

*2024 West Virginia
Young Writers Contest
Anthology*

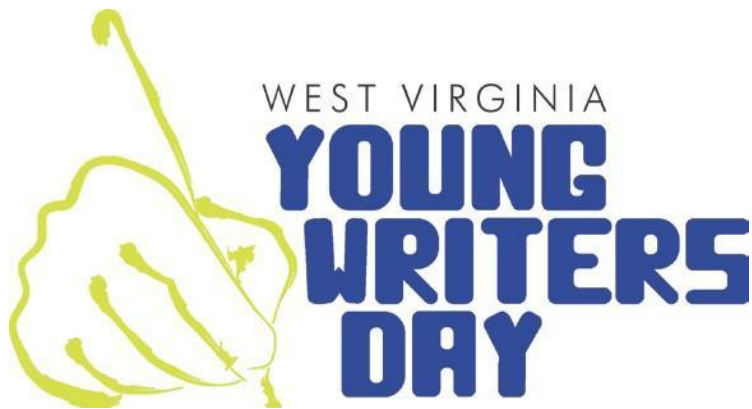


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Introduction

We proudly present the anthology of the 2024 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. The West Virginia state winners of first, second, and third place in each grade level category are included.

The West Virginia Young Writers Contest has honored excellent writing by our state's students in grades one through twelve for 40 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 provides invaluable support by hosting Young Writers Day at their Campus. 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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Acknowledgments

WV Young Writers Contest Steering Committee

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The Champion

Baylor Brown

Frankford Elementary School, Greenbrier County

Teacher: Lori Quick

West Virginia State Winner

1st Place, 1st – 2nd Grade

Long ago there lived a young girl named Baylor. Baylor was very adventurous. She loved country stuff and horses. She loved barrel racing and she was really good at it.

One day during a show, Baylor fell off her horse and got hurt really bad. She was going around the third barrel and fell pretty hard. She hit her head on the barrel and her leg was crushed underneath her horse.

After many x-rays, they realized Baylor needed surgery for her broken leg and was told she could never barrel race again. Baylor was devastated with the news from the doctor. She didn't let that get in her head though. Baylor fought to get stronger each and every day.

Then one day, she did the unthinkable. She got back up on her horse and started running. Baylor loved it! She said it was one of the best things that had ever happened to her. Baylor felt like she had gotten her freedom back.

After three hard years of training and resting up, Baylor finally made it back to the show ring. She continued competing until she got to the top of the field in barrel racing and became the champion.

Since Baylor reached her dream of becoming a champion, she decided to help other people with similar challenges. She went around the world and gave speeches to inspire them. Helping others brought Baylor lots of happiness just like barrel racing.

Now, Baylor spends her time on her farm rounding up cows. She remains a champion in life to this day.

The Bird

Taylor Brown

West Teays Elementary School, Putnam County
Teacher: Kristina Painter
West Virginia State Winner
2nd Place, 1st – 2nd Grade

Crystal clear water drops fall, loud thunder booms, and clouds hang as black as night. The sky is dark yet welcoming because all of nature is thirsty. I flap my thin wings over to a deep watering hole. I dip my feathers into the freshwater pond. I go underwater to try and catch a fresh bite. I yank my head down fast as a flash of lightning. I caught my meal, but it was a grumpy old fish. I knew it wasn't going to taste as good as a young fish would, but I dashed back towards my nest in the old oak tree anyway. As I was headed home, I could hear frogs croaking and see beautiful deer eating the dark red apples that had fallen on the ground.

Suddenly, as I got back to my nest, there was a mountain lion waiting for me! There was a heavy wind tingling down my feathers. I knew it was about to attack me. I flew up in the blink of an eye, but it was guarding my den. Out of nowhere, there was a flash of lightning and a tree fell in front of that sneaky old lion. He leaped away and the shining sun seemed to rise. But where was my fish? I checked all around, but it was nowhere to be found. I flew back to my warm, comfortable nest and there it was. I ate it all in one gulp. As the bright sun started to set, I saw pinks, purples, and oranges fading below the trees.

An Ocean Adventure

Payton Bolyard

White Hall Elementary School, Marion County
Teacher: Christina Richards
West Virginia State Winner
3rd Place, 1st – 2nd Grade

Rosie and Tim take a walk on the beach. It's a full moon making everything bright. The sand, normally a dull yellow, shimmered in the moonlight. Rosie noticed a soft blue glow in the distance. "I see something," Rosie said. They saw two turtles touching a blue stone with their flippers. The turtles looked at Rosie and Tim when suddenly the moon turned blue. Rosie and Tim looked at each other. "You're a turtle!" they shout in unison. The other turtles and blue stone disappeared. "I don't know why," said Rosie, "but I think we have to go in the ocean." "All right," Tim said uncertain, "let's do it."

They slowly waded into the water. "Here goes nothing," said Rosie as she plunged into the inky black ocean. "Wait for me," called Tim as he, too, dove in. Tim looked around and found Rosie floating in front of thousands of glowing jellyfish. "Remember those obstacle courses we used to make?" said Rosie. "This one is for real!" Rosie dashed into the bloom of jellyfish with Tim close behind. They were laughing as they swam out of the jellies.

"Tim!" Rosie shouted, "look out!" A great white shark was heading straight towards them! "Swim!" yelled Tim. They swam as fast as they could. "Rosie, sharks usually only eat at night. I think the shark is following your sparkly necklace!" shouted Tim. Rosie pushed off her necklace with her flipper and the shark followed it.

Rosie and Tim took a minute to catch their breath.

Rosie saw a blue glow out of the corner of her eye. “Tim, I think I see the blue stone. Let’s touch it together.” Suddenly, Rosie and Tim were back on two feet on the beach. “Tim,” Rosie said, “I’m excited for our next adventure.”

Take Me Home to the Forest

Isaiah Fitts

Talcott Elementary School, Summers County
Teacher: Mrs. Fix
West Virginia State Winner
1st Place, 3rd – 4th Grade

I started going camping in the forests of West Virginia with my family when I was one and a half years old. My mom likes to tell the story of my first camping trip when we went backpacking in the Cranberry Wilderness in the Monongahela National Forest. I was just starting to talk and I called all animals "woof woofs." We were exploring the creek by our campsite and I kept asking my mom if I could see more "Daddy Woof Woofs." My family was confused until they figured out that I was trying to say "crawdads." My older sister and I had fun spotting the crawdads crawling in the clear creek. That camping site is right by a pretty waterfall and swimming hole, and we have gone back to camp there other times.

I am lucky enough to live with a West Virginia forest right out my back door. In the summer, the forest is all green. On a nice sunny day, it's fun to go in the shade of the forest to cool down. You can also pick wild berries that the forest gives to us and the other animals. I have seen foxes, bears, bees, snakes, deer, and rodents in the forest. Be careful, though, because the wild blackberries have a lot of thorns.

In the fall, there are so many different shades of colors in the forest. My dad takes me and my sisters on "mushroom walks" through the trail in our forest. There are so many different shapes and colors of mushrooms. There is even one that we find sometimes and we eat it. It's called Chicken of the Woods. It's orange and white and some people think it tastes like chicken.

In winter, you see white all around in the forest and splotches of green on the evergreens like pines, cedars and rhododendrons. We even have some holly trees in the woods by my house. One time, we decided to cut down a holly tree from the forest for our Christmas tree. It was not the best idea. It was still fun to decorate it, even though it poked us a lot.

In the spring, it rains a lot. It's cool to hear the sound of the rain on the leaves of the trees. We like to look for the flowers peeking out of the ground too. Ramps grow at the edge of the forest by my house. They look a little bit like grass, so sometimes I think I might be stepping on them. My dad loves to cook and eat ramps, but honestly they are not my favorite. It's cool that the forest has food in it, if you know where to look.

I can't wait to see the colors the forests show us this year.

