



BYWAYS

JOURNAL OF ARTS AND LETTERS
SPRING 2021

re/hi/ro

Anna Maria

Byways:
Journal of Arts and Letters
Spring 2021

Cover Art
Trina Orr, Amber

2022 Poster Art
Kiki Kelley, Facebook

Special Thanks to:
Mike Matthews, Professor of English

Hobby Memorial Library
Editorial Staff

Forward

Byways: Journal of Arts and Letters is an annual collection of creative works submitted by Central Texas College students. The works presented in this issue are original works of drawings, paintings, poetry, photography, and short stories. This year, a new category, musical lyrics, was added. The pieces showcased in this issue represent the best in their respective categories.

Whether art, literature, or music, its purpose is to provide each artist's unique perspective with all creative work. It invites discussion and an exchange of intellectual ideas between the creator and audience. This type of creative stimulation offers each person the opportunity for growth, expanding our knowledge levels while encouraging us to think beyond the limits of today's boundaries.

Students submitted many pieces for inclusion for this year's Byways issue. The works included in this volume represent the best of CTC students' creative abilities. For all authors and artists that submitted works not published in this issue, your pieces were commendable and showed great potential for your future development. Lastly, the editorial staff wishes all submitters the very best in whichever direction your artistic talents guide you.

Byways Editorial Staff

Table of Contents

Forward.....	i
Rustic by Lacie Draper	1
Eternal Heartbeat by Ashley Demers	2
Grandma’s Brooches by Amber McCallister.....	3
Logan by Mekaila Vila.....	4
Petals by Ashley Demers	4
Khan el-Khalili by Crystal Kniffen	5
Fountain of Youth by Aelissa Vasquez.....	6
Lost in the Woods by Amber L. McCallister	7
But the Mirror Said by Gryphon Roberts.....	8
Power to Create by Kaeden Nelson.....	10
Constitution on Parade by Jared Sonti	10
Collapse with the Dawn by Naomi Mitchel	11
Abstract Sky by Aelissa Vasquez	11
Dear John by Ashley Demers	12
Love’s Perspective by Amber McCallister	13
Hello Goodbye by Ashley Demers	14
Rock Romance by Amber McCallister	15
Hello, World! by Gryphon Roberts.....	16
Levi by Mekaila Vila	16
My Psalm 23 by Antwion Lewis	17
Facebook by Kiki Kelley.....	18
Bust of a Grenadier Jared Sonti	19
Parley by Gryphon Robers	20
River of Hope by Aelissa Vasquez.....	20
Black is Beautiful by Steven Valentin	21
Summer Fails by Juan Arango	22
Picture Plain by Aelissa Vasquez	22
Beach by Kiki Kelley	23
Mo3 by Dymon Finklea.....	24
Tears of Hell by Amber McCallister.....	25

Amber by Trina Orr	26
“Please, just call me Ton.” by Kaeden Nelson.....	27
Obsidian Earring by Megan Combs.....	34
Portrait of a Man by Jared Sonti	35
Mana Burst! Kaeden Nelson.....	35
The Glass Sentence by Gryphon Roberts	36
Depression by Kaeden Nelson	37
Haikyuu Nishinoya by Gemini London-Edwards	38
King without a Crown by Diunté L. Bridges, Sr.....	38
Mom’s Bouquet by Mekaila Vila	39
Two Is Better by Antwion Lewis	39
Who Am I? by Antwion Lewis	40
Blue Moon by Amber McCallister	40
Traces of Time by Kiki Kelley.....	41
The Storm Within by Michael Solis.....	42
Perspective by Amber McCallister.....	51



Rustic
Lacie Draper
1st Place- Photography

Eternal Heartbeat

Ashley Demers

2nd Place – Music Lyrics

Blue skies to angry black clouds
Happy smiles to sad sad frowns
You have gone away...

Sweet baby girl to grown up woman
Trying to figure out what went wrong and
Realizations of you gone...

Hey, Ms. Haeli Renee
You will never fade away
You...will always be...

There, in our heart and soul
Gone, but not forgotten, no
Our hearts are torn, torn
To pieces, where's our peace and
Harmony, you are so lovely
Eternal heartbeat

I, am filled with despair and tears
Knowing I failed you through the years
But you, forgave me lovingly
I was blind, but I can see...that

You, always in our heart and soul
You will never fade away, no
Our hearts are torn, torn
To pieces, oh but you will ever be
Lovely, your heart and soul so lovely

Eternal heartbeat...
Runs deep
Within our family
No matter what, all we see is beauty
Blue seas, laughing
You will forever be

An eternal heartbeat, even through our misery
We see, how you flow so deep

Through our sadness and misery
You will be forever flowing
You are always in our memory
Yes you are, forever and always
Eternal heartbeat

We long to see your face again
Why did we lose you? Oh can we see you again...
It came to a bitter end
And we can't wait to see you again...

Even through our misery
Our hearts break, our souls seek
To see you smile, hear your laugh again
If I had one more moment with you again...

I'd ask you to smile and laugh all over again...
I'd ask your forgiveness all over again...
I'd do everything all over again...
If I could just see your face again...

From sugar sweet to rushing river stream
We would turn back time if we could...
Your beautiful eyes, your dazzling smile
Something we have of you, and for good...

Eternal heartbeat...



Grandma's Brooches

Amber McCallister

Honorable Mention

Logan
Mekaila Vila
Merited Work



Petals

Ashley Demers

1st Place – Music Lyrics

Pick a petal, pick a petal, watch it fall into
blue

Mind won't settle, heart won't settle down
until we find the truth

Oh, yellow petals into blue waters...
Sit and watch it sink farther...

Down, into the unending depths, so far...

Petals, wither like a knife to the heart

Oh, watch it fall apart
Oh try not to fall apart

The colors fade into the lapping waves
Tell the petals it's time for them to be brave

Can't dive in and attempt to save
Petals become the water's slave...

Pick a petal, bring a petal to your face
And smile...

Rose red, innocence, beauty in a smile...full
of grace

Purple petals, blue petals
Beauty in your eyes...so wide

Happy, sad, sorrow, mad
They all whirl on the winds...of change
You are here, you are not here
It still all seems...so strange

So...I will go...and...

Pick a petal, pick a petal, watch it fall into
blue

Heart still broken, tears still flowing
Not knowing what to do...

Pink petal, yellow petal, watch it fade into
blue

Smiling...I know it's you

Khan el-Khalili

Crystal Kniffen

3rd Place – Short Story

My husband and I saved all year to prepare for our dream trip. We went to Egypt for Christmas of 2008. With three days to see as much as we could, we used the first day to see the Sphinx, the Great Pyramids of Giza, as well as the Pyramid of Djoser in Saqqara. We woke up early on day two and spent the morning shop hopping by way of tuk-tuk. We checked off our shopping bucket list with a trip to a papyrus factory, a create your own perfume lab, a smoke shop, and a carpet shop. We also stopped at a roadside market to have a bite to eat and purchase handmade jewelry from a local family before heading back to our room to get cleaned up for our Nile dinner cruise. Upon boarding the paddlewheel and string light donned boat, we were offered a cocktail and escorted to our small corner table. The evening was filled with entertainment, including a belly dancer, a band, which incidentally sang "We Wish You a Merry Christmas" in a thick Arabic accent: and a Tanoura dancer. The Tanoura dancer was the most interesting to us as we had never seen anything like it. A large, well-groomed man dressed in a round quilted skirt danced and twirled like a little girl with a new dress. The huge skirt spun like a top as he made his way from table to table, encouraging audience participation. The evening drew to a close as the band played, and the tip basket circulated.

In true, "save the best for last" fashion, we reserved the Khan el Khalili market for our last full day in Egypt. This was something I had researched and planned for months prior to our trip. However, no amount of research could have prepared us for the reality. The taxi driver stopped the car and mumbled something to us in an impossible to understand, Arabic, English mashup. As we climbed out of the cab, we began to wonder what we had gotten ourselves into. Our senses were completely overwhelmed. First, by the smells of this buzzing beehive of commerce. There was a stench of dirt and body odor and cooking meat and hookah, and perfume and spices all combined with the glorious smell of fresh-baked bread: somehow, we could smell each scent individually and also as one. We made our way deep into the labyrinth of narrow passageways, broken alleys, and make-shift buildings. The sounds of shop keepers yelling at each other and at us, combined with cars, scooters, and their horns filled the air like the roar of the game day crowd fills Yankee Stadium. And then, as though someone flipped a switch, everything came to a screeching halt with the call to prayer. This was a great opportunity to take a break and enjoy the fresh, round pita-like bread that we had purchased, literally, off the top of a young man's head. As we sat and enjoyed our snack, it was impossible not to notice the vibrant colors and scattered reflections of the metallic trinkets. Imagine you took a paper rainbow, cut it into a million tiny pieces, and sprinkled it like confetti: that was the Kahn el-Khalili market.



Fountain of Youth
Aelissa Vasquez
Merited Work



Lost in the Woods
Amber McCallister
1st Place Metalwork

But the Mirror Said

Gryphon Roberts

3rd Place – Poetry

Let me tell the story
Of the boy who broke his own heart.
I'm sorry to say this is true,
It's a story; not a work of art.

This boy thought love came from one lady
And she was all that he had.
The only love that he could hold,
The one that would leave him so sad.

He tried to make her smile.
He wanted her to love him so,
But the boy had competed for that love,
And he lost more than you could ever know.

He cried "Mirror, tell me how to beat them.
They always win her love when they grin."
The Mirror spoke back and shook his head,
"Sorry, but you'll never win."

The boy didn't think this was fair.
He thought that there must be a clue.
He blamed her for not loving him more.
He blamed love for not loving him true,

But she loved this boy very much.
If only he had seen it then,
But this boy was desperate and losing it all;
He'd go through this pain again and again.

