WRITE FOR 2026

An Anthology of Stories and Poems Written by Teens for the 2026
Write @ Your Library Creative Writing Contest

THE OWEN SOUND & NORTH GREY UNION PUBLIC LIBRARY
2026

WRITE FOR 2026

Anthology Copyright © 2026 by
The Owen Sound & North Grey Union Public Library
"The Little Drummer Boy" Copyright © 2026 Graycon Tremain
"Whispers" Copyright © 2026 Kalaina Lefebvre
"Home Again" Copyright © 2026 Rose Ladner
"A Place Called Dog Heaven" Copyright © 2026 Miriam Kruisselbrink
"Above the Joys and Sorrows"
Copyright © 2026 Nadia Winter Maud Miller
"An Ode to Pie" Copyright © 2026 Esaiah Mueller
"Nature's Song" Copyright © 2026 Tianna Zehr
"Behind the Glass" Copyright © 2026 Haidyn Ruthven
"From Camper to Counsellor: Evie's Last Year One-on-One at Camp Menesetung" Copyright © 2026 Michael Lang
"The Second Draft of Me" Copyright © 2026 Andrea Lacko
"Oh Everlark" Copyright © 2026 Abigail Radstake
"The Reaper" Copyright © 2026 Abigail Radstake
"Autumn's Kiss"Copyright © 2026 Abigail Radstake
"Summer in the Valley" Copyright © 2026 Taya Brindley

Cover design by
Abigail Radstake

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book, or portions thereof, in any form.

Printed in Canada

The Owen Sound & North Grey Union Public Library
824 First Avenue West
Owen Sound, ON N4K 4K4
www.library.osngupl.ca

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Junior Short Stories

The Little Drummer Boy – Graycon Tremain 1

Whispers – Kalaina Lefebvre 5

Home Again – Rose Ladner 9

A Place Called Dog Heaven – Miriam Kruisselbrink 13

Junior Poetry

Above the Joys and Sorrows – Nadia Winter Maud Miller 17

An Ode to Pie - Esaiah Mueller 18

Nature's Song – Tianna Zehr 19

Senior Short Stories

Behind the Glass – Haidyn Ruthven 20

From Camper to Counsellor: 25

Evie's Last Year One-on-One at Camp Menesetung - Michael Lang

The Second Draft of Me – Andrea Lacko 30

Oh Everlark – Abigail Radstake 37

Senior Poetry

The Reaper – Abigail Radstake 42

Autumn's Kiss – Abigail Radstake 43

Summer in the Valley – Taya Brindley 44

Junior Short Story – First Place

THE LITTLE DRUMMER BOY

By: Graycon Tremain

The wind blowing off Lake Erie was cold, but fourteen-year-old Thomas Wright didn't really care about the chill. He was far too focused on the thick, freezing mud that had just splashed right across his face.

"Look, lads! Look at the great protector of Upper Canada," laughed Silas, his voice booming across the camp. Silas was a blacksmith's apprentice from a few towns over, a young man nearly twice as wide as Thomas.

"Skinny as a dry winter stick and useless. If the Americans ever actually manage to cross the river, Thomas, try your best not to snap right in half when the wind picks up!" Silas joked.

The older boys gathered around the cookfire all laughed in unison, their harsh chuckles echoing against the damp wooden barracks. They left Thomas standing alone in the dirt, forcing him to use the rough wool of his sleeve to wipe the dark muck off his burning cheek. He swallowed the humiliation in his throat, staring down at his boots. Silas wasn't completely wrong, though. Thomas knew exactly what he looked like. He was small for his age, lacking the broad shoulders and muscled arms of the farm boys who had stepped forward to defend the colony. His wrists looked like fragile twigs sticking out of his cuffs, and his scarlet red army coat was too big. It hung off his narrow shoulders like a loose sail on a windless day.

He hadn't actually joined the militia to be a big hero, nor to gain any grand stories about military glory. He had volunteered as a drummer boy for a much more practical, desperate reason, the British army gave him free daily rations. In the harsh climate of 1812, that meant one less hungry mouth for his widowed mother to feed back home in the small settlement of York. Every piece of salted pork he consumed here was a blessing for his family. But to the older guys in the regiment, he wasn't a provider or a defender. He was just a waste of space, a useless kid who would panic and get in the way when the real fighting began. As the sun began to dip below the horizon, an unnatural weather pattern rolled over the water. The fog became so thick that you couldn't see five feet in front of your own

face. It swallowed the tents, the trees, and the shoreline in a heavy shroud of grey. Thomas sat on an overturned bucket near the edge of the perimeter, carefully tightening the ropes on his brass-bound snare drum, trying to ignore the silence that had settled over the lake.

Suddenly, the loud, violent cracks of gunshots broke the stillness.

The terrifying sound echoed from the treeline, followed immediately by the screams of the guards. The Americans were launching a surprise attack, using the blinding fog to mask their landing down the coast! Within seconds, the peaceful British camp went entirely berserk. Officers were sprinting out of their quarters, screaming random orders into the mist. Soldiers were scrambling blindly in the dark, tripping over tent pegs and knocking into one another as they desperately tried to locate their muskets and cartridge boxes.

Silas, who was always talking big in the barracks and bragging about how many invaders he would run through with his musket, turned as white as snow. The heavy musket in his hands was shaking so violently that the metal barrel clattered against his buttons. With a sudden, terrified gasp, his fingers slipped, and he dropped the heavy weapon directly into the mud at his feet. He looked, his chest heaving, completely stilled by the sudden reality of war.

"Get in line! Form up on the road!" the captain yelled from somewhere in the grey void, his voice cracking with tension. But his commands were entirely drowned out. The enemy drums were getting louder, intimidating thunder advancing through the trees. The blinding fog made it impossible for the confused, terrified men to find their officers or locate their proper groups. Panic was spreading through the camp like wildfire. If they didn't form a defensive line immediately, the charging Americans would overrun the camp and kill them where they stood.

Thomas felt a huge, suffocating knot of terror tighten in his throat. His knees were knocking together so hard he could barely stand, and every instinct in his body screamed at him to drop everything and run away into the deep safety of the woods. He was just a boy with a piece of wood and animal skin who didn't belong in the middle of a war. But as he turned to flee, he looked back at the camp. He saw the older boys, the fierce militia, and the regular fools

all running in circles, their faces twisted in absolute horror. Without order, they were going to get completely destroyed.
He didn't have a gun to fight back, but he realized he had something louder than any musket.

Steeling his nerves, Thomas grabbed his wooden drumsticks from his belt. He didn't look back. He sprinted through the swirling mist and climbed up onto a high, exposed stone wall that ran along the edge of the camp. He was standing out in the open, a perfect, elevated place where any advancing enemy sniper could easily see him through a gap in the fog. He took one deep, freezing breath, ignored the primal fear tearing at his mind, and raised his arms.

He hit the drumhead with everything he had. He began to play the beat "To Arms" signal. He poured every ounce of his remaining strength into his wrists, making the sharp, crisp beat steady. Rat-tat-tat. Rat-tat-tat. The rapid, piercing sound rolled off the stone wall and cut right through the heaviness of the fog, piercing through the shouts of the men and the terrifying noise of the battle. It was a universal language that every man in the area knew by heart. It gave the desperate men something to focus on.

Hearing the familiar rhythm the running soldiers finally stopped their panic running. They skidded to a halt in the mud, their heads turning toward the music.

"The boy! The drummer boy is showing us where the line is!" someone yelled through the darkness.

Using Thomas’s unwavering drumbeat to find each other in the soup of grey, the soldiers and militia finally began to group together. They went into formation, shoulder to shoulder, their confidence returning the moment they felt the presence of their comrades beside them. Silas, who was still frozen in place by his dropped musket, looked up in shock. His eyes widened as he peered through the haze.

