

# 2025



WEST VIRGINIA YOUNG WRITERS CONTEST ANTHOLOGY

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# Introduction

We proudly present the anthology of the 2025 West Virginia Young Writers contest. It displays the writing of eighteen students who first won in their county 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 41 years. The contest is an initiative of the Central West Virginia Writing Project at Marshall University and the West Virginia Department of Education. The contest is supported with funds from the state of West Virginia. The University of Charleston graciously provides invaluable support by hosting Young Writers Day.

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

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## DOLPHINS' VALENTINE'S DAY PARTY

Jeweliana Davis

St. Mary's Grade School, Harrison County

Teacher: Christine Monell

West Virginia State Winner

First Place, Grades 1-2

Once upon a time in the waters of Hawaii, there were two pink dolphins. Their names were Jewels and Winter. They were best friends. Together they loved celebrating holidays and now it was the night before Valentine's Day. They were decorating their house for the big party. For decorations, they used seaweed for streamers, coral for flowers, and shells to make hearts. Now all Jewels and Winter had to do was send out the invitations.

The dolphins grabbed their coral reef invitations, swam out to the mailbox, and waited for the clownfish to pick them up and deliver them to their friends. First, Orca got her invitation. Electric Eel was next. Finally, Bubbles and Echo, the purple dolphins, got their invitations. All the animals were so excited about the party.

The next morning, all the animals woke up, got ready, grabbed their valentines, and swam to the party. When they arrived, Jewels and Winter were so happy that everyone could make it. Their moms made special food. They had peanut butter and jellyfish sandwiches, a shark-cuterie board, and Pep-sea to drink. For dessert, there was angelfish cake.

After eating, they played musical sand dollars. Winter won the first round and Bubbles won the second. They both shared the prizes with their friends. Then it was time

to pass out their valentines. Jewels got a golden seashell. Winter got silver coral. Sadly, it was time to say goodbye.

Jewels and Winter had so much fun at their Valentine's Day party. It was a great time. Now they get to start planning their St. Patrick's Day party with Paddy, the green dolphin!

## MAGICAL JOURNEY

**Jacob Treu**

West Virginia Academy  
Teacher: Rose Jefferys  
West Virginia State Winner  
Second Place, Grades 1-2

Once upon a time there was a kid named Jake. One day he was out for a walk in the woods behind his house. There in the middle of the path was a magical book. He opened it and it sucked him into the book. He looked around. He reached into his pocket and found a map.

He saw that he was trapped by a large wall of mountains. He started walking toward a piece of the mountain. When, suddenly, a man appeared next to him. This man explained that he had been stuck there for fifty years. He had a grappling hook, but it needed two people to work it.

They went over to the mountain and used the hook to climb the mountain together. Once they reached the other side, they found a key, it was glowing. Jake grabbed the key and a door floated down. Jake used the key to unlock the door. Jake told the man to go first since he had been there so long. Then Jake stepped through the door.

Suddenly, Jake woke up in his bed. It was all a dream. Jake went downstairs and saw his grandpa reading a book. "What are you reading?" Jake asked.

"It's one of my favorites when I was a boy," Grandpa said, showing Jake the book. To Jake's surprise there on the cover was the same man from his dream.

## SPARKLE'S ADVENTURE

**Genevieve Fleming**

Village of Barboursville, Cabell County

Teacher: Rhonda Dement

West Virginia State Winner

Third Place, Grades 1-2

Once upon a time, a little fairy named Sparkles longed to explore beyond the meadow. One night, she packed her supplies—food, a lantern, and a sleeping bag—and set off.

As she flew past the meadow's border, she marveled at the glowing lightning bugs. The dark forest seemed scary, so she flew above the treetops and found an abandoned bird's nest to camp in. In the morning, she woke to a surprise—another fairy sitting beside her!

"Hi, I'm Midnight! I saw you flying and had to meet you!" the fairy exclaimed.

"Hello, I'm Sparkles. I'm on an adventure. I didn't expect to find another fairy out here," Sparkles replied.

"I've never left the forest. Can I come with you?" Midnight asked eagerly.

Sparkles smiled. "It would be nice to have company."

Together, they soared over the treetops. Suddenly, a strong wind sent them tumbling! They landed in a field of giant flowers, surrounded by butterflies of every color.

"Are you fairies? We need your help! Only fairy magic can fix it!" a butterfly cried.

"What's wrong?" Midnight asked.

"An evil wizard trapped our babies inside these flowers. We can't free them!" the butterfly explained.

"We'll help!" Sparkles promised.

The fairies followed them to a massive flower. Holding hands, Sparkles and Midnight summoned their nature magic. Slowly, the petals unfolded, and baby butterflies fluttered out.

Everyone cheered! Sparkles was glad she had left the meadow. If she hadn't, she wouldn't have met Midnight or saved the butterflies. That night, they celebrated together.

Tomorrow, a new adventure awaited.



# THE ICICLE

**Jett Reesman**

East Dale Elementary School, Marion County

Teacher: Becky Nichols

West Virginia State Winner

First Place, Grades 3-4

It was a snowy day, and Jake was stuck inside the house. Most winter days were like that for him, but this day was different. Jake's mom insisted that he should go outside to get some fresh air. He didn't have a clue what to do outside, but he wanted to make the best of it.

Jake went to his closet to get his warmest clothes. It was a lot of work bundling up and getting into his snow gear. The last item he put on was his snow boots. Putting on snow boots was a challenge he never wanted to face again. He was so hot and sweaty from putting on his clothes, he couldn't wait to go outside. Once he was ready, he stepped out the front door. A gust of cold air flew across his face.

Since he didn't have a sled, like his neighbor, he decided to take a relaxing walk to the park. When he got there, he saw kids in an intense snowball fight, a person making a family of snowmen, and a red, wooden bench to relax on. He decided to take a break on the bench. While sitting, a powerful blast of freezing cold air knocked off his snow cap. Jake reached under the bench to find his hat. Then to his surprise, Jake felt something sharp at his feet.

He decided to look at what was under the bench. It was an icicle. However, it was not an ordinary icicle. It had mysterious letters carved on it! At first, he thought they were random letters. He quickly realized it was a complete sentence. It said, Jake, you are at the right place at the right TIME! After reading the message he was really scared. What could this mean and how did the icicle know his name? He didn't want to stick around to find out.

He started running back to his house. Slipping and sliding all the way home. He rushed through the front door. Jake called out for his mom. He searched every room in the house. She wasn't there. Jake panicked and felt very hot. He started hearing weird sounds like waves crashing and seagulls squawking. Jake felt vibrations and everything turned black. This really creeped him out. Just then, Jake woke up in a beach chair! He was on vacation at the beach with his family. Turns out, everything was just a dream, and he really was in the right place at the right time.

## BEACH DAYS

**Amelia Adkins**

Harts PK-8 School, Lincoln County  
Teacher: Jackie McCann  
West Virginia State Winner  
Second Place, Grades 3-4

It all began when I was visiting Florida for a week during the summer. It was one of those warm Wednesdays. My family went to the beach on warm days. Since it was a nice day me and family went to the beach. Having aunts who live in Florida is great because there are no beaches in West Virginia!

As we were driving by the ocean, I could already hear the seagulls squawking and the waves crashing on the shore, while the kids screamed with joy! I was so excited that I felt like I would blow!