The Wish: The Lucky Kitten

Penelope Buzzard

Marlinton Elementary School, Pocahontas County
Teacher: Jennifer McCarty
West Virginia State Winner
2nd Place, 3rd – 4th Grade

I sat in the tall grassy field; a gentle breeze swept my face. The leaves in the trees were dancing in the wind while I thought about a new pet. My name is Charlie Anna Birchwood. I use Anna because I think Charlie is a weird thing to call a girl.

After breakfast the next day, my dad, Ryan, took me to school. As we're driving, I saw three birds perfectly perched on a powerline, I closed my eyes and made my wish. I wish for a pet every day. When we arrived at school, dad hugged me and said "goodbye." I ran up the stairs and walked timidly through the door. I stopped and stared at all the kids. I walked to class and tried to find my seat. Once I found it, I sat down and sighed. I was twelve and I had been at this school for nine years. All day I couldn't stop thinking about the wish I had made.

My dad came to pick me up after school. I hopped in with a smile and was kicking my legs back and forth. Unexpectedly, a scrawny, black kitten with blue eyes caught my attention. "Stop the car!" I screamed and with a jerk we screeched to a complete stop. "What's the matter?" exclaimed my dad anxiously. "There was a kitten!" I yelled. I pulled open my door, but the kitten ran away. I frowned disappointedly; tears were rushing down my face.

In the morning (the weekend) I was planning to make a trap. "It won't hurt the kitten..." I mumbled. "... But it will catch it!" I set it up where I saw the kitten. I stuffed the trap with tuna and salmon. I carefully closed the trap and went inside to take a break. We ate lunch... Rattle, rattle, shake, meeeoow! I had sprung from my seat and rushed

out the door but, suddenly my feet weren't on the ground... I fell. "Ouch!" I yelled. I had blood running down my left knee.

After I got cleaned up, I went back outside slowly this time and looked at the trap. The kitten! A scrawny, black kitten with... "Blue eyes!" I shouted happily. I carried the trap inside. "I caught... him!" I yelled with excitement. I carefully took the animal out of the trap and whispered, "It's okay." I said it in a calming voice so I wouldn't scare him. "A name" I said thoughtfully. "...Lucky!" I shouted. The kitten got startled. I couldn't believe I had my own kitten.

We had to clean him. I held the wet kitten that was folded in a towel. A faint smell of lavender drifted through my nose as I held the kitten up to my face. After he dried enough to be counted as damp, he was the softest kitten I had ever felt. I stroked his head. He gently purred, vibrating softly. My wish came true, I had my very own loving kitten.

A Battle for Ocean's Harmony

Jaycie Lusk

Mylan Park Elementary School, Monongalia County
Teacher: Olivia Dieringer
West Virginia State Winner
3rd Place, 3rd – 4th Grade

Once upon a time, in the depths of the shimmering ocean, there lived a beautiful mermaid named Marina. She had long, flowing turquoise hair and a voice that would enchant anyone who heard it. Marina was known for her adventurous spirit and love for exploring the vast underwater world.

One fateful day, as Marina was swimming near a hidden coral reef, she stumbled upon a sparkling treasure chest. Curiosity filled her heart as she reached out and opened it, revealing a magical scrunchie. Little did she know, this scrunchie held immense power and was sought after by an evil goddess named Morgana.

Morgana, with her dark and mysterious aura, was determined to possess the scrunchie. Its magic held the key to unlocking her ultimate power and domination over the ocean realm. She had been searching for it tirelessly, and when she caught wind of Marina's discovery, she set her sights on the unsuspecting mermaid.

As Marina swam through the vibrant coral gardens, she felt a chilling presence behind her. She turned around, only to find Morgana's piercing gaze fixed upon her. The evil goddess's voice echoed through the water with malice and desire.

"Hand over the scrunchie, little mermaid, or face the consequences."

Marina, brave and determined, refused to surrender the magical item that had mysteriously come into her possession. She knew that the scrunchie held great power

and could be used for good. With a flick of her tail, she darted away from Morgana, leading her on a thrilling chase through a coral maze.

As the chase ensued, Marina utilized the scrunchie's magic to her advantage. With a simple touch, it granted her the ability to swim faster and manipulate water around her. She weaved through narrow passages and performed daring acrobatics, always staying one step ahead of Morgana's clutches.

Finally, Morgana gave up, "Fine take it!" she yelled as she was sitting in the sand.

"So, you give up?" Marina said.

I give up! It's just one power that isn't that useful. I don't need it," Morgana spat in a sly voice with a wink.

"Earlier I found out that it can take your powers! So, I can use them for good! Maybe I can help the city!" Marina exclaimed.

Morgana now furious, "WHAT?! No, just no! This can't be true!" she said dramatically. "Oh yes, it is, Morgana. Now this city can be a better place! Now we all can be happy!" Marina said while jumping up and down.

"This isn't over! We will come back to this same spot tomorrow! You hear me?" Morgana now yelling at Marina.

"Okay," Marina said now frightened.

The next day Marina came back to the same spot. Morgana was already there.

"Hey squirt," Morgana said with a completely straight face.

“You know Morgana, I have decided that I’m going to keep this scrunchie,”
Marina proclaimed.

“No, you aren’t!” Morgana argued. Marina used the powers the scrunchie had
and blasted off.

Morgana lost sight of her and yelled, “THIS ISN'T OVER!”

Under That Sweet Smile **Chloe Deel**

Sandy River Elementary School, McDowell County
Teacher: Destany Finley
West Virginia State Winner
1st Place, 5th – 6th Grade

Once upon a time, in a small town nestled amidst rolling hills, there lived a girl named Lily. She was a bright soul who smiled all the time, but under that sweet smile she was a fragile soul, burdened by her father's tragic death. The unbearable weight of her own mind, the only person in her life who understood her was gone. Lily's days were clouded with darkness, as darkness had woven its insidious tendrils around her heart.

Lily's world was painted in shades of gray, her once vibrant spirit dulled by the relentless grip of sadness. Each morning, she would wake up with a heavy heart, feeling as though a storm raged within her. Her days were filled with a constant battle against the suffocating darkness that enveloped her mind.

The world outside seemed to have lost its luster, as if the color had been drained from it. The vibrant flowers in the garden had wilted, mirroring the decay she felt within. The laughter of children playing in the park echoed hollowly in her ears, a painful reminder of the joy she had lost.

Suffocating any flicker of hope, Lily's once warm and welcoming home had become a prison, its walls closing in on her. The light that filtered through the curtains seemed feeble and distant, unable to penetrate the dense fog of her despair. Her room, once filled with mementos of a happy childhood, now lay in disarray, reflecting the chaos within her soul.

Days turned into weeks, and weeks into months, as Lily struggled to find solace in a world that seemed intent on breaking her spirit. Friends and family tried to reach

out, but their efforts were met with a heavy silence. Lily had withdrawn into herself, feeling isolated and disconnected from the world around her.

One endless night, as Lily lay curled up in her bed, tears streaming down her face, a flicker of hope sparked within her. She stumbled upon a contest, a chance to share her story and find a glimmer of recognition amidst the darkness. With trembling hands, she poured her heart onto the page, describing the depths of her pain, the battles fought in silence, and the longing for a shred of happiness.

The day arrived when the winners of the contest would be announced. Lily's heart raced with a mix of anticipation and anxiety. As she opened the email containing the results, her heart sank. Her story had not won. The words she had poured onto the page, bearing her soul, were deemed unworthy of recognition.

The world around her changed, evolving, and moving forward, while Lily remained trapped in the endless cycle of her despair. Friends drifted away, unable to comprehend the depth of her pain, and the family attempted to find the right words to offer her some peace.

The weight of this rejection crushed Lily's fragile spirit. She felt as though the world had turned its back on her, confirming her deepest fears that she was unworthy of love and understanding. The darkness that had plagued her intensified, wrapping its icy tendrils around her heart, suffocating any flicker of hope.

Lily's story ended abruptly, leaving behind a trail of unspoken words and shattered dreams. The world moved on, unaware of the silent battle she fought within. And as the days turned into years, Lily's name faded into obscurity, a forgotten soul who had longed for a ray of light in a world consumed by darkness.

