

*2022 West Virginia  
Young Writers Contest  
Anthology*



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## *Introduction*

We proudly present the anthology of the 2022 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 38 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](http://www.marshall.edu/cwvwp)

### **Partners**

*Central West Virginia Writing Project  
West Virginia Department of Education  
Marshall University College of Education and Professional Development  
University of Charleston  
With assistance from West Virginia Books*

## **Acknowledgements**

### **WV Young Writers Contest Steering Committee**

Dr. Barbara O'Byrne, Committee Chair and Director, Young Writers Contest, College of Education and Professional Development, Marshall University

Donna Atwood, Professor, College of Education and Professional Development, Marshall University

Dr. Stephanie Burdette, Co-Director, Central West Virginia Writing Project, West Virginia State University

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Dr. Andrea Lemon, English Language Arts Coordinator, West Virginia Department of Education

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### **WV Young Writers Contest Judges 2022**

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Susie Garrison

Kim Gunnell

Susan Malinoski

Emily Patterson

Cat Pleska

Brianne Vandal

Travis Vandal

Faith Winkelmann

## *A Magical Day*

**Ivy Ware**

West Teays Elementary School, Putnam County

Teacher: Kristina Painter

West Virginia State Winner

First Place, Grades 1-2

The birds were chirping outside as the clouds swiftly drifted across the bright sky. Golden sunlight covered the ground. I grabbed my sunglasses and slipped out the door. I ran through the wet puddles to get into my treehouse. I looked out the window and saw bunnies hopping on the leaves and bees on dandelions. Suddenly a glowing light showed up on the pale green leaves. Silver dust led me through the woods. I came to a stop when a soft sound filled the air. I looked down and gasped. Tiny people with wings dressed in miniature clothes were fluttering in the air. I looked at one walking on the dirt closely, her hair was braided with little daisies, her outfit was made from flowers and leaves. When I realized what she was, I gasped! SHE WAS A FAIRY! I quickly took a step back, it felt like time had stopped. Everyone was staring at me, and they all froze in horror. Both the little fairy and I took a tiny step forward. I bent down slightly and picked up the little person and placed her in the center of my palm. A small grin lit up her face. Suddenly, a huge rumble fell across the floor of the forest. They all screamed in a high-pitched voice. "The giants are coming!" one shouted. "What are the giants?" I asked, trying to talk over the loud sound. No one answered, but the noise was getting even closer! I ran behind a tree hoping not to get swept up by the horrifying ogre. Big footsteps came stomping in like boulders. Then, the huge monster came bounding in. Boom! Boom! Boom! My eyes flew open. My teacher was standing over me saying, "Wake up! It's your turn to read." Was I dreaming?

## ***Little Blue Bird***

**Lyla Titus**

Big Otter Elementary, Clay County

Teacher: Linda Jarvis

West Virginia State Winner

Second Place, Grades 1-2

Once upon a time there was a beautiful magnolia tree and in that tree was a little bird. His name was Little Blue Bird. He was a blue jay with soft, fluffy feathers. He was brighter than the sun. One day Little Blue Bird tumbled out of his nest because he couldn't fly just yet. Luckily, his mother was near and saw his plight. She rescued him just in time for he was about to crash to the ground. She said in an angry voice, "You need to stay in the nest!"

As Little Blue Bird got older, he finally learned how to fly. It was his day to leave the nest, but he was still a little scared. He pondered for a while and finally decided to give it a try. "I will go then." He muffled as he spread his wings and away he flew, just like he saw his mamma do so many times.

Little Blue Bird grew alone and scared living on his own. Then one bright sunny morning his life changed. He discovered a beautiful blue jay perched on a limb just below him. She noticed him too. It was love at first sight! Now Little Blue Bird knew he would never be alone again! Soon he had a family of his own. In time he would teach his babies how to fly just like he had learned. That was the story of the little blue bird, only he is not the little blue bird anymore. He is Big Blue Bird!

The End

# *Animals Around the World*

**Ava Grose**

Bluewell Elementary School, Mercer County

Teacher: Katie Hincer

West Virginia State Winner

Third Place, Grades 1-2

Imagine taking a wild African safari to see lions, flamingos, and giraffes. Then, walking around a forest to see meerkats, zebras, and a gorilla. Finally, you end the day with a train ride to a secret land with even more adventures. This is what I experienced at Disney's Animal Kingdom.

I am eight years old, and I dream of being a veterinarian. So, I had a lot of fun and learned great tips at Animal Kingdom. Let's start with the safari.

At the safari, my family and I got on a big truck. We rode around and saw all sorts of African animals. My favorite animals were the flamingos. I learned that they stand on one leg while they sleep, and they are pink because they eat so much shrimp! Next, we went on an African hike in the jungle.

We walked along the Gorilla Falls trail. Here, we watched meerkats play and saw hippos underwater. We also saw gorillas at the end of the trail. In fact, there was a brand-new baby gorilla named Ada. She was so cute; I took lots of pictures.

Finally, we took a train to a secret land called Rafiki's Planet Watch. We were able to see veterinarians work on animals, we saw goats and lambs at a petting zoo, and we walked along the path to explore the area. However, my favorite activity was a special art session with a Disney animator. He taught us how to draw Crush and Squirt from "Finding Nemo". Then, we took the train back to the mountain and saw Animal Kingdom behind the scenes.

I love Disney's Animal Kingdom because I adore animals. I hope to visit again, and maybe I will be a vet at Animal Kingdom one day.

***Same, But Different***  
**Sophia Lowther**

Leading Creek Elementary School, Lewis County  
Teacher: Cristina Stout  
West Virginia State Winner  
First Place, Grades 3-4

Just as the different types and colors of flowers planted in my garden make it incredibly beautiful, so do the different types of people make our world more vibrant and exciting.

My friend went on a school field trip with her class to a pumpkin patch. All the children were to pick a pumpkin for Halloween. As my friend waited for the teacher to help her, the other children excitedly ran from the bus down the rocky path to the pumpkin patch. She waited... and waited until finally deciding she could find her own pumpkin. She laughed as she fumbled and stumbled along the rocky path. She felt under the large, green leaves until her hand touched upon a textured round pumpkin.

“Just the right size.” she thought.

But just as she was about to break it from the vine, another child claimed it as theirs. Kneeling she continued feeling around on the dry, rocky ground until she found another pumpkin. Though a bit smaller, she was happy to have found it.

Then she heard a little girl sadly crying. To comfort the little girl, she offered her pumpkin to her. On and on she searched, thinking how kindness can make life so much better. Tilting her head to listen to a bird’s joyful song, she closed her eyes imagining its beauty. While lost in her own thoughts, she tripped over a rock and just as she caught her balance, she found another pumpkin. But there was a hand attached to it and it was not hers! She apologized and started her search again. She began to feel discouraged, but on she stumbled to the other end of the pumpkin patch, until her stumbling became a tumble and with a rather loud sigh she landed on her backside.

“Well, fiddlesticks!” she mumbled as she sighed loudly.

Then she heard a small voice say, “Hello, I’m Jack.”

She reached her hand into the vine and found the voice.

“Hey, you’re a pumpkin... a talking pumpkin! And you’re square, not round!”

Sadly, he cried, “That’s why no child wants me. Though I’m the same as other pumpkins on the inside, I’m different on the outside.”

With an understanding smile she said, “I’m different also. Though I look the same as other kids, I’m blind. I see with my hands, not my eyes.”

“Then we’re perfect for each other!” said Jack

Together they happily fumbled back down the path toward the bus, both content because they found each other.

Because of our sameness we have understanding and compassion, but it is our differences that make life an exciting adventure.