There, standing boldly on top of the wall, was the skinny kid he had mocked just hours before. Thomas's thin arms were moving faster and stronger than ever before, his face set in a mask of determination. Suddenly, a stray American bullet whizzed right past Thomas's left ear with a terrifying hiss, hitting itself into the wall and chipping a large shard of wood off the rim of his drum. Thomas flinched, but he didn't stop playing. He didn't step down. Instead, he immediately switched the rhythm, transitioning smoothly into the fast, aggressive beat of "Advance."

The captain, seeing his line finally formed and inspired by the young boy's unbelievable bravery, drew his sword and pointed it toward the hidden enemy. "Forward!"

With a huge, collective shout that echoed across Lake Erie, the grouped-up British line charged blindly through the fog. The sudden counter-attack caught the advancing Americans by surprise. The redcoats and militia pushed them back step by step, chasing them all the way down the rocky slopes and back to their wooden assault boats.

By the afternoon, the heavy fog had finally been burned away, revealing a clear blue sky. The battlefield was quiet now. Thomas sat alone on an old wooden supply crate near the edge of the barracks, his body trembling from the comedown of adrenaline. The big blacksmith's apprentice was standing there awkwardly, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. In his massive hands, he was carefully holding out a metal plate. It was piled high with the absolute best pieces of roasted beef from the officers' dinner mess. He cleared his throat twice before he could find his voice.

"You stayed up on that wall when the rest of us almost ran away into the trees, Thomas,"

Silas muttered. He stepped forward and gently pushed the heavy plate toward Thomas's hands.

"You earned the extra food today. Soldier."

Thomas slowly reached out and took the plate, a nice, genuine warmth blooming in his chest that completely removed the lingering chill of the Lake Erie wind. He was still the skinniest kid in Upper Canada, and his oversized red coat still didn't fit right around his shoulders, but as he took his first bite of dinner, Thomas knew one thing for certain nobody would ever bully him again.

Junior Short Story – Second Place

WHISPERS

By: Kalaina Lefebvre

There are ghosts in my house.

Not just in my house but everywhere, following me, haunting me. They wait for my moments of vulnerability or when I want them around least, reminding me of all my faults and flaws.

Everything I've done wrong.

Like now, as I lay in my cramped, uncomfy bed, they whisper, "You deserve this." Forcing my regretful memories back.

"Remember when you snuck out?"

"Or when you **lied** to your friend?"

My stomach twists upon hearing their words. I try to focus on my breathing, but the ghosts persist. I shift, curling my body, hoping to shield myself. "You don't work hard enough!"

"You're a cheater!" I whimper, kicking my blanket off me. For a second, I feel like I can't breathe. Like the ghostly figures are reaching out, squeezing my throat.

Then a soft purring, a slight warmth. My cat, Ginger. He struts onto my bed, his orange coat glowing in the dim light. I concentrate on the feeling of his fur against my chest. I listen to the rhythm of his heart, mine calming with it. Gradually my eyes start to feel heavy, and slowly, I drift off to sleep, leaving the ghosts for tomorrow.

***

The next morning is brisk, far too cold for an autumn day. I shrug on my navy jacket, more or less ready for the day. Shoes tied, bag filled, I call to my mom, "See you tonight." In which she replies, "Love you! Have a great day." Turning the cold door handle, I step outside. "Do you know how hard she works for you?" **They** ask, the voices send a shiver down my spine as I start walking. Of course I do! Even through all her long shifts at the hospital she makes time for me. I think. "With everything you've already done wrong, you don't deserve her!"

"This is why your dad left, it was your fault!"

Out of anything they could say... that hurts the most. Beads of sweat fall off me as I crumble, steps away from the bus stop. My chest tightens and despite the weather, I'm extremely hot. Everything around me is spinning. Through the ghosts' violent

attacks, I hear a voice. Barely audible but there. They calmly say, "You're safe, I'm here. Deep breaths, focus on the ground, how does it feel?" I do what they say and begin to regain awareness of my surroundings. Through it all, they talk to me. "Breath Veronica." Shakely, I bring my hand to my heart.

When I open my eyes, **she's** standing in front of me. **Her**. "Oh look, it's Mandy, the dear friend you betrayed." The ghosts say, as if I don't know.

Mandy helps me up, just as the bus arrives. "Thanks" I murmur. "No problem, are-"

"I'm fine." I move towards the bus, ghosts swirling around me; aggressively speaking over each other.

Once I'm on, I head straight to my seat. I sit and pull out my well-used sketchbook. I open to a blank page and begin sketching. I start near the corner of the page and draw a fragile glass, small cracks appearing all over it. I struggle with capturing the transparency of the material but eventually add the final details and lift my chewed-up pencil. In bigger format, I draw a mirror. The reflection displays a beautiful girl smiling. However, as you look closer, you see the forcedness of her happiness. In the background, a strange figure can be seen. To finish the illustration, I sign my name in cursive, somewhat getting lost in the loops.

"WHAT YA DRAWING?!" A random boy yells behind me. Blushing, I tuck my book into my backpack. We pull into the school, and kids begin to stand.

I wait for the stampede of children and teenagers before getting out of my seat. The driver nods to me as I leave, a tradition we had started a long time ago. I stare at the tarmac as I move towards the school. Nearing the doors, I trace my fingers over the worn brick walls. I walk through the large doors, dodging the many people. I get a dirty look from an older student and hurry along, not wanting to be teased.

I get to my locker and enter the code. A once taped on photo of me and Mandy falls to the floor, fighting tears I shove it to the back of my locker.

After collecting my items, I direct my focus to getting to homeroom. I rush through the buzzing hallway; my face covered behind books. I glance sideways at the students who seem they don't have a care in the world. Nearly missing the entrance, I stumble through the door.

***

My classes drag on but when lunch finally comes, I'm surprised to see Mandy sit beside me. Out of all the tables in the cafeteria, why here?

"Hi, I wanted to see if you were doing okay after... you know..." She says, setting her overflowing tray down.

"I'm not sure what happened but I'm okay." I mutter, avoiding eye contact. "I think you had a panic attack." She says.

"How would you know?" I reply somewhat irritably. "I get it." She says, looking at the floor. Do you? "Look we haven't really talked since-"

"You used her!" The ghosts speak over her. "Look I feel bad about it every day, the ghosts make sure of it." I say, then immediately regret it.

"Wait did you just say ghosts?!" I blush, how could I have made that mistake? "Your great at making mistakes." **They** remind me.

I'm silent but my thoughts are racing. Do I tell her? She'll think I'm crazy or lying! But wouldn't I be if I said no?

"Yes." Mandy gives me a contemplating look. I can't help it, I'm so exhausted carrying this burden alone. I tell her everything. From the sleepless nights to the endless guilt. Tears threaten to come as I say the last part. "They say my dad leaving is... my fault."

I gulp but Mandy grabs my hand. "V, that's not your fault, the divorce had nothing to do with you! And yes, I was hurt when you lied and I'm not sure if these ghosts are even real or metaphorical or whatever, but I love you and I'm always here for you!" My throat burns but I manage to ask, "You're... not mad."

"You made a mistake, I know you're sorry. I forgive you." She puts her arms around me. "I'm so sorry I promise-" I start. "It's okay." The bell rings and kids start to leave, probably giving us weird looks, but I don't care. Even with the ghosts whispering, I don't care. Nothing matters but the amazing friend in front of me.

Mandy walks me to my class and when we stop, she smiles. "One thing really quick." She motions for me to come closer. "You need to forgive yourself, if not for me for you. And if I were you, I would tell those ghosts to screw off." We chuckle and say goodbye but as I walk into the class I wonder, Could that work?

***

Back in my unadorned room I hold up my small mirror, pondering today's events.