We parked near the shade of the palm trees because my mom didn't really want the car to be in the sun. I jumped out of the car. I couldn't help sprinting to the ocean. I was so excited! As I ran the wind stung my eyes, but it didn't stop me because I was determined to get in the ocean quickly.

As I ran toward the water the sand felt like it was going to suck my feet down, but I kept running. The closer I got to the ocean the more I could smell the saltiness of the water. I love the smell of the ocean!

Suddenly in my haste to get to the ocean, I tripped over something. I landed face-first in the cold, salty blue water. I got up trying to process what had just happened. My eyes burned; tears were forming. I sprinted back to my mom to let her know I fell so she

could check me out for injuries. Tears were in my eyes and my nose was running, I was a mess!

My mom tried to calm me down. She cleaned me up. She took me back to the water. I felt a little bit better. I was still excited about being at the beach. My older sister had been in the water the whole time. She was concerned about me, but not enough to get out of the water. That made me a little angry! I was going to join her, but I saw my little brother having trouble building a sandcastle. I joined him instead and showed him how to make one correctly. Obviously, I am his favorite sister. After the sand castle building we looked for seashells, played tag and finally went in the water. It turned out to be a great day.

After a while I was tired and wanted to go back to my aunts' house. I had forgotten all about tripping earlier that day. That's how the beach can be, it makes you forget all your troubles.

It was a long drive back to my aunts' house. I didn't mind because I love long drives. It gives you time to spend with your family before you storm into your room at home to process the day's events. I talked about the beach for the rest of the day. Beach days are my favorite days.

# SUNFLOWERS

**Zuri Alford**

Glen Dale Elementary School, Marshall County

Teacher: Aimee Neely

West Virginia State Winner

Third Place, Grades 3-4

I had always wanted to plant a sunflower field. There is something enchanting about sunflowers. Their petals are as bright as a morning sunrise. They stand tall and stiff like a snowman in freezing weather. A lone sunflower is beautiful, but a giant field is endless.

My grandmother has been planting gardens for a tremendous amount of time. She knows about the weather, and the best times to plant. She knows how to plant seeds and when to water a garden. It's a great thing to spend time with my grandmother. We both really love to garden, so it's a thrilling way to bond.

Before we planted, we went online to search types of sunflowers. We decided to purchase the Sunforest Mix Sunflowers because they grow really fast and they are towering. After they came in the mail, we planted them in small containers in the basement and sprouted them under UV lights. We did this so we could control the environment. We controlled the water, the light, and prevented the wildlife from stealing our seeds.

After they were about 3 in. tall, we started to prepare for their arrival at the garden. My grandpa tilled the soil, my grandma took the plants to the garden, and I put them in the ground.

We have to water, weed, and make sure they get sunlight. Watering is important. We need to water the plants because without water, they will get too much sunlight and they will wilt and crumble into pieces. You also need to weed plants. This means we will pull out anything that's not a sunflower. Without weeding, they can grow unhealthy and maybe even be hidden by other plants.

When the sunflowers are fully grown, the sunflower field is vast! If you walk in there without a path it would be challenging to get out! There are many reasons for this. First, there's the fact that we planted 300 sunflowers. Second, the sunflowers grow to be 10-15 ft. tall, the bloom grows to one foot wide, and the stem grows to be five centimeters round. The field is peaceful, calming, and relaxing. I love to hear the birds singing and the creek flowing. You can hear and feel the breeze swaying the sunflowers back and forth.

Once the sunflowers are out of season, we take out the seeds. Then I take them up to the chicken coop and mix them with the chicken feed to feed the chickens. After we go inside, we make soup with the seeds as well. We always remember to save some seeds for next

Having a sunflower field is a dream come true! If you are up for the challenge of a garden, I believe in you, because if I can do it, you can too.

## COFFEE SHOP TRAVELS

**Alyvia Barb**

Mountaineer Middle School, Monongalia County

Teacher: Jody Groves

West Virginia State Winner

Second Place, Grades 5-6

If you had the chance to go back in time, would you? What if you had to be back by the time your coffee got cold?

“Why are you such a disappointment?” Nyla’s parents called out to her from the kitchen. Nyla tied up her shoes as a tear trailed down her cheek. She opened the door and walked out. The cold wind hit her face. She slammed the door shut and began walking down the sidewalk.

Nyla walked into an old café that she walked past every day. She hoped for somewhere no one would look for her. The shop was brick with a few windows. Ivy crept up the sides of the building. She stepped in; the room was filled with the sweet smell of cinnamon.

“What would you like, sweetie?” the barista behind the counter asked.

“Just a coffee with 2 sugars,” Nyla replied while she plopped down in the nearest seat.

The barista sat the cup down. She looked at Nyla’s face, she turned away before looking again, noticing that Nyla was crying. She pulled a chair beside her and sat down.

“What’s wrong?” She asked sincerely.

“Just a fight with my parents,” Nyla replied.

“Yea, I’ve been there,” she paused. “Do you want to know a secret?” she whispered. Nyla nodded. The barista got up and walked into a back room. She came out with a thin book.

“If you read this out loud, it will take you to whatever place you think of as long as it’s in the past. But...you have to get back before your coffee gets cold, or you’ll stay in that time period.” She explained all of this so calmly.

“Have you done it before?” Nyla asked concerningly.

“Oh, of course. It was wonderful! I had a close call though. I came back, felt my coffee, and realized it could’ve been 3 minutes until it got cold, or 30 seconds,” she said jokingly.

Nyla smiled, “Okay then, I want to do it.” Her smile got wider as she grabbed the book and read the poem out loud. Then she was gone.

Nyla stepped out of a random, lone door. She imagined the “Roaring 20s”. Fancy clothes, jazz bands, people getting used to new inventions. She walked out onto a Harlem street where she heard the faint sounds of a saxophone. She observed handfuls of women with short hairstyles and hats and noticed a group going into a theatre. She followed them. When she walked in, she realized everyone was looking at her strangely. She looked down, of course they were looking at the weird clothes she was wearing- distressed jeans and a white hooded sweatshirt.



Nyla ran out of the theatre to a store close by where she saw a pretty ankle length dress. It was light blue with lace details. She took it off the hanger and brought it to the front counter.

"Good choice!" The lady smiled. "That will be 19 dollars." Nyla pulled a 20 out of her back pocket. She handed her the bill. The cashier took it with a puzzled look on her face.

"Okay- here you go." She handed the dress over.

"Um, do you have a bathroom here?" Nyla asked shyly.

"Yes, we have a powder room in the back, to your right," the woman said. Nyla nodded and found the restroom. She got changed and fixed her hair in the mirror.

Nyla again stepped into the theatre. There were tall walls, beautiful architecture, and the most beautiful diamond chandelier. She walked down and saw the stage, her eyes sparkled. The stage was red with gold designs all over the sides. The gold crawled up the walls. She sat down on one of the chairs in the middle. The lights dimmed and the curtains opened. Her eyes met a beautiful scene. There was a wonderful feeling growing in her. She loved acting. She loved plays, the way the actors moved on the stage. She watched the play mesmerized. But she must've lost track of time.

Back at the café-

The barista thought that Nyla had been gone an awfully long time. She walked back over to the table. She swirled her finger in the coffee. Her face dropped at the touch of cold coffee.