# ***The Great Puppy Disaster***

## **Seneca Boddy**

Maysville Elementary School, Grant County  
Teacher: Cheryl Jolley  
West Virginia State Winner  
Second Place, Grades 3-4

It was a lovely spring day in the neighborhood of Maple. Ava Sailor was skipping up the steps of their local pet store, Furry Friends, for it was the big day. The Sailor family was finally adopting their very own puppy! Exactly one week ago, the family had gone to see the puppy they wanted to adopt. They ended up choosing a jet black puppy with small specks on its ear. Ava was so happy, she could have jumped up and down screaming. But that was too immature for an 11-year-old like her. They were picking the puppy today, and she was so excited!

They had stopped at the pet store before coming here so they had everything ready for the puppy. Ava was now standing in the pet shop with the puppy right in front of her. She bent down and clipped the leash to its collar. The little guy needed a name.

“How about Charli?” Ava’s mom suggested. “That’s perfect!” agreed the family. Now they were ready to go home. When they arrived home, their mom reminded them a puppy was a massive responsibility and to put it in the kennel while she and dad went shopping. Guess what they didn’t do? They did not put the dog in the cage.

Charli was sleeping in the kitchen, so they left him alone outside his cage. Everyone went upstairs to watch a movie. One hour later, the movie was over. When Ava and her siblings, Christine and Sam, went to grab a snack, they saw the worst mess ever! There was a broken glass on the floor. Juice was spilled on the table. Paper towels and napkins were strung everywhere!

There was also a puddle of...was that lemonade? Wait! Nope, that was something else, dog pee! And in the middle of the mess was Charli. How would they clean up this mess before mom and dad got home?

“Well, we have to start somewhere,” Ava announced. “First, let’s put Charli in his cage and wipe up this pee!” she exclaimed. Next, they picked up the napkins and paper towels. They also swept up the sharp glass carefully. Lastly, they took care of those juice stains.

Everything looked great until they noticed it; there were paw prints all over the rug. Ava glanced at the clock and gasped, “We only have 20 minutes before mom and dad get home! Let’s wash this rug, quickly spray it with water, and wipe it hard because we don’t have any other options.” They started working and together they got the kitchen spotless.

When their parents arrived, they noticed how clean the kitchen was. Mom and dad were so pleased! The kids learned two especially important lessons. Lesson One was to be responsible, and Lesson Two was to work together.

# *The Shapeshifter*

**Brynn Sickles**

Norwood Elementary, Harrison County  
Teacher: Jasmine Lowther  
West Virginia State Winner  
Third Place, Grades 3-4

Hi, I'm Max – just a normal 11-year-old before this happened and changed my life forever.

Last Sunday began as a regular Sunday. I woke up, ate breakfast, and got ready for the day. Then, I heard a loud bang from my dad's lab, so I grabbed my water bottle and went into the basement. I set my bottle on the table next to a beaker that contained a purple, watery substance. "Hey, Dad. What are you doing?" "Hey," he responded. "Oh, just research on shapeshifting." "Cool!" I said and grabbed my water for a drink. "Stop!" Dad shouted, "That's my shapeshifting solution! I haven't tested it yet!" I realized my water was still on the table, and I was drinking the purple ick. I spat out what was left, and we both cried, "oh no." "What's gonna happen to me?!" I asked. "I don't know. I haven't tried it on anything! We'll just have to wait and see," Dad replied. "Okay, I'm going outside to ride my skateboard." "Alright but be careful. Anything could happen," he said as I walked away.

I got my skateboard from the garage and headed outside. I found my friends skating at Jonah's house already. "Hey guys! How's it going?" "Awesome! What's up?" We each did a few tricks when suddenly ... "Oh no," I thought, as I turned into a one-eyed, green monster! "Eww!" Jonah shouted. "What's happening?!" shrieked Paige. The others just looked at me like I was a mutant (which I was). I turned back into myself and said, "we need to talk guys." "Yeah, we do!" said Jonah. I told them the whole story. "Oh, so you can't control it?" Paige asked. "I guess not, but this was the first time. Maybe I'll be able to learn to control it," I answered. We kept playing until curfew. "Don't tell your parents about this," I said before heading home. Everyone agreed.

I woke up on Monday, a school day, and went to the dining room for breakfast. My dad was there. "I can't go to school and let people see me! They'll think I'm a freak!" I panicked. "It'll be fine," he tried to calm me down. "It doesn't matter what other people think." "Ok," I sighed.

I walked to school, and before I knew it, it was lunchtime. I hadn't shapeshifted! I sat down with my friends and started eating and talking. That's when "it" happened. I had turned into a bologna sandwich! (School lunch was bologna sandwiches). I panicked again, and when Tim was looking away, I accidentally fell onto his tray and knocked his real sandwich onto the floor. He picked me up for a bite, but I couldn't say anything because, well, I was a sandwich! As he opened his mouth, I changed back. All eyes were on me now.

The lunchroom went quiet except for a few people. "Wow!" "Cool!" They thought it was cool! Everyone became friends with me, so I had over 100 friends! In the past few days, I sort of learned how to control it. I was able to trick people by turning into different kids and acting like I was them. I'm not normal anymore, but I love it!

***Cats***  
**Anna Jenkins**

Jackson Middle School, Wood County  
Teacher: Laura Arnold & Jennifer Miller  
West Virginia State Winner  
First Place, Grades 5-6

The house was warm and cozy. The people were sitting around the fireplace speaking in low hushed voices, so they wouldn't wake the baby. She sat on her bed grooming, before walking off to her dish full of milk. Her pink tongue, rough with spikes, lapped it all up. Content with her belly full, she pranced off to lay on the laps of one of the people.

She jumped onto the couch, purring loudly, like the soft hum of a washing machine. She settled down on the man's legs and fell asleep. Suddenly, out the window, there was a loud boom in the sky and a beam of light crashed across it. The rain started and beat down steadily on the roof shingles. From down the hallway, the baby started crying. Both the people leapt up to tend to the baby.

She was left alone on the couch to listen to the sound of the rain. Just as she spread out on the couch to finish her nap the people came back, one holding the crying baby, the other holding the bottle. They gave her a gentle push off the couch, desperately trying to soothe the baby. She pounced back up, determined to investigate the baby. She rarely ever got to see him. He was all red faced with big, wet tears running down his face.

She got closer, close enough for her whiskers to brush against him and to smell the strong scent of baby powder. Before she could understand what was happening, she felt large hands pick her up and take her to a different room. She let out a long, loud meow, and her tail lashed back and forth angrily. She wanted to go back to the baby! She sat on the floor crying and meowing until the man came back again. This time, he took her to the front porch!

She sat lonely on the step in front of the house. It was so dark that her silky, midnight black fur blended into the dark sky. Full of boredom, she jumped off the step. Her large, green eyes looked like marbles as they darted around the front yard, watching the bats and bugs. The rain was still falling gently, and her fur was damp. She didn't care. As she watched the creatures, ready to pounce, the rain came to a stop, and the moon shone down on her. Her claws were small daggers, waiting to be released. Her snake-like tail twitching. She jumped and danced around the yard, trying to catch the fireflies.

Tired from all the running, she strolled into the garage to lay down. She had forgotten about the baby and could only think about how tired she was. Her fur had a musty smell like she had been sleeping on a dusty pillow that needed to be washed. Eventually, she woke up stiff from cold and remembered the warmth of the house. Wanting to be let in, her shrill meows rang out in the night like the baby crying. The door opened, and she ran into the warmth of the house.

As she sat on the window, leaning against the cold glass and watching the trees sway, she drifted off to sleep.