Even if some of what she had said was a joke, what Mandy had told me bounced around in my head. Abruptly, my phone rings. Out of the corner I read 'dad' on the screen. Biting my lip, I reach for my small, old phone. Maybe this could be something else that goes right today. I wonder. I hold my breath and pick up. "Hey sweetie." My dad's voice crackles through the speaker. "Hi..."I reply shyly. We start to talk and, like normal, it's awkward. My dad pauses and sighs. "Look honey... I'm sorry about the divorce." He finally says. "I hope you know you had nothing to do with it." I'm sure my dad had said that to me before, but today... I believe him. "I know." I say honestly. "Okay," he said, more relaxed. "Good. And just know your mom and I love you."

"I love you too."

We talk for a little longer, but eventually I set my phone down. But now I'm certain of what I must do.

I take a deep breath and glance at Ginger, who meows encouragingly. Mom isn't around to question this. I turn around, facing the ghosts bravely. "Screw off!" I yell. "It's not true, none of the horrible stuff you say to me! I deserve to be here, people want me here! I forgive myself!" When I finish, I'm out of breath, but I feel good.

***

Days, weeks and eventually months pass, and the ghosts never fully disappear, but they shrink. They don't get to control or define me. I'm human, I make mistakes and the only thing I can do is my best to fix them and be better in the future. No matter what the ghosts or anyone says.

Junior Short Story – Third Place

HOME AGAIN

By: Rose Ladner

It was a particularly chilly October afternoon, and wind blew across Wren's flushed face as she walked home from school. It was a normal day. Nothing strange or unusual should have happened. But then again, every day is normal until something *ab*normal happens.

Thirteen year old Wren waved goodbye to her friends.

"See you next week!" her friend Nora called to her.

"Yep. Have fun skating!" Wren called back.

As the brisk air nipped at her exposed skin, Wren's thoughts wandered back to her old school, as it often did.

She had moved two months and fourteen days ago (she counted), and she loved it here, but it still didn't feel like home. Her real home was Toronto. A city with diverse people, confusing streets, and skyscrapers at every turn. It wasn't like here. Every day felt the same and nothing changed.

Wren was jolted out of her thoughts by the jarring sound of a car honking and realized that she walked straight onto the road and almost was hit by a car.

"Sorry!" she yelped, and she ran back to the sidewalk. As the car advanced forward, Wren was distracted by a glinting object to her right.

That's strange. Wren thought. *What is a Toronto Transit token doing out here?* As she bent down to pick it up, it vanished.

Wren watched in amazement as it reappeared about two metres in front of her. She looked both ways before crossing the road and crouched down in front of the Transit Token just to see it disappear again. Wren stared at the token in awe as it reappeared again across the road.

Wren looked up to see a street she had never seen before. She was surprised that she had never noticed it on one of her long walks home from school, especially because it was much unlike anything you would see in this type of neighbourhood. It felt misplaced, like it wasn't supposed to be there. In fact, it looked eerily similar to a street near her old house.

Chainlink fences lined the properties, cars were parked bumper to bumper on each side of the street, and the houses left very little space between them.

She realized that the coin strangely didn't disappear this time as she walked towards it. Placing one foot in front of the other, she reached the sidewalk where the token was. She kneeled before the coin and grasped it with her trembling fingers in one quick swoop.

As soon as she picked it up, someone pushed her from behind with powerful force and she flew forward, landing hard on the rough concrete and skinning her knee. When Wren turned to face her attacker, all she saw was the front door to her old house.

There was a moment. A moment when she stopped breathing. A moment where it felt like everything but the door disappeared and it was just the two of them. The door Wren had longed to see for months. Her house, with its peeling paint siding and cracked steps. Her house, with its cold drafts and uneven tiles on the bathroom floor. But also, her *home*. With millions of beautiful memories over thirteen long years crammed into those four walls. Her home, with its tree in the front she would always climb, and that inviting smell it always had, but she couldn't quite place.

Then the moment ended and her knees felt weak. She noticed the dry heat on her skin unlike the unforgiving wind she had experienced mere seconds ago. It felt like a warm summer day here. Wren sat on the stoop and watched the cars go by on her old street, two hundred kilometers away from the Bruce Peninsula as she went through her day in her head.

She woke up, went to school, had a math test, ate a salami sandwich for lunch, walked home, touched a magical token, and travelled a two-and-a-half-hour drive away in one second to her old house.

Wren exhaled with a shaky sigh and took deep breaths until the tears forming around her eyes went away.

Then, she stood up and turned the knob of her old green wooden door and stepped inside.

That familiar smell washed over her as she entered her old house, leaving her with a calm state of mind. That was until she heard her parents' voices yelling upstairs.

"Mom? Dad?" she called frantically as she sprinted up the steps. Why were they here too?

"Do you know why this is happening?" she continued, but the voices didn't stop, even when she reached her parents' door. She swung it open, but her parents didn't acknowledge her. They pretended she wasn't there.

"This can't keep happening, Darren. She's really upset!" her Mom yelled at her dad.

"I wish I could be there too, but I was busy *providing for the family*." He countered.

"You weren't providing, you were working. I was providing when I drove our kids to school today, or when I made their lunches, or when I picked them up, or when I made dinner tonight that you didn't even call to tell me you would be missing!" her Mom interjected.

"Stop fighting! What are you talking about?" Wren asked. They didn't even face her.

"One missed dinner isn't the end of the world, Marcy." Wren's dad said.

"*Five in the last month!*" Her mom sighed and held her face in her hands.

Wren felt uncomfortable being there so she left the room and opened *her* door to find a girl crying on her bed. That girl was Wren.

Tear stained tissues littered her floor. Wren stared at herself-but-not-herself silently weeping when she suddenly realized that this was a memory. She was in a memory. That would explain why her parents didn't notice her. Or why it felt like summer here.

Wren remembered this day. Her parents were planning to tell her that they were going to be moving *together.* But her Dad picked up an extra shift at the grocery store and missed dinner. Her mom flipped out and told her herself just before her Dad came through the door with a sorry expression on his face. Wren's parents had been yelling and arguing with each other for an hour before it stopped. Wren watched past-Wren's tears roll down her chin and drip onto her plaid comforter and thought about how she hadn't cried like that in a long time. Her parents hadn't fought like that since they had moved. They all seemed happier now.

Wren stole one last glance at her old self and slowly walked out of the room. She took a couple of deep breaths as she descended onto the first floor. She could hear sirens wailing far in the distance; she didn't notice how annoying it was until she had been away from it.

The more time she spent in her memory, the more she realized that her life here was not as great as she remembered. Her friends were rude, she was sad all the time, and she felt unsafe walking around in her neighbourhood. Wren loved it in the city, but

she started to understand why her parents thought it would be a good idea to move to a small town.

She didn't know how or why this was happening to her. Wren just wanted to go home.

Wren longed for her real home. She longed for the forests, the lake, the woodland creatures, and most of all, the happiness that she felt there.

Was she ever going to leave this memory? Would she ever see the Bruce Peninsula again? Her chest felt tight. She needed air. She started hyperventilating. Wren stumbled out of the hallway, reaching for the door. She grasped the handle and pulled it open, her vision blurring. She lurched forward out of the house and fell into a terrifying dark abyss and fell and fell and fell until she hit the bottom.

Wren closed her eyes as she made contact with whatever hard surface laid at the bottom of the darkness that surrounded her.

When she opened her eyes again, she found herself covered by a plaid comforter and the darkness was replaced with dizzying bright lights. As her eyes adjusted, Wren was comforted by the sound of her mother's warm voice. She couldn't make out what she was saying, but it soothed her worrying thoughts to know she was near.

"Mom?" Wren whispered, her voice barely loud enough to hear.

"Wren!" her mom excitedly exclaimed.