As we close the book on Lily's story, let us remember that sometimes, even the most heartfelt stories go unnoticed. Let us be reminded of the importance of empathy and understanding, for within the depths of sadness lies a longing for connection, a desire to be seen and heard. As the years went by, Lily's once vibrant spirit continued to wither away under the weight of her depression. She became a mere shadow of the girl she once was, her laughter a distant memory, her dreams fading in the wind.

Lily's story, untold and unrecognized, echoed silently through the corridors of time. It serves as a reminder that the battles fought within can be invisible, yet their impact is profound. May we strive to understand the struggles of others, to offer compassion and support, and to ensure that no one is left to face their demons alone. With a sad, depressed heavy heart, we close the book to Lily's story, knowing that her pain, though unseen, was very real.

The Blame **Makenzie Conley**

Chapmanville Middle School, Logan County
Teacher: Maria Farris
West Virginia State Winner
2nd Place, 5th – 6th Grade

West Virginia, the place full of nature and history. For most people, if you are born there you stay there. But as a teen in West Virginia who desperately wants to get out of all the mountains, I'm leaving as soon as possible. Most importantly, I need to get away from the blame of what happened that night with Scarlet. As soon as I make it back across the stage, I'm going to start the journey to somewhere new. Everyone else in my senior class is planning on staying here, working in the mines, or something boring like that. Not me, I'm going somewhere new, somewhere I can live an important life, a life away from that night.

I'm on the edge of my seat, not because I'm about to graduate, but because not knowing what I will do after I walk off that stage scares me. "Next up, Paisley Grace Isaacs," the principal of Chapmanville High calls out to the crowd. Here we go. I stand up slowly and make my way towards the stage. So many thoughts begin running through my head. As soon as I cross this stage my whole life changes.

Everything becomes a dream as I walk across the stage. I still haven't had the time to fully wrap my head around the fact that I am going to be a real adult with new possibilities. I look out in the audience and for a moment, I see Scarlet, but then I realize it's not possible, it will never be possible. Keep it together, I tell myself this is important. Before I realize it I'm being handed my diploma. I take it and give a quick nod before speeding off the stage.

I try not to look at anyone the rest of the ceremony. I know what they're all thinking, and honestly, I believe it too. Scarlet should be the one graduating, not me. I

was the reason she died, it should have been me. Despite my efforts, Ava, my friend from before the accident, waved at me and started walking over. Her blond curls bouncing up and down as she walked looked almost like a teen movie, if teen movies had someone accidentally killing their best friend. Not because I wanted to hurt Ava but because I couldn't stand to hear about Scarlet or the crash, I sped off.

I started walking home— I still didn't trust myself in a car. The sky got that gray-blue look that it got when it was about to storm. "Great," I whispered to myself. I still had a way to go before I was even close to home. I was almost zoned out, staring at the ground while being careful to stay away from the road. My mind began to wander back to that night, this time I let it.

I hadn't even noticed when it started raining, I was too busy reliving that night. Before I knew it, I was in a full flash-back and was sitting on the guardrail. I saw the text that I got that night that told me that Scarlet was drunk at a party and I would need to pick her up before she got in her car. I saw myself leaving in the rain and driving down the road, going too fast. Then the crash... Scarlet pulling out in front of me, the car behind me getting me out. I saw the hospital, the blood on her face and hair, the lifeless look in her eyes.

I couldn't think about this anymore, I absolutely had to get home. I was drenched from the rain and I knew it would only get worse. I started to run, run as fast as I could. I was in a dead sprint when suddenly I saw a car. I immediately recognized the black glossy paint and the blue-white headlights shining through the rain. The car was the one behind me that night, the one that got me out of my car.

The car began to slow before coming to a complete stop in the road. The dark tinted window rolled down to reveal a man with dark hair and greenish-gray eyes. The man seemed to be close to my age. There was a different feeling about him though, it felt as if he was someone I knew, someone I could trust. "Hello, my name is Layne," he

spoke softly. Something about him made me want to stay, like maybe all that had happened was for a reason. "Would you like a ride," he asked when I didn't reply. I turned around to look at my surroundings before accepting the ride. I don't know why but I had the feeling that this is where I should be, that the blame didn't matter.

Thanatophobia

Bailey Goodwin

Marlinton Middle School, Pocahontas County

Teacher: Erin Murphy

West Virginia State Winner

3rd Place, 5th – 6th Grade

I'm scared. Scared of lots of things, but it makes sense to fear everything when you live in a place like Baltimore, Maryland like I do. The scariest things happen there, like kidnapping, that kind of stuff, but there is one thing that bothers me the most, which is the death process. I'm not scared of myself passing, I'm scared of being the one to have to *witness* somebody go through the death process. When I try my hardest to fall asleep, I have a feeling that someone or something is behind me, waiting for the perfect moment to... well, you know, how most horror movies and books end. I fear this out of experience. I was once a young, small, *mysterious* child, with not a care in the world. "Goodnight mom!" I yelled. I had gone upstairs to sleep on my small, unicorn-decorated bed, with the brightest of colors that looked like a rainbow that ranged from purple to pink, and even to yellow. I turned my astronaut night light on, laid down on my comfortable bed, and eventually, I shut my eyes, hoping for a good night's rest, *or at least that was my intent.*

Eventually, I heard a loud creak come from our squeaky, wooden floorboards, yet I thought nothing of it. Suddenly, I heard the loudest shriek I have heard in my life. I sat up in my bed, and I screamed as loud as screaming can go. I hesitated whether to stay upstairs in my room, or run downstairs to see whatever it was that was happening at that split second. I went with the second choice, which to this day, I see as the prime choice. As I ran down the steps, and saw my younger sister, Aaliyah, run out of her room, sobbing out her little ocean blue eyes. It felt like she cried enough to flood the hallway. I ignored it, but in the least profane way possible. I sprinted for my mother's room, to see a shadow of a tall, lanky man. I couldn't really tell what he was wearing, considering the room was gloomy and somber. He was holding my mother at gun point,

covering her mouth with his hand that looked about as big as a trash can lid. “Scream for help, and she is done.” he said with no remorse.

Suddenly, I felt a rush of anger. “Please, don’t do this.” I pleaded. “My mother, my sister, and I are too young for this. I know you have better intentions surrounding your soul somewhere. If you do this, you wouldn’t just be hurting my sister and I, you would be hurting yourself, your family, and our family. So please, for the love and mercy of God, could you please leave and give our family the chance of life it deserves?” I started to cry. The man took his large, dry, trash can lid sized hand off my mother’s mouth with a loud sigh, “You’re lucky.” he said, as he walked out of the front door. My mother hugged me. I yelled for Aaliyah, and I let her know Mom was okay. Mom squeezed Aaliyah and I in a tight hug to the point where I thought our heads would pop off like popcorn in a microwave.

“I love you so much.” said my mom. As you can see, just telling you this story has brought me to tears. If it wasn’t for me and my smart choice of life, I would have felt my mother’s sad, melancholy death as a part of me for the rest of my life, thinking it was my fault, and that I was the reason that my mother would have been gone. Aaliyah would have cried like a young infant enough to fill a gargantuan swimming pool, so in reality, I saved her eyes from drying out.

Finally, for the rest of my life, I will always remember that man, and how he had given our family’s fragile life another chance. For even though I talked him into letting my mother free, it wouldn’t have been a possibility without him and his mindset. If something like this ever happens again, (which I hope it doesn’t), I will always remember the day that this tragedy happened. My family is okay now, considering it has been close to twenty years since that night, and I am a grown adult. I hope that nobody will suffer a tragedy like this one, for it was a very heart-breaking night, and I will always remember my mother's words from that night as well, “I love you so much.” I know that

she is grateful for me. I am just glad that I can watch the trees dance in the wind,
peacefully.