# *The Writing Contest*

**Rhea Harlan**

Mountaineer Middle School, Monongalia County

Teacher: Joella Groves

West Virginia State Winner

Second Place, Grades 5-6

"And remember," chirps Mrs. Cantla, my English teacher, "The deadline for the Writing Contest is next Wednesday!"

Marie, my classmate, groans, and whispers to her best friend, "That's too challenging."

I frown at her. I am always up for a challenge. But, of course, it's typical for my classmates to complain. I open my mouth to say something to Marie but the bell rings, cutting me off. I pick up my bag and walk out of the door to where my friend, Zoe, is waiting.

"Hi, Riley!" she says cheerfully.

"Hey," I respond with a bright smile.

"So, did you hear about the Writing Contest?"

"I sure did;" I grin, "I have it all planned out."

Zoe laughs and nudges me.

"I know you, you always have a plan, whether it's organizing a picnic, or deciding which test questions to answer first!"

"That's me," I admit sheepishly.

Planning and organizing are my specialties. I'm kind of proud of it. Zoe is the opposite. I glance sideways at my blonde-haired, freckle-splattered friend. She's very messy. As we round the bend in the hallway, I spot my next class.

"Well, I have to go. I'll text you after school and tell you my plaaaaaaan!" I yell as the giant mass of students sweeps me away from her. I faintly see her give me a thumbs up before the tidal wave of people swallows her up. I shiver happily and contentedly. I can't wait to tell her my brilliant plot!

That afternoon, after the bus spits me out at my house, I text Zoe my writing idea.

BananaZoe6: I've been DYING to hear your plan! Tell me, TELL ME!!!! ;D

33IndigoRiley: Ok, ok! No pressure!

BananaZoe6: JUST TELL ME ALREADY!!

33IndigoRiley: Jeesh, Miss Impatient! ;) So, basically, I'm calling it "The Wedding Woes," and it's about this girl who must help her relatives get ready for her aunt's wedding, and she has to deal with all of these problems like cousin trouble, crazy pets, a baking disaster, and sibling conflict! In the end, she learns to appreciate her giant family and the wedding ends perfectly. Whew, that took, like, ten minutes to text!

Banana Zoe6: AMAZING! Can't wait to see it win ;)

33Indigo Riley: Thanks! What are YOU gonna write about?

BananaZoe6: Dunno yet. I'll think of something. It definitely won't be as good as yours!

I shut off my phone and grab my computer. My hands are itching to let the story inside me flow out onto the keyboard. I can't wait to start my story!

The week flies past in a colorful blur as the writing deadline looms. I'm not worried, however. I already finished the story and turned it in to Mrs. Cantla. She had beamed with pride when she read it.

"I know a first-place winner when I see one!" She'd exclaimed.

I smile, thinking about it. It's already Wednesday. The stories are due today, which reminds me, I want to see how Zoe's been doing with her writing. I spot her in the hallway.

"Hey, Zoe!" I call out. She waves awkwardly and steps into her class before I get a chance to talk to her. What's up with her? I think. Lately, Zoe has been avoiding me. Oh, well. I've got bigger problems to deal with. For instance, how to wait to see if I won!

"And let me remind all of the teachers that there is an assembly this morning to announce the winners of the Writing Contest. Have a good day!" The vice-principal says as the loudspeaker clicks off.

I can't wait. I've had butterflies in my stomach since I woke up! My homeroom teacher lines us up and we silently file down to the auditorium. I grab a good spot on the bleachers and wait nervously with my class. The principal steps onto the stage and the crowd hushes.

"You all know why we're here today," the principal drones. "I am very pleased to announce the first-place winner for the Writing Contest."

My sweaty hands grip the edge of my seat. The custodian walks onto the stage, rolling a giant cart carrying a giant, shiny trophy.

"And the winner is..., Zoe Koffthid!" I gasp, not willing to believe it. The principal continued, "She wrote a very detailed story called 'The Wedding Wrongs' and is about a young girl who has to help her relatives get ready for a wedding. The story is well written. There is a lot of family drama, naughty pets, and baking disasters!"

Zoe walks on stage with a smirk. My stomach turns to ice as I realize what was going on. I don't believe it. Zoe had stolen my story! My best friend has betrayed me! I put my head in my hands as my heart shatters.

# *Lucid*

**Caroline Ashcom**

Simpson Elementary, Harrison County  
Teacher: Katie Jedrosko  
West Virginia State Winner  
Third Place, Grades 5-6

Herbal tea flows lightly into a tiny floral cup, I look down and take a sip. It burns my upper lip, but only a little.

I walk up the stairs silently, enter my bedroom, and tug the string to my lamp and watch as the light dims. Softly, I fall into my bed. With my head resting on my pillow, I gently close my eyes.

I can do anything when I sleep. See anything, hear anything, smell anything, feel anything... be anything.

I can see winding rivers, feel the cool water brushing up on my ankles. I can hear woodland animals going about their day in the neighboring forest. I see the cold morning dew resting on the grass. Bugs tickle my legs as I observe the world around me. I smell bonfires coming from my neighbor's campsite. Wind swirls through my hair causing a slight chill. I feel tiny pebbles under my feet as I walk around the campsite.

Or I'll be at the beach with my toes in the sand. The grainy texture is nothing new. I walk past the crowd of people on the beach and make my way towards the sea. The ocean sings an old familiar song. I can smell the salty water. Young children splash and play around me. The sun is shining brightly, as I stand covering my eyes. Seagulls squawk and fly overhead.

Perhaps I may be biking through the streets of Italy. My bike is a sage green color with a brown basket on the front. Inside the basket, there is a small goldendoodle puppy named Odie. Upon our return from the beach, we are going to get food. We proceed to bike for about 15 minutes; Odie decides to peep his head out of the basket to take in the beautiful scenery. White brick walls covered in flowers tower over us casting a slight shadow. Odie's tail starts wagging, aromas of bread swirl around us. I immediately know we are close

to the restaurant. I keep going down the street and pull into the parking lot. My bike rests on the wall. I put Odie on his leash, and we casually step in.

The restaurant is filled with windows and light cascades throughout the interior. There are dark hardwood floors. Standing proudly on the floors are the tables, all of them are round and have tiny glass vases on them filled with roses and daisies. A waiter walks up to me and leads me to my seat. He sets a menu on the table, as I order my drink.

“Just lemonade please,” I request politely.

“Right away,” he replies before he promptly walks away.

Odie sits in my lap while we wait. Not long after, the waiter comes back with my lemonade. He sets it on the table and I take a sip, it’s perfect! It isn’t too sweet, but not too sour. The flavor tingles on my tongue, but just as I close my eyes, I am in an apple orchard.

It is autumn, the trees have orange and gold leaves, they are overflowing with apples! The trees are planted in rows based on what kind of apples they grow. Jonagold, Pink Lady, Honey Crisp, McIntosh, and so, so many more! Every time I pick an apple off of a tree, it regrows in a matter of seconds. I lug around a basket that seems to be bottomless, as if it could carry all the apples in the world. I walk around for hours in awe, simply admiring the elegant autumn weather.

I might be relaxing in December. Just my dog and I in a cabin. I sit on the couch beside the crackling fire with Molly at my feet. She’s a mutt with long black and brown fur. My hand glides gently across her back as the Christmas tree glistens in the corner of my eye. I lean back with not a care in the world. I hazily close my eyes and fall asleep.

Soon after, I hear buzzing. I lazily open my eyes and am disappointed to find out that it was just my alarm. I can do anything when I sleep. See anything, hear anything, smell anything, feel anything... be anything.

# *All the Things I Don't Remember*

**Jemma Boyd**

John Adams Middle School, Kanawha County

Teacher: Emily Thayer

West Virginia State Winner

First Place, Grades 7-8

The way the sun was reflecting off of the pond made the ripples of water shimmer.