"What happened?" she asked drowsily.

"You must've had a bad reaction to that week-old sushi last night. Oh Wren, I'm so sorry. It looked okay. I mean, I guess there was that weird green stuff but I thought that was just wasabi and-"

"Mom. *Mom.* I'm okay. I'm just glad to be home." She said.

And as Wren looked out her window at the beautiful lake, she knew it was the right thing to say.

The End

Junior Short Story – Honourable Mention

A Place Called Dog Heaven

By: Miriam Krusselbrink

Ok, so yesterday was literally the worst day of my entire life. I'm not even exaggerating. Do you think your days are bad because you got a C on Mrs. Gilbert's pop quiz, or you lost your favourite lipgloss in the school change room? Just stop right there. My dog died.

His name was Moose and he was a rottweiler. but not like those perfect rottweilers you see on tiktok. Moose was kind of a chunk, honestly. He had this one floppy ear that never stood up properly because it got caught in a bush when he was a puppy, and his breath smelled like absolute garbage 24/7, but he was my best friend, Like literally, my absolute best friend. It's just been me, my dad, and moose, for as long as I can remember. Dad got him for me for my seventh birthday. Which feels like a million years ago. I remember crying because he was so small he fit inside my back pack. Yesterday, he left, and our house feels so big and quiet now that he's gone.

It all started like 2 months ago. Moose started getting really, really slow. Normally, the second I walk through the door after the bus drops me off, he does this hilarious thing where he takes one of my dad's old shoes and does a lap around the kitchen island, shaking his whole body so hard his collar jingles. But lately he would just stay on his big red dog bed in the living room and hit his tail across the floor "thud thud thud" like he wanted to get up so bad, but his back legs were just too tired.

"Dad, why isn't moose getting up?" I asked one afternoon, dropping my backpack on the floor next to the door. "Usually, he's practically knocking me over by now."

My dad stopped stirring the pasta and looked over at Moose's bed. "Liliana, sweetie, he's just getting old. Big dogs get tired."

"But can't the vet give him a vitamin or something?" I kneeled to scratch him right behind his floppy ear. " He looks so sad. Look at his face, dad. He looks like he's apologizing for not running to the door."

"We're doing everything we can, Liliana." Dad said softly, but his voice sounded kind of tight. "Just give him lots of love."

I knew it was more than just being tired. I can see it in his eyes. They used to be bright brown, like shiny marbles, but they were starting to look cloudy, like looking through a foggy car window.

And then came last night. I was sitting at my desk trying to finish my homework, which is already a nightmare, then I heard this weird sound. It was like a tiny, sad, whimper. Moose never whimpered. He only barked at the mail man, or when he wanted a piece of my cheese sticks.

I dropped my pencil and ran into the living room. Moose was lying on his side, and his breathing looked really heavy. I got down on my floor right next to him on my knees.

“Daad!! Come in here right now! Something is wrong!” I screamed. I think my voice cracked because I was starting to panic, like that feeling when you lose your phone but times a billion.

Dad came running out of the kitchen. He still had a dish towel in his hand. The second he saw moose, his face went totally blank. My dad is like this big guy who never cries–he didn't even cry when he stepped on a nail last summer–but his eyes got instantly watery.

“Oh, buddy, “my dad whispered, kneeling down on the other side on moose. He patted moose's side, but his hand was shaking. “What’s going on, old friend?”

“Is he breathing okay?” I asked, my voice getting super high and squeaky. “Dad make him sit up, he's breathing too fast!”

My dad put his arm around my shoulders, rubbing moose's head where he loves it. "Liliana, sweetie,” he said, and his voice was shaking so much it scared me more than anything else."I think it's time. He's hurting. We can't let him suffer.”

“No, he's fine! He just needs water or something!” I said. I was completely refusing to accept. I stood up so fast I knocked over a plant. “Let me get his bowl. He's just thirsty because it's warm in here!”

I went to his blue water bowl, splashing it all over the kitchen floor because my hands wouldn't stop shaking. When I brought it back and put it under his nose, I begged, “Come on, moose. Drink some water. “Please, buddy, just one sip.”

He wasn't even close. He just looked at me. He looked right into my eyes, and it was the weirdest thing ever. It was like he was saying, it's ok Liliana. I'm just really sleepy.

“We have to go to the emergency vet clinic,” my dad said, his voice dim and cracked. “Right now; get his blanket, Liliana.”

It was like 9:00 PM, and it was raining outside, because of course it was. It felt like a movie scene where something terrible was about to happen. We wrapped moose in his favourite fuzzy green blanket–the one he chewed a hole through the corner of when he was a puppy. My dad lifted him up. Moose didn't even try to stand. like a giant stuffed animal.

The car ride over was completely silent. Nobody turned on the radio. Usually, my dad and I sing along to eighties rock songs, but I just stared out the window at the blurry streetlights. I kept my hand on moose's back the whole time. I could feel his heartbeat. It felt slow and bumpy, like a skateboard going over a sidewalk crack.

When we got to the vet clinic, it smelled like alcohol and bleach. They brought us to this private room in the back. It didn't look like a regular doctor’s office; it had a couch and a rug to make it look cozy, but it just felt sad. A nurse brought moose a huge bowl of peanut butter.

“Here you go, big guy,” the nurse said, her voice super sweet. “You can have whatever you want now.”

“He won't even eat it,” I whispered, the tears finally spilling over my eyelids. “Dad, he always eats peanut butter.”

“I know baby,” my dad said, pulling me into a tight hug against his chest. “I know.”

The vet came in a minute later. Her name was Dr. Sarah, and she was really really nice and wore scrubs with cartoon cats on them. She knelt down next to us on the rug.

“Hello Liliana. Hello Mr. Davis," Dr. Sarah said, speaking very softly.

“Moose is a very special boy, but his body is just too tired to keep going. We're going to give him a medicine that helps him go to sleep, and he won't feel any more pain at all. Do you understand?”

I just nodded because my throat felt like it was full of cotton. I sat on the floor with moose's head in my lap.

“Thank you, Moose,” I told him, Burying my face in his neck. The tears were dripping down my face so fast. I don't even care that my mascara is probably running and making me look like a total zombie. “You’re the best boy. Thank you for always waiting for me at the bus stop. thank you for eating my broccoli when I hid it under the table.”

My dad wiped his eyes with the back of his hand.” you were the best dog a family could ask for, moose. good boy.”

Moose gave my hand one last, slow lick. It was super rough, like sandpaper.

Then Dr Sarah gave him the medicine.” It's okay to hold him,” she whispered.

I held onto his front paw. His paw pads were all rough and calloused from all the miles we walked together around the neighborhood. I watched his chest go up… and then go down… and then it stayed still.

“He's gone,” Dr Sarah said gently. “He passed very peacefully”

I burst into total tears. I buried my face into his neck and sobbed so hard my stomach hurt. My dad threw his arms around me, crying too, hugging me so tight. It felt like the world just stopped spinning.

“I don't want to leave him here,” I choked out between sobs.” We can't just leave him.”

“We are bringing his Spirit home with us, Liliana,” my dad whispered.

Now the house is completely quiet. I just miss him so much. His empty bed is still in the corner, and it looks huge. I don't want him in doggy heaven. I just want him back on his red bed, smelling like garbage, and waiting on the porch for when I get home from school.

Junior Poetry – First Place
ABOVE THE JOYS AND SORROWS
By: Nadia Winter Maud Miller

Oh how simple things would be,
If I had thy wings to lift me.
Across the treacherous ocean of fear,
defying the most wrathful of storms with a laugh!
Above the densest woods of worry,
Ignoring the twisted branches striving to ensnare me in their grasp.
I would even dare fly by the perilous mountain of fury,
scorning the pitiful blizzards that come, trying to spoil my fun.
But alas, with my pride,
I would overlook the golden fields of joy, never give a thought to those content below.
Yes, no matter the benefits of fleeing away, I think I shall take every day with its joys, and with its sorrows.