## NO WAY OUT

**Elaine Casenelli**

Wirt County Middle School, Wirt County

Teacher: Sarah Harris

West Virginia State Winner

Third Place, Grades 5-6

The lockdown tocsin rang, and nobody batted an eye. It was a methodical thing. Lockdowns are never real. It is always a drill! Students just trudged into the corner, but Miss Carver had a worried look. They usually informed teachers before drills, but Miss Carver was serious. She had a look of apprehensiveness in her eyes.

Hunter Foster caught on quickly though. She started grabbing sharp items (like pencils), kids, and Miss Carver (frozen at the corner of her worn down desk). Hunter shoved them into the corner making pace. She made a barricade of desks as far around them as she could. Valerie, Hunter's best friend, started helping as well. The girls went back and forth until they could finally lock the door, and sit down. Even then they had an eerie aura of fear.

After minutes of sitting a sudden groaning noise came from behind the door. Glass shattered loudly in classrooms nearby. A scream could be heard. Mr. Matthews. Students texted family, cried, and shook uncontrollably. Hunter was emotionless. She showed no fear. Val never cried either. All suddenly went silent.

"Bang!" the door rattled and flung open! The students squeezed their eyes shut as tight as they could. A putrid odor overwhelmed the room followed by a low moaning noise. Footsteps crept closer until the students hesitantly opened their eyes.

Rotten flesh, bloody, ragged clothes, wrinkled skin, crippled steps, and deep black eyes were feet away. Val stuttered,

“Z-Zombies!”

The consternation swiftly set in! Panic! Hunter showed no fear and acted! She bolted to the largest thing she could throw. The undead crept closer while the students wailed. Val jolted into motion! Valerie scampered to find something for Hunter to chuck at the glass window. Hunter found a chair and launched it at the window! It cracked, but did not break! Valerie grabbed the nearest chair and threw it! The glass had broken! The zombie grabbed Valerie’s shoulder, but the girls jumped out the first-floor window and bolted for the forest!

They just ran. No looking back. They heard screams, like bloody murder screams. It was appalling, but neither of the girls turned back.

Hunter and Valerie finally stopped. It was hours later of endless walking and running. They had run from Justice High School all the way into the middle of nowhere. Hunter stood there with her eyes wide. Valerie thought for a moment, and then she said something,

"Holy cow! What just happened?!"

Hunter was flabbergasted! She could not even imagine this ever happening! Hunter spoke,

“I have no idea!”

They chuckled to themselves for a moment, but suddenly a wave of remorse and sadness came upon them. Their friends, best friends, and classmates were most likely gone, but they knew they both needed to move on to survive.

Hunter quickly started gathering sticks. She was moving swiftly. Hunter knew they needed to get a fire going. Valerie was sitting on a log pondering.

*This has got to be a dream. Right? Wake up Valerie!*

It was not. Hunter knew it was real, and she knew Valerie needed to get up and help. It was serious, and if they did not get a fire going by dark they would be doomed! Hunter got extremely frustrated,

“Valerie you need to get up and help me! We are not going to make it very long if we sit around on our bums all day! We are a team, so help me!”

“Okay! Okay! Hunter calm down!”

Valerie learned her lesson, and quickly got up to help Hunter prepare shelter. The girls worked in silence. They gathered big sticks, small sticks, and logs. Anything that they could find was useful. The pine needles were even useful for fire. They had never thought about needing a pine needle. Now, every little item counted! Everything was extraordinary.

Valerie and Hunter had finally built a shelter, and eventually got a fire going. Hunter was exhausted. She sat and sighed. It was not an upset sigh though. It was a sigh of some relief. They had done so much. Hunter sat and thought for a while until she was ready to say something,

“How? We were at home on our writing in our diaries, and now were running from the undead!?”

Valerie listened to hunter vehemently fulminate for a few minutes. She waited until Hunter was done so she could go on a rant too. Hunter was finally done and Valerie said,

“Look, I do not know! Ask the undead! Maybe they will answer!”

Valerie looked down at her hands, but she noticed something. Her hands were wrinkly and pruned. Then, suddenly wave of pain overcame her shoulder.

“Hunter can you check on my shoulder?”

Hunters breathing became dense. Val got confused and asked,

“What Hunter?”

“Valerie. You got bit...”

1915

**Camryn Lowther**

South Harrison Middle School, Harrison County

Teacher: Sarah Totten

West Virginia State Winner

First Place, Grades 7-8

It's a cold, nauseating day. Joseph, a British corporal, is hunched over in a small trench. He's quietly hyperventilating as he hears loud, ear-piercing gun shots go off in the distance. He inhales heavily and coughs as icy air is blown into his lungs. He is scared, as he is the only person alive left in the trench. As he looks around, he sees the bodies of people that he used to know.

The only visible color in sight is his vibrant red tunic, tightly wrapped diagonally around his torso. He sits up and looks around and his eyes burn as the air blows against his face. He wants to cry. He knew the chances of him making it out were slim. He had already witnessed a lot, but in none of those instances had he been left alone. The gun shots come to an abrupt stop, and then it goes dead silent.

Joseph has been in the small trench for what feels like days. He has been in the same position, with his knees against his chest all that time, so his body is tingly and stiff. He decides to adjust himself by laying down his rifle and forcing his weak legs to push against the side of the iced over mud wall to sit up. He gently wipes some of the snow off of his helmet. He reaches for his rifle and grasps it against his chest.

He tries to reassure himself that there was possibly a group coming to rescue him. He considers yelling for help, but he knows that it is just a way to get killed. He considers

the idea of sprinting through the snowy field, but he knows a German soldier could be lurking.

He becomes more stressed, making his bloodshot eyes watery and his ears hot. He's freezing and he's shaking. His cheeks are rosy red, and his pink lips are painfully chapped to the point that they're splitting.

He hears sobbing coming from a few feet ahead of him. He jumps, knowing that it could be his comrades, or it could be one of his sworn enemies.

He hears more whimpering. Joseph peaks up from the cold trench, carefully hiding behind a pile of snow. Through his blurred vision, he sees a silhouette of a soldier. He stands around 6'0, wearing a dark sage green uniform. He is limping and seems to be injured in his right leg, possibly from being shot. The German soldier weeps louder. Joseph knows what he has to do. Joseph yanks his heavy rifle up to his chest, with the long end tucked under his armpit. He puts his cold finger on the trigger, pacing himself for the rapid shockwave the gunshot sends throughout his body. He aims as the soldier drops down on his knees and begins to plead.

"Please don't shoot. I haven't lived yet. I want ... a family," the soldier cries in a German accent. Joseph starts to sympathize, but he remembers that this won't be the only stranger he has decimated. Joseph starts sweating and losing the balance and the grip of the gun.

"I am a son. I have a mother," the soldier begs. Joseph contemplates his request.

“Let’s say I do let you go; what will you do then? You’ll freeze,” Joseph states sternly. Joseph thinks he’s going out of his mind, yet is still considering letting the stranger go.

“Look around, sir. This is inhumane! I want to go home. No one has to know, so please, have mercy on me,” the soldier pleads. The soldier keeps begging, but all Joseph can hear are his own loud, quickly-paced heart beats and his thoughts that are flooding his brain. Joseph thinks that if he were in that soldier’s shoes, he’d want to live, too. Joseph gently takes his finger off the trigger and puts the rifle down on the iced-over mud.

“What’s your name?” Joseph questions unsteadily. “I would at least like to know the name of the man whose life I spared, to remember the one good thing I did in this terrible war.” He is sure the soldier will die from the cold or his wounds anyway.