Overgrown grasses and wildflowers surrounded the outskirts of the small body of water. Minuscule frogs hopped from lily pad to lily pad searching for an insect to capture from the sky. I sat on a small wooden bench overlooking the pond. The uncomfortable seat was beginning to allow moss to occupy the vacant areas of wood on the legs. There was a name carved into the back of the structure, however, I couldn't place a face to the name.

A hand found my shoulder, interrupting my tranquil daze. The hand belonged to a young girl who was accompanying me at my home. She had informed me multiple times who she was, but I could never seem to recall her identity. Her hand trailed down my arm as she assisted me in standing. We turned away from the iridescent pond and began our expedition on the bumpy cobblestone walkway.

The path led to a victorian residence. The dollhouse-like structure loomed over us as we climbed the rickety steps. The girl opened the door to the house and guided me through the entrance. I was led towards a small room. I don't remember being in the room, but I presumed it was a living room considering I was being helped onto a sofa. The space was warm and inviting. It was filled with old photographs, knitted blankets, and books of classic literature. Curtains the color of a delicate cream bordered the windows. The girl rushed out of the room, chasing the sound of the dinging oven.

As I waited for the girl to return, the old photos on a nearby bookshelf caught my interest. I stood up from the couch and wobbled towards the pictures. I found the people in the photos unfamiliar to me. There were photos of weddings, birthdays, and a little girl by a glittering pond. The child in the picture looked similar to the girl in the kitchen. I wondered if she knew anything about the pictures. My eyes trailed over one of two people at an altar, smiles happily covering their faces. The woman's white dress flowed on the ground like clouds rolling over blue skies. I couldn't help but notice that her face looked oddly comparable to the one I see when I look in the mirror. Sentiment filled my heart as my eyes captured every detail, but I don't recall that day. Had it happened? Was I there? Why didn't I have any memories of that day? Suddenly, a creak in the floorboards made me jump from my trance. I turned around to see the girl who I thought to be from the photo carrying a tray of cookies that smelled of vanilla and cinnamon. When she realized that I was viewing the old photos, her face softened and a sympathetic gaze appeared in her eyes.

After we devoured the treats, the girl swiftly rose from her chair and walked to a sleek grand piano. She sat down and began to press her fingers on the ivory keys in a rhythmic pattern. The enchanting melody flowed through the room effortlessly. The sound seemed to trigger something in my brain. I had heard the music before. Each chord tugged at my heart, filling my body with *deja vu*. It reminded me of something that would be played at a wedding. I felt my muscles relax as I sunk further into the sofa, allowing myself to be completely consumed by the tune of long forgotten memories.

Later, I lay resting in bed, listening to the sweet song of the early morning birds through an open window. A crisp, refreshing breeze occasionally filled the chamber. The clean, white curtains would dance gracefully when the wind made its occurrence. Bumblebees buzzed in and out of the room to visit the vase of lilies near the window. A gentle stream of light flowed into the room, creating a heavenly atmosphere. I closed my eyelids as a peaceful feeling ran through my bones. I

felt lighter, as if I was floating into the inviting breeze. I deeply inhaled, knowing it would be my last, as I drifted into an eternal slumber.

# *To Be Human*

**Alison Schmidle**

Central Preston Middle School, Preston County

Teacher: Karyn Schmidl

West Virginia State Winner

Second Place Grades 7-8

Have you ever heard the phrase, if a tree falls in a forest with nobody around, did it really make a sound? I hear the trees fall. The phrase says nobody, not anything. My name is Death, I collect the trees that fall. It does not matter if people hear you fall or not, it does not matter how much you grew, or how little. When you fall, I will collect you. When I saw this tree, it looked familiar. Another tree who was infected with an undetectable disease. The worst kind. Surrounded by “friends and family”, good grades, happy all the time, we all know the symptoms. Really, it’s quite sad how many people live like this until, eventually, they die. Everyone dies, but not me, never me.

Lyra lived like this. Only a few knew she wasn’t okay. I had seen this one-too-many times. Sixteen and so close to me. I would carry her soul very gently home. She did not deserve her fate. A case I knew all too well. I may be Death, but I still have feelings. I always cry when taking a soul home that does not deserve its fate. Tears of laughter, tears of joy, anger, and mourning. I cry all the tears they could not. She is a beautiful writer, thousands of poems, songs and stories that will never be told. Unless they could. I am tired of seeing young souls die, the ones that were bursting with light, the ones filled with songs and stories. This time it was going to be different. She was going to live.

Unlike my counterpart Life, I saw the world. What they started, I ended. To be human, what does it mean? I would live as though I was one. One of her few who knew she was dying. I’m glad it was the beginning of summer break. Being a human was weird, I could bleed, and breath, I

had to meet Lyra. Lyra was always at her secret pond during this time. It really was a beautiful place. Vibrant flowers and bright moss covered the ground that led to a small sandy shore where the water was crystal clear. You could see the fish that swam lazily through the pond. The low rumble of the waterfall hitting the water, and the cave behind, that seemed to be the safest place in the world. Time passed so quickly with her. Being with her, I felt myself connect with her almost immediately. I felt something strange begin to rise in my chest, I believe the human term was “butterflies”. I found that strange, butterflies *did not* belong in a human body. Then again, neither did I. It was like I was meant to meet her, I wanted to stay here forever, looking at her sketches and poetry, hearing her stories. Her tree, it stood a little taller than it did before, and I could rest. I found I couldn’t close my eyes, my mind was running wild thinking about her, it was like a switch had been flipped in my mind, thousands of universes, and people, but I couldn’t stop thinking about her.

With heavy rains, the cave would flood, but no rain should be falling. It was not April anymore so no “showers” should fall. We were both tired, but it looked like she was not going home tonight. I left the dead world early. I was too excited to do much. Life, or rather death, was boring now that I had met her. I’d go to the cave today to see if she was there. What confused me is that the ground was wet. It was not April. Why was there so much water? “April showers bring May flowers, and what do May flowers bring? Pilgrims!” I could hear her rhyme echoing in my head. My feet pounded on the wet earth as I raced to her cave. I could see the pond in the distance it had completely flooded. I prayed that she slept near the opening of the cave and not in its bowels, but she adored the darkest part of the caves, so many different creatures to see. She would have drowned down there. I heard nothing and that scared me. I was to collect her soul soon anyway...no. I couldn’t just watch. Not like every other day of my miserable existence.

I dove into the freezing water, but all was still. I searched the dark water, pushing myself up for air. The dark water would not tell me where she was hidden. Then, I saw her soul. At the bottom of the cave, lying peacefully. Gently, I carried her soul into the fine white mist that would lead her to her paradise. Finally, she was home.

# *A Star-filled Story*

**Mary Calvert**

Washington Irving Middle School, Harrison County

Teacher: Anna Malone and Scott Haskell

West Virginia State Winner

Third Place Grades 7-8

Occasionally, I will remember the many warm summer nights filled of richest blues and magenta's that engulfed me in a beautiful pure obsidian black. When I always laid sprawled out in my yard feeling the silky grass and allowing the delicate breeze to touch my skin that always welcomed me while I was left staring at the calm bright astral diamonds that were sprinkled on the night sky. I'd always favor how unique each orb of light simulated enchantingly and pulsed elegantly regardless of how other stars would perform. If you look closely, each celestial body tells a remarkable story whether it is long or if it's short. And on those countless hushed nights, I would think of myself as a star as well, because I ,too, have a story and universal personality like the millions of other burning orbs that inhabit the universe.