He cried, "Mirror, I want her to love me.
How can I make this true?"
The Mirror looked sad, but told him still,
"Sorry, but she will never love you."

The boy was nearly broken.
What could this possibly mean?
"Perhaps it's who I am as of now."
He would change the way he is seen.

He tried to be all kinds of people.
He tried to be somebody new.
If he could do this every day,
She'd truly say she loved him too,

But the boy could only do so much.
He exhausted his heart to a tee.
"What if this didn't work; what if I failed?"
"Could anyone love me for me?"
His love was true, but so very unstable,
His plan simply failed again.
What had he done to be in so much pain?
Why was he born to be so broken?

The boy crawled his way to The Mirror,
It's all that he knew how to do,
But The Mirror's words drove him insane,
"I'm sorry, but I can't fix you."

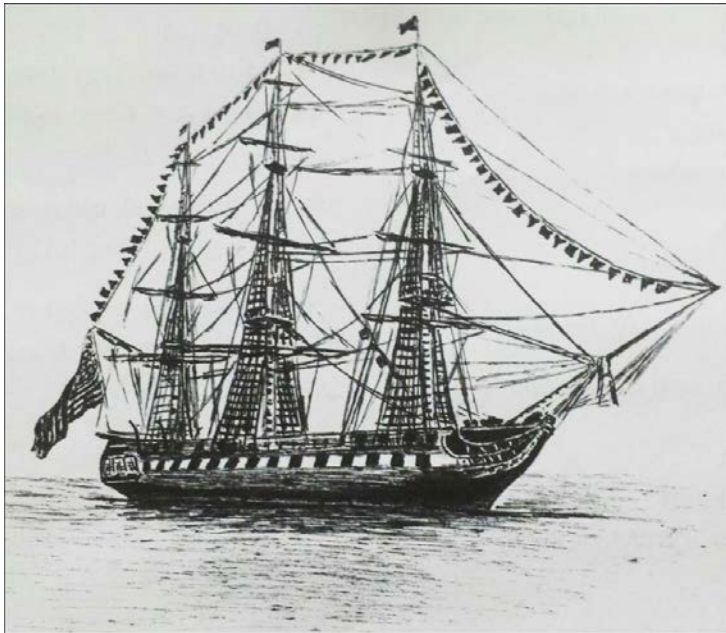
And thus, the boy had shattered,
Yet The Mirror stood tall and unharmed.
Were The Mirror's answers right all along,
Or was the boy's questions just wrong?

But the story didn't end here,
The boy lives on in pieces of his past self.
But he had thrown away who he was before.
He had thought so little of himself.

But the boy would not give up yet,
He'd live life one step at a time.
He learned to love himself and his traits.
He learned of The Mirror's crimes.

He would find what he thought was broken.
His life would be just fine.
He would put himself back together again.
His love would be justly defined.

Power to Create
Kaeden Nelson
Honorable Mention – Digital Art



Constitution on Parade
Jared Sonti
Honorable Mention

Collapse with the Dawn

Naomi Mitchel

1st Place - Poetry

Two hours before I woke the family,
In our last conversation you told me,
“Defeat and survive this calamity
To remain strong-willed, and earn my degree.”
As mother took hold of your frigid hand
With the dawn your, once brown, eyes have turned blue
This awful pain, how are we to withstand
I'm not ready to say good-bye to you!
Echo the sounds of a metallic ring
As the Reaper arrived to lay a claim
Time for your soul to return to the King
“Welcome home”, the Angel's loudly exclaim.
Then your heartbeat reduced to zero
With trembling hands, I lost my hero.



Abstract Sky

Aelissa Vasquez

Honorable Mention - Painting

Dear John

Ashley Demers

Honorable Mention - Poetry

Dear John,
Thank you for being born
Although it was cut short
What a wonderful guy you were...

I wish I'd known you more
But this I know for sure
What a wonderful guy you were...

You made her smile
You made her heart beat wild
When I think of yall I cry
And incessantly ask WHY

My first memory of you
Is the day I first met you
You said, "Nice to meet you ma'am"
I thought, what a wonderful man

You make her happy, yes
You make her heart soar, yes

You love her craziness
Together yall were blessed

Thank you oh so much
For helping me in a crunch
You were our music guy
In the sweltering heat, you made us smile
I'm so glad you were a part
Of our wedding day and start
Of an adventure anew
I knew it would be the same for yall too

Now our hearts are in pieces
Oh Lord, please bring us peace and
Answers to our deepest lows
Lord, why these two sweet souls

We're trying every day
To get through every day
And so I just want to say...

Dear John...thank you...I'm sorry...and we
say...
We will miss you...and yall's love...always



Love's Perspective
Amber McCallister
Honorable Mention - Painting

Hello Goodbye

Ashley Demers

Merited Work - Poetry

Late night, early morn, waiting for you to be born
Wanting to hold you and see you smile, making the hot summer
sleepless night worthwhile
She's here! She's here! Tears in our eyes and smiles on our face
Welcome to the world Ms. Haeli Renee
Adorable giggles and baby snuggles, your first birthday cake
smash and nap time cuddles
Gave way to playtime, tutus and daredevil tumbles
Saturday nights spent at the races with lots of familiar faces
Watching your daddy drive, you were his biggest inspiration
Fun summer days splashing in the pool to your very first First
Day of School
Your favorite cheerleader movie, days of unpredictable fun
Becoming such a free spirit, and far from done
You became a big sister, and oh what a sight, to see you love
little sister with such intense delight
A warm May day, both dressed in white, and you catching the
bouquet with a squeal of delight
Banding together with a change of life and dealing with it in
sadness and strife
Cold snow and rocky mountains, new experiences and still
youthful fountains of joy, strength and love
Back to the heat and sweltering sun, I have you back yet my own
sadness has overcome...I am there
in body but not in heart, my own selfish antics made me seem as
if apart
I am ashamed every day for letting my issues get in the way of
fun with you and your sister too
I know I said I was sorry and I know you said it was okay
But I was going to make it up to you, try as I may
A new, better man in my life, you accepted him as family
And what a joy it was to not be in calamity
An ocean of blue as you walked across that stage
Made our hearts swell with pride as they said your name
The world is your oyster, so much ahead
If only we knew there was little time left
Together on the waves of the sea, so glad you were there with me
Such a time of adventure and child-like glee
Again you two walked together, flowers preparing my way

But you knew in your heart, this love is here to stay
My heart swelled with pride again, my beautiful nieces watch our
journey begin
And you, beautiful soul, with the man of YOUR dreams
Watching your love for each other grow, a glorious scene
All of us together for what would be the last time
I wish there would've been some kind of sign
That dreadful night, New Year's Eve, a darkness came and
enveloped me
WHY? Was all I could say, this must be a dream, no, a nightmare,
please say
Tears running down our cheeks, faces fixed in utter disbelief
Where do we go from here, we think
Each in our own grief, wanting answers, justice, WHO DID THIS TO
YOU? Yet we sink
Our hearts, hopes, to the depths of distress
And now we say goodbye to this beautiful girl
Who brought so much happiness to this world
Tear-stained faces, sobbing embraces
Struggling for words, answers, erase this pain oh Lord, we
prayed
We will never forget your kind heart and soul
The love you had for another dearly departed soul
We remember your goofiness, laughter and smile
Goodbye Ms. Haeli Renee, see you after while

Written by: Ashley Demers
19 January 2021

*Dedicated to the memory of my niece Haeli Renee Lingo, 7-1-2000 to 12-31-2020



Rock Romance
Amber McCallister
Merited Work

Hello, World!

Gryphon Roberts

Let me try,
I swear that I'm ready this time!
Who knows, I might just blow your mind!
We'll be fine; I'll always stay kind!

Hello, World!
It's okay, you can send me out,
Although I may be scared throughout.
I'll make it there; I have no doubt!

How I wish I could stay,
But I'm leaving today!
You want me to stay, but need me to go.
Gotta be this or that, so I gotta know!

Sorry I couldn't do it like the rest of them all.
It wasn't coded in me, but that wasn't your call!
Let's say it again, before my life gets twirled,
Just like you taught me: Hello, World!

I'm scared, I know. It's plain to see
That I'm not ready, though I'll never be!
No one ever is; they all get hurled,
But you're in my heart when I say, "Hello, World!"