Revival of the Wilting Woman
Brianna Epperly

Oak Hill Middle School, Fayette County

Teacher: Katherine Fox

West Virginia State Winner

1st Place, 7th-8th Grade

The clatter of porcelain and glass slammed and shattered against the ground. With that noise came the running footsteps of Ms. Chrysanthemum. She practically threw herself onto the floor, pulling her antiques close to her. She almost shed a tear at the sight of a small chip on one of her “babies”, as she called them. Her smile faded every time she spotted a new speck of dirt, a chip of paint, or any mishap that showed itself on any of her collectables.

“Oh, my poor darling!” she yelped and scooped up the few objects that had fallen. She ran through the halls of her home and gently placed the antiques onto a tablecloth which lay wrinkled on a wide, wooden desk. Around the objects, various crafting supplies, sewing materials, and clay products were spread out in a sloppy manner. She sat down on the small cushioned stool beneath the desk and got to work. Her frail hands shakily dragged paint globbed on a paintbrush over the scuffs; her eyes were wide and ready to fix all the flaws. Time was nothing to Ms. Chrysanthemum, for she was completely alone: No husband, no children, no mother, father, sibling – not to mention, her lack of friends. The reason was simple: she looked petrifying. The state even paid her to stay away from society. That is how “ugly” she was. “A witch”, the people would scream, “A goblin, a werewolf...a monster!”

From birth, Ms. Chrysanthemum was excluded. Her own mother tossed her into a barn, leaving no note or any sort of item to show her undying love for her daughter. Even foster homes wouldn't accept such a creature. They all called her Chrysanthemum, for the face that was simply shreds of flesh attached by skin appearing

to be a flower. Her mother didn't even waste time trying to name her. The nickname became her legal name after she became 18. This was when she went looking for work. Of course, all of the stores, shops and restaurants declined her.

One day, she was out searching for a job when a policeman stopped her. This was how the state noticed her. They saw how inhuman she appeared and knew it would cause a disturbance if enough people saw her. In secret, all of the top people decided to pay her to stay hidden. They found an abandoned home (the owner had passed away decades ago) and fixed it up to the best of their ability. This was truly her dream home. The only catch to her ownership of the home was to stay inside at all times. Of course, she can go outside and take walks through the woods, but that was the final line. That was all her freedom was.

As the years went on, she had very little human contact. Her only source of this was her delivery woman, Luella. Ms. Chrysanthemum would purchase antiques from the catalogs and request certain items from Luella. Ms. Chrysanthemum would call Luella her lifelong friend, though she was simply doing her job. One day, Luella drove up into Ms. Chrysanthemum's driveway and hopped out of her car.

She jogged around the vehicle and swung the back door open. After grabbing a bag of Ms. Chrysanthemum's requested items, she walked up to the front door and knocked her usual two times. When there was no response, she knocked once more...Maybe one more time? Maybe a shout?

"Ms. Chrysanthemum?" Luella yelled through the door. Another moment in silence passed, and Luella began to worry. She crouched down and set the bag of old teapots, porcelain dolls, and other assorted antiques beside her feet before lifting the flower pot beside Ms.

Chrysanthemum's door. Beneath it lay a spare key. Luella unlocked the door and stepped inside. She roamed the home in search of just one sign of Ms. Chrysanthemum, yet she found nothing.

As Luella searched the house, a putrid scent started inviting itself into her nostrils, a stench so strong it made her gag. Just as Luella turned the corner, a sight that made her widen her eyes revealed itself. The frail body of Ms. Chrysanthemum lay with her head hung low in her arms. There was foam seeping from her cracked lips, giving a sign that it must have been a natural death – perhaps an extremely aggressive seizure. In horror, Luella's mouth sat wide open as she stared at the scene in front of her. It's not like Luella had a close relationship with Ms. Chrysanthemum, but she was all Ms. Chrysanthemum had. That simple truth will eat at Luella for the rest of her life. Ms. Chrysanthemum's maggot-filled eye sockets and her protruding, rotten lip was now a permanent image in Luella's brain...

Bloom

Malakai Jones

Mullens Middle School, Wyoming County
Teacher: Brooke Wolfe
West Virginia State Winner
2nd Place, 7th – 8th Grade

I once stood tall and proud in a lush meadow, sprawling in the sunlight, and swaying gently in the breeze. I thrived in a resonate garden, my exquisite and fine petals unfurling to the warm caress of the sun. My petals were a vibrant, joyful tone, and my fragrance glided through the air, drawing in bees and butterflies. Constantly, I would be regarded as lovely and could always bring a smile to a human's face. Life was simple, yet beautiful, and I embraced each day with gratitude.

But as the seasons shifted and the days grew shorter, I felt a change within me. The warm feel of the sun became less comforting, and the once gentle breeze now felt harsh and unforgiving. The once lively tint of my petals began to fade. I would grow and saturate in the sunlight, loving my existence, the water that once cherished me now seemed to slip through my parched roots. I struggled to draw nutrition from the soil, and my once luscious leaves began to wither and droop. I felt a sense of helplessness as my once vibrant colors turned dull and lifeless, and my once sweet fragrance began to fade away.

I watched as the other flowers around me continued to bloom and thrive, their colorful blooms a crisp contrast to my own fading beauty. They showed a painful reminder of my own decline. I itched to ask for help, to seek guidance from the earth and the sky, but I was rooted in place, unable to move or change my fate.

As the days passed, I felt my strength recede away and knew that my time in this world was ending. My once vibrant petals turned a pale shade, and my fragrance

diminished to a skimpy whisper on the wind. I felt a sense of sadness and longing for the days when I was full of life, vitality, and spirit.

One by one, my petals began to fall, leaving me exposed and vulnerable to the elements. I felt a deep sense of loss as I watched my once beautiful form disintegrate, returning to the earth from which I had sprung. I longed for the warmth of the sun, the touch of the rain, and the whispers of the wind, but they seemed to slip further and further away with each passing moment.

As the days turned into weeks, I felt my strength wane, and my existence became a mere shadow of what it once was. I lay there, whimpering and fading, I found a strange peace in the acceptance of my fate. I knew that my time had come, and I was ready to embrace the next phase of my existence. I suddenly could always remember watching children step on flowers. Humans picking flowers and not letting the life of one be in peace. I closed my eyes and let go, feeling a strange sense of calm wash over me.

As my last petal fell, I released a sigh that seemed to carry my essence into the world around me. I felt a sense of freedom as I drifted away, carried by the wind and the whispers of the meadow. I loved letting go of everything and all the hatred I had for my torture. My physical form may have succumbed to the passage of time, but I knew that my spirit would live on, a part of the eternal cycle of life and death.

In my last moments, I found sadness in the knowledge that I had played my part in the grand world of existence. As I faded into the earth, I held onto the hope had brought beauty and joy to the world, and even in death, I knew that my presence would not be forgotten. I became one with the earth, knowing that my essence would nourish the soil and provide sustenance for new life to come.

Life. Life as a flower. Humans could never imagine the life of one. Trauma, and yet no peace ever found. Loving myself. Being loved but the love being too much. No

boundaries in one's bubble. My existence. Nothing but being tugged at and pulled on by one of significant size. No one ever to acknowledge my life. Gallop around me as if it were nothing. But what am I? Nothing to anyone it seems like.

As I walked out the acceptance of the earth, I held onto the hope that someday, another flower would take my place, bringing beauty and joy to the world once more. And in that hope, I found a sense of peace, knowing that the cycle of life would continue, and that my existence had not been in vain. Ready for rest. So, I send farewell to the world I once knew. A flower once lived.

Thirteen **Brielle Coburn**

Glenwood School, Mercer County
Teacher: Ruby Hubbard
West Virginia State Winner
3rd Place, 7th – 8th Grade

Thirteen is everything and nothing at the same time. Thirteen is everything to me, and nothing to someone who is fourteen. Thirteen is confusing. I wake every day to see people having the time of their life. Why can't I be happy and carefree? Why am I so confused while everyone else seems so confident in their life? "You only live once!" they say. Yeah, your right. So how will I spend my one chance?

Thirteen is tears. I find tears threatening to fall when I see how much I have changed. When I see how distant I am from my family. I miss my mother's embrace when I wept over a scrape. I miss being daddy's little girl. I miss playing dolls with my sister.