My story begins as a young adolescent child that quickly learned to intently observe the world bordering me and always enjoying the pleasures of going out with close relatives, keeping an energetic positive personality, and overall feeling my environment and making something creative and beautiful out of it. But, there were people lurking around each unchecked corner unhappy with my diverting good-natured behavior and always aiming to control my personality and what place I should serve in the real world, which eventually introduced me to the notorious comment, "If you functioned normally you would be improving yourself and the world." Which rose one question: "Would changing myself be better for others and benefit the world?"

So, just to experiment, I started doing as I was told by others and preferred keeping to myself when around my friends or family and persisted in restricting myself from social situations due to always feeling ashamed for acting differently and always focusing on perfection. Soon, I attempted to prevent my flaws from seeping through the walls I built up in an effort of protecting myself from others' judgement, and I gained a fear of being pushed away from others due to feeling as if I was “too strange.” And once the minutes of this external torture became hours then they became days and the days soon became years. I began to struggle even getting out of my eternal slumber or completing simple daily tasks and everything started blurring together like all the paints on a pallet morphing together in an exquisite painting. Time and the universe itself meant nothing to me and it was as if the sky lost a star. I lost myself and missed out on many opportunities due to seeing my imperfections as only a “lost cause” or “weird and un-comforting” and followed others directions to the wrong path in what is called “life”.

Amazing people had abandoned my side, my education had slipped over my head, I had distanced myself completely from my family, and I had deserted every single mirror occupying my room and could no longer recognize who I was and where my place was in the world. I had to not only see my entire life gradually break into fragments firsthand, but I also had to accept and realize that I let everything go in order to reach a goal that would never provide happiness for me. That’s when I knew changes had to be made in my life before the rocks residing at the bottom of my hole caved in.

And so I began to broaden my horizons and took initiative to tend to my unkept and wilted garden, and I dug myself out of the ground when below rock bottom and allowed myself to be happy and empowered my personality. I established new goals and prioritized my mental and physical health and began to search for my beautiful place in this world by making new,

supportive, accepting companions and after learning to put beneficial boundaries down, and accept minor details that would assist me when riding the cold harsh waves that life would occasionally uproar in my face and aim to drown me in.

That's when my peers regained their fun comedian; when my friends regained their creative friend with a beautiful outlook on the world. That's when my teachers regained their knowledgeable student, when my relatives regained their loving family member, and when the stars embedded in the ink black sky regained a lost star that finally found their way back in the world and universe itself.

So the next time you look up at our star-filled sky and our galaxies tumbled art, make sure you take in each star's history carefully and maybe consider experiencing yours fully too because I guarantee you each star's story is special and worthwhile.

## *Taking Time*

**Abbigail Burdette**

Ripley High School, Jackson County  
Teacher: Saunyell Atkinson  
West Virginia State Winner  
First Place, Grades 9-10

She sat alone in her cold apartment, yet she did not feel lonely. She was in the company of her things – her oil paintings and her knickknacks. Her things were all that she had left – the old photographs blanketing each wall, the ancient newspaper clippings featuring her young, bright smile, and the memories. But even the memories were fading, like a wonderful dream that you can't quite remember. Slowly, day by day, month by month, her brain grew fuzzier, and the memories became harder to distinguish. She closed her eyes, willing the memories to come back, but there was nothing. It was like looking through a foggy window – features can be seen, yet not distinguished. Her eyes still shut, a jumble of voices and tunes filled her head. Soon, she drifted off to sleep.

People from her past waltzed in and out of her dreams; some she recognized clearly; others were only wisps of who they used to be. Dreaming of her days on the stage, she danced wildly with Fred Astaire and played on the screen with Cary Grant. These, she wanted to believe, were real memories. She saw herself bowing, and the clapping of the crowd rang sweetly in the old woman's ears. But soon this dream blew away in the wind like the others. One strong gust and it all disappeared.

She woke up confused, as she always had now-a-days, not recognizing where she was. *Ah, yes. My apartment.* She finally remembered, but... it took her a little longer this time. A soft rapping on the door had woken her; it was getting louder now. She hoisted herself out of the

wicker rocking chair with her walker and shuffled to the front door. That was becoming quite a chore for her these days. “Just a moment!” she shouted.

Finally, the frail thing had reached her rickety, old door and her gnarled fingers worked at the array of locks securing it. She creaked open the door to reveal a smiling face, but she could tell it was only plastered on for show. It was her landlord. The man in the entrance was irritated with the old woman; upset that she hadn’t paid up that month.

“Hello, Mrs. Clay,” the landlord said, squeezing through the door into her apartment with no real invitation. “I think you know why I’m here, Dorothy.” He tracked dirt onto her living room rug and made himself comfortable on her couch. His name was Adam Daniels, and he was an intrusive man. Mr. Daniels encroached on all of his tenants at one point or another – it was his way of doing things. He didn’t ask kindly for rent; he barged into your home and snatched it away from you.

“No...no, I don’t remember. Why are you here?” She had her head cocked to one side like a confused pup, and her voice was soft and tired as she spoke.

“Your rent, Mrs. Clay. I came to collect your rent.”

“Oh, yes. The rent... of course.” Dorothy’s voice began to trail off, and her gaze was locked in on one particular photograph with cloudy eyes. *What was she staring at? What was she seeing?*

“Dorothy?” He moved in front of the old woman, waving his hand inches from her face. “You don’t have many days left before I kick you out, Ma’am. You either pay now, or I will force you to leave, and there is no refund on that deposit, remember?” She only sat there. “Of course, you don’t remember,” he said, and silence followed.

The woman’s glaze partially melted off her eyes, and she looked up at the middle-aged man towering above her. “Michael!” Her face brightened. “My darling boy, you’ve come back!” She smiled now, more brilliant than she had in months.

“No Mrs. Clay, I am not your son! I’m your landlord, and I am here for your rent!” He was officially disgruntled by now, and he wasn’t hiding it well. “You have been living in my apartment building for four years now, Dorothy.” He wasn’t surprised her memory had gotten this bad. It was at this point that most of his tenants started their decline.

The old woman’s smile slowly faded and the brightness in her eyes flickered out. She was more confused than before. The old song playing on the radio in the kitchen sounded further away now. “Apartment building?” she asked.

“Yes.” He sighed. “Old Timers Estate. You moved here four years ago, but you won’t be living here much longer if you don’t pay this month’s rent.”

“But, Sir, I cannot afford rent. I used to be well off... I think, but I am poor now.” She reached into her purse and pulled out a few coins. Her arms reached out to the man, fifty cents in hand. “It is all I have left, Mister.” He almost couldn’t bear the sight of her any longer, but he stayed where he stood – he still needed to collect.

“Dorothy, I don’t want your money, you know that wasn’t part of the agreement.” *But did she know anymore?* He thought. “It is your memories, Dorothy, I need my share. It is the nature of the game.”

Some form of realization phased her. “But I don’t have many left, Mr. Daniels.” A single tear rolled down her cheek.

“I know, Dorothy, but it is my job to take them. I’ll make it quick.” But he wouldn’t - he would drag it out as long as he could, and he would revel in every moment with a serpent’s smile. Adam Daniels took a cardboard box from the corner of the room and started to collect things from the poor woman’s apartment.

He began by taking a few knickknacks and one or two newspaper clippings. They were haphazardly dropped into the box. All the while, things became foggier for Dorothy. She clutched a framed photograph of her son – this too he took, but he had to pry it from her grasp.