Levi
Mekaila Vila
3rd Place Photography

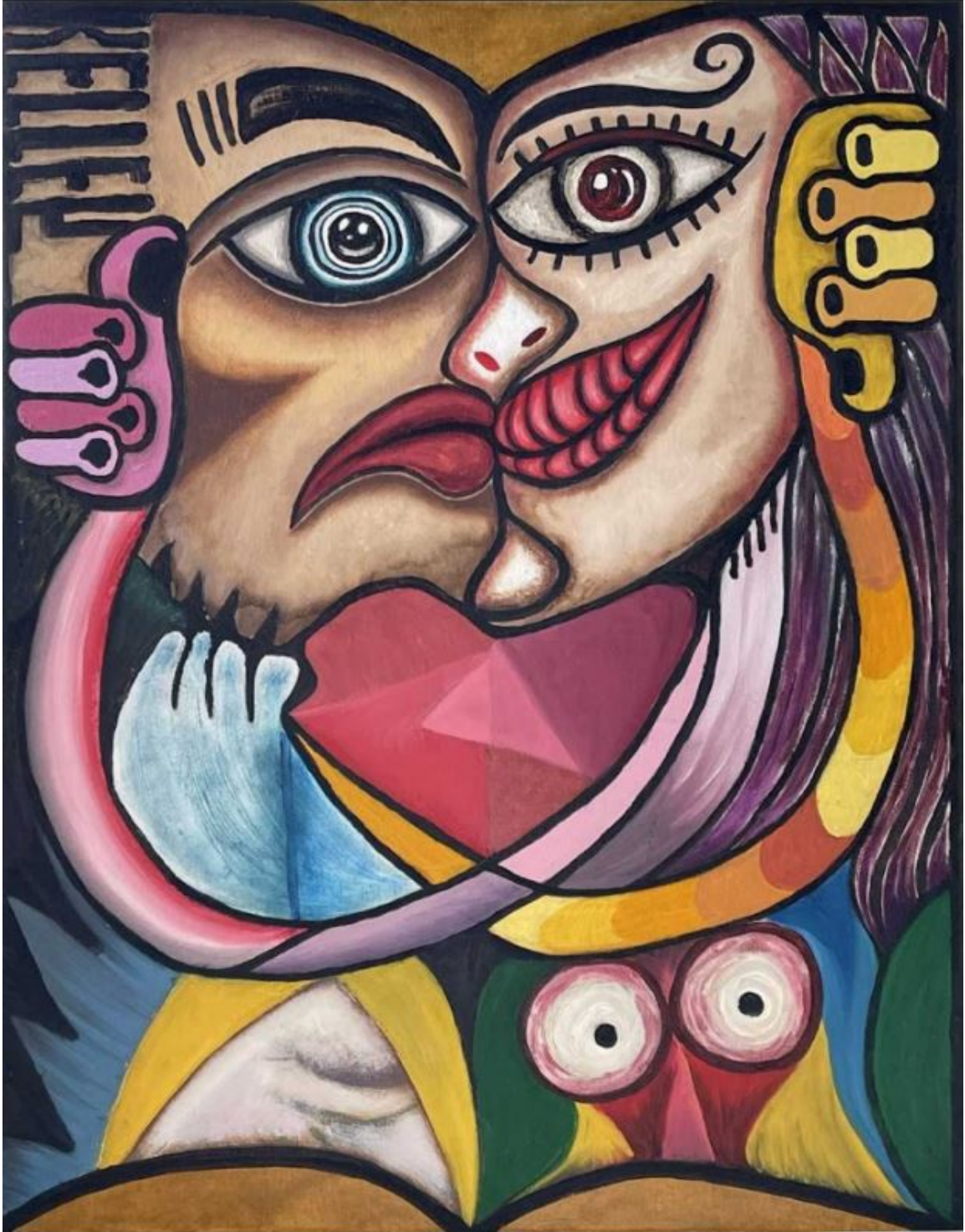
My Psalm 23

Antwion Lewis

Honorable Mention – Poetry

(Based and Inspired by New Testament grace of Jesus Christ and
Psalms 23)

Guided by His Voice, when He calls
My mind is laid to rest,
And I have direction.
No longer lost to ponder,
Answers from deep reflection.
I can eat and drink,
In the best places.
Finally, my soul is still,
And I notice that food has been tasty.
I increase in my heart and mind,
Now I'm fit for life's races,
No matter how high,
Or how low.
Thoughts, His Voice replaces.
When it is like Niagara Falls,
Or the smallest flowing river,
It is for my building,
And I alone have understood.
Things too great to count,
People always cheering,
It seems that it will never end,
Though it is nearing.
I have been forgiven,
You have been forgiven,
Now let's start cheering.
When I'm home,
I'll understand forever,
Without thinking contrary.



Facebook
Kiki Kelley
2nd Place – Painting
2022 Byways Poster Art



Bust of a Grenadier
Jared Sonti
2nd Place - Drawing

Parley

Gryphon Roberts
Merited Work – Poetry

Are you lonely?
Why did you say you're not lonely?
We can't keep going.
I know,
Love's not for show,
But I'm loving our case.

Would you love me?
Could you ever truly love me?
We can't keep falling.
I know,
Twice in a row,
But I'm loving the chase.

Is it working?
Tell me, why is this not working?
We'll just keep trying.
I know,

It's still too slow,
But I'm loving this pace.

Can we parley?
Please, can we just simply parley?
We'll just keep fighting.
I know,
We took a blow,
But I still love your face.

Am I sorry?
Why did I not say I'm sorry?
My heart keeps hurting.
Just go,
I still don't know,
If I'm loving this place.

Are you dying?
Why did you say you're not dying?
My heart keeps crying.
You know,
I'll be alone,
And you can't be replaced.



River of Hope

Aelissa Vasquez
Merited Work



Black is Beautiful
Steven Valentin
Merited Work

Summer Fails

Diunté L. Bridges, Sr.
Merited Work - Poetry

Trapped inside a cage, clear and calm as a lake,
In the spring of time
Should its body be hard as a shell yet so soft on its inner core.
A life that's trapped under the water or over a rock
Owner of a twelve by six-inch house
No worries in life but that of to eat and drink.

Worth less than gas but needs of upper class.
Youngins of bone and flesh constantly poke its face for fun and games.
No walks just swims; no food but pellets.
When life is done, and the flushes come.
It's he and his coastal shell,
Turtle



Picture Plain
Aelissa Vasquez
Merited Work - Drawing



Beach

Kiki Kelley

1st Place - Painting



Mo3
Dymon Finklea
3rd Place - Painting



Tears of Hell
Amber McCallister
2nd Place - Photography



Amber
Trina Orr
1st Place – Digital Art
Cover Art

“Please, just call me Ton.”

Kaeden Nelson

2nd Place – Short Story

My name is Tonya Brittany Love, but people have always called me Ton—mostly because I don't like Tonya. This day, I was wearing my favorite pink PJs with purple polka-dots. I was just waking up; my hair was an awful mess, and I was groggy with a minor headache—which was typical for me waking up in the morning. This was just another morning... or so I thought...

I wake up yawn, and say, “Ahh, what a great night's rest. I wish summers could last forever so I could do that every morning”—whilst my head is still aching.

Then, I gasped. “Wait, I'm forgetting something very important.” Because of that “morning-ache” I wasn't quite sure what it was I couldn't remember.

“Ton, honey you're doing it again; you're talking to yourself”, said my mother to me, annoyed.

My mother has a mud-like shade of blonde hair. Her eyes have a soft glow, warm, like an oven, and saturated. Her voice was soft and caring, but powerful and stern. She was strong, but gentle; balanced, calm, and reserved. My mom is a very respectable and very respected woman. Her name is Rose Lily Love.

My mother always knew when I talked to myself—probably because I was always super loud when I did it—and whenever she noticed me talking to myself, she would correct me, in hopes that one day I would learn to stop this habit of mine.

“Sorry Mom”, I replied, somewhat insincerely.

“Seriously though, I've got to be forgetting something”, I thought to myself.

“Well, I didn't practice math problems, but I have plenty of summer for that... Wait, what's today?”

I mentally screamed!

My mind was—and has always been—exactly the opposite of my mom's: cluttered and disorganized; confused and conflicted. My head is filled with miniature versions of me. None of the mini-Tons had any real control over the big-Ton on the outside though.

The date was August 24, 2084, the last day of summer for the students of Acirema. Prior to this date, all upcoming middle school students—which included myself—had to make one very important choice.

“I FORGOT TO CHOOSE MY CLASS!!” I screamed horrified. “Oh my God! I'm literally going to die!”

Yeah, that... The upcoming 6th graders had to be sure to choose one of 12 “classes.” By this point you are probably wondering. “Or what?”...

“Alright Ton calm down. Now, what happened,” Mother asked me, appearing to be calm but was really freaking out herself.

“M-mom... I f-forgot. I forgot it. I forgot it and now I'm dead,” I stuttered looking broken and defeated. “M-mo,” I started as my mother interrupted.

“Ton, spit it out!!” She yelled, sounding angry.

“Mom, I f-forgot to choos-se my class-s at school,” I said, now feeling even more defeated than before.

“That’s okay, Honey,” said my mother nervously—while pretending to be fine. She’s always had a knack for hiding her emotions.

“Mom, I’m dead, aren’t I?” I asked my mother hopelessly.

If you didn’t catch on to the problem, I am literally dead if I do not get the chance to choose a class. The consequence for not choosing a class—and the incentive to choose a class—is execution by the government. Most importantly, the due date for this consequence is tomorrow.

“Ton, no you are not “dead”. All you have to do is choose your class today; that isn’t so hard is it?” suggested my mom to me.

“Mom, you’re right. I am going to school now... As soon as I get dressed...By the way can I ride Horsie –Horsie was my horse’s name– to get there faster”, said I, feeling oddly confident.

“Yes, Sweetheart you may,” replied Rose as she continued, “and as a matter of fact, you can keep it; it’s yours!” Mom said happily, but mostly just to get rid of the thing.

As I started to get dressed, I got the idea to put on my favorite, cosmic pink jacket. I also put on my favorite purple scarf that my dad gave me. The idea of dying was probably getting to my head and bleeding into my wardrobe choices.

Soon, I was dressed and ready, but not quite without practice. To actually “choose” my class, I needed to pass a test, a simple test of shooting. This test was so simple that anyone could do it with their eyes closed. I just had to shoot a few targets and break them—like a certain mini-game I played before.

Still, I needed to practice just in case, so I shot the targets that my mother prepared in the back yard for about 10 minutes, just long enough for me to regain my accuracy over the fear and possibility of instantaneous death.

Then I said it: “Mom, I’m ready,” with glowing eyes filled with confidence—they were a gorgeous blue.

Mother replied, “Now that’s my girl! Oh, but one more thing: here.”

She gave me one hundred Aciremian dollars, about two hundred American dollars—as of 2020. The thought of her daughter dying was getting to her now too.

“Actually, Ton have this too”, said my mom, handing me one-hundred more Aciremian dollars.

Sure, she was grieving before I even died, but, if I died indeed, at least I got some money to spend before-hand. I was always a heavy spender—by now I’ve gotten a bit better, so Mom knew none of the money would return. Every dollar would be spent on my journey.

Thank...you, I whispered guiltily.

“You’re welcome, now, bye my sweetheart; don’t get hurt out there!”, she said.

“I won’t”, I replied, and with red cheeks, I quickly exited and began my journey.