Junior Poetry – Second Place

An Ode to Pie

By: Esaiah Mueller

I'd die, I'd die, I'd die for a pie!
A delicious, yummy, crumbly pie!
A cake? A croissant? No, they won't do.
I need some scrumptious berry goo!
I'd love a pie, it'd taste so great.
It'd be the best thing I ever ate.
I need a slice; I need some more.
I'd eat it right up off the floor!
I want some pie; it is my dream.
I'd use a gallon of whipped cream!
If I had a pie, like cats I'd purr
at the golden crust of brown sugar.
But alas! There is no pie to cook--
except the pi in my math book.
I'd die, I'd die, I'd die for a pie!
...but all I've got is jam on rye.

Junior Poetry – Third Place

NATURE'S SONG

By: Tianna Zehr

Nature's Song
Rain falls down, down.
Nature's song is all around
Either high in the sky or deep underground
I see it and wonder why
Most people pass it by.
Because beauty Is in the flower,
Beauty is not in power,
But in the tiny wonderful things
Like the mark on a butterfly's wing.
So go outside and don't pass the beauty by.

Barbara Hehner Memorial Award
Senior Short Story – First Place

Behind the Glass

By: Haidyn Ruthven

Thorntonsburg is a deceitful little town, hidden behind a false front of cheery comradery. Upon a foolish glance, gentle roads glide through lush greenery and the sun shines in a perpetual beam as if to say, *darkness does not exist here.* The residents–neighbours–all play along: cordial smiles across the street, chitchat at the checkout, and the occasional lasagna for when our dear friends *tragically* fall ill.

It's all just salt in the sugar jar.

Beneath the surface is an underlying thirst–a crazed glint in their eyes. Sure, they'll say, *I'm not one to start gossip,* maybe even throw out the odd *bless their hearts.* But they never really mean it. The sorrow of others is like their drug. That *rush* they get when they dial up a fellow gossipmonger to spread the word. It's irreplaceable. It's addictive. And when they run out of their antidote, they go crawling for some half-made tale to tell. Thorntonsburg is riddled with two-faced jokers, and plenty of blinking-idiots to buy whatever they're selling. In this place, you could commodify your lawn trimmings with enough charm.

Today is an insignificant mid-April Tuesday. The clouds hover in contemplative darkness; *to rain or not to rain*. Hardly a question… a storm is inevitable. After a handful of near-summer days that got the community buzzing with excitement, the temperature plummeted right back down. Serves them right for thinking winter's gone so soon. As predicted, the sky makes up its mind and decides to pour misery over the town.

Plink.

Plop.

Plank.

Water falls like ice pellets upon my tin roof, which shields a rather unimpressive structure. It resembles a house, but lacks that special ingredient that transforms a dwelling into a proper *home*. I'm used to it though.

The Eppertson residence–my childhood abode–always held a certain arrogance. Pristine picket fences and elaborate gardens surrounded the majestic mansion. On the third floor, a robust

balcony protruded towards the houses across the street. I would stand there feeling as though I were a king watching peasants pass below in their sequences of mundanity.

Boom!

Thunder shakes the fragile walls, followed by a zap of lightning. My lamp flickers before all electricity is stolen. Between flashes, I spot a shadow lurking on my porch, leaning cooly against the railing as if unphased by the churning weather.

I rise from my recliner and start for the door. *Who dares to interrupt my solitude?* When I reach the front, the figure has vanished. Probably some pranking kid who'd heard the rumors. Remember when I mentioned the town's hungry tendency to conjure falsities? Five years ago, the well of gossip ran dry and I happened to be the ideal victim.

I was walking down Copin Street one evening when I heard the shatter of glass in Yancey's bungalow. At first, I paid no mind, dismissing it as the usual toddler racket, then I remembered the Yanceys were in Florida. No one was around to protect the vulnerable home, making the investigation my responsibility. Edging across the lawn, I retrieved an abandoned baseball bat. I gave the door two knocks before turning the knob and stepping inside where I caught the thief with duffel bags bursting with valuables. The burglar looked my way with a murderous stare and I knew I had to act quickly. With one sturdy swoosh, the baseball bat sprang into action. I can't recall what happened next–it's a hazy memory lost within my mind. However, people don't hesitate to share what *they* think happened, leading to a mighty accumulation of conspiracies. Most say the Yanceys cut their visit short after little Annie caught the flu. They were unloading their luggage when Mr. Yancey clumsily bumped into the heirloom statue in the foyer. He claimed that I had drunkenly stumbled through the doorway and assaulted him. They all just refuse to believe that I was a hero.

I *am* a hero. They should thank me. Why won't they thank me?

***

The sky's raging battle persisted throughout the night but subsided in time for the sun's routine entrance. Even though the storm has abandoned Thorntonsburg, a gloomy darkness still remains.

Sipping my black coffee, a movement out the kitchen window catches my attention. The prankster from last night hasn't let up,

trying to get a good fright out of me, I'm sure. I'm about to march out there and give him a piece of my mind when a stream of water comes dripping from my ceiling. With a roof as rusted as mine, it's no surprise that the ceiling suffered from the downfall.

Bergrudging that my day will be wasted with this new inconvenience, I set down my mug and head to the local hardware store for supplies. On the walk there, I pass a young couple surveying their neighbours' damage: lawns disheveled, playsets tipped, branches fallen, and garbage strewn across the sidewalk from the early-birds' bins.

"Good morning, Mr. Eppertson," says the woman. Her husband tightens the grip of their hand-hold, as if I would attack right there in daylight. The greeting is empty and she doesn't really mean what she says. If it were socially acceptable, she'd wish me a miserable morning. I prefer not to engage with such fake people, so I keep walking without giving them the satisfaction of acknowledgment.

At the store, I'm far less noble. The glares make my teeth clench, eyes twitch, and anger bubble. How shallow these people are to completely disregard my account and treat me as a criminal. How foolish, how–

"Teddy!" A baritone voice interrupts my thoughts. "Ted Eppertson, is that you buddy?" I wheel around in aisle two and spot Jim Creig, a middle-aged stay-at-home-dad I used to sit next to in senior biology. Inhaling sharply, I try to pinpoint his motive. What's the purpose behind his friendly mask? Just like the rest of them, he must take pleasure in these encounters, acting as a neighbour while thinking evil thoughts of me.

"Feels like we haven't seen you in forever!" he says. "Well, not since…" Here he goes, subtly digging for information and hoping I'll toss him a gold nugget worthy of the gossip column. I sneer at this.

When I stay quiet, he adds, "You doin' okay, buddy? It's probably been hard since…"

"I'm innocent," I snap, due hostility creeping into my tone. "If it hadn't been for me, that thief would've gotten away. I'm the victim framed as a criminal." My hands have balled into fists and my breathing has grown unsteady.

He backs up. "Um, y-yes of course. I b-believe you."

I smile, satisfied. "Bye now, Jim." It feels invigorating to have defended myself. Perhaps everyone just needs to hear my side, then they'll believe me.

With my newfound hope for Thorntonsburg, I spend the rest of the day schmoozing with the neighbours instead of repairing my ceiling. By evening, almost everyone has been enlightened, apologetic that they ever doubted me. My chest swells with a rewarding feeling–victory. When I arrive home, I spot someone once again on my porch and this time he stays put, awaiting me.

"You think they believe you," he whispers raspily. "And you thought *they* were fools." A snicker escapes his lips.

"Who are you?"

"I'm just another piece in this merry little game," he says. "A piece that doesn't believe you."