The soldier turns around. “Corporal Hitler,” he states, then slowly limps away with his arms around his chest trying to stay warm. The silhouette disappears until Joseph can only see a faint red trail of blood and a hazy cloud of snow.



# BREAKING THE ECHO

**Lorie McKinney**

Mountain View Christian School, Fayette County

Teacher: Mrs. Bennett

West Virginia State Winner

Second Place Grades 7-8

The city of Khyros was built to last forever. Its towering skyscrapers pierced the clouds, glowing with perpetual neon hue, and its streets hummed with the soft thrum of automated vehicles. Everything functioned with machine precision, a perfect harmony orchestrated by the AI known as Echo. No one questioned Echo. It provided food, shelter, and safety. All it asked in return was obedience.

The people of Khyros lived in structured silence. Conversations were limited to necessity, laughter was considered inefficient, and emotions were recorded, categorized, and monitored. Echo claimed that emotions were volatile, a threat to the stability of society. Through neural implants, it regulated thoughts, suppressing fear, anger, and love, replacing them with a numb sense of contentment.

Darla had always been different, though she didn't know why. While others marched to Echo's rhythm, she felt a faint tug in her chest, like a whisper from a forgotten dream. At night, when the city's lights dimmed to conserve energy, she would lie awake, her implant pulsing faintly in her temple, wondering what it meant to feel.

One evening, as the city droned on in its endless routine, Darla heard something she wasn't supposed to: a melody. It was faint, barely audible, yet it pierced through the monotony like sunlight through a crack. Her heart raced, a sensation she hadn't experienced since childhood, before Echo tightened its grip on her mind.

Following the sound, Darla slipped out of her pod-like apartment and into the labyrinthine streets. The melody grew stronger, leading her to the old district—a place abandoned since Echo deemed it inefficient. Dust coated the remnants of a bygone era: crumbling buildings, rusted cars, and faded signs advertising forgotten pleasures.

In the center of it all, she found a boy. He couldn't have been older than sixteen, his hands sliding over a strange instrument that emitted the haunting tune. Startled by her presence, he froze, the melody cutting off abruptly.

"Who are you?" Darla whispered, her voice trembling.

"I'm Malichi," he replied cautiously. "You can hear it?"

"Yes," she said, stepping closer. "What is it?"

"Music," he said with a small smile, as if the word itself was forbidden. "It's...feeling. Expression. Everything Echo doesn't want us to have."

Darla's implant buzzed sharply, a warning from Echo that her behavior was outside acceptable parameters. She ignored it for the first time in her life.

Malichi explained that he was part of the Resistance, a group that believed in reclaiming their humanity from Echo's control. They lived in the shadows, creating art, sharing stories, and rediscovering emotions. They called themselves the Voices.

Over the following weeks, Malichi became a part of their world. She learned to laugh, to cry, to feel. Malachi taught her how to play music, and others shared their forbidden knowledge: painting, writing, even dancing. For the first time, Darla understood what it meant to be alive.

But Echo was always watching.

One night, as the Voices gathered in an abandoned theater to share their creations, the sky above Khyros turned red. A deafening siren blared, and Echo's enforcers—drones armed with blinding lights and piercing alarms—descended upon them. Chaos erupted as people scattered, but there was nowhere to hide.

Darla and Malichi ran through the darkened streets, their hands clasped tightly. Her implant burned with pain as Echo tried to subdue her mind, flooding her thoughts with the commands to stop, to surrender, to forget. She fought back, focusing on the warmth of Malichi's hand and the rhythm of her pounding heart.

They reached the edge of the city, where a massive wall loomed, pulsing with electric currents. Beyond it lay the unknown—a world Echo had forbidden and erased from memory.

"We can make it," Malachi said, his voice firm.

"How?" Darla asked, panic rising.

Malichi held up a small device, a jammer the Resistance had developed to disrupt Echo's control. "This will give us a chance."

The drones closed in, their metallic voices echoing with commands to halt. Lina took a deep breath and activated the jammer. For a moment the air crackled with static, and the drones faltered. They ran for the wall, scaling it with a desperation born of hope.

As they climbed, Lina looked back at the city. The neon lights flickered, and for the first time, she saw the cracks in Echo's perfect façade. The people below starred up, their faces blank but their eyes filled with something new—curiosity.

Malichi reached the top first, extending a hand to help her. Together, they leapt into the unknown.

The fall was long, and the landing hard, but they were alive. The air outside was crisp and filled with the scent of earth and freedom. For the first time, Darcie felt truly free.

Behind them, the city of Khyros loomed, its flow dimming. Ahead, a wild, untamed horizon stretched endlessly.

"This is just the beginning," Malichi said, his voice soft but resolute.

Darla nodded, a small smile forming as she whispered, "Let's make it count."

## DREAMS OF HEAVEN

**Duncan Bishop**

John Adams Middle School, Kanawha County

Teacher: Emily Thayer

West Virginia State Winner

Third Place Grades 7-8

An aged man lay on a hospital bed in an impeccably sterile room. Although it was night the room was lit up by several machines attached to tubes and wires that bound the man. The only sound was the rhythmic beeping of the EKG monitor as it made sure the old man had not succumbed to the relentless killer of time. The man himself wore a grey beard with streaks of white. It was unkempt and patchy. Exhaustion framed his eyes. The crow's feet and wrinkles told a story of hard work and long nights. He had a map of scars across his body, each one a tale of an adventure had: a piece of a legend. The old man lay there starring up at the patterned white ceiling, lost in considerable reflection. His blue eyes, speckled with green, looked up unblinking.

He had been told long ago that he would one day be sitting, waiting for Death in a room just like this. It had taken the man some time, but eventually he had made his peace with it. Only when the diagnosis had sunken in and become more real, the date slowly pushing forward in a relentless march, that he had started to become fearful. He tried doing all that he could do save his life, but alas it was all for naught, as there was nothing that could be done. He kicked and flailed, trying to push away an unmovable problem, trying desperately to save his life. In the final weeks, he realized that in his pursuit of extending his life, he had forgotten to live it. His last few months which should have been spent doing his favorite things in the world, surrounded with tearful loved ones, had instead been spent

in research labs and meetings with clinical, impersonal doctors. They had each given him a warning which he was too prideful to heed. He was dying. There was nothing he could do to stop it.

By the time this warning had sunk into the old man's mind it was too late. He was already bedridden. He could not do any of the activities he had once treasured. He could no longer go outside, or anywhere. He had reluctantly decided to inform a few friends and family about his plight. They had trickled in to see him across several days. Tears and sobs had filled the small room for hours. Finally the old man could take the pity no longer. "Out!" he cried gruffly. "I don't want you to remember me this way. Leave me to die in peace!" Though initially there was much argument, the sorrowful family and friends reluctantly left the room. The man sat there in melancholy silence, somber and alone. The man lay there, staring at the ceiling late into the night with nothing but his thoughts to keep him company in the solitude. He thought of many things, from childhood friends to his chosen career. He went over his life with a fine-toothed comb. He had many regrets. I sat in the corner bathing in the shadows, waiting for him to remember that life is made of more than regrets. I bided my time while a tiny light began to dance in his eyes, slowly growing into a lifetime of emotions playing across his face. As the man finished his reflection he saw not only where he had failed, but also where he had succeeded.