I rode my horse—that I had brilliantly named Horsie—to New America Middle School, where I saw a line about the length of a football field and a half. I stared for a moment until...

“Nope”, I said, walking in the other direction. I was not about to wait in that line for hours.

“Rather than standing pointlessly in a line and wasting my time, I’m going to do something fun with my time”, I said as I started racing toward the mall of New America. This mall was notorious for “killing your time and murdering your wallet”, perfect!

“I am about to have the best day of my life! Can you believe it Horsie, two hundred dollars to spend at the Mall of New America; this is a dream come true!”

I couldn't wait to get to the mall. I was ready to buy everything everywhere. I raced toward the mall, which was about six miles away, a good 20-minute jog for most of my peers, but for me, it took a good 35-minutes of running, and another 5 minutes to catch my breath afterward.

"Wow, this place looks so much better now that I can actually afford what I'm looking at", I said with my red-er face. "Do I want this one, or maybe this one" was all that could be heard for hours throughout the mall of New America. I didn't yet realize it, but the reason no one else was there was because none of the stores had anything of value. Soon enough, I realized that I didn't really like anything I was looking at. In the end I just settled for a box of Gourmet cookies—and I wondered why it took me 40 minutes to get here— and started running back to the school. I knew Horsie was getting tired of waiting, and I didn't want him to have to endure any more torture.

When I arrived, I found, to my amazement, that Horsie was the second one in line, and suddenly, the thoughts started flooding through my head: "What if I fail? Am I even good enough to pass? If I fail, what will I do, will I just die?" "No", I yelled aloud causing strangers to say, "who's she talking to".

"Negative thoughts are why people fail. If I think in my mind I will fail, it will become a self-fulfilling prophesy. I am instead going to bust in there, and I'm going to show the test who's boss." So, I walked in there, quite confidently, loaded my pistol—I've always liked pistols— and I took the shooting test.

"Positivity and optimism:" I just kept repeating these powerful words in my head throughout the entirety of the test; after all, science suggests positivity can improve mental health, and optimism can heal sicknesses. Basically, being happy makes life better. After about 12 minutes of waiting not-so patiently, I got a gorgeous paper explaining in-depth my test score. On the top of the page I saw an average score, and I celebrated the passing grade and my saved life, at least I did until...

"WHAT!", I screamed, after looking down. I noticed that my grade was on the bottom of the page—seriously, who designed that? It turned out, I scored only 20 points of 200. I failed the shooting test, and I failed. I was lost inside and did what any one in my circumstance would've done: started crying.

I just pathetically sat there, crying and regretting everything. There was nothing to do, no hero to save me, not even a friend to hug me.

Suddenly, "BOOM!" People busted through the door with shotguns! "Now which one of y'all got money?", asked one of the bandits of the Zuza clan—who, might I add looked quite fearsome.

I, despite being stacked with 196 Aciremian dollars, didn't say a word. The bandits waited about three seconds for a response, then the boss commanded, "Get 'em boys!". The team of bandits swarmed the room instantly. All the adults in the classroom were targeted and knocked down first, with the new sixth grade students following quickly after. Everyone in the classroom was quickly taken captive, everyone except for me.

"God knows I can't shoot this thing well enough to survive, let alone save these guys, so why would he put me in a situation like this?" I wasn't sure what to do next, so I started looking around.

"Well, looking around seems to always work in cartoons, so I'll just give it a try", I thought, desperately searching the classroom for a weapon—or more-so an escape

route. There was a pointed magic staff and a curved sword dropped by the bandits. And I—being the excessive nerd that I am—thought, “If you can’t use range, there’s always magic, or... melee... At times like these, Ton, just go with your gut.”

I jumped up, grabbed the sword, and ran immediately toward the boss.

“You dare challenge Kimbley The Big, you’ll regret even thinking about challenging me!”, the boss, Kimbley, said as he charged at me with his two mighty Berserker Blades.

The blades looked like weapons from an RPG-type video game—or a demon-related anime. They were a burnt black color with deep red ends, and white spikes that looked as though they were carved from the bones of his enemies. Kimbley swung his mighty right Berserker Blade, and the powerful beast cut nearly five inches into the ground.

Luckily though, he missed me, for I slid perfectly—and gorgeously—behind the blade and under Kimbley’s legs. I then propelled myself from the wall behind Kimbley and leaped onto his hulky, rough back—eww, his back was rough. I then held his arms tight with my favorite purple scarf and threw him into the wall. Kimbley’s head, with an oozing, blistering knot, the size of my fist—that’s nasty—fell to the ground as a result of the impact. Kimbley The Big was brought down by a little girl who wasn’t even capable of passing her own test. Due to this, Kimbley was made very angry, which I would come to find later, but what mattered is that now I won, and I did so not because I was stronger, rather, because I was smarter than my opponent.

“If any of you guys get any closer, I’ll have no choice but to kill your boss right now”, I said, as I held my sword to Kimbley’s throat. I was bluffing, but they didn’t know I was bluffing.

The other bandits kept creeping closer as the sword kept creeping closer to Kimbley’s esophagus.

“You guys think I’m kidding, you’re about to lose your leader forever!” As I said this, I ferociously stared down everyone in the room. If I got anything from my mother, it was my ability to get whatever it was that I wanted with a little bit of sass.

Each of the bandits dropped their weapons and left. Kimbley got up, but he couldn’t leave just yet.

“No, you can’t leave yet”, said I sternly. “Wh-why not?”, whined Kimbley—so pathetic.

I then finished: “I want you to grab every single dollar you took here today, and I want you to put it in my hand.” Prior to the raid in this class, I assumed he raided other classes.

After a long pause Kimbley said it: “Here”. Kimbley was quite hesitant, but when he remembered that knot I put on his head, he gladly handed it over.

After getting the money, I politely handed it in to the principal of the school and returned to greet Kimbley one last time. “Okay, you can go now”, said I with a cute little smile on my face.

After saving everyone else’s lives, I came up with a plan that just might save my own.

“Hello, sir, are you still doing class entrance tests?”, I nervously asked a knight class test proctor—who had a sort-of odd smile about him.

“Yes, ma’am we are. Because today’s the last day we decided to extend it out until seven o’clock, which gives you two hours. Does that sound like enough time?”, asked the awkwardly cheerful test proctor.

“Yes, thank you, that’s plenty of time,” I said very sincerely .

“Would you like to start now?”, asked the proctor with a toothy, very suspicious, smile.

“Yes, please”, I answered. I was in fear for my life, so I sounded really desperate when I said it.

“Judging by the sword in your hand, I reckon you want to take the Knight Entrance Test”, asked the still nice proctor.

I nodded. Then the proctor says, “Alright then, good luck!”.

I entered the exam, and I was standing in a room where I saw a team of five warriors, each holding a sword and a shield. “I guess I’m supposed to fight those guys,” I thought to myself. At this point, however, I realized the wisest way to go about it was to just wait for the first one to charge at me, so I wait.

I was correct; the first of the five warriors started charging at me recklessly, so I thrust my bandit sword through the chest of the first fighter. The person disappeared into dust. They were just holograms, so there was no reason to feel guilty for killing them.

After the first one was taken down, the rest quickly rushed toward me all at once. I leaped up, causing each of the holograms to bump into each-other’s heads. Since they were all stunned already, I slaughtered each of them within 5 seconds.

“That was way too easy!” I thought, only to see a team of ten, stronger, knight warriors standing behind me when I turned around.

This time, they chose not to charge at me.

Consequently, I had to come up with an entirely new plan to beat them, and I would have to be the first to make a move too.

“Well, part of being a knight is actually knowing how to fight; only question is can I do that?”

I was without a plan, but I was hoping that I would figure one out as I went along. Until then though, all I could do was dodge.

The warrior slashes, and I jump to the right. The next one slashes, and I duck below it, and the next one slashes and cuts my arm. At this point I realize that I am not making any progress.

“This isn’t working; I’m not hitting anything. At this rate I’ll fail. I need a plan.” At this point, however, I still had no idea what it was that I should do. The knights keep slashing at me, but I cannot seem to defend myself aside from these quick dodges. Then I asked myself “What can I do with this?”

At first nothing comes to me, but I soon consider dodging attacks in a way that would throw them off like dancing or something, something that they would not be able to predict.

So, I put my desperate plan into action; my dodges turned from large hops and dips to small steps and ducks. Eventually, I perform a slight head tilt as a sword comes at me, and the sword stabs the knight behind me right in its target, and while the other warrior was struggling to get its sword out, I broke its target with the back of my sword and thrust it into the target of the knight in front of me. What I just did was great, excellent, but now I still had seven more warriors to take down. Worse, I was getting tired, and the adrenaline was starting to wear off; my whole body felt as though it was instantly falling apart. I was really beginning to feel the increasing pain of the cut along my arm. Moreover, there were still seven warriors to beat, and I was surrounded in a circle.

“Wait, I know this circle”, I declared to myself mentally. “This is the same circle from earlier only now I can’t wait for them to charge”. “So, what can I do? I’m surrounded, fatigued, and dripping blood. Well, I’ve got no choice. I’ll try the attack from that one video game,” I thought to myself.

“Sword spin attack!”, yelled I, while performing a video game move. The attack was surprisingly enough to beat the entire team at once.

“That was exhausting,” said I whilst panting. I was relieved and victorious... or so I thought...

The dust from the warriors was all that was visible in the room for a few minutes.

“Why do I still see the simulation”, thought I; I looked around the room. After about 30 seconds of looking, I laid my eyes open something straight out of a horror movie. Submerged in smoke and dust, there was a single, female warrior.

“Something tells me tricks won’t work this time”, I thought to myself as I questioned how I would even begin to approach her. She looked like she ate the mercies of her opponents as breakfast, keeping sure not to share any with anyone.