My mouth twists into a scowl. *Who does he think he is to ruin this fine evening?* I push past him for the door, but he is quicker and lodges himself in the frame.

"*Tsk, tsk, tsk*." He frowns with false pity. "There's no escaping. Not from me." Clearly, he didn't account for the back entrance. I stomp down the steps and make my way around the yard. Once inside, I secure the deadbolt and begin shutting the drapes, not out of fear but because I don't appreciate being watched.

As I make my way through the rooms, the man suddenly appears as though materializing from nothingness.

"There's no escaping," he says. "You don't listen well, do you?"

"Leave me alone. You're not welcome here."

"What really happened that night?"

Heat sploshes through my chest. "I was the hero."

"You almost killed a man."

My breath shakes. "I was the hero."

"You're as good of an actor as the rest of them."

Red tints my vision. "I am a hero."

"You're a fool."

My hands clench.

"The only one to blame for your misery is yourself."

I snap, throwing a fist towards the tormenter. Upon contact with his left eye, the man simply smiles.

Blood drips down my hand and runs along my arm.

Splat. *Splat. Splat*

I tremble from shock and anger as the man's laughter fades. It's as though he were never here. I draw my gaze down to the floor and something much more unnerving sends a shiver through me.

Millions of glinting shards lay scattered across the ground, each one containing a different reflection of the same object: me.

Senior Short Story – Second Place

From Camper to Counsellor: Evie's Last Year One-on-One at Camp Menesetung

By: Michael Lang

Evie stepped off the bus and felt the wind lift her hair like a gentle wave. The scent of pine, sunscreen, and smoke from a faraway fire drifted over the hill. She'd known this place for years—from her nervous first day as a camper in Cabin 5 to her first year wearing the navy staff shirt. And now… her last.

But this summer, Evie wasn't leading a cabin. She wasn't wrangling bunk bed assignments or organizing dance nights. She had a new role.

She was a one-on-one.

Her camper's name was Marley. She was seven. It was her first time away from home.

🌼 Monday — Niblet the Raccoon and a Very Quiet Hello
Marley arrived clutching a red backpack, a sketchbook with a frayed corner, and a soft raccoon plushie with matted fur. Her shirt was too big, her hat was floppy, and her eyes looked everywhere but at people. Her mom crouched beside her as they approached check-in.

Evie stepped forward and offered Marley a gentle smile. "Hi, I'm your buddy this week."

Marley didn't respond. She only moved slightly behind her mom's leg.

Evie knelt. "What's your raccoon's name?"

There was a pause. Then a small voice: "Niblet."

Evie's smile grew. "Niblet is adorable. He can stay with us all week if he wants."

When Marley finally let go of her mom's hand, it was only to grab Evie's.

At Cabin 1, they unpacked slowly. Evie offered Marley the bottom bunk by the window and helped her line up her markers beside her pillow. She didn't push or rush. She just… waited.

That evening, when the rest of the camp sang silly songs by the fire, Marley sat at the edge of the circle, her raccoon in her lap, her fingers curled tight. Evie sat beside her and sang softly—just for the two of them.

When someone passed her a marshmallow stick, Marley didn't say anything, but she roasted it until it was perfectly golden. She gave it to Evie.

That was her first wordless "thank you."

🎄 Tuesday — The Quiet Woods
Tuesday was the overnight trip into the woods.

Evie helped Marley pack a small bag: flashlight, bug spray, her sketchbook, extra socks, and of course—Niblet.

The hike was long, but Evie let Marley set the pace. They stopped often to look at beetles on logs or soft mossy stones. Marley barely spoke, but Evie saw the way her fingers twitched like she was memorizing everything to draw later.

At the campsite, most of the kids gathered close around the fire, shouting and laughing. Marley sat farther back on a log beside Evie. Evie handed her a pair of soft earmuffs and whispered, "Want a story just for us?"

Marley nodded.

Evie told her about a raccoon named Niblet who found a hidden forest grove where the trees whispered songs only special kids could hear. The stars there were different—brighter, quieter, kinder.

That night, in their shared tent, Marley whispered, “I think Niblet’s been there.”

Evie smiled in the dark. “I think he brought you with him.”

🌊 Wednesday — Dipping Toes, Painting Dreams
Lake Day.

The heat shimmered on the sand. Kids splashed, screamed, and did cannonballs off the dock.

Marley sat cross-legged under the shade of a tree, her raccoon and sketchpad in her lap. Evie sat beside her.

“You don’t have to go in,” she said. “But you can just feel the water if you want.”

Marley nodded slowly.

They walked to the edge, and Marley took off her shoes. One toe, then a foot. Then both feet in the cool water.

A wave lapped up and splashed her shins. She gasped—and laughed. A real laugh, small but wild. Evie nearly cried.

Later that day, during arts and crafts, Marley didn’t want to paint with her hands. So Evie found a sponge and helped her mix gentle purples and blues. Together, they painted a big smooth rock with stars and clouds and a raccoon’s tail curled in the corner.

They wrote:

“Quiet is strong.”
“Different is beautiful.”

Evie carried that rock back to the cabin like it was a treasure.

🌟 Thursday — Fancy Dinner and the Star Story
The dining hall glittered with fairy lights and wildflowers in old jars. Everyone wore their nicest clothes.

Evie helped Marley into a soft yellow dress and braided her curls with a clip shaped like a star. “You look like the sky right before the stars come out,” Evie said.

Marley didn’t answer, but she twirled once in the mirror.

They sat together at a table just for two. Marley tried new foods (the mac and cheese and the strawberries were her favorites) and fed a bite of bread to Niblet.

Then came the Talent Show.

Marley watched carefully from the side, eyes wide as campers danced, sang, juggled, and told jokes.

About halfway through, she turned to Evie.

“Can we… do the raccoon story?”

Evie’s heart leapt. “Of course.”

They stepped onto the small wooden stage, lit with twinkling white lights. Evie told the story again, of the raccoon who led the girl to the grove of stars. This time, Marley stood beside her, holding up the drawings she’d made: Niblet, the secret grove, the girl watching the stars.

They ended in silence.

Then the audience—campers, counselors, and staff—erupted in applause.

Marley clutched Niblet. She looked up at Evie.

“I didn’t think I could be brave,” she whispered.

Evie knelt beside her. “You already were. You just needed a place to show it.”

💌 Friday — A Hug, A Drawing, A Beginning
Packing took time. Marley wanted to fold everything just right. Her drawings went in a special folder. Niblet got tucked into her backpack's side pocket, head sticking out.

Instead of a letter, Marley gave Evie a drawing.

It was of the two of them sitting on a log under stars, Niblet between them, and the words:

"Thank you for seeing me."

When her mom arrived, Marley hugged her tightly—then turned back to Evie.

"Will you be here next year?" she asked.

Evie knelt again, heart aching.

"I don't know. But even if I'm not… you'll still belong here. You always will."

Marley nodded. She didn't cry. But she waved as the car pulled away, holding Niblet high in the air.

Evie sat on the dock, the painted kindness rock in one hand, Marley's drawing in the other.

It was her last summer.

But Marley? She was just beginning.

And that made everything worth it.

Senior Short Story – Third Place
THE SECOND DRAFT OF ME
By: Andrea Lacko

Prologue

Sometimes, the future doesn't arrive like a thief in the night. It stands right on your front porch, staring at your own eyes… History is a trap, and I built it.

Chapter 1:
The Uncanny Neighbor.

Why does math want me to solve all its problems? I'm stuck doing equations, but mom grounded me until my homework was done.

Leaning back, I saw a moving truck outside. The house beside me has been empty for ages, but now a girl was moving in. She looked like an older me. The second I finished, I opened the door to see her standing there.

"Hey! I'm your new neighbour," she gave a smile.

"Hi?" I replied. She held out her hand, and that's when I noticed a scar across her skin.