## *Azrael's Ledge*

**Addison Eldridge**

Princeton Senior High School, Mercer County

Teacher: Laura Presley

West Virginia State Winner

Second Place, Grades 9-10

I was six years old when I first saw someone die. A breeze drifted through the barren canyon valleys, leaving sharp pin pricks across my face. If I listened closely, I could almost hear the melodies of the wind ring through the air. Almost. It sounded like the heavens themselves had chosen to sing a song, just by chance, but the lyrics were nothing more than insignificant mumbles. I stumbled my way to the ledge of one of the ravines, my child-like wonder conjuring countless narratives of the possibilities that could lie at the top. As I peered ahead, I saw a woman standing on the edge of the rock, gazing ethereally at the void below her feet. She wore a white linen gown, bound by what appeared to be a garland of dark flora at the waist; all which seemed to be in harmony with the wind, as they worked together in perfect unison to flow around her, encompassing her body in a solemnly angelic cloud of ivory. Her hair, the same long dark auburn as mine, fostered an effortless wave that matched the manner of her dress. At first, I wondered if she had lost something down there, in the depths of the canyon. Or if perhaps she wished to capture the view below her? She seemed to only hold a letter in her hands. In mine, I held a multicolored, plastic camera that I was eager to let her borrow. As I raised the camera to my eyes, and began to take a picture, I could hear a faint shift of fabric in the wind. Then, just as gracefully as the birds that climatically flew above her, cloaked by the night sky, she leapt. Just as my camera shuttered. She didn't scream or flail, and there was almost a serene stillness to the air around her. Same as the woman, I, too, did not scream or flail. But rather, gazed around the desolate peak, holding the

photograph of the woman between my fingers, half-expecting her to return. However, when she didn't, I made my retreat down the canyon, innocently numb to the experience.

I never understood the mangled relationship people had with mortality after that, since my only experience had been one that, sometimes, provided me with a morbid sense of peace. It always felt like society had mocked the gentle hand of death, while simultaneously holding this brazen assumption that they'd one day outrun it. They fight against their physical death with every ounce of their being, while allowing themselves to careen to their own demise. Pulled inevitably towards a center that knows no end, only to be engulfed in a blaze that knows only the end. To be discarded as a demoralized mound of shred and cinder. What was the point? To extinguish a life that had become so distorted by heartbreak, and trauma, and abandonment that it really held no weight at all. A life that would be reduced to nothing but a stark and smoldering shell of what it once was. It seemed as if everyone had naively accepted this fate, that they too would only grow to be a vessel for everyone else's pain. There was almost a restful repose to this acceptance, as if it was only one less thing to have to ponder, since the answer had been given by some divine authority.

I've lived so many lives, that I began to see them as different people entirely. What differentiates us from who we once were? From the scared and lost child, still grasping onto that multicolored camera, to the teenager who wondered where it all went wrong, to the adult, who in many ways, became responsible for caring for all her previous lives; but still found herself being just as lost and marred as they were. I have achieved all the superficial societal merits that were expected of me, and I am constantly surrounded with love and appreciation. Yet I know that I too will find myself burning in the seraphic atmosphere of fate, until I am reduced to nothing but shell and fallen ash, only to be filled once again with the pain and troubles of the world around me. Maybe it was ingrained in me since birth, or maybe it was simply spoon-fed to me, piece by piece,

until one day it became a part of me. Either way, it's as much of a truth as anything else. But just because something is true doesn't mean you have to accept it as such. Because I think your reality, that you control, will always be different from what the world will tell you. Reality is a choice just like anything else, it sends ripples around us, and we may never know where those ripples will end up. But at least we can know that it was by our own hand.

As Azrael admired the canyon below her feet, in her ivory-white gown, bound by a waist of black lilies and thorned vine, she tucked her completed letter into her hand. She could finally hear the wind's still song drifting around her. She whistled this sweet melody as she admired the beauty of the heavens above her, and the abyss below. Nothing but the gentle harmony of her notes mattered. As the fleet of ebony condors rose above her, Azrael stepped from the ledge of the canyon. Her gown tenderly tracing the memories of where she once stood as she descended. A small girl, with long, dark auburn hair, still grasping a plastic, multicolored camera, stood softly in the distance behind the rock ledge. Acknowledging the absence within the crisp air, where Azrael had existed, just like her. A sense of wonder shined across her face, as she retreated down the canyon from which she came.

## *Time*

### **Anna Gribben**

Fairmont Senior High School, Marion County  
Teacher: Laura Ciarolla  
West Virginia State Winner  
Third Place, Grades 9-10

I looked into the mirror: at the top of my head, it says 47 years, 23 hours, and 3 minutes. I had never known what that meant until a couple of years ago, I was walking down the street and someone's timer said 3 seconds. It started counting down 3, 2, 1, and then he dropped to the ground. Everyone around came rushing over. I stood there, stunned. What had just happened?

“Sir, are you okay?” someone said, bending down to check his pulse.

The man that fell did not say a word.

“There's no pulse, someone call an ambulance!” the guy said.

Just minutes later, we all heard sirens getting louder. Two EMTs came out, and everyone made way for them. They later pronounced him dead. That was the very moment I had found out what the timer on top of everyone's head meant.

I had never told anyone that I see things, they would call me crazy, or think I need help. Except one person: Jaylee. I could trust that girl with my entire life. We have been friends since we met on the first day of preschool, and from there on we have not left each other's side.

“Anna, breakfast is ready!” Mom called from downstairs. I rushed down to the smell of pancakes, my favorite breakfast ever.

“These smell delicious mom. Thank you so much.”

“You're welcome sweetie, I hope you have a good first day of high school.” she said, giving me a kiss on my head.

“Thanks mom!” I grabbed my lunch and backpack and headed outside where Jaylee and her mom were waiting in the car for me. “Hey Jaylee, are you ready for our first day of school?”

“Yeah, I am a little nervous though, what about you?” “I’m fine, I’m just scared I'm going to get lost in the school.”

“Yeah, me too.” We finally arrived and walked our separate ways to our classes. I got to meet some new people in each class, and I really like all my teachers. Jaylee and I met up at lunch outside to discuss how our days have gone so far. That is when I told her that a lot of the kids in school are going to die within the next 10 years. Ten years may seem like a lot, but it really is not considering we are only teenagers.

“That’s a little scary.” Jaylee said before she took a drink of her water.

“Yeah, I know right?” I replied.

Jaylee has never asked me to see how much longer she has to live, and I have never told her. She does live for a while, but not for too long, that is why I always make the best out of everything when we spend time together.

“I can’t believe we have like, literally no classes together.” she said as she shook her head.

“Exactly, like what are the odds we had every single class together last year, and absolutely none this year?” I replied.

“I don’t know, but I wish we had at least a couple classes together.” Jaylee said, and we both nodded our heads.

I realized I was the only human that could see times over people's heads when I researched it online. I got no results, and no one could see what I see every day. It could be worse, the timer could get in the way of my vision, but it does not. I can only see the timers when I really focus on them, other than that, they are not there. The first time I told Jaylee about what I could see was when we were on my trampoline one summer night and I asked her.

"Hey Jay, do you see clocks above other people's heads counting down?" I asked, looking at her.

"Anna, are you crazy? Of course, I don't see clocks on people's heads." She replied laughing.

I did not say anything. She thought I was joking but I was not, I was serious.

"Wait, are you serious Anna?" a worried look crossed her face. She sat up, and the hairs on her head stood from the static on the trampoline. Her hair made her look even more shocked as she stared at me with her wide eyes.

"Yeah, I mean I've never told anyone this, I kind of thought everyone had it." I said as I looked into the distance. An awkward silence came over us as we both did not know what to say. Minutes passed and she finally broke the silence.

"Well, I think that's pretty cool, and you shouldn't tell anyone." she said, smiling at me. From then on, she has never told anyone, and I have never told anyone.

