escape. If you do so I will slaughter you, your mother, and every insignificant person on this ship. Do you understand?”

Jovie simply nods her head once, distinct and abrupt. She notices the gleaming silver hilt protruding from the man’s sheath as he climbs the ladder ahead of her. She feels a flicker of doubt for only a moment, until her mother’s screams play over again in her mind. As the man steps up the final rung of the ladder, she grabs his boots and yanks with the entire force of her body. He plummets back down into the room as the women cower in the corners. Speedily, Jovie leapt from the ladder and pressed her knee against the back of the man’s neck. She grabbed his sword and unsheathed it, with a loud whistling noise following. The women covered the eyes and ears of the youth in the cabin, just in time for Jovie to hit the man with the hilt of the sword. With a dull crack, he was unresponsive.

“I am coming Mother.”