Suddenly, she—still a computer program—attacked, blasting fire everywhere. Her flames added to the dust, making an unbreathable arena full of dangerous Carbon Monoxide. Surviving longer than a few minutes would be impossible. Worse, after the previous “Sword Spin Attack,” I was out of breath. Moreover, the pain from my cut was starting to become unbearable.

“If death had a look and feeling this would be it,” thought I. My gaze was filled up with flames and my lungs with carbon dioxide. I checked my pockets for anything. I found a few—yummy—cookies, a water bottle, and nothing else, so I opened the bottle of water, and splashed it in front of the blast. I managed to protect myself from the blast, but only partially; I was now left with a minor burn all the way down my right arm.

I groaned, “Great, now that makes two arms in brutal pain.” By this point, swinging a sword would not be very easy for me.

“That hurt, but it worked. Okay, now what,” thought I desperately.

What was I to do? This lady set the whole room on fire!

“You know what, this is it; I will not lose here! I’m going to beat you no matter what it takes! You can burn my arm, my leg, my face, my hair, my anything, but I will beat you, here and now!” , I screamed as I dashed at the warrior—albeit recklessly—I slashed once, and I missed, hitting only the ground. Following up with the second slash, I dashed again only to get half-charred on my right again. Still, the second slash was quickly followed with a third.

“You think burning me will stop me, huh,” thought I, racing toward the warrior through the unbearable pain of the flames—and the cut on my left arm. This time, however, my sword was too fast for her to handle. One hit quickly turned into two than three. Sooner than I knew it, the warrior’s target broke, and I won. “Whew, I’m do-”, I started before fainting in exhaustion.

Apparently, as I fell, I was caught by that creepy, nice test proctor from earlier.

“Congratulations miss,” said the proctor even happier—and creepier—than ever. “Also, I’m terribly sorry you had to go through that,” added the proctor who looked hurt by the circumstances.

“Sorry, but why?” I didn’t know what he was apologizing for.

“Miss, the simulation just now, you got a level 50 boss with fire mage abilities. The odds of getting that setup is one in ten thousand, if not less; no-one has gotten that before.”

“So,” I replied, “I won, didn’t I?”

“Well, you did, but you now have second degree burns along your right arm and a deep cut along your left. You also could’ve very well died to Carbon Monoxide poison.”, explained the proctor.

“Well, we can’t change it now, can we? We might as well just look at the positives. I won, and saved my life twice doing so; that’s good isn’t it,” said I, with a smile.

“Yes, it sure is, miss Tonya; it sure is.”, the proctor said as he smiled back—Eww, he wasn’t supposed to smile back.

“Please, just call me Ton”, said I, walking next door to pick up my results for the test.

Just like last time I, saw the average grade, but it wouldn’t fool me this time; I looked underneath to see my grade was a whopping 180 out of 200. I only needed 150 points, but I gladly accepted more.

After jumping up with joy, I walked gleefully back to the mall; this time I would hopefully find something that I would like. The Mall of New America has been noted for its knight class armors and weapons, and today, I would finally be able to make use of such noted items, so I headed back toward the mall.

Upon arriving, I noticed that there were a lot of more fashionable outfits; however, I disciplined myself and was able to resist buying them. Today, looking great was not—entirely—my goal. Eventually, I found a silver helmet for about \$50 (Aciremian). I decided to buy it, but only with a pink can of spray-paint (\$3 Aciremian). This helmet looked like a medieval bowl with lines through it, ugly yet impractical. I also bought a chest plate and some knee-pads for \$90, (Aciremian). I then bought a saddle for Horsie, which was on sale (\$30, Aciremian). I pocketed the remaining 9 dollars—tax is a monster.

I came home, and my mother greeted me as any good mother would.

“Ton!! Oh my God, what happened!?” she questioned.

“It’s a long story,” I replied with a sigh.

“Ton, where’s the gun? Wait, Ton, you didn’t pass the shooting test?”, Mom asked me, concerned.

“Yeah, I failed it mom...”, I admitted.

“Honey, I’m so sorry,” she said, with tears in her eyes.

“...But, mom, I did pass the knight test,” I explained.

“Well, Ton, that’s alright; things like that happen. It may just be what God wanted for you.” She continued, “Sometimes we can’t see what God wants for us until he shoves it in front of our faces, you know.”

“Anyway, how about we enjoy this pizza that the pizza-man delivered here,” suggested Rose with a smile.

The two of us talk as we enjoy delicious, Acirema-style cheese pizza. Eventually, in the conversation, a question comes to my mind...

“Hey mom, why don’t we ever talk about dad,” I asked casually, with a face stuffed with pizza.

“Ton, sweetheart, we just don’t okay,” replied my mother.

“Mom, you know, you can’t just keep dodging the question; it won’t ever be answered,” I added, starting to get irritated.

“Ton, honey, I can see the way you’re squinting your eyes, and it’s disrespectful, so stop it,” said Mother, pretending to be annoyed.

I sigh. “So, is that your way of avoiding the question mom,” I questioned whilst angrily widening my eyes.

“Tonya, WHAT did I say!?” Mom yelled.

I then squinted once more—and, I perhaps went a little overboard.

“Ton, that’s disrespectful; stop it,” she said again.

“Well, it’s hard to respect you when you aren’t making any sense, mom,” answered I, whilst still squinting.

She suddenly stops and goes silent. Consequently, I feel terrible, but was I truly to blame? My mother was never the sensitive type, so I thought that she would not get mad at me...or so I thought.

Mom laughs hysterically (the angry kind) –and, at this point I realized that I screwed up. “You know what Tonya, keep acting like that, questioning life; you’ll get your answers one day,” Rose said, with a red, anger fueled face.

“Yeah, and what’s wrong with that,” I questioned.

No, shut up me, you idiot.

“No, Ton, you aren’t supposed to say that,” thought I, immediately.

“Ton, sweetheart, I ...” Rose started as tears began flowing from her face.

It was only at this point that I realized that my mother wasn’t mad at me at all. She was saddened, hurt by something, something she was not yet able to tell me. Still, forcing it out of her wouldn’t help anyone, especially if talking about it brings her to tears each time. The wisest thing to do at this point was just to shut up and listen to her.

“Ton, just... I don’t want you to end up like your father.” She sighs and continues. “I just can’t...”

No, Mom, you’re supposed to finish!

“Mom, I’m sorry,” I said, guilty because I had just made her cry.

Mom gets herself together and says, “Also, Ton, you’re grounded for the rest of the week.”

“Well, so much for that,” I think to myself before saying, “Okay.”

“Also, sweetheart, it’s 9:30 and school’s tomorrow. You know what that means,” Mom finishes, as she heads to her room.

“Yeah, good night mom,” I say as I go to my room.

This day was quite an adventure; however, another one awaited me in the morning, the first day of Aciremian middle school.

Obsidian Earring

Megan Combs
Honorable Mention





Portrait of a Man

Jared Sonti
3rd Place – Drawing



Mana Burst!
Kaeden Nelson
3rd Place – Digital Art

The Glass Sentence

Gryphon Roberts

2nd Place - Poetry

There was a boy who loved to write.
It was his passion, his heart, his soul.
He wasn't confident on how good he was,
But at least it made him whole.

He had a lot to give to the world,
But made one fatal mistake:
He didn't believe in his own worth.
He could give, but would not take.

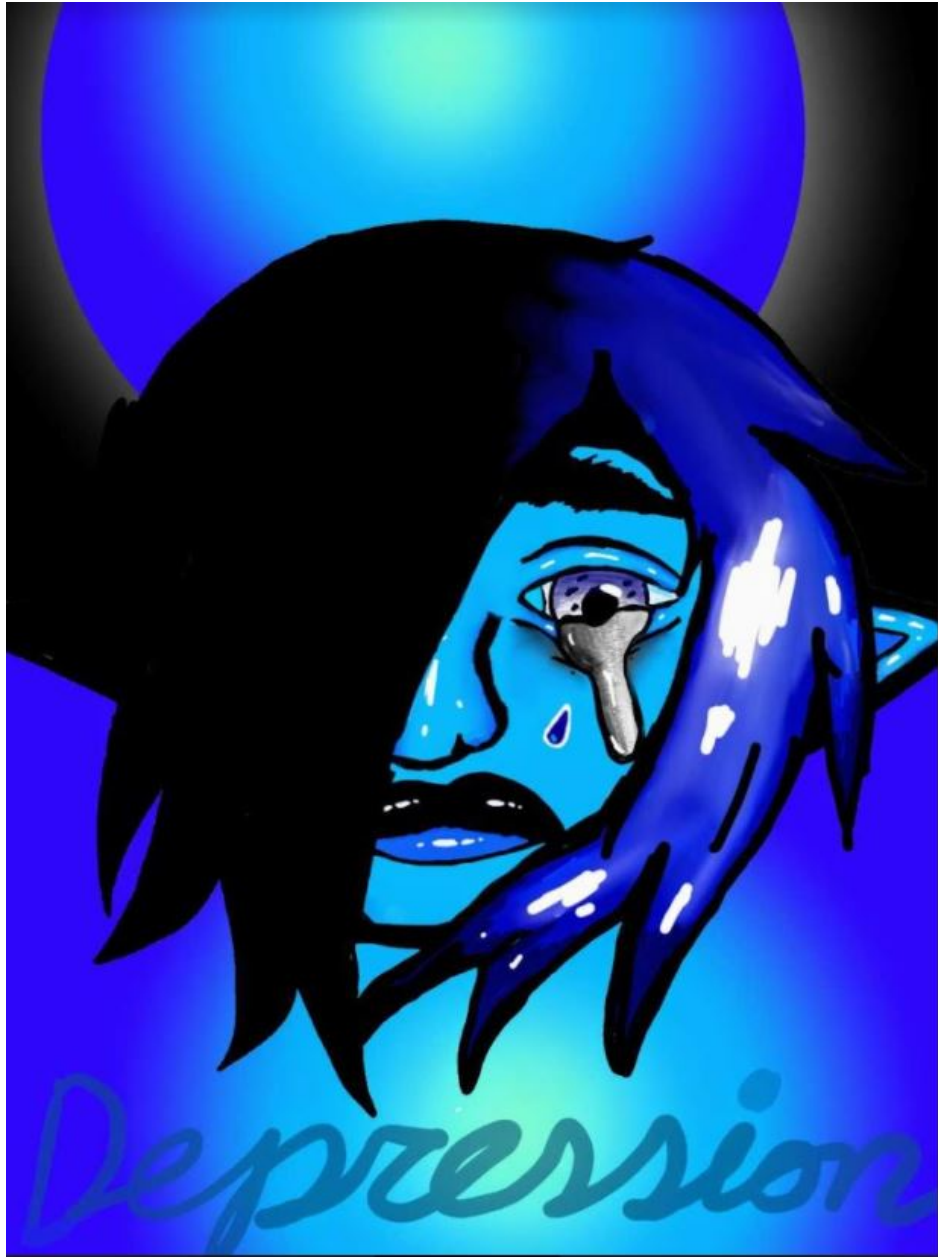
When a world too cruel had shattered him,
Others rushed to take what was left.
This was the boy's true sin:
He did nothing to stop the theft.