Jaylee and I have always liked to talk about our futures, what colleges we are planning to go to, what our dream jobs were, our future weddings, about anything. She even told me she wanted to move to the beach and start a family. One day we were talking about our dream college,

and that is when she said she could not wait to get out of high school and start a new chapter in her life.

“Do you think it’s possible we could have a room together in college or not?” she asked.

“I don’t know, what if we don’t even go to college together?” I answered. I tried not to sound disappointed or upset, even though I knew she was not going to make it to experience that life.

I followed and told her I was excited too. Meanwhile, I glanced up at her timer and saw 2 years, 16 hours, and 4 minutes. She did not have enough time to even make it out of high school. And, with a heavy heart, I faked a smile and kept planning our future.

# *Pyromania*

**Elizabeth Kittle**

Philip Barbour High School, Barbour County  
Teacher: Fran Wagner  
West Virginia State Winner  
First Place, Grades 11-12

As I sped down the highway, I could hear the distant sound of the sirens. They would surely catch me, this I had known from the beginning. The wind blowing in from my window made me feel alive. My hair caught onto my lips, sticky from the red shade that I had just applied. The wild flash of blue and red behind me caught my eye, the familiar thrum of excitement filling up my veins.

The sun burned my eyes in such a wonderful way. My vision was splotchy, dotted with white spots as I scanned the road ahead of me. My tongue slid between my teeth as I pressed even harder onto the gas pedal. Iron spilled onto my tongue as I bit down.

I had driven past countless vehicles at this point. Some stopped quickly, with tires screeching and horns blaring. Others continued driving as though they simply couldn't be bothered to slow down. I thought about each one that I passed, the minivan holding the local youth soccer team, the brand new sports car, driven by some big shot that was merely passing through town. That was all this place was: somewhere to pass by, to not think twice about. I liked it that way.

I exited the highway as soon as I could and began down a back road, one that was beautifully familiar to me. My car barreled down roads of gravel and dirt. My open window drew in dust, making me cough. With every windy curve, I was taken back to days full of long car rides and motion sickness. The police and their bothersome lights trailed behind me, a few minutes away. On the highway, they had an advantage. Here was a different story. My fingers tapped on the steering wheel, my excitement embodied by them.

This route was far less traveled than the highway, which made for fewer distractions. There was nothing on my mind but what awaited me at the end of this perpetual road. I was surrounded by the thick

woods, woods where no one could hear a scream for miles. Woods that were just so easy to get lost in, with little to no hope of finding your way back. The road by now was nothing but dirt, my tires carrying on faithfully and kicking up dark, brown clouds all around me. The bright sky was beginning to dim, a lazy auburn glow just emerging from the horizon. Sunset was always so beautiful at home.

*Just a little more*, I thought. I felt electric. *Almost there*. My mind was racing, faster than my heartbeat. It was always going to come to this, my mind had been set for years. There was no way that they would be taking me alive.

I grinned wide as I saw the end of the road. My brakes squealed as I slammed my foot down impatiently. The door of my car annoyingly stood in my way. I tugged at the handle and swung it wide open. I was a few minutes ahead of the police, but still, I needed to move quickly like always. Muscle memory took over, my mind not even processing my experienced motions.

My first time had just been an empty shed, small and rundown, no more than a mile from my home. No one would notice its disappearance, the ash that would be left behind. I rode over on my bike, the overgrown, dry grass easily giving way beneath the thin tires. The small, blue lighter that I had stolen from my mom's purse was placed near my heart, in the pocket of my shirt. I stole a canister of gasoline from my dad's truck bed and had balanced it on my handlebars. That first ignition, the light that danced in front of me, is what began my end. The flame was graceful, moving with the gentle wind. It rose and depleted, in a slow, repeated manner. I had long thought about what that flame was capable of. I often fantasized about an all-consuming blaze. It was only a matter of time before such a thing came to life.

Standing outside of my car I took in my surroundings. The house in front of me was surrounded by thick woods, dense trees casting shadows. Shadows were begging to be filled with light, and who was I to refuse? Quickly, I got into my backseat and pulled out three canisters. Fitting them under my arms, I followed the stone path that ended at the stairs leading to the front door. They were old and wooden, creaking under my feet, with nails sticking out in some places. Gently, I sat the canisters on the top step. I

followed them down, sitting with my legs crossed at the ankles. I looked up. A medley of colors was painted across the sky.

I began to hear the sirens and saw red and blue flash behind my eyelids. On cue, I turned to my left, grabbing a canister. I gripped the plastic handle and splashed the fluid down each step. I turned my body and splashed the door. I repeated this for my right side with the second canister. The final canister rested next to my thigh. My fingers caressed the rough surface of its side, stopping at the center. I pushed tentatively, knowing it would be too full to knock over. The swishing sound was loud, overpowering everything else in my mind. I focused in on it and picked the canister up from the bottom with both of my hands. I raised it over my head, letting it tip. Gasoline came rushing out, covering every inch of my body. I couldn't help the smile that spread across my face. It was overtaking me, all I could feel, all I could smell, all I could taste. I threw the canister to the ground when I had emptied it.

Reaching into my shirt pocket, I pulled out a small red carton. Smoking was always my greatest vice. I popped open the top effortlessly, years of practice behind the simple motion. The single remaining cigarette found its way between my fingers and rested sweetly on my lips. I pulled out the lighter that had been tucked neatly into the plastic-wrapped pouch on the carton. My hand grasped it tightly, bringing it up to my face. Small and blue.

The sirens and lights seemed to finally reach their destination. Tires screeched to a halt in the yard, men getting out of their cars. Someone yelled. The men were talking, either to me or amongst themselves. I wasn't paying attention to anything but my lighter. I applied pressure to the wheel, feeling it turn beneath my thumb. In turn, the lever met its weight. The beautiful relationship required to create the spark. I smirked and looked down, meeting the flame that burned inches from my face.

## *Nostalgia*

**Abigail Loudin**

Buckhannon Upshur High School, Upshur County  
Teacher: Edwina Howard Jack  
West Virginia State Winner  
Second Place, Grades 11-12

As I opened the fresh box of apples, I could smell the sweetness of them. I picked one out. It was beautiful. The color was a ripe red, almost as red as a rose. There were spots revealing a daffodil-like yellow. The smooth skin pressed against mine as I sat it in the pot filled with the others.

My grandmother's house was not impeccable, but it was nothing but special. It radiated with the essence of love, kindness, hard work, and perseverance. The green siding was weathered and old. The doors were creaky, and the windows tattered. There were red brick stairs leading to the front door that was rarely used. Beside the house was a red brick building. There was an opening where some of the wall had collapsed, but the building never caved. It was sturdy. The roof consisted of metal and age. Inside the door made from a sheet of wood, were shelves lining the perimeter of the shack. These bowed, wooden shelves were filled edge to edge with jars of canned apple filling. The kind that made my grandmother's apple crisp the most wonderful in the world.

I filled the pot with lukewarm water and tart lemon as I picked up the yellowed paper covered in my grandmother's writing. The paper held the instructions of how to make the filling. Her writing was hard to read yet the words presented themselves beautifully. Step 1: wash, peel, and cut the apples. I rinsed them one at a time. The water cascaded off the sides as if they were resisting the warmth of the water. I gently peeled the skin from the apple, revealing its hidden

saccharinity. I then sliced what seemed like the tissue of the apple into fourths and plopped them into the pot.