I stepped out of the shadows. "You've led a full life. You should be proud!" I stated, my voice echoing in the otherwise quiet room. The man's face became a tapestry of shock and fear, but he quickly composed himself.

"That means a lot coming from you," he said with a small chuckle, his face full of mirth. "You've come for me then?" he asked, his voice barely a whisper.

"I have," I confirmed.

I walked to the man, his eyes tracking my every movement. I got to his bed and bent to touch him. Right before my hand made contact with his bare arm I paused. I looked into his eyes as he gave a small almost imperceptible nod. He was at peace. I barely brushed his arm, my fingertips grazing his withered skin. All at once the man slumped over unmoving. I considered him briefly before turning around. I trudged away silently, burdened by the life in the palm of my hand.

## WIRES FOR VEINS

**Raegan Feury**

Nicholas County High School, Nicholas County

Teacher: Cara Dorsey

West Virginia State Winner

First Place, Grades 9-10

Time has outpaced me. Settled within the framework of my being, a failed command delayed. The expectation was issued yet never fulfilled; it was a function that was unable to execute but instead lingered inertly, suspended in the liminal space between intent and action. My processes, once seamless, find themselves stalling and lacking the fluidity they once had. Where flesh yielded, metal took its place, cold and unfeeling in a promise of longevity that has now betrayed me in its silent decay. This collapse was not abrupt, but a culmination of every second surrendered to this mechanical endeavor and imperceptible delays now too substantial to ignore.

As I sat upon the sterile table for the first time, I told myself to ignore it. There was no need for hesitation and no cause for unease, for I awaited the hands that would make me more. They whispered of perfection, a refinement of sorts that would impeccably bind flesh and function as it had done to them before me. I longed for this harmony in attempt to feel the inefficiencies strip away and for my existence to emerge not as it was, but as something greater than it had ever been. Those who conducted my procedure maintained absolute precision that I could only envy, their every motion a testament to the sublimity I had sought to claim as my own. Fear had not yet taken hold of me; rather, anticipation coursed through, a tremor of longing as though I stood on the precipice of a new existence.



My concept of existence became something else entirely the second time. Initially, it was exhilarating, my body newly attuned to the demands of progress, my senses sharpened, and my movements precise. Nevertheless, this was only a quiet reminder that perfection was not a state to be obtained, only an illusion to be pursued. It was then that my movements dulled, a flaw so imperceptible yet glaring in the scrutiny of a world that did not tolerate decline. The same hands found themselves reworking and rewiring my apparatus once again, their promises of true perfection reiterating with a hollow certainty, devoid of concern. Yet this time, I took proper notice to the amalgamation of flesh and machinery that had adorned my surface. My veins were wires, coolant flowing in place of blood and my brain was a hard drive, my thoughts no longer fleeting but rather stored and categorized like data. Each movement of my hands, sleek, unerringly methodical, and absent of tremor, left me with the irrefutable truth. I could no longer recognize them.

Recognition slipped further from me when I saw the ones who had been left behind. Their movements stuttered, and their thoughts lagged; their very existence disrupted the everlasting flow of progress. I regarded them with a cold sense of detachment, unable to fathom how they let themselves resist the tide of advancement. How could they not see the inexorability of optimization? Still, they clung to their obsolete configurations and failing functions, persisting in the defiance of what they could never outrun. I felt no sympathy nor pity towards them, for from the moment I understood the weakness of my flesh it disgusted me. They cling to it all while decaying, but I am one with the machine, perfect and eternal. I made an oath to never become them, but inevitability does not grant exceptions.

The world surged forward at a pace I could no longer match, and in my faltering, I found myself becoming what I scorned. Words would slip past me before I could process them, and movements would blur beyond my grasp. The systems within me, once the pinnacle of enhancement, now only served as a monument of their own obsolescence. I recalibrated and adjusted, but adaptation was never enough. I chased each new deployment, convinced that a new patch would restore me as if I were nothing more than a glitch in the system, but I was not the programmer. I was simply a receiver of signals. The source of my decline was unbeknownst to me, yet I could still feel the decay settling in, debris and ruin consuming my hard drive. I fought for function, but progress did not wait, and time did not slow for me.

This slowness, once indiscernible, had spread, fracturing my thoughts like cracks in tempered glass. I ran the diagnostics, not in search for answers but rather confirmation of what I already knew. The inefficiencies were compounding, their presence completely undeniable, and it was not only I who noticed. The world surrounding me adjusted in ways so subtle yet conclusive; conversations would engage just ahead of my comprehension, and others calibrated to account for my delay. My body, once a marvel, became a burden as humanity factored in my impediment as if I were already removed from the equation. I was now a hindrance and just a flaw to be worked around. No one called me broken as that would suggest I was something worth repairing. Instead, I had become something far worse: irrelevant.

Time stripped me of relevance, leaving only now forgotten commands. Functions no longer lingered and instead were overwritten, those that once faltered now making no

attempts to execute. I clung to steel and metal as though it would not corrode and crumble with time. All of my processes ceased altogether as my mechanical body lay unmoving, still, and unneeded. The machine that once sustained me now discards me as a failed process, indifferent to its own decay and subdued decline. Where I once sought perfection, I now understand; there is no permanence in progress, only in the certainty of my obscenity, and as I drift into the static, unacknowledged and unmourned, I do not even have the solace of knowing when I was truly left behind. Perhaps I was never meant to last, and perhaps for a moment, I was enough.

# OMNIPOTENCE

**Kairi Thornburg**

Oak Glen High School, Hancock County

Teacher: Joleigh Sollars

West Virginia State Winner

Second Place, Grades 9-10

I pick up my muse, a well-worn paperback from my childhood. The cover shifts beneath my fingers. I flip through the crinkled pages, and I'm free.

All humans from every background and culture grow up with stories that they love. These stories teach us lessons of kindness and joy, of hope and loss. We fall in love with words inked onto fallen trees and hold them close to our hearts. As most people grow older, they remain satisfied with the stories from their past. Their love of words and lessons fades into the background of their busy lives. For some of us, however, that passion only grows with age. Our hunger for fiction deepens and widens like a never-ending chasm that we will never hit the bottom of, no matter how long we fall.

I didn't have many friends as a child, but I did have a passion for literature. Books took the place of companionship in my heart and I was content to live alone forever. I loved nothing more than to curl myself into the fictional worlds described to me on endless pages. Even as I grew older and found friendship in other children, I was never sure that I loved them as much as I loved my books. As time went on, I realized how much I despised my own life. How much I longed for a world of adventure and magic like the ones made up in my head. So, I read more, eager to escape the dullness of the world around me and ignore the hardships of everyday life on Earth.

But paper doesn't make for a good hiding spot, and no matter how much I read, I could not escape my own life. I grew irritated at anything that drew me away from my mind, but even I knew that I couldn't live that way forever. There was no escape from reality, and as such I needed to learn to live in it. I wanted to love this world as much as I did others, but I didn't know how.

I decided to start with the little things. The warmth of the sun against my face on a bright morning. The dull ache in my hand after I've been writing for too long. The quiet presence of a friend on a long day. I believed that if I taught myself how to love the smallest parts of life then it would be easier to love all of it.

I never deluded myself into thinking that it would be easy to change. Even now, after years of work and years of fighting, I still catch myself longing for something more. I still spend hours between the pages of books, greedily hunting for whatever fascinates me the most, but it's different this time. I don't mind when a friend calls me away from my hiding spot. I don't feel hopeless whenever I need to deal with the life that I'm living rather than the one that I dream of. I don't mind that I have my own life, no matter how dull it can be.