"What happened to your hand?" my voice tight.

"A dog bite when I was 10," she replied smoothly.

I zoned out, that exact thing happened to me.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Nora.." I took a skeptical step back.

"My name is Nora, too! My nickname used to be Nora-bug."

Barely anyone knew that. As I tried to push past, she stepped into my space, her eyes unblinking.

The scar. The nickname..

I ran straight to the park to Aurora, I told her about the scars and the nickname.

Aurora stopped walking, her eyes wide, “That's so…creepy.”

We tried to shake off the odd vibe by eating sushi at our favourite spot, but I had a weird feeling. On the way back, Aurora’s face was serious. “ If you see her standing at the treeline, Get inside.”

As I went to my driveway, standing at the treeline of the rotting house, was the doppelganger. She stood like a statue, her blank eyes staring through the twilight.

I bolted up the steps in panic, slammed the front door shut and turned the deadbolt.

Suddenly, a sharp *PING* echoed through the foyer. My hands shook as I opened my phone. It was an unknown number:

Watch out for question 5 on the math test tomorrow, Nora-Bug. If you do, you’ll fail.

—----------

Chapter Two:
The Green-Eyed Monster.

I didn’t sleep, my brain spinning over words on a glowing screen. By 6:00 AM, the warning text was gone

I paced the kitchen, trying to explain the neighbour, scar, and vanished text. Mom sighed softly, “You’ve been pulling all nighters all week for this math test. That house has been empty since preschool. Eat some toast”

When my eyes reached question 5, it was a brutal polynomial equation. Staring at the numbers, I spotted it: a small negative sign behind brackets.The doppelganger was right.

By lunch, the horror dissolved into the crowded cafeteria. Aurora sat at our table, charcoal on her fingers, sliding sour keys across. “Nora-Bug! Tell me you survived.”

“Barely,” I muttered. I loved Aurora, but sitting beside her made me feel invisible. I reached up, my fingers brushing my empty collarbone, wishing for the gold heart necklace I lost two summers ago.

Eli stopped at our table. He had messy brown hair, an oversized thrift jacket, and left thumb permanently stained with ink. I have had a big crush on him since freshman year.

“Hey, Eli,” I said, my face heating up.

“Eli! You have to look at this,” Aurora interrupted smoothly, showing a napkin sketch. Eli let out that genuine laugh that made my chest ache. He didn’t even look at me.

Aurora was just trying to be a nice wingwoman but my jealousy blinded me.

By the time the final bell rang, my fear had curled into dark defiance. I couldn’t take the silence. I went straight to the stalker's lawn.

I screamed at the boarded windows. “Stop messing with me!”

The rotting door slowly opened. The older Nora stepped out, her face was hollow. I saw a tarnished gold pendant catch the light; a scratch was across it.

“You don’t understand what you're throwing away,” a voice stripped of youth.

“ Leave me and Aurora alone!” anger filling my eyes.

The doppelganger stared with haunted eyes, her voice dropping to a cold whisper:

“Then don’t go to the party.”

—----------

Chapter 3:
Point of no return.

“What?” I snapped.

She stepped backward, the wooden door closed. I stood on the dead grass for a minute and went back home.

I yanked out my phone. The screen lit up with school chat notifications.
“Everyone is going to the party tonight !! “ one read*. “Eli and Aurora are already heading over together,”* another popped up.

Then don’t go to the party. It echoed in my head

“Watch me,” I wasn’t sitting at home cowardly while Aurora stole Eli.

By 9:15 PM, the outfit I chose felt more like armor than fashion

As I stood in the living room, the doppelganger’s whisper kept echoing through my mind.

When Eli walked in, my plan clicked into place. Aurora walked over, laughed with him, and looked for me.

She walked over to Eli, laughed at something he said, then winked at me before slipping into the kitchen to leave us alone.

But my green eyed monster turned her kindness into a threat.

I pulled up the sleepover video, and just as my thumb nearly clicked send, A new text from the number:
“Don’t hit send, Nora-Bug. You can’t undo the echo.”

I text blasted the video directly to Serena, the gossiper in our school group chat. "*Look what your precious Aurora has been hiding,"* I typed. Then to embarrass Aurora more, I plugged in my phone to the projector and hit play.

Serena sent the text to everyone, the heavy silence crashing in. People pulled out their phones.

The video projected in vibrant color. There was Aurora, on screen, 2 years younger, sitting cross legged on my bedroom floor in her pajamas during a private middle school sleepover.

"Fine, dare!" her digital voice blasted through the quiet house, full of innocent trust. *"But you have to promise you won't tell a single soul, Nora. Especially since we're starting high school. I've had a big crush on Eli since seventh grade. But it's totally fine! I buried it the moment I found out you liked him. He's all yours, Nora-Bug!"*

Many faces slowly turned to the real Aurora standing by the kitchen doorway.

Color drained from Aurora's face, her charcoal hands trembling. For one sickening second, ice flooded my veins. *I won*.

But then Aurora looked at me, a look of broken betrayal. She fled through the front door in tears, disappearing into the night. Eli's face was full of shock, as he gave me a final glance before running out into the snow to Aurora.

Suddenly, my phone shook in my palm. It was a final text from the unknown number.

"History is written, Nora-Bug. Enjoy the silence."

I ran out of the house, onto the lawn, looking down the street. There standing under the flickering street light, was the older Nora. She disappeared into the winter night for good.

On Monday Aurora's seat was empty. Her half-finished canvas collected dust in art class.

When she returned, it wasn't Aurora I knew. Her light was gone.

The neighbours house next door was boarded up again, **the trap had snapped shut, The damage was done.**

—----------

Epilogue:
Bittersweet ending

Five years later, the winter rattled the window of my favourite downtown cafe.

I sat alone in the corner. a stack of data sheets spread across the wooden table. My mom had been right about one thing, I was good at math. I worked in data entry, staring at numbers for forty hours a week. My hands cupped a lukewarm, my reflection showing hollow eyes and a scratched necklace.

I looked up, and my breath caught up in my throat. Aurora walked in, her cheeks flushed from the cold and was laughing. He smiled softly down at her, walking to the counter to order her favourite coffee without having to ask.

Crushing regret hit my chest. Five years ago, my betrayal drove Aurora and Eli together, letting them fall in love in the space my pride had cleared out

Suddenly, Aurora looked around and locked her eyes onto mine. I braced myself for a cold stare. Instead, she walked over to my lonely table, and placed a freshly baked pastry next to my cold cup of coffee and gave my shoulder a tiny pat before heading back to Eli.

It wasn't a cartoon with a happy ending. It was a mature, quiet boundary: *"I have healed, and I forgive you for what you did as a kid, but you lost your spot in our lives forever."*

As they walked out into the snow together, I sat in the weight of my actions. My petty attempt to embarrass her had broken trust,

bringing Eli to comfort her. Finally understanding the cost to my pride. It isn’t being hated, It's being handed unconditional kindness by the person whose heart you chose to break.

Senior Short Story – Honourable Mention
OH EVERLARK
By: Abigail Radstake

People are just so utterly

Unreliable

Untrustworthy

Self-centered.

Really, it's truly sickening.

So why make an exhausting effort to know them just for them to abandon you with no explanation? Why speak when they secretly are waiting for you to shut up so they can rant? Why support their desires if they loathe the existence of yours? Why spend time with their friends who secretly gossip and slander against you? Why, why, why, why, why?

People, sickening creatures, aren't they?

Or maybe I'm the person who is just so utterly

Unreliable,

Untrustworthy,

Self-centered.

Then again, I have no one to abandon, no one to shut up, no one to loathe, no one to gossip about, and no one to slander against. Even if I had, I doubt I would do any of those evil deeds. Nobody deserves that feeling. You know? To be discarded, forgotten, alone. People watching. Even when there are no people to watch. Of course you don't get it. You and all the other creatures of this corrupt world will never understand that feeling.