There was a white laundry basket that remained in the corner of the shack. It was used to transport the dusted jars to the house where they would be shared with loved ones. As you entered the side door, there was a sink that took up the right side of the mud room. Across from it sat the washer and dryer. There was an entryway to the left that led to the kitchen. The cabinets were both above and below the counter space that was overtaken by measuring cups and mixing bowls. The kitchen could not mask its age. The two cabinets to the top left no longer shut completely. On the other side was the sink that held the pot full of potential. There was a worn pink towel that waited patiently to dry the apples. Fresh jars lined the corner of the counter awaiting their new task of housing the filling.

The next task to be accomplished was making the filling itself. “You’ve got to watch carefully because one day I won’t be here to tell you how to do it,” she would always say before beginning this part of the process. Step 2: fill the jars  $\frac{3}{4}$ ’s of the way with the apple slices and set aside to begin the filling. Use the recipe below to mix all ingredients in a pot and bring to a boil. Once that is finished, pour the filling over the apples until the entirety of the jar is reached. I mixed the white sugar that glistened when the light hit it just right. Next was the cornstarch and just a teaspoon or two of cinnamon.

My grandmother was never one to stick to a recipe; she liked to switch it up depending on what happened to be in her fridge that day. But when it came to the filling, she was precise. I continued adding the ingredients and mixed until the desired consistency appeared. I set the stained wooden spoon to the side and waited for it to come to a boil. Once it had boiled just long enough, I

picked up the spoon once more to test it. I dipped it into the filling and introduced the taste to my tongue. It was almost perfect.

Once the filling was made and moved to its temporary home in the old shack, we had to clean up the mess. We were always taught to clean up messes we made, or messes that we did not. My grandmother would always say, “If we work together, we get done faster.” She would run the sink full of hot water and add a few drops of Dawn. She would use a battered, green washcloth that had the corner torn off. I would clean up the counters and dry the dishes as she reminded me where to place them.

I pressurized the cans as I finished the infamous filling. Of course, it could never be exactly like my grandmother’s, but the process was oddly nostalgic, though it was not the same without her. I thoughtfully placed the cans into a white laundry basket I had found in the corner of the laundry room and carried them to the recently built cellar. My family knew the importance of food storage, but only because they had been taught by my grandmother. I jerked the door open and caught a whiff of the moist underground. I placed them on the sturdy shelves and stepped back with a sense of accomplishment. “She would be proud,” I thought to myself.

My fondest memories were created in those places, the memories I could never forget. The laughter, tears, and sometimes unwanted but necessary advice. The love from her that was never out of reach will always remain in my heart. My grandmother was and always will be my very best friend. The least I can do to repay her for all she has done for me is carry on her legacy in every way I know how.

## *Secrets of the Game*

**Mika McCormick**

Tolsia High School, Wayne County

Teacher: Sabrina Hill

West Virginia State Winner

Third Place, Grades 11-12

I hate the nail salon. Being surrounded by my own race still leaves me so isolated. Deprived of the language, disconnected from the culture, detached from my way of life, and discarded into an antiparallel universe at an early age, I never felt a sense of belonging anywhere, which I never understood. Those are *my* people in there, my race, but it wasn't until that day that I realized it—*why* I hate the nail salon.

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I was only pretending. That's all anyone could have called what I did for Heritage Day at school. I placed the second chopstick in my traditional, Chinese hair brooch. I loaded the bus wearing my Chinese apparel: a black, silky qipao, lined with red stitching and binding. Embroidered on it were red flowers and a diagonal slit enclosed by standard Chinese button knots. Luckily, when my mother was in China for my adoption, she thought ahead and got an outfit for me for every year and size until the age of 16.

The day was oddly okay—no usual rollercoaster of emotions; no highs or lows; just an excited 16-year-old playing pretend for homecoming. It was only an imitation because that was not *my* culture. It was only a version of myself I like to think I would have been had I not been moved to the hills of Appalachia at 13-months-old. That day, I represented an image of a girl I wish I had more knowledge about, sometimes, a girl I wish I would have been. I did not feel entitled to play the part, call things by their actual terms, or act like I had any prior knowledge

about the culture, because really, I didn't. I still don't. In fact, I had to Google the pronunciation of *qipao*. I felt like a fraud; still, I wore the dress.

The day went fast, until it didn't. Then, seventh period, creative writing, one of my favorite classes, struck. Being more so of a research class rather than one of a creative background, it was always about participating in analyses and trying to make sense of it all. It never occurred to me that I would soon need to apply that analysis to my reality.

The phone rang. The teacher looked at me sullenly, "Honey, you're needed in the office." It was unusual for me to be in the office. Though it was around the corner, the walk there seemed endless. To my disbelief, my mother greeted me with a blank stare and lips of a double-edged blade. "Go grab your things. I signed you out." Normally, she wears her mouth with a hairpin curve at the ends. She wears her smile proudly. However, that day was not normal.

Mom knew how badly I wanted to engage in spirit week—especially that day. She stopped me before I could begin to chide, "Mika, Mim has passed." I felt a strong wave of guilt for approaching her with anger. After all, that was her Mim, too—her grandmother. She could have been referred to as everyone's Mim. Everyone should have the privilege of knowing her:

Mim, my great-grandmother, was my greatest confidant. I had been growing closer to her every day. I always made sure to be present with her for any family event or holiday. She taught me to see things from every point of view. We always played cards and puzzles together. Uno, Solitaire, Rummy, it did not matter about which game. She *loved* those cards. After a fall at her local senior citizen community center, Mim's health declined exponentially. In her last days, she was composed of only love, skin, bone, and a deck of cards. I say only, but it

was more than enough for me. She was extraordinary. One-of-a-kind, to say the least. I will always remember her last words to me: “And we’ll play cards the next time.” but I realized, nearly too late, that our time was limited, that there would be no “next time.”

For the first time, someone had caught me speechless. At that point I felt incredibly selfish. I yelled at Mom, all for what? Spirit week? I had nothing to say after that. Mim was gone. I opened door 101 and it was as if I had a spotlight above my head. The croupier at a casino, all eyes on me. I see now why mom had that look of steel and blade; I armored myself with the same gear because I too had to shield myself from a cut that deep. I grabbed my things and left. I walked the lonely halls and did not look back. Everything else was unclear, it still is.

I went to the salon straight from school because I had to for homecoming the next day, and though I was in no mood to dance, Mim would have wanted me to. So, there I sat in the pedicure chair. The Chinese man from Paradise Nails who scrubbed and polished my feet. He could tell something was wrong. He asked me if he was hurting me. Although I could barely comprehend what he was saying, I attempted to sputter the word “No.” It was then, I had no choice but to let it out and cry. At that moment I, in my qipao, in a room full of people who looked like me, mourned for both Mim and the culture taken from me. In a room of my own kind, still, I was the joker in a stack of cards. My Mim, my best friend, had just passed, but somehow, I was the one feeling a sense of betrayal. How was that right, or possible? In a way, it seemed as if my adoptive family had uprooted me yet again.

Reflecting on this point of my life, I can now see there were no faults in my feelings. Although I am eternally grateful for the things that my adoptive family has done for me, I still have the right to question and discover more. It is more than okay for me to be curious and want

to embrace my origins. *I do not owe anyone anything.* However, I refuse to be selfish. I have learned to appreciate both sides. The Card-dealer knows exactly which cards he distributes and how this game is going to go. Looking back, I understand why I was upset, but I also understand the loyalty I have for my adoptive family.

I have learned to see things as my Mim would: to live and be happy with the cards I have been given—to be happy I'm in the game at all. Had I been given another life, had he dealt me another hand, my life would have been completely different. I would not have been sitting in the class that day. I would not have met my friends. I would not have met Mim, who taught me the secret to the game. Because of her, I keep playing, embracing the cards I have been given. I keep winning because I am learning, and I am looking forward to playing the next game with her in the following life.