They took his heart so when he wrote,
He knew not how characters would feel.
They took his soul so when he spoke,
He'd be ignored; his voice concealed.

A writer with no sympathy; a heart with no empathy.
The boy lost the passion inside.
When words are everything, yet he is nothing,
What else would he do but hide?

To a writer, words mean so much,
But nobody would understand his.
He didn't set himself in stone,
So others could simply break what he is.

Every word he spoke was small and timid;
His voice fragile, but that was his penance.
"This boy is cursed!", we all admitted;
For he could only utter a Glass Sentence.



Depression
Kaeden Nelson
2nd Place – Digital Art

Haikyu Nishinoya
Gemeni London-Edwards
Merited Work



King without a Crown
Diunté L. Bridges, Sr.
Honorable Mention – Digital Art

Mom's Bouquet
Mekaila Vila



Two Is Better

Antwion Lewis

Merited Work - Poetry

Journey of life is not to be alone
Major choices, determine the outcome.
In the blink of an eye, it will be gone,
If we come together, we make the sum.
In this stage, we can be very happy
Do not fail the commitment or things be...
Arguments may rise which make things unhappy,
Pass this stage, and a long life we will see.
Did we blink, no time to think, are we here?
Mixed grays and two generations, we made
The sound of the chariot is now near,
Flashing back, moving forward, and we fade.
The time will come for everyone to decide
However the yes, there is a long ride.

Who Am I?

Antwion Lewis

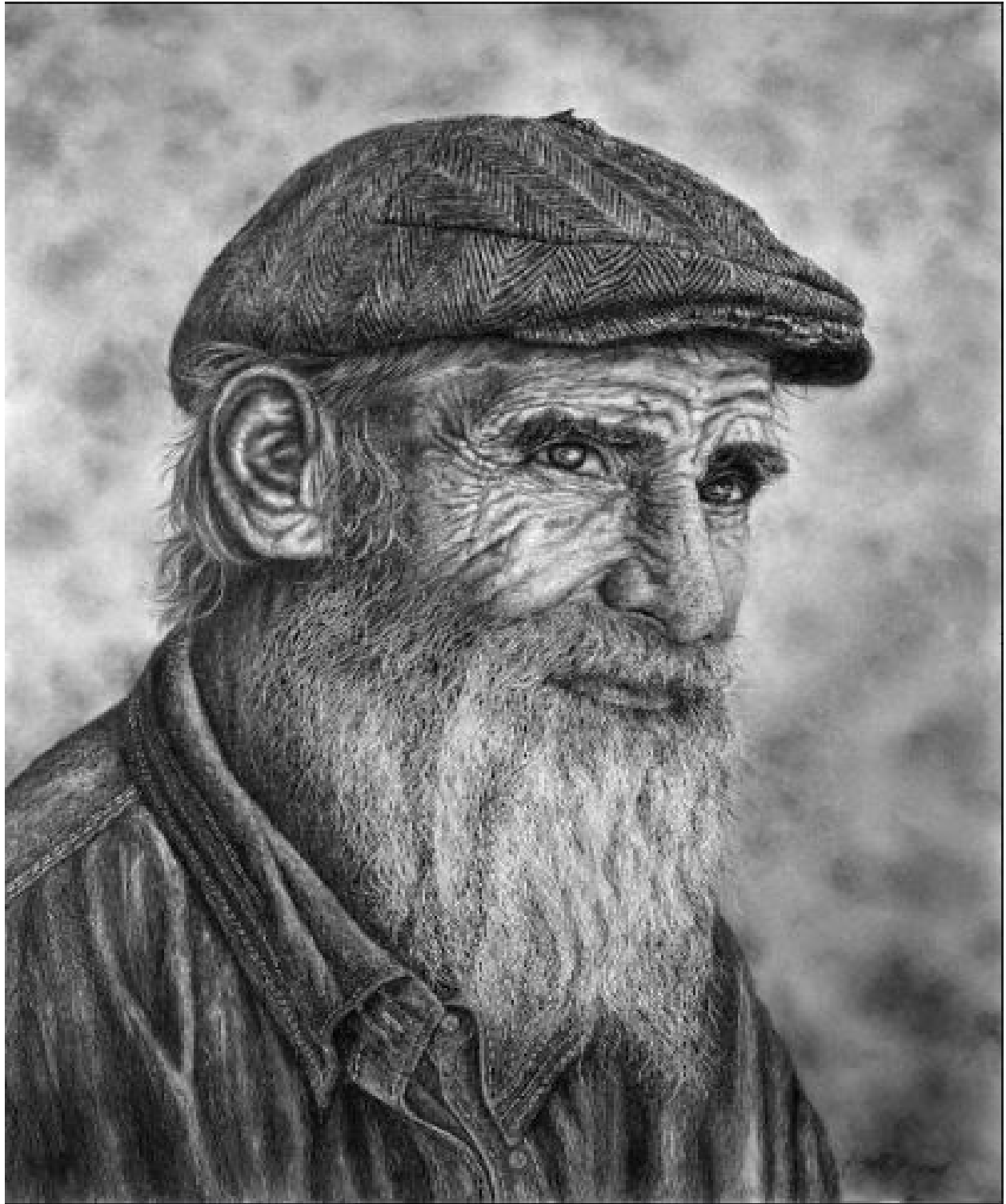
Express Me,
Can You?
Express Me,
But I got deep.
Express Me,
I can breathe.
Express Me,
I am free.
Express Me,
Without confinement.
Express Me,
And come into alignment. Express Me,
At your liberty.
Express Me,
But not in your reality.

Signed by: Love



Blue Moon

Amber McCallister
Merited Work - Painting



Traces of Time

Kiki Kelley

1st Place - Drawing

The Storm Within
Book I of the Survival Series
Michael Solis
1st Place – Short Story

Acknowledgments

I WOULD LIKE TO DEDICATE THIS BOOK TO A GOOD FRIEND WHO I CONSIDERED A BROTHER TO ME. WE LOST HIM TOO EARLY BUT I'VE COME TO REALIZE THAT HE LIVES IN ME NOW. TO ANTHONY OWENS AND HIS SON RICHARD. MISS YOU BOTH VERY MUCH. FLY HIGH

TO MY FAMILY, FRIENDS AND SUPPORTERS WHO MADE THIS POSSIBLE. I WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN ABLE TO PURSUE WHAT I LOVE IF IT WASN'T FOR YOU ALL PUSHING ME TO BE THE BEST I CAN BE.

ONE

He was in the middle of a field, sword in hand, bodies littered on the ground around him. The crimson red sun reigned supreme in the blood-soaked sky. He was panting, out of breath as the stench of blood filled his nose. Vultures swarmed the battlefield, swooping down from above to pick the remains of the fallen. It did not matter who was friend or foe, for they were both food in the eyes of the ruthless scavengers.

He struck the ground beside him with his sword, falling to his knees. He could not catch his breath regardless of how many times he took in large gulps of air.

Then, from the depths of hell of an unknown origin, there was a terrible roar that erupted from all around him, making the miniscule hairs on his neck and spine stand on end. "Foolish boy," a cold voice said. "You really think you can defeat me? I've been around since the Beginning of Dawn. There's no way you can end me." There was a sound that sounded like laughter. "I, however, will have no problem ending you."

He got up to retrieve his sword before turning around and walking right into the teeth of a phantom creature.

Daniel jumped out of bed, sweating profusely, his heart beating abnormally fast. He threw the blankets off of him and walked to the bathroom, running the water to let it get cold. He made a cup with his hands and ran it under the water, allowing it to fill up, after which he threw it on his face to help him wake up. He breathed a sigh of relief; he was now fully awake and not shambling about anymore. Going back to his bedroom, he glanced at the clock on his bedside table. It read 6:40 AM in bold red numbers. Might as well get ready for school he said to himself as he sat on one corner of his bed. He retrieved his headphones, plugged them into his phone and began playing some Five Finger Death Punch, nodding his head occasionally to the beat.

Twenty minutes later, he went downstairs to get something to eat. His father was sitting in his reclining chair listening to the news. His mother, however, busied herself in the kitchen, cooking up breakfast. His mother had long black hair with caramel brown eyes. He had the same jet black hair passed down to him but not her eyes; he had darker brown eyes like his father.

“Morning mom,” he said as he took a seat on one of the barstool chairs. “What’s for breakfast?”

“Morning sweetie,” his mom replied, taking the time to look up from what she was doing and smiling, her face glowing like the sun as she did. “Eggs, bacon, and pancakes is what’s for breakfast dear.” She hurried to the griddle to get the last pancake. She made his plate and handed it to him. “Here you go hon. Eat up. Your bus will be here soon.”