Thirteen is fear. The fear of not making an impact on this world. Will I be something great? Who will I be? What will I do? Will the world be kind to me?

Thirteen is jealousy. I am envious of the perfect girls on my screen. I am jealous of the girls that are smarter and prettier than I am. I'm jealous of the people who are brave and confident. I envy their lives.

Thirteen is joyous. I have so much kindness to give. Will the world swallow up my kindness? Joy is a beautiful feeling. I have memories of getting a Barbie for Christmas one year. The beautiful outfit she was wearing, her hair, shiny and freshly brushed. I remember feeling so much joy that day. Childhood joy is magical and special. Nothing feels as happy as being a carefree little kid. I miss that type of joy.

Thirteen is full of choices. Small choices, big choices, hard choices, and sometimes easy ones too. "What shirt looks better on me?" my friends ask. If only life was as easy as a shirt choice. I have choices now that will affect me forever.

Thirteen is tiring. I'm tired of waking everyday at six a 'clock. I'm tired of trying to be perfect. It feels like I'm drowning. I'm under water fighting to get back up. Each time I get up from the water, I'm pushed back down again. I feel a weight lift off of me when I finish school work. Then it piles back up before I can even take a breath. I'm just tired.

Thirteen is funny. I have people making me laugh nonstop. They brighten my day so much. I wonder if they know it? I wonder if they know I think about their jokes hours later and still laugh. I hope they feel the same way about me. I hope I'm funny. I hope they laugh at my joke's hours later too.

Thirteen is frustration. I am frustrated with my life. All the anger built up and bottled emotions can never come out. It's frustrating. I get so frustrated over nothing really. I'm frustrated when I don't get question right, if I can't understand something, or even when my hair is not straight enough. Why is thirteen so frustrating?

Thirteen is embarrassing. All the stupid mistakes I make leave me embarrassed. When I get a bad grade, I'm embarrassed. When people make a mean joke about me it's embarrassing. Thirteen is full of embarrassment.

I remember when I was nine, I wanted to be ten. When I was ten, I wanted to be eleven. When I was eleven I wanted to be twelve. I'm practically a grown up by then!" I would say. When I was twelve I wanted to be thirteen. "Being a teenager is going to be so cool!" Now that I am thirteen I wish I could be nine again. I wish I didn't spend all my years wishing to grow up. I miss only worrying about what stuffed animal I would sleep with at night. I miss the visits to grandma and grandpa. I miss playing with my cousins, and begging our moms to lets us have a sleepover. I miss the magic of

childhood. I miss when girls weren't mean. I miss when boys were still gross. I miss not worrying about my looks or weight. I miss it all!

Everything is a big deal at thirteen. Your shoes, your clothes, your friends, how many sports you play, and how smart you are. I bet at fourteen life will be easy. No one will care who I am. I will know what to do and who I will be. Thirteen is confusing, full of tears and fears. Thirteen is full of choices, and thirteen is funny. Thirteen is embarrassing and very frustrating. Thirteen is everything and nothing at the same time. Everything to me, and nothing to someone who is fourteen.

Observer **Makayla Orndoff**

Hampshire Senior High School, Hampshire County
Teacher: Emily Keefer
West Virginia State Winner
1st Place, 9th-10th Grade

I experience everything around me. I see the bounding of playful dogs and the footprints they leave behind. I watch each one fade away over time, eroded by nature. I see structures built and torn down and rebuilt as something new. I hear mothers gossiping and see fathers throwing ball with their sons. I hear joyous laughter during the day and the chirping of crickets at night. I am eternal. I am an observer.

I sit in a park, surrounded by equipment dirtied by youth, just as I have for the past two thousand, five-hundred, and twenty-two moon cycles. Nothing surprises me anymore- I know everything that goes on here, but I never stop paying attention. As repetitive as life can be, there is still an endless beauty in it. Humans are always rushing, unable to stop and admire what's right in front of them. I am both gifted and cursed in the way that I may never rush as they do, but am instead forced to simply watch.

It's little things that make observation worthwhile; the hatching of eggs in a nest that took a mother bird months to build, or the blossoming of a new friendship caused by a perfectly random game of tag. I've taken a particular interest in the woman who frequents the shade under my strong arms, engrossed in a different book every time she visits. She becomes lost in the pages, never stopping to think about the deeper meaning of the words. She went from romance novels to books on motherhood after a bulge began forming on her stomach, and soon she would lay a blanket over the earth she used to sit on, where her daughter would accompany her. The curiosity in that girl's eyes reminded me of my old self.

It seemed that she was only like this for a moment though. Unlike the rest of the world, she seemed to grow by the second. She crawled, then stood, and then she was walking, but never too far from my roots. Her mother, who no longer read novels, spent her days admiring her little girl. The more she grew the less I saw her. When I did, her eyes looked brighter, her hair longer, and her clothes bigger. Although her visits became infrequent, they never ceased; once a week, the pair would visit me and enjoy lunch together- each time they did, there was an unseen tension that thickened.

Eventually, a third joined them. A man, big, burly and anything but keen to be there, seemed to fit uncomfortably on the blanket meant for two. He made conversation that only her mother entertained, and her eyes would wander from them to the world around her. Just like me, she began to observe.

This continued until her mother and newfound father stopped showing up. She would find me, alone, with the same blanket her mother used to tuck into a basket. She lugged around a heavy backpack filled with worksheets and complex supplies. When she finished her work, she would pack up and just sit there for another hour or so, her eyes clouded. She wasn't quite watching anything anymore; more like avoiding the task of going wherever she went after she left me. She didn't glow with youth anymore; however young she was. She seemed tired, like she was a person in a much later stage of her life.

It was many months before I saw her again. During that time, I did something I had never done; I felt something much like what I imagine mother birds feel when their hatchlings leave the nest- I missed her. A part of me knew she'd come back. And that she did- this time, with a little one of her own in tow, accompanied by a man her age.

She looked more content than she ever had, eyes trained to the bundle in her arms. She laid out a blanket fit for three, and enjoyed lunches made with care. She had found her family, her home, and her happiness all in one. When she wasn't watching her

son, she was reading to him. When she wasn't reading to him, she was eating with him. The man next to her seemed to find comfort in her presence, and her in his.

Her son began to age. He grew rapidly, but unlike his mother, was unwilling to stay still. He was constantly running, enjoying his youth to the best of his ability. Even with all his energy, he was never too rambunctious for his mother. She was determined to make him the center of her world, and she was effortless in doing so.

As days passed, so did months, and then years. The little girl wasn't little anymore- gray had begun to show in her hair, but that curious spark still shone brightly in her eyes. Her husband didn't accompany her so much anymore, but she didn't seem to mind. She sat at a distance now, over on a bench under the protection of another's leaves. Watching her from afar, knitting intricate patterns into an ever-growing cloth, she looked serene.

Later, I would only see her on occasion, chaperoned by her son. Her hair was thin and white, her skin wrinkled, and her body frail. He would sit with her, talking about anything and everything. She rarely responded. This carried on until I only saw the boy. He was a replica of her, with bright eyes and a charming smile. I knew she was gone- I had dreaded it for so long, but a part of her remained. He, just like her, would settle down, have children, and grow old. If there is anything I've learned in all my time, it's the repetition of life. People live and die, but there is an impact, if only a small one, from each of those lives. Life isn't just about how it's lived, but what it leaves behind. This is the beauty of life. This is why I observe.

Remembrance **Maddix Duckworth**

Keyser High School, Mineral County
Teacher: Whitney Umstot
West Virginia State Winner
2nd Place, 9th – 10th Grade

Under the topic of war, we tend to focus on the conclusive victories or the cunning leaders who guided nations through battle. In the years 1942 to 1943, a decisive battle took place in Southern Russia: The Battle of Stalingrad. Over four million individual soldiers fought and nearly two million lost their lives. These men weren't expected to live, and they would be lucky to last a single day. Over the two years of constant fighting and little mobility of positions, Stalingrad would dreadfully receive the title, *The Bloodiest Battle in History*.