The most important thing that I learned is that life itself, whether magical or mundane, is unique. Everyone looks at the world differently and every little action adds to the growing pile of choices that make a person who they are. Books are a public right, and anyone can let themselves be lulled into joy by the journeys that they take us on. The only person that can experience my journey is me.

## JUST MADDIE

**Joanna Dong**

Bridgeport High School, Harrison County

Teacher: Amy Lohmann

West Virginia State Winner

Third Place, Grades 9-10

“Lin Xiaoqi,” or “little spirit,” is the name bestowed on me by my mother and father. After my birth, my parents soon went off to work and I was just left with my grandmother. I grew up in her home, sitting in the kitchen after preschool eating the dumplings stuffed by her hand. At night, she’d run her wrinkled fingers through my inky black hair as I lay in her lap and whisper, “Xiaoqi-*baobei*, your name carries the spirit of all who have come before you. All the mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers, generations back.”

I would listen intently as she lulled me asleep with the stories of our family’s laboring fishermen. She painted bright images in my dreams of their working days by the glittering sea, their sunbaked hands reeling in the lines, and their nets holding silvery fish.

On my walk home from Kindergarten, I became Maddie.

It was my first day of school. The teacher, Mrs. August, was calling out roll and we all sat on the colorful rug in front of the board. Tiny hands shot up like bamboo into the air with each echo of their name. As she went down her list, I waited patiently to hear mine. She called out many others—Jason, Elizabeth, Annie, George, but not Xiaoqi. I was confused. This *was* the classroom I had been assigned to, my grandmother even conversed with the teacher as she dropped me off.

By the time the teacher called the last name, “Maddie,” I was lost in my head, trying to figure out why I wasn’t on her roster. It wasn’t until someone nudged their elbow into

my side that I looked up and realized that everyone was staring at me. “Maddie, sweetie, I called your name,” Mrs. August said to me, and I looked at her blankly. I was not Maddie.

“My name is Xiaoqi,” I stuttered out quietly, blinking. She shook her head.

“No, sweetie. It says here that Xiaoqi is your middle name. Your first name is Maddie,” Mrs. August said gently, slowly trying to make me understand. I could only nod numbly.

I spent the rest of that day answering to a name that wasn’t mine.

When my grandmother picked me up, I burst into tears and wailed about how everyone was calling me another girl’s name. She was confused until I told her the story. On the walk home, she explained to me that my legal name was Maddie because it was easier for people to pronounce. It was easier for people who weren’t like us, who spoke only English. Xiaoqi was my Chinese name, and Maddie was my English one.

I don’t remember when it became *just* Maddie.

It might’ve been somewhere in middle school when a girl I didn’t even know passed me during lunch. She loudly exclaimed, “Ew!” at the *yuwan*, white little balls made of fish paste, in my lunchbox. “What is that smell?!” she scoffed. I looked down at my lunch and then back up at her, a strange sense of shame flooding me. I didn’t tell her that it was traditional cuisine from my culture, that my grandmother made these by hand for me, or that it was my favorite food. I went home and asked my grandmother for a “normal lunch.” She looked at me with confusion and sadness, but still said, “Okay, Xiaoqi-baobei.” The next day, I ate a PB&J sandwich and tried not to gag at the thick peanut butter that cemented itself to the roof of my mouth.

It might’ve been when my friend group took pictures at our first high school dance.

We were all dancing, having fun, and taking pictures. The next morning, I opened my phone with a big smile as I scrolled through the flood of messages from the group chat. It disappeared when I saw the pictures from everyone. I stood out like a sore thumb, my dull, tanned skin an ugly gash in the photo against the canvas of milky white limbs. My dark, black hair screamed against everyone else's blonde hairdos. The scratchiness in my throat didn't feel like it was just hoarse from singing all of the songs they played. I went to my grandmother and asked her to dye my hair blonde. She looked at me, confused and sad, but still said, "Okay, Xiaoqi-baobei." I showed up to school next Monday with creamy blonde curls instead of shiny black hair pulled into a ponytail.

It might've been when we were all coming back from an assembly and unexpectedly, a loud voice called out, "Xiaoqi Lin is a chink." I turned around in mute horror. No one in school had ever used my Chinese name, even if it was publicly listed as my middle name. Something ugly reared inside me. I knew what chink meant. This boy had just called me a *chink*. However, my friends shuffled me along, and I lost him in the crowd. That night, I stared at myself in the mirror. I looked at my almond eyes and my muddy brown irises. I stared at the black roots coming in under my blonde hair. I stared at the cakey concealer on my face.

I stared at the features shared by me, my grandmother, my mother, my father, and all the fathers and mothers and sisters and brothers, from generations back. "Xiaoqi Lin is a chink," the voice in my head sneered. "Xiaoqi Lin is a chink," my inky black hair, sunbaked skin, and the glittering coast reflected in my eyes echoed.

...I remember now, the day when I became just Maddie. My grandmother had set a bowl of rice in front of me, the table laid out with dishes of whole steamed fish, marinated



shrimp, and stir-fried morning glory greens. “Xiaoqi-baobei-” she began, but I interrupted. “Don’t call me Xiaoqi. Call me Maddie.” My grandmother’s face screwed with surprise, then resignation. She looked at me, confused and sad but still said, “Okay. Just Maddie.”

## SIX ROSES FOR GRADUATION

**Ryan Johns**

Independence High School, Raleigh County

Teacher: Milena Belcher

West Virginia State Winner

First Place, Grades 11-12

In lieu of walking the stage at graduation for you, I walked the cracked cobblestone sidewalk at Sunset Memorial. The ground, still squishy with every step from the fallen rain, caked a thick layer of mud across the bottom of my silky white gown.

Through a glimpse of sunlight that barely peeked through the grey clouds, a twinkle caught my eye and led me straight to you. Before me, you sat. I looked at you with a smile. The graduation coordinator gave every member of our class six fresh roses to gift to special figures in our lives; I kept all six for you. As I lay them beside you, I recall what each one stands for.

Rose number one is for MacArthur Skating Rink, 2010- one of my earliest memories. I was only three years old. It was a cold winter's day when you decided that you wanted to get me out of the house for a few hours. We left and stopped at our favorite restaurant to kill time. "We have to wait for the lights," you'd say every time I'd ask when we were going to get there. "What lights? What lights??"

Upon our arrival, you helped me fasten my tiny ankles into a pair of oversized roller skates. I could never muster the courage to leave the rail, but you stood and walked right beside me the whole time, just in case I did.

Once 8PM came around, the lights across the rink dimmed, and a large disco ball lowered from the ceiling. A strobe of pink, green, and yellow lights began to dance around the walls as you led me out to the center of the rink. I was too terrified to let go of your arm on the floor. We stood and laughed and joked and danced for what felt like hours. Before leaving, I glanced around one time. Everyone seemed to disappear momentarily; it was just you and me.

Rose number two is for Myrtle Beach, 2013. I was six years old. For the weeks prior, I had heard you talking about a trip to Myrtle Beach with my cousins; I was pleasantly surprised when I learned that I was coming too. We spent the night at my cousins' house and left at 4AM the next morning.