The doorbell rang a couple of minutes later; he heard his dad calling out, “I’ll get it.” Daniel knew who it was and he smiled instantly, his mouth full of syrup drenched pancake no doubt. He felt in his shorts to see if he still had it and as soon as he felt the hard square shaped box, he put it down so as not to arouse suspicion.

“Good morning Mr. Gates,” he heard the voice of his girlfriend say, her English accent undoubtedly beautiful. He heard her footsteps coming towards him and a few seconds later felt her warm lips press up against his cheek. He blushed when he glanced up and saw his mother smiling. “How are you my love?”

Mrs. Gates put her hands to her heart and said, “Aw. Young love.”

“Let’s go,” Daniel said, jumping up from his seat, running to his mother and giving her a kiss on the cheek. “Love you mom. See you at the game tonight.”

Mrs. Gates nodded as she watched her son take his girlfriend’s hand and lead her out of the house. When she had heard the door close, Mr. Gates entered the kitchen and wrapped her up in his arms. “We need to let them know how everything is going. Be at the school later David. We need to make sure they don’t come up.”

Mr. Gates nodded and gave her a kiss before going upstairs to get ready for the day ahead.

** ** *

She gazed into the blackness of the darkened room, kneeling, head down and waiting to be told otherwise. “The Assassins are placed where you instructed we put them Dark Lord. They await further orders.”

A deep cold voice resonated through the room, making the atmosphere that much colder. “Observe. We must make sure he is the one. If he is, we will move on to the next phase.”

“Yes My Lord.” She got to her feet and was walking toward the exit when a deep growl ensued from the shadows. Though their body was absent, the deep red eyes glowed maliciously.

“Do not fail me. If you do, I will personally make sure your exit from the human realm is as painful as I can make it. Do we have an understanding?”

She smiled, though not in front of the Dark Lord. She cleared her throat. “I wouldn’t dream of failing you, father.” With that, she went about her way.

** ** *

TWO

After a hellish day at school and a surprise pop quiz, Daniel was ready to put on his pads and play some football. He held his girlfriend’s hand as they walked along the corridors. “So,” he started, fumbling to find the words. “I have something for you.”

“Oh yeah?” She stopped, still holding his hand. “What is it?”

Daniel reached in his pocket and pulled out the square box; Mary gasped and put her fingers to her mouth as she held back tears. "Oh my god." Her luscious black hair flowed freely in the spring wind, her green eyes watered.

"I was going to give you this beforehand but I just couldn't wait any longer. You make me hap—" Daniel looked over her shoulder and saw that there was a man in a black suit, glasses on, staring at both of them. Daniel awkwardly stood there a bit of fear creeping up in him. Who were these men? And what did they want?

Mary turned around to see why he had stopped and cursed under her breath. "We got to go," she said with a tone of urgency. "Now." She grabbed his arm and turned the opposite way to run but before they could go full speed, another suit blocked their path.

They changed direction and ran along the main corridor and when that had eventually failed, they stood there, brains buzzing rapidly, adrenaline pumping through their veins as the suits made their way ever closer to them. Daniel looked around for a slip through the cracks and when he couldn't find any, went to protect Mary.

"Stop," came a voice from behind him.

Daniel and Mary turned around and saw a red haired woman with red heels coming toward them. She looked at him and smiled from ear to ear. "I must admit, I thought you would be harder to track down."

"Who are you?" Daniel asked.

"You'll know my name soon enough. You should do the smart thing and come with me. It will save you a lot of pain down the road."

"I have a better idea," Mary replied, gritting her teeth. "Get lost."

The woman laughed then nodded at one of her guards beside her. The guard instantly took out his weapon from his holster and shot her.

Daniel turned around and saw her holding her stomach, her hands stained with her blood, her shirt dyed with bright red. "No," he muttered as she looked into his eyes. When she fell, he caught her and helped lower her to the ground.

"I will see you soon," the woman said. "I suggest next time you will be smarter." Before another word could be spoken, her and her men disappeared into nothingness, without a trace.

Seeing how everyone around him was gone, he held onto Mary tightly, his hand on her wound. "I wish there was something I could do to help."

"Y-You being here is more than enough for me. I-I'm sorry I never told you about who you are."

Daniel gritted his teeth, trying to keep from crying despite his eyes watering. "HELP!" he shouted at the top of his lungs. He looked behind and in front of him but nobody was coming. "HELP!"

Mary shook her head slowly, her face beginning to turn pale. "They won't be in time." Despite the fact that he could hear the sirens in the distance, he knew reluctantly she was right. "I love you."

He couldn't hold the tears back any longer. As he felt them rush down his cheeks and fall off his face, he was quick to wipe them off her face. He could see the fight in her eyes begin to disappear; he swallowed the lump in his throat. "I...I l-love y-you."

He felt her grip on his hand loosen, one last breath issue out of her body. She was gone. Her eyes were looking at him blankly, her face white as a cloud in the sky. He lowered her head

gently on the ground before backing away from her corpse and putting his head between her knees, where he began crying nonstop.

** ** *

The first thing Daniel did when he got home from school was throw his backpack near the door and go upstairs. He didn't care about no football game, homework, or anything school related. On top of that, he had a killer headache from all the crying and his eyes were red and puffy. He locked the door so he could mourn in peace, or at least attempt to.

There was a knock on the door, followed by his father saying, "You okay sport?"

Daniel ignored him, his face buried in his pillow. He didn't want to talk to anybody, hear anyone's voice; he just wanted to be in his own little world. Who were those people in suits? His brain, despite the emotional state he was in, was buzzing with so many questions.

This time around, there was another knock on the door and then his mom's voice came shortly after. "Honey, could you please open up?"

Daniel groaned as he lifted himself from his bed and stumbled to the door. As soon as he turned the lock and opened, his mom flew in and embraced him tightly. "I'm so sorry my sweet boy. I know it hurts."

He didn't know what to do, deciding to whether or not to hug his mother back. "Thanks mom."

"It's time you knew just why it happened."

Daniel got out of his mother's embrace with a puzzled expression on his face. "What don't I know?"

His mother closed her eyes, appearing to be troubled. "You will find out soon enough. Get some rest. I'm sure Mary's parents are going to come here shortly and will want to know what happened."

She let him be, walking downstairs and leaving him with more questions and more confusion. He went to lay down in bed, a picture of Mary beside him.

** ** *

"It's done My Lord," the woman said as she kneeled.

"What is? I thought I told you to scout the area out, make sure it's really him before going on to the next phase."

"He and his girl were awfully antsy seeing the guards—"

"Anyone would, you fool!" At the start of him raising his voice, the invisible hounds growled viciously, their deep guttural sounds filling the room rather quickly. "I told you to scout, not to worsen the situation."

"Nobody saw My Lord. It was only him and his girl."

The Dark Lord stood up, though nobody could see him doing so, and walked over to the room. "Whether he is the one or not, I want him dead. Do so now."

"Yes My Lord." She looked up at the pitch black ceiling and was gone in a bright flash of white light.

His room now dark and motionless once more, he sat on his throne, his hounds taking their place at his feet. "My daughter loves to try to make me proud," he said, muttering to himself but looking at his pets, stroking their heads. "Make sure she does what I set her out to do."

** ** *

THREE

Daniel snuck out of the house as soon as he woke up from his nap a couple of hours later. Retrieving his wallet and his Los Angeles Dodgers military cap, he went downstairs as quietly as he could, unlocked the front door and gently closed it.

As he walked down the street with loud music coming in through his headphones, his eyes focused on the ground, he couldn't help but stop at Mary's house. He saw her parents at the foot of her house hugging friends and relatives as they did all they could do to help them cope with their loss. Her parents were miserable looking, as could be expected; the guilt that he felt quickly overwhelmed him and he had to keep going. He couldn't bring himself to approach them, let alone tell them it was his fault that their daughter was dead.

By the time he had reached into his pocket to mute his phone and removed his hoodie, he glanced up and saw the church bell towering above him some good fifty feet high. The windows were dark and tinted to block out the sun, the light brown texture of the building shining from the sunlight.

When he put his foot in the church, he saw that it was barren; church pews were empty as well, with thick Holy Bibles in the back of said pews. Walking along the walkway, he saw the cross in front of him as the altar grew closer with each step; he couldn't help but think about how in a week or so he would be carrying his girlfriend's casket, grief overflowing the place.

"It's been a while since you have set foot in this church, hasn't it?" somebody asked as it lit the candles on the right side of the altar. "Three years. If memory serves me right."

"I'm not big on religion," Daniel responded, taking a seat. "Not big on faith either to be honest."

"What brings you in?" the pastor asked, sitting next to him. "If not faith or your religion, something had to usher you in."

"Maybe I wanted to know when the service for my girlfriend is going to be. Other than that, you wouldn't find me here on any given Sunday."

The pastor looked disturbed at what he had just said. Finally, after a moment he said, "I am so very sorry for your loss. I know you and Mary were close but—"

Everything happens for a reason. Right?" He held his composure, standing up and taking a few steps back, his eyes like daggers. "I've heard it all before pastor. If I didn't love my girlfriend, you would not see me for a very long time. That's what I think of your religion."

He walked towards the door but before he could push it open, the pastor called out after him. "One day you're going to have to choose the path you have been avoiding: the path to help those in need, or the path to condemn the whole world to an unforeseen mercy. Be careful and mindful of what you pick."

Daniel advanced out of the church, the warning going in one ear and out the other. He sat on the third step leading down to the sidewalk and put his hat and sunglasses on. He looked at the clock on his phone. 2:35 PM. Almost the end of the school day. Something was telling him to go but, at the same time, he didn't want to hear people's apologies or sympathetic words. I'll just go back at five. When I know everybody will be at home.