Regardless of the oncoming spring, temperatures persistently dropped to freezing, actively stalling the troops and freezing their petrol reserves. German soldiers were freezing to death, and attempting to seek shelter in the rubble of monolithic structures, which had once housed civilians who were now far removed from the city. One of these refugees was engaging in lively conversation around a makeshift fire built from a rusted gasoline barrel. His name was Gunter, a new recruit to the 3rd Infantry Division who was drafted to war—he fought for the Third Reich.

As the final bowl of soup was dished out, crackling of bullets were heard outside. This was the third time this week that they had been attacked. It was routine to them now. Gunter grabbed his weapon, pulled the bolt back and slid it forward again. Scouting the area briefly for cover, Gunter viewed one of the derelict tanks which had been left behind in the thick snow. The snow was cold. His eyes consumed by a glimpse of brightness as light reflected across the powdery mirror below his feet; however, a

figure could still be spotted overhead. It was Ulrich, a comrade of Gunter who he found assurance with.

“I suppose you’re still alive, hm?” Ulrich said in a mocking tone to Gunter.

Ushering for Ulrich to take cover with him, Gunter began to respond,

“Yeah, you’ll be free of me one of these days.”

The rounds began to stabilize. Gunter readied his firearm and peeked from the tanks track. With the sudden stall of fired bullets, he expected to see at least a few soldiers; however, there lacked a single one. It now appeared to be abandoned wasteland of snowed in concrete towering among a deathly gray skyline. He lowered the rifle and looked back to Ulrich with a chilled stream of sweat flowing across his forehead.

“They’re gone.”

“All of them? That isn’t possible. They must be hiding in the snow, or considering your eyesight, just standing there.”

Ulrich began to snicker at his own joke, but noticing the dull eyes of his friend and lack of motion realized the severity of the situation. Gunter raised his firearm higher and arched his back slightly, bringing slight defensive comfort to himself in the uncertainty of enemy soldiers. They mutually laid into the snow to further secure their positions. After a brief duration of awaiting instructions from the division’s officers, a signal never came. The air howled into their ears like a trapped phantom, and the temperature began to dilute as the dusk drew near.

After minutes passed, Gunter and Ulrich began to freeze. It was becoming a taxing order to wait for the officers. Their absence was startling considering the lurking enemies, so the search had commenced to locate the missing regiment. All of the surrounding buildings were identically formatted: concrete monoliths seemingly built for the sole purpose of housing individuals regardless of comfort. Gunter was distracted with all of the ancient rubble from the onslaught of bullets rained upon them, pondering the theory of *why*. He didn’t choose to fight in the war, and the life he encompassed

before the war seemed distant now. He didn't want to be here, he didn't want to kill, and more importantly he didn't want to face his own death fighting for somebody he had never met.

Rather spontaneously, the air grew warmer around them. Ulrich looked in the direction of Gunter with his eyes appearing colder than the breeze and his mouth drooping like a frozen waterfall. His comrades' eyes were looking behind him, seemingly into the deep abyss of the redundant structures.

The world seemed to slow down. Gunter knew what his friend was staring into. Feint rhythms of a firearm's trigger released behind him, and with rapid succession, a bullet flew past his head. Before any reaction could ensue between Ulrich, he fell to the floor in silence. A newfound silence entered the snowy wasteland as Gunter turned to the gunshot. His eyes wandered rapidly among the area, and a singular Soviet soldier appeared into his vision with a large rifle armed with a bayonet. Similar to his friend, there was no time to react. As the blade pierced the neck of Gunter, he fell to the snowy floor just as Ulrich. A pool of blood expanded near him, and the city was cloaked in silence once more. The snow enveloped him fully, and his skin began losing its warmth—another casualty of war, gone unnoticed to the world.

As the second world war raged forward, many countries celebrated the crushing defeat of Adolph Hitler's Third Reich, however, many of these soldiers would become forgotten in time. Centuries of life will thrive onward and different battles will be parted across the world. Although, our society cannot forget the individual lives of those who were slaughtered for a purpose which remains highly avoidable. Ruler of the Soviet Union, Joseph Stalin states, "One death is a tragedy, a million deaths is a statistic." Most often, a large-scale conflict is grounded into numbers, when this isn't true. This point is rather true considering the amount of pain suffering throughout Stalingrad. Stories and tales of ancestors going through the same troubles all build to the tree of

pain supporting the art of war. That is, until the ever-expanding tree is cut down by the negligence of mankind and her fantasies of violence.

Tainted Reflection **Brooklyn Ratliff**

Gilmer County High School, Gilmer County
Teacher: Tabatha Beall
West Virginia State Winner
3rd Place, 9th and 10th

Clink-clink-clink-clink-clink.

The sound of a million shattered pieces hitting the floor. Broken glass scattered across the room. She doesn't even care if she steps in it. Maybe she wants it, the feeling of the shards breaking her skin. Even if it doesn't feel pleasant, she'd be feeling *something*. She's numb.

Her mom hurriedly runs in the room. "Oh sweetheart, are you alright? What was that?" She lifts the frame of the once-intact mirror, now like a constellation of crystalline fragments spotting the ground.

She can't stand the way she looks. She can't stand her own reflection. The sight of herself in a mirror makes her sick to her stomach. No matter how much powder and gloss she piles on, it's like putting makeup on a pig. Nothing *truly* changes. Deep down she knows her consistent feelings of hatred toward her own body will never change.

Each day repeats like clockwork. A broken record replaying, telling her she'll never look like the girls she sees in pictures. All the pretty girls that boys want. That would never be her, no matter how thin she was. The mirror tells her she's too big; she's too ugly. She pokes and prods at her stomach, and although you can see her ribs, she sees fat.

Her hands are shaking from a lack of sleep. The bags under her eyes show how she stays up at night crying, wondering why she was made this way. Each night as she lies in bed, she dreads the moment the sun rises and the day repeats again.

An agonizing stomachache eats away at her, continually feeling more and more pain until she doesn't feel anything. She hasn't eaten in days, surviving only on water and her medications. Her medicine makes her feel like a lifeless zombie.

A few months ago, her mom took her to the doctor when she noticed that her daughter no longer ate at the dining room table with her, but instead insisted on eating in her room. Shortly after, her mother realized she was developing a sickly figure. Her whole personality had changed; once a spirited, bubbly teenage girl, had quickly turned into a recluse that hardly had any social interactions.

The doctor took her symptoms as signs of depression, especially since she spends so much of her time alone in her room. However, the doctor didn't know the real truth about how she felt. She thought maybe her medications would stop her feelings of disgust with herself, but instead they just compounded her hopelessness and emptiness. She begged her mom to let her stop taking these pills, but the answer was always no. She knew that whatever was wrong with her couldn't be combated with some wonder drug.

Her almost hourly trips to the mirror were becoming more and more frequent. The buildup of repulsion that piles up every time she sees herself gets more and more intense until she can't take it anymore. She picks up the lamp on her nightstand and throws it as hard as she can at her reflection, shattering the glass. Her mom runs in the room frantically asking her what's wrong, but all she can choke out is some heavy sobs.

Once she gathers herself again, she pours her heart out to her mom. She lets out everything she's bottled up in the recent months and tearfully shares the struggles within herself. For the past months she's had a war raging in her mind telling her she'll never be enough, causing her endless downward spiral. She won't eat, she can't sleep, and she's in tremendous pain.

Tears soaked her mother's devastated face seeing her daughter in this fragile state. *How did I miss all these signs? Why didn't she come to me sooner?* More questions swirled around in her mind, but they wouldn't help her daughter now. She embraced her daughter's frail body and held onto her slender frame, now feeling the bones poking out.

All along, it had never been depression. She'd been struggling with her self-image and suffering with dysmorphia. She had a warped perception of her true appearance. The only thing that could help her was a realization of her genuine, natural beauty.