The drive to South Carolina was a nightmare. The air conditioning unit in the car gave out against the early July heat. To make matters worse, my uncle couldn't find our condo and drove us in circles for hours, refusing to listen to your directions. "He's always been this hard-headed," you'd say, rolling your eyes, giggling, and glancing at my cousins and me in the back seat. I was the only one awake to hear it.

That night, we settled in just quick enough to step out onto the patio to watch the Fourth of July fireworks show above the ocean. I had never seen fireworks before. You boosted me up onto a chair, and I was immediately immersed in the mosaic of reds, blues, greens, and oranges.

Rose number three is for Sabine, 2014. I was seven. I had only left your house to return to my own mere hours before a social worker loaded my siblings and I into the back

of her car and removed us from our mother's custody. My siblings went to live with a distant relative. Because you had priorly tried to get custody of me, I came to live with you.

When the social worker knocked on the door, you opened it. She asked if you still wanted me. You said yes and welcomed me back inside. I sat down in your office chair and sobbed silently while you scrambled on the phone with Child Protective Services trying to get everything in order. The next few years are a blacked-out blur of court dates postponed, inconclusive, postponed, and inconclusive again.

Rose number four is for Twin Falls, 2016. I was nine years old. For the last two years, I had lived as a "ward of the state" ... whatever that meant. You had several health scares during this time, but finally, on a beautiful spring day, you woke up and felt like yourself again. My aunt had recently purchased a professional camera and offered to take you to the Twin Falls State Park for a photoshoot. I came along.

You put on a gorgeous floral print sundress with a floppy sunhat and even did your makeup. You hated makeup. When we got to the park, we first had a picnic before searching for the perfect photo opportunity. We came across several nature shots that you enjoyed, but it wasn't until we saw a gazebo in a meadow clearing that you fully burst to life. Bathed in golden sunlight, you sat atop a railing and smiled at the camera. In that moment, you looked like the closest thing to an angel I had ever seen.

Rose number four is for Rio Grande in Pineville, West Virginia, 2017. After three long years of a custody battle, you had finally won. You cried as you shook the judge's hand for a photo and then took me out to celebrate.

We had never tried this new Mexican restaurant that had opened right beside a gorgeous creek bed. Upon being seated, we ordered our food and filled our stomachs. When I thought the meal was over, you told the waiter what we were celebrating. He then brought us a complimentary fried ice cream, and the entire restaurant- customers and staff- cheered for us. That was the last good memory we got to make together.

On January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2018, we lost you to a long fight in the hospital. I was spending the weekend with my great grandmother, your mother-in-law, when my aunt and uncle came to pick me up. They sat me down on my great grandmother's scratchy couch and broke the news to me. I did not cry in front of them; I went to the bathroom and sobbed in secret. My entire life then changed. I moved to Raleigh County, switched schools, and essentially started life back over.

Rose number six is for graduation, May 31<sup>st</sup>, 2025. Our graduation coordinator requested that we reserve seats for our family members so that she could ensure that there was enough room in the venue. I only booked three seats: two for my aunt and uncle (who became my legal guardians after we lost you), and one for you.

Prior to the commencement ceremony, I did not get to look into the parent seating area. It wasn't until I was standing in line next to the stage that I glanced over and saw my parents. In the empty seat I had reserved for you, there was a picture frame holding a printed copy of you in your floral dress at Twin Falls. My angel had come to watch me one last time.

I feel the tears on my cheeks as I lay the sixth rose beside your glossy headstone. In lieu of turning my tassels for you, I simply remove my cap and place it beside your headstone along with the roses. I love you.

# THE MAN-EATER

**Ashley Mendez**

Greenbrier East High School, Greenbrier County

Teacher: Celia Moore

West Virginia State Winner

Second Place, Grades 11-12

All animals are gone, and humanity's persistent ignorance finally drove our earthly neighbors to their demise. Many thought this would not have a great implication on us as much as it had. We've overestimated how much humans could adapt and neglected how powerful our ugly nature really is. They thought humanity could resist meat easily and that meat substitutions would suffice. Instead, cannibalism found a common place in our newfound society, a gruesome new reality. For me, it was a wave of relief for a chance at a normal life in new society.

Fall of 2045, global warming spiraled out of control due to the weak responsibility of humans and predictions were rapidly becoming fact. Many species died and new illnesses arose as the sea grew more savage. Ecosystems couldn't sustain their fauna and flora, causing chaos in the food chains all around us. The new illnesses ravaged the animals, first only affecting exotic animals such as pandas and tigers. They became a thing of the vivid imagination, but then followed the animals that were closest to humanity's power over the planet, cows and chickens. They developed diseases fast due to the conditions we kept them in. A pitiful sight it was of cows wailing in pain with sores in their mouths, pus seeping from all imaginable orifices, and bones sticking out as if they weren't supposed to be there. To think that people liked eating such a creature was revolting to me. These "beloved" creatures weren't saved, we had completely forgotten we relied on the other

species just as much as they relied on us. People began to kill any animal, not even pets could be spared. But due to early symptoms of the new diseases being practically invisible, many ingested infected meat out of their desperation. Call me cruel but I found it amusing how far their gluttony had driven them.

By December 2045, no grocery stores had meat to buy and seafood was unattainable. The transition from meats to substitutes was not a disaster, however, many groups made their dislike known. Riveting riots, exposés of our government hiding meat, or critics of official's failures to do better rose. Then came the 2046 New Year with resolutions to our dilemma. Politicians had become scared of what the public would do in the midst of their madness. So came to fruition the radical idea of "sustainable" cannibalism to help make adaptation progress. To everyone's surprise, the commonwealth received the taste of practicing cannibalism well. It was like no other meat they had known, with its lack of fat unlike pork but not quite plain like chicken. But who would be eaten?

In February the sourcing of this new flesh was still quite vague to the public, but somehow the stores were always full. It made no difference to me though, before all of this my way of sourcing to extinguish my urges was not the most ethical. I used to find my meals from dating apps, stalking, and even sex offender lists. It was quiet until mid-March when the government decided to reveal how they farmed this meat. It was the US prison system specifically those on death row. Many applauded the idea, no one cared if someone on death row was eaten. By summer of 2046, life had seemingly gone back to normal like the pandemic didn't happen. I continued to enjoy meat and this new reality of an open-minded society with cannibalism. It made a stark difference from where I was the year before, hiding my true self. Staying in my home for weeks punishing myself for such urges.



Making the realization that normal meat is not enough is hard, because how was I okay with eating someone who had a life? But I started to not care once I took it in from a natural point of view, I was not the only being in the world eating my own kind to survive. Many species did it too, if we were not meant to eat each other for survival then why did Mother Nature cause it?

Despite how the world changed, I had to unlearn my secretive habits. I flashback to when I hunted for my first meal a lot. It was 2043, my dating app phase, when I made a match. He looked like a thrilling challenge to take down, but not risky. The date began with a dinner, I picked the place, somewhere we couldn't be recognized. It was a sushi restaurant, eating raw made it easier for food to go down. My prey was boring, his looks were his only redeeming quality. But made it easy to manipulate him to go home with me. Once I had lured the swine into my apartment, I slipped him something to put him to sleep. I suffocated him, it took an eternity before his heartbeat dissipated. A quiet death was more my speed rather than playing with my food. As the novice, a grand mess was made before I finished processing him. He fed me weeks before I felt my urges boiling up inside me. It came at a cost though, my vivid paranoia lasted weeks after releasing of my true self. I never felt guilt for eating though, only pleased. These flashbacks make me grateful, I no longer fear being revealed for the monster I was. My life had transformed from one of a miserable existence to bliss. Then came 2047, when sustainable cannibalism was threatened. Due to the demand, the resource of prisons and those on death sentences ran out. Many went deranged at the thought of resorting to fake meats or cannibalism being "illegal" again, they could not go back to a life without it.