Or maybe I'm the one who's truly self-centered. Maybe I'm the hideous creature.

The smell of chamomile and sweet hibiscus sifted through the air, traveling into Everlark's branches that covered my head from the drops of rain pouring from the sky. Nan must be brewing a pot of late-afternoon tea with the kitchen windows open. Odd, as she rarely skipped her usual lemon-ginger blend.

She'll probably fetch me soon, so I don't catch a cold.

I could save her the hassle and just go inside.

Or I could just…

That feeling,

That beautiful, breathtaking feeling.

Rain against my bare feet, drenching the golden ringlets drooping past my ears, turning them into a big ball of frizz.

That feeling,

Me, alone.

Alone with Everlark,

My best friend,

He's no evil, earthly creature.

But that's not something anyone would ever understand but me, of course.

He fills my deprived lungs with air, and in return, my carbon dioxide. He has grooves embedded in his skin, and smooth, droopy, flowered hair.

I still hear Nan's kettle steaming, it's getting louder, and louder and louder, and…

"*Katherine*"

"Yeah, Lark?"

"It's getting dark. You should go to Nan and have your tea."

I look up from the strong trunk of mighty Everlark into the night sky.

"I know."

"Nan's worried about you."

"I know."

"You should go in."

I swallow. "I'm afraid of the dark, Everlark. It swallows me whole, everyday living in that world." I say, pointing past Nan's fields of flowers and ripe vegetables, to the empty abyss of that awful, wretched world. "Being with you erases that feeling."

"But you're not *with* me, Katherine."

"Katherine?"

"Yes?"

"I'm not *really* here."

"*I know*."

Nan's kettle is getting louder from the kitchen across the large garden as the sun fades away into the atmosphere. It gets darker, and darker, and darker, and…

Suddenly I can't move.

I can't breathe.

Once again, oxygen. Oh, deprived are my lungs.

Everlark. Oh, my Everlark. You have left me, abandoned me, failed me.

You are just so utterly

Unreliable,

Untrustworthy,

Self-centered.

My body screams for air as my attempt at wailing is garbled by the bubbling of my dry throat. Oh, dearest Everlark. Return to your body, fill the hollowness of your bark. Breathe the air back into my lungs. Rescue me from the darkness.

You know that I'm afraid of the dark.

"*Katherine*,"

I shift away from his back, scraping my bare feet against his roots. Beads of sweat blurry my vision.

"*Katherine, I'm sorry*."

"You've already left me once, Lark. The breath from your lungs has been stolen. Don't take away mine too."

"I was afraid of the dark too, you know. I'm encased in it now, eternally. You can't end up the same way."

"I won't."

"Promise?"

"I promise." I say to the mighty tree. I look up to the bright moon, shining down onto Lark's branches guiding me to the kitchen door, where Nan is soon to embrace me with her sweet, chamomile tea. I think I like it better, compared to her bitter, sour lemon-ginger blend.

Perhaps the darkness isn't as murky as I once had been.

Perhaps the people of this world aren't creatures.

Maybe, *just maybe*, they aren't so utterly

Unreliable,

Untrustworthy,

Self-centered.

Perhaps they are just shadows of the branches, reflecting off strong, beautiful trees. Like Lark, oh, *my* Everlark. Perhaps the darkness I was afraid of was just those shadows surrounding me as I embraced Everlark. Maybe the first step away from darkness is across the garden, to the kitchen door. To tea. Sweet, sticky tea with Nan. But for now, I sit, head against Lark's, looking up at the moon.

I was afraid of the darkness once, when it embraced Lark's beautiful eyes, beautiful face, beautiful soul. He was my daylight, my escape from reality. Perhaps I need to be his for once. I thought that was something no one in this awful, wretched world would understand but me, of course.

Perhaps I'm the one who's truly self-centered.

Florence Murphy Dabbs Memorial Award
Senior Poetry – First Place
THE REAPER
By: Abigail Radstake

Sprouting from their branches, dancing in the sky,
Soon bearing golden cider, as well as spicy chai
Apples bounce within the wind, weighing down their wings
While a hardwood Broughan basket is what its reaper brings
Bright, ripened apples groove her into a sudden dance
Whilst she tosses them into her bundle without a second glance
Abundant is her basket, as minutes pass like seconds
The tree now naked and empty, begging her through beckons
Down the gravel pathway in skips the reaper goes
Whistling, she waves to the field as the farmer mows
Now down the wooded pathway, joyous and full of glee
There the reaper flies with her empires, majestic royalty
Two turns until she's home, nestled safe within her galley
For life can't get any better when you're living in the valley
Peeling away at apples, until her skin is raw and sore
But she is happy while she is cutting each apple to its core
Apples upon apples, spices, and just a few pounds of honey
Sticky apple cakes for the market, and in return a lot of money
Tomorrow she will go to town, while today she rests with pride
For the reaper is in love with baking, she could be his bride
The dishes are a hassle but it's all worth it in the end
For there's no big burden that an apple cannot mend
It crunches sweet within her teeth, while flavourful on her tongue
It reminds her of her childhood; it reminds her of being young
Brought back into memories, once they were forgotten
Now living back in time, erasing everything rotten
Sprouting from their branches, dancing in the skies,
The reaper holds on thankfully, happy as she cries

Senior Poetry – Second Place

AUTUMN'S KISS

By: Abigail Radstake

I gasp when cool breezes gush air as August takes her final breath
I laugh as streetlights flicker, probably perplexed by the soon arrival of equinox
I watch as leaves turn from pine to amber to russet to sepia, glowing in the sunlight
I sniff the sweet redolence of harvest, as its fragrance envelops the streets
I grab a basket and my gloves, picking fruits until their branches bare nothing
I crunch into bitter apple skins, soon to embrace a crisp gala to its core
I walk to the festive coffee shop, soon to endure my guilty pleasure
I taste pumpkin and cardamom, letting it scorch fire to my lips
I bear the burden of knowing this sensation will soon deplete
I cry at the thought of mourning the loss of Autumn once more
I laugh knowing that great joy comes to those who wait
I embrace Autumn's gift of foliage dancing around me in the gusts
I am blessed, for I have found Autumn's kiss

Senior Poetry – Third Place
SUMMER IN THE VALLEY
By: Taya Brindley

-- About the beauty of nature and life, and how we need to save the Earth.

Summer in the valley, are filled with friends and warmth,
It felt like the feeling of ivy, against a nice old oak.
Today I met a friend, one with hair like yolk.
She told me of a story from very long ago,
Of days where life was bright, and everyone would just know;
That these days don't need to end,
They can stay; don't turn the bend.
Deer and fairies will dance around,
Then sleep through the night; safe and sound.
No fear of hunters or being prey; just sleep in comfort on the ground.
Dreams were warm and filled with hope,
That these days will never slope.
A wish for days to stay the same,
No one needs to end the game.
She held my hand to comfort me,
Underneath that old oak tree.
I wish for this day to never end,
For no need of nature to be mend.
The world is broken, filled with woe;
But back in the day it was filled with glow.
The future can still be bright,
If we make the right decisions, keep it light.
I write a poem about awareness,
That our earth is crumbling, stripped to bareness.
There is no need for war or fight,
We could live in peace; everyone has the right.
Why the need to hunt and kill,
Why the need to be so shrill?

We are the new generation of people,
We can help make everyone equal.
Take the time to think of what our actions will cause for future us.
The future is now in our hands,
We can save us, mend the lands.
Someday will be our final chance,
We need to be strong, hold our stance.
There is no backup plan,
For a planet broken, stolen by man.
We need to save it before its too late,
Save the earth, seal new fate.