She begins to sweep up the mess of glass like a thousand daggers on the floor. She picks up a large piece and holds it up to her face. In the reflection she sees something she's never seen before. Looking back at her, she sees a beautiful girl. As she's gazing in the mirror, she grasps a new thought. The only thing standing in the way of her and this breathtaking young woman is herself. If only she would realize her authentic beauty, this view could become a reality for her.

When you're in the dirt, you must understand that you are either buried, or you are planted. This is all determined by your mindset. The girl struggling with dysmorphia was in the dirt and thought she had no way out. However, she saw the light at the end of the tunnel. That girl was me.

One Eye Open **Anna Trent**

Doddridge County High School, Doddridge County
Teacher: Mrs. Curran
West Virginia State Winner
1st Place, 11th-12th grade

Photographs. They have the ability to capture a moment that is otherwise gone forever, impossible to reproduce. They act as a ticket in time, containing the sheer humanity of every moment. As soon as Jessie had figured out how, she had taken pride in loading a roll of unexposed film and clicking that button. The familiar shutter and flash were a figment of her mind, finding comfort in the sound. However, there was one thing she was painfully unaware of; that her calling would be her curse.

“Steph, bring the thumbtacks” Jessie called out to her older sister.

“Coming,” she replied from the living room, sounding somewhat winded as if she had been moving some of the many boxes that resided in the space.

Jessie had just moved into her first home, tucked into the small suburb outside of Columbus, Ohio. Throughout her photography career, Jessie had hung her favorite pieces on the wall in a collage-like display. She lightly traced an index finger over one of the glossy sheaths of the polaroid pictures, sprawled out messily over her bed. She gazed down at the many memories that had been captured in time, whilst surveying the wall she wanted to hang them on. She heard the light sound of shuffling feet and peered over her shoulder, finding Steph studying her with a perplexed grin. Her sister had never understood her interest in photos but didn't seem to judge her for the quirk. Together, they began to thumb through the pictures, placing them with care. Jessie's heart beamed, seeing the last picture she had taken of her old apartment complex in Belmont, Massachusetts. She had grown up there, knowing every short cut, coffee shop, and back road in the city. In the months leading up to the move, she had decided it was time

she got serious about her photography career; she needed a change, full of new inspiration and opportunities to grasp. Holding the photo between her fingers, she gazed at the crimson bricks her building had consisted of. She had been so familiar with that apartment complex, the newness of this place suddenly seemed daunting.

“I’m going to have these all hung up before you ever stop reminiscing,” Steph spoke, interrupting her doubtful thoughts. They finished hanging the last of the photographs and stood back to admire their work. With a huff and a wipe of her glistening upper lip, Jessie turned to find her sister’s soft eyes.

“Well I think that’s everything,” she said with a wistful smile, tucking a strand of her short chestnut locks behind her ear. Steph stared back, examining her face, before finally breaking into a big grin.

“I can’t believe how grown up you are, Jessie!” She embraced her in a swift hug, pinching her cheeks in classic grandma style.

“Steph,” she groaned, squirming away from her overbearing hug.

“Alright, Alright. I’ll let you settle in. If you need anything just call me okay.”

“Thank you for everything,” she replied, meaning that deeply. Jessie watched as she gathered her purse and opened the front door with a swift movement, her long golden curls swaying at her hips. As she stared at the closed front door, she thought to herself *This change is exactly what I needed*. She wasn’t sure if she meant that or if she was trying to ease her own anxieties, but either way she repeated it in her mind.

After putting the empty boxes away, Jessie sleepily walked toward her room, falling into her bed on her back. As she stared at the unfamiliar ceiling, she couldn’t help but feel out of place. She knew that moving was the wisest way to expand her

photography career and make a life for herself; however, she couldn't help but wonder if she had made a hasty decision. As the thought swirled through her head, she turned to face her photography collection plastered on her wall, the only thing that typically brought her comfort. As she scanned through the many familiar photos, a specific one caught her eye: one of her new house. She sprung to her feet as her heart dropped to the floor. Upon examining the picture, she realized this was not a work of her own, but more amateur. Allowing herself to take a deep breath, she rationalized that her sister likely took this picture to commemorate the new move whilst gathering her photography supplies to bring inside. A sweet gesture, Jessie concluded, placing the picture back onto the wall before crawling back into bed.

As Jessie's eyes fluttered open, she realized she had dozed off immediately after lying down a few hours prior. She crawled from her warm bed, heavy-eyed and drowsy, finding her glasses and stumbling her way to the bathroom. After fulfilling her typical morning routine, she slipped on her fuzzy slippers, contrasting against the cold floors. Shuffling back into her connected room, Jessie sat at her makeup vanity to begin to get ready for the day. Looking into the mirror, she lightly dusted her face with a beige powder using a soft bristled brush. Her gaze wandered to the reflection behind her, finding her unmade cream colored bed comforter outstretched. She scanned her way up the wall to where the photos were hanging. Jessie's blood ran cold, freezing in place with a tight grip around the brush. Her hands began to tremble, turning to face the collage sprawled on the wall. She stood from her seat carefully and walked in that direction, feeling as though her legs may give beneath her at any given second. A gulp slithered its way down her throat, inching her way closer. The hair on the back of Jessie's neck stood straight and a bead of sweat formed at the top of her brow bone. Her eyes studied and blinked rapidly, determining that the picture she was viewing was real; a photo of her sleeping last night. Terror-struck, hundreds of thoughts crossed through the pathways in her brain at one time, however quickly blundered by the sound she knew so well: the shutter and flash of her camera going off from behind her back.

Chess

Grace Brantley

Morgantown High School, Monongalia County
Teacher: Chase Leone
West Virginia State Winner
2nd Place, 11th – 12th Grade

Concealed within a wardrobe of burly, weathered coats, a dust-covered chessboard rested atop a shelf. A child stumbled across it in surprise, her twirling figure guided by the wind's faint nudge. Nimble fingers searched with anticipation, reaching relentlessly for the mysterious box like a moth drawn to a flickering flame. Nona, bestowed with the name by a grandchild who struggled to pronounce "Mona," observed in silence. She watched the girl's graceful attempt to climb a stool, rising on her tiptoes but slipping like a teetering cup.

Finally, Nona stood from her creaking chair, a symphony of bones protesting each slow movement. Hobbling over, dust cascaded onto her silver hair as she retrieved the hickory chessboard. The little girl peered at her with intrigue and delight, oblivious to the forgotten box's contents. Leading her to a round table, Nona opened it up, meticulously arranging the pieces.

"The first thing to know about chess, Elizabeth, my dear," Nona mused, her wrinkled hand enveloping a piece, "is that the queen orchestrates the game." Eliza's sage eyes sparkled with curiosity, and Nona continued, "Heed not the king; without the queen, entire kingdoms crumble."

Nona cleared the board and opened her fist, revealing the queen and placing it directly in the middle. The piece started to move seemingly on its own, or at least Eliza remembered it doing so. Golden cords strung it along vertical, horizontal, and diagonal paths, traversing as many spaces as desired. Eliza watched in pure wonder as the

powerful queen waltzed across the stage. Funny how, in the eyes of a child, simple things look so much grander.

Nona quickly rearranged the board to its proper format, and the magic appeared to still. Rising from the table, she walked to the kitchen, opened the freezer, and grabbed two clinking china bowls from a cabinet. Her flower-printed dress got stuck in a drawer, and Eliza giggled at the sound of her laughs. Nona placed the bowl in front of Eliza and said, “My grandmother taught me nearly everything, always accompanied by a scoop of ice cream to keep us going. Now, it’s my turn to do the same with you.”

Nona explained the rules between bites of chocolate-drizzled vanilla, wiping her mouth clean with delicate poise. The dessert was not so kind to Eliza; it covered her forehead and practically every spot nearby. Nona chuckled while describing the role of each piece. Before Eliza knew it, the game began.

The first match took seconds to transpire. Eliza advanced a knight and a pawn, but Nona relied on the queen. Certainly, the only way to learn to win was first to lose. Eliza’s stance turned committed, and her brow furrowed as she focused on the game ahead. She played to confuse, moving bishops and rooks in unexpected ways. Yet, Nona evaded each spirited effort. With decades of wisdom and practice above her, she admired Eliza’s dedication to succeed.