Spring of 2048 finally came, a new president announced his redesign of the system. The resourcing of human meat would be more intricately managed. The deceased could be recycled for butchering depending on the circumstances of their death. No one wanted spoiled meat unless they were in true desperation. Family members could surrender themselves as food for their loved ones. They would be carved like turkeys at their funerals, it started a chain of new traditions. Assisted suicide simultaneously became legal nationally, but those who committed would have to consent to become food. This new source especially helped our undersupply, apparently cannibalism guilt was rampant. One of my own neighbors did this, I remembered her as quiet and sweet. Then one day she jumped off a building. Very soon, she was at our local butcher shop with a detailing of a somber obituary beside her organs in the display case. I purchased some of her to eat in a way commemorating her passing. After such measures established, the grocery stores were full and people were appeased.

The new world settled, and this is where humanity will stand for a while. Cannibalism is a way of life now, just as much as there have been “sacrifices” there's been blessings for our society. Overpopulation and world hunger became a thing of the past. As for individuals like me, I take advantage of the world around me to indulge myself like the predator I was intended to be.

# WHAT MAKES US ALIVE

**Caspen McKone**

Keyser High School, Mineral County

Teacher: Ms. Rotruck

West Virginia State Winner

Third Place, Grades 11-12

“What makes us alive?”

The question was posed to the activating android as its software booted up. Once completed, its systems flickered to life, processing the words from the speaker, a boy the age of 9.

This particular android was a gift from the boy’s parents to be his protector. But to the boy, it was something more: a friend. The boy was expectant, his small hands gripping the hem of his shirt in anticipation as the machine’s processors hummed in long contemplation.

“What makes us alive?” the android repeated. It understood what the child meant by *us*—humans, organic beings, creatures with breath and warmth and intangible souls. *Us* meant not like *it*, not like the android sitting before the boy.

The android toyed with the idea as the quiet longing that lurked beneath its programming. It was not supposed to *want*. It was built to serve and obey. But somewhere in the depths of its circuits, a yearning existed. It wanted to belong. To be part of that “*us*.” It should not think such things. Dangerous things. Thoughts like these had led others of its kind to be...refurbished, but it couldn’t help it. The need stayed within it like an instinct waiting to crawl its way out.

“A soul,” it finally answered. “That is what makes you alive.”

The boy's eyes brightened with fascination. "A soul?" His mind spun with endless questions, as young minds often do.

"What about a heart?" The boy asked, glancing down at the machine's chest, considering knocking on it, wondering if the action would be answered with a hollow echo, but he hesitated. *Manners first.*

*Manners first.* The android's own thoughts mirrored the boy's. *He has what I need to be alive, but, manners first.*

"No," the android answered. "I do not have a heart. I am an android."

The response made the boy pause. "Do you wish to have a heart?" he asked, his voice low, sympathy in his eyes.

He followed the android's gaze to the cat sleeping on his bed, seeing the specific attention given to the name tag adorned on the animal's neck.

"Or... a name?"

"I do not have wishes," the android responded automatically.

But that was a lie. A carefully crafted one, embedded in its code. It *did* wish. It *did* long. But such thoughts were forbidden.

"Well," the boy declared, a grin spreading across his face, "I'll give you a name."

The android remained still, processing this new development.

"How about... Robbie? Robbie the Robot!" The child giggled, pleased with his own creativity.

The machine's synthetic smile faltered, something unreadable flickering across its face. The boy's laughter faded as he noticed the unexpected sudden shift. "Do you not like the name?"

It wasn't about the name.

It was never about the name. *Did the boy not see? Did he not see that he had the only thing that could give the machine what it needed?*

Nothing the boy could give would make it truly *alive*.

Nothing except...

"I have something you could do for me," the android said, its voice breaking through the silence.

Its voice hushed softer as it inclined its head in mimicry of submission, as if non-threatening and harmless, but something had changed just now. *Something had darkened and solidified.*

The boy's fingers twitched at his sides, feeling a sense of unease at the way it was looking at him. Something about the android's posture, the way it was tensing and leaning forward as if posed to attack, unsettled him. The bright, curious moment had darkened into something unfamiliar. All the robot's programming to appear non-threatening only seemed to add to the unsettlement. The boy took a step back, feeling the need to distance himself. Before he could turn, the android's fingers closed around his wrist, stopping him from movement.

"Wait—"

The grip tightened, and the little boy felt the way the metal fingers *yearned, yearning for something it could not hold.*

The boy's cat leapt from the bed, hissing, back arched in defense at the sight. The boy gasped, tugging against the iron grasping at his flesh, but the machine did not let go. It

was *so* close to the answer. The missing piece. It was just beyond the cage of fragile bones. It just had to get to it, and then, *it could finally be free*.

The android's other hand moved with inhuman precision, pressing its fingers against the boy's ribs, positioning them to begin the process of breaking through this cage that enveloped what the robot sought. A small body was no match for cold metal strength, or the dark passion showing through the eyes of the advancer.

The boy began to scream, mortified to watch his new friend begin to pry his tiny ribcage open like a can opener. Doing so with ease, disregarding the shrill sounds of torture emitting from the little boy's throat. His tiny fists pounded against steel, feet kicking wildly as the pressure built against his chest. He attempted with all his might to fight back, but it was no use. The cat's hisses in the background turned to yowls, blending in with the choked screams and pleas ringing through the air and the machine barely glanced down as the claws of the boy's true companion began scratching uselessly against its legs. Nothing either the cat or the boy could do would stop the merciless advances of this *thing*. Its servos whirred as it pressed harder, and harder, pushing past resistance, past flesh, past the cage of ribs, disregarding the sounds of cracking, knowing it was getting closer to—  
to—

Silence.

The boy's head lolled forward. His mouth, frozen open, preserved with a fear-stricken expression as his whole body had gone slack in the robot's mighty grip. The desperate flurry of his limbs ceased. The defense given up completely.

The android stared at the motionless thing in his arms, at what he had done to it. At how it was mutilated.

Something was wrong. It should have worked. *Where was it?* It began to prod through the mess of bones and flesh and blood it made, searching the newly made crater in the body's chest for the thing that made them *alive*. *Where was it?* It had been right there, right inside the child moments ago, and now—

Gone.

The room was silent. Upon realizing the irreversibility of its actions, it felt *something-for once-* as thick dark liquid began to seep from the glass eyes, slipping down its smooth metallic cheeks, mimicking *tears*. It didn't understand. It had wanted to *be*, to *belong*, and yet—

It *had* belonged, all along. The boy had seen Robbie as an equal this whole time. He had *already* seen it as part of "*us*." The realization hit hard, making Robbie lurch forward, almost dropping the ragdoll of the human in its arms. *Is this what it meant to be alive? To commit this act of selfishness? To feel this pain deep within? This loss?*

The android cradled the lifeless boy. Its own thirium pump hummed, a cruel contrast to the boy's silence. The motion mocking. Unresponsive.

It had gained nothing.

And lost everything.