“Careful child, watch your queen with care. While the king retreats, the queen glides toward the scare.” Nona won.

“Kings and pawns move one square, but the queen can move almost anywhere.” Nona won.

“She protects even when she bleeds. Selfless and caring queen she is indeed.” Nona won.

Eliza began to decipher creative tactics as thousands of games flew by. When asked how she never grew tired, she explained it was impossible to be bored when she was with her Nona. As barren trees sprouted brilliant leaves and the breeze carried wistful tunes, summer stepped aside for autumn, and time moved gently. The chessboard evolved into a sanctuary.

Eliza became taller, her dark hair longer, and her mind swifter. Each day she looked more like her grandmother. Seated in a chair across, she gazed into Nona's kind eyes, determination coating her face. The golden cords from her first game reached out, bringing a rush of memories: Five years old, discovering the box. At eight, inviting her stuffed elephant to the table, believing he would aid her in victory. Twelve, laughing when Nona accidentally knocked the entire board onto the floor. Eighteen, a single glance exchanged between the two when she gave that speech about chess. The solace of childhood took a deep breath, and, at last, Eliza won a round.

There came a moment when Nona realized playing chess was no longer so effortless. Her fingers stiffened, and fatigue set in. Her words wavered, and her thoughts grew weary. On Eliza's last visit, sugary laughs flowed through the air as they played the game once more. See, to the girl, the queen was everything.

"You can't go! What shall I do without you?" Eliza cried in utter fear.

Nona wrapped her arms around her tightly as Eliza tried to memorize how she smelled of roses, how her voice elongated vowels, and how she joked when telling stories.

In kingdoms, the queen can't reign forever. In the end, Nona's smile never faded.

Pain invaded and tore up Eliza's lungs. Why must sorrow overwhelm those left behind?

Check...wobbling queen... falling queen...checkmate.

Sometimes, no one wins the gilded throne.

And I cannot play chess alone.

For when the queen becomes too frail and dies, everyone she once loved no longer tries.

Dinner for Two **Sandra Ballenger**

Meadow Bridge High School, Fayette County
Teacher: Elizabeth Hamlin
West Virginia State Winner
3rd Place, 11th and 12th Grade

Clanks and dings could be heard in the kitchen, where pans and utensils were working in tandem. A warm scent wafted through the space, warm and peppery. It floated along and felt as if you could cut the smell in two with a knife. Vegetables were strewn about, some were diced and some were julienned. A hefty Dutch oven is being heated over the largest eye of the stove; a thin layer of oil that coats the bottom has nearly reached its smoking point. Skillful hands danced about, readying the array of ingredients that lay about in the clean kitchen. Carrots, celery, and different vegetables alike are added to the heat, their earthy smell permeating the air. The mirepoix is slowly homogenized, and browning very nicely as fond builds on the bottom of the stainless-steel pan. Calloused hands delicately reach for fresh herbs on the window sill, gently plucking the greens from the stem, and roughly chopping them before throwing them into the pot.

The aproned woman moved once again, seeking out two bottles of burgundy wine; a cabernet sauvignon and a merlot. Under the knee-length apron, long legs strode carefully while humming, heels clacking on the spotless, seemingly sterile floor.

A knock at the door switches the focus from wine to window, and she peers outside to see an expected visitor.

“Come on in!” she said loudly, as she continued a few feet ahead to the wine rack that covered a wall of the open pantry. The dark oak door creaked open, revealing a wide smile from a dapper young man.

Refocusing attention on her guest, bottles in hand she says, “Oh dear, how are you this evening?” she says gently with a nervous chuckle. ‘I am so sorry; I know this is a lot for only a second date, I normally only go on firsts.’

“I am doing quite alright,” he chuckled, charm seeping off him in bouts as he fixed the collar of his maroon blazer.

“No worries, a date is a date. I appreciate the effort, sweetheart...” He punctuated with a kind lilt, his smile never reaching his ocean blue eyes, “It smells delightful.”

The tall woman gave him a genuine smile, tilting her head in sincerity, speaking without words. Her auburn eyes looked him over, devouring him with her sight.

“Come on them, I have already set the table. Dinner is nearly finished.”

The well-dressed man followed the stout woman into the kitchen adjoined to the lavish dining room. The house has an open floor plan, making nearly every room and piece of unique furniture visible. She motioned her hand toward the end of the table, the seat with a plate already set with two differently sized forks, a silver spoon, and a large steak knife. In the center sat a large bouquet of carnations and chrysanthemums, the beautiful colors a contrast to the dark mahogany of the table. Her apron flowed as she returned to the counter, setting the bottles of wine down. The pot of sautéing vegetables continued to gently sizzle as they softened from the heat. With a loud pop, the cork was removed from the bottle of merlot. She poured the wine into a crystal glass, twirling the glass and mixing the contents with a warm smile before sauntering over and handing it to the man.

With keen blue eyes, the man seated at the far end of the table observed her movements in the kitchen as she gracefully moved from side to side. His gaze became heavy with a sly, devious smirk crawling its way onto his lips. His eyes darkened and

focused, like a predator to its prey. She was unwavering in her task, hands moving and scattering ingredients here and there, worried about nothing more than what was at her hands. His shiny eyes look up as he takes a hefty drink of the fine wine, clicking his tongue as he swallows. He takes a deep breath while he plays with the steak knife that rests on the napkin beside his plate.

He tosses the knife up, catching it back in his hand before stabbing it into the wooden tabletop. The brunette turns quickly, shock painting her face.

“Surely you did not just ruin my table for a little bit of theatrics?” She hissed, venom dripping out of her voice as she marched to the dark wooden table, slamming her hands down on the opposing end.

“This is a *dangerous game* you’re playing, gorgeous.” He says as sly as a fox, his words echo in hopes of instilling fear. He toys with the reflective spoon, twisting and turning it in his hand as he leans back in the wooden chair, lounging like a lazy animal.

“*The most*, I am hoping.” She says with a chuckle, looking towards him and locking eyes, her laugh turning maniacal and crazed as she watches his face contort with disbelief. She reaches up to wipe the corner of her eyes from the tears spilled from the hearty laugh, unable to regain composure. The man’s façade withered, in utter confusion at the sense of humor the woman had when he expected fear. She snicked as she covered her mouth, hiding her growing, carnivorous smile as she looked past the man.

The man’s face dropped, his skin pulling and turning a ghastly white. The spoon he held in hand felt heavy as if it was suddenly made of lead. A glimpse of a raven-haired woman with a large smile plastered on her face appeared in the bowl of the spoon before it clattered onto the table, her head tilted as her long face shifted into an

exaggerated pout. The soot-haired woman leaned forward and placed her hands on his shoulders, leaning over and whispering into his ear.

“It feels bad, being vulnerable and helpless, doesn’t it?” she grabbed his cheek, forcing his limp neck to face her, her voice was raspy as she spoke, while his was nonexistent- having been rendered speechless by the paralytic that was coursing through his intestines into his bloodstream. Vengeance ran through the woman’s bones and into her marrow, faded bruises and black eyes were painted in her words.

The woman in the ebony apron used a deathly sharp butcher’s knife to chop up the fleshy, pink meat that was a similar shade to a slice of pork. It was bloody and slick, fresh- never frozen. The artisan-crafted blade sliced in practiced movements, thumping on the wooden cutting board underneath, splattering the surrounding countertop with crimson spritz. She seasoned the cubes with carmine spices before tossing them into the pot to be seared and browned. The sound of sizzling filled the room, an ambiance to die for as soft and subtle classical music played in the background. Quick hands wiped up the crimson blood splattered on the counter, leaving the surface spotless. Light feet padded on the floor and pale arms wrapped around the chef’s waist, dark hair tickling the back of her neck. Steam rose from the pot as the food simmered to a finish. The bronze-eyed woman smiled as she leaned into the touch, the obsidian-haired woman’s breath tickling her neck as she murmured,

“I figure that revenge is best served hot!”