"Daniel," he heard a soft voice in front of him.

He knew immediately who it was and therefore he was reluctant to look up. This time, the woman approached him and shook his shoulder for a second. “Daniel?”
“Yes?”

“What are you doing here?”

He took a moment before he responded. “Just wanted to get some fresh air.”

“I’m happy that I found you here. I wanted to ask you something—”

He jumped to his feet and ran down the street, turning the corner and moving as far away from her as he could. He wasn’t ready to tell her or to see the pain in her eyes. Not now anyway. The wound to her was still so fresh, in no way or form ready to heal. He sat down next to a big dumpster, put his headphones in, and tuned the whole world out, his head between his knees and fresh tears spilling out onto the ground.

Daniel woke up to him drooling and his playlist no longer playing. He retrieved his phone and realized it was a little after five o’clock. He also saw that he had a couple of missed calls from his parents followed by a few text messages. Now was the time to head to the high school and satisfy his hunger.

Half an hour later, he was at the front entrance of the school, the sun rapidly setting behind him. He would have to move fast to avoid being in the dark. He jogged down the darkened hallway to his locker, the sound of his footsteps echoing off the walls of the high school, the sweet smell of lemon filling up his nostrils pleasantly.

He reached Mary’s locker, looked both sides to make sure none of those agents or anyone else was coming his way before putting in her combination. When it had opened, he instantly went for the picture of them together in Mickey Mouse ears and the picture of them when they were little, around six. A piece of paper folded in a square caught the corner of his eye and, curious, he took it and put it in his pocket.

A deep growl caught Daniel by surprise; in response, he quietly closed the locker and ran to the end of the lockers. He dared himself to look and could see nothing in particular but two sets of red eyes that were as red as blood. He had never seen anything like it; it was too big to be a dog and he was pretty sure it wasn’t a wandering wild animal, but sooner or later, he would have to deal with them. But what to do? He looked around. He saw the double doors but the chances of them being open would not be enough time to scurry back to his hiding cover and think about another corner to hide in.

“Your heartbeat is calm for a person who has two Hellhounds tracking you.”

His feelings of mourning and grief turned instantaneously to that of anger and revenge. He knew who it was and he wanted nothing more than to rip her throat out. He didn’t care what these hellhounds were, or what they were capable of doing. He came out of his hiding spot and put his hands up, ready to fight.

From the shadows glowed two more red eyes. “Do you know what I am, Daniel Gates? I do not play nice but most of all, I do not fight with my knuckles!” A blue light shot at him; with a half second to react, he ducked down and avoided the blast. What the hell? he asked himself as he scrambled to his feet.

“What are you?” he asked, his anger threatening to overtake him.

The shadowy woman laughed, the hellhounds at her feet, waiting to be told otherwise. “More powerful than you. Are you ready to die?”

“Not before I take you with me!”

As he began running towards her, he was blinded by a bright white light. He threw his hands to shield his eyes and could feel his body lift up in the air. When the light died down, he had to adjust to the new surrounding that was his home. He rubbed his eyes and could see his parents in front of him and when he turned behind him, saw a muscular man with shoulder long brown hair standing over him.

“What happened?” he asked, shaking off any assistance the man was trying to offer him.

“You almost sealed your fate,” the man behind him said, eyeing him closely. “Going up against a succubus is one of the most stupidest deaths in the history of mankind.”

“I’m sorry, but who are you?” Daniel asked, his fists balled up and ready for action.

The man looked down at his fists and smiled, getting close to Daniel, each smelling the other’s breath. “If you think you’re fast enough to land that first punch, do it tough guy.”

Daniel’s dad appeared in the living room, a man with a bald head next to him. “Balisnor. Daniel.” He said both their names sternly but none fidgeted, not even an inch. They stayed in place, staring persistently, intently, until the bald man took his turn. “Balisnor! Show some restraint!”

The man named Balisnor broke his eye contact with Daniel, though he was reluctant, and stepped back a few paces.

“Please sit,” the bald man stated with a smile on his face. When Daniel did, he went on. “My name is Erek. You have already met my bodyguard Balisnor. First off, I want to offer my deepest condolences to you for your loss. I know it’s not easy but trust me when I say, things get better.”

Daniel looked at his dad and didn’t hide how he was feeling when he opened his mouth. “How much did you pay this therapist? Because now would be a perfect time to get your money back.”

“Don’t be rude to our guest Daniel. He’s not a therapist. He comes far and wide to explain what we cannot. Your mother and I love you and want the best for you but we can’t hide the truth from you no longer.”

“What is it that you and mom can’t tell me? Am I adopted?”

Erek was the one who answered this time. “If you want me to be honest with you, these folks you refer to as your mom and dad are not your actual parents. They were assigned to protect you and, up until this point, they have done a spectacular job. However, in this unfortunate scenario, it is no longer safe for you.”

Daniel’s mind was now whirring. If these people weren’t his parents, then where the hell were his real parents? And when he heard Erek say that it was no longer safe, how was he supposed to interpret that? “I’m confused. Why is it no longer safe?”

“It’s too much to explain. We don’t have time to break down everything you want to know. That succubus is going to stop at nothing until she has you in her possession.”

“How much do you need me?” Daniel asked, sitting back on the couch, clearly amused. He wasn’t buying any of this hot garbage, regardless of how desperate they were trying to shove it down his throat.

“I need you to understand the gravity of our current situation. It’s no laughing matter. We need you to further our movement.”

“I’m not going anywhere until I go to my girlfriend’s funeral. Your movement can shrivel up and die before I turn my back on her and go somewhere with complete strangers.”

Balisnor and Erek went to speak before his father figure raised a hand and chimed in. “Let me talk to you in private for a second.”

He and Daniel got up and proceeded to go to the kitchen, out of prying ears and sharp dagger eyes. “You’re making this impossible Daniel. And at the wrong time. She will be coming here next.”

“My life has been a lie!” Daniel said through gritted teeth. “I don’t know who the hell is who anymore. My real parents are somewhere else and the people I thought were my parents are decoys instead. When were you going to tell me?”

“When we had more time. But we don’t. There comes a time when we must all make a decision that will make an impact in our lives. You must make one.”

“What about Mary’s funeral? You want me to just forget about her?”

“It’s never easy making a decision out of a complex situation like this one. To answer your question though, yes.”

Daniel couldn’t believe what he was hearing but if there was anyone that he was going to listen to, parent or not, it was going to be him. “Alright. I’ll go with them but when they allow me to, I’ll be back.”

His dad had a gleam in his eye, putting a hand on his shoulder. “It’s going to be a hard life, transitioning from one life to another. However, you won’t have to be at a disadvantage when enemies come for you. If we are destined to meet again, then may the goodness of the earth make it so. If not, I wish you nothing but the best.”

He nodded, realizing that he had desperation in his voice; and although he really did not want to go, he knew that this was his calling.

They went back into the living room together, his dad’s hand on his shoulder. Daniel took a deep breath, exhaled slowly and looked down at the floor as he said, “I have decided to come with you, as long as I can come back once I’m done with my training.”

Erek got up with a bright smile on his face. “Excellent! And of course, of course! We should go now, before it’s too late.”

Daniel trudged over to them and waited, not wanting to make eye contact with Erek or Balisnor. He looked at his parents, however, and managed to smile. “May we meet again.”

“You will find the answers you seek,” his mother said, smiling reassuringly.

“We will meet again,” his father stated as he watched Daniel vanish before their eyes. “Stay strong,” he whispered.

He grabbed his wife by the waist and pulled her close. “We did the best we could. Balisnor will teach him the ways of the warrior. The hard part is over.”

Just then, the doorbell rang. They knew who it was.

“I love you.”

“I love you too my love. May we meet again.”

The woman with the gold eyes slowly walked in, admiring the art on the wall as well as the pictures. When her eyes fell on the couple, she smiled, her hands turning into long sharp claws. “Who wants to hurt first?”

** **

The last thing Daniel saw before it turned to a white nothingness was his parents waving goodbye. After twenty seconds of free falling, his feet finally hit the ground...then his knees. “Ow,”

he grunted as he got up and dusted off. His mood instantly turned sour when he saw that Balisnor and Ereke were still on their feet. He could have sworn that Balisnor had a smirk on his face.

From the middle of the forest, they traversed to escape the trees. Once they had and they were along the starting line, Daniel lost his breath at the sheer beauty of this unknown alien place.

Up ahead was a large marble castle with a large watchtower on the left side; the majestic building was protected by a thirty foot high brick wall that had what appeared to be soldiers patrolling the area. To the left of where the castle was erected were snowcapped mountains that were breathtaking. To the right was a large lake that was busy with people fishing and swimming.

“Where are we?” Daniel asked, not being able to take his eyes off the beautiful scenery before him.

Ereke smiled, putting his hand on Daniel’s shoulder. “The castle before you houses the most powerful royal family within the Five Kingdoms. This one is called Varin. Welcome to Varin Daniel, your new home.”

To continue reading this story go to

https://www.ctcd.edu/sites/ctcd/assets/File/Library/Byways/Byways%202021_2.pdf

Perspective
Amber McCallister
Merited Work



Byways: Journal of Arts and Literature is a student publication featuring original creative written work: short fiction, poetry, song writing, non-fiction and drama. It also includes original art work: paintings, sculptures, photography, music score, music lyrics, short plays, and metal works.

All currently enrolled CTC students worldwide can submit their writings and art for publication consideration at the beginning of the fall semester.

All work should be submitted electronically to: [Byways Submission form](#) or Byways@ctcd.edu.

Artwork - digital photos of your work can be submitted in any of the JPEG (.jpg) format.

Writing submissions should be submitted in Rich Text Format (.rtf) or as a Word Document (.doc).

Please include your title of work, art medium, email address, phone number and physical mailing address with your submission.

For more information about BYWAYS and submission requirements, contact: Byways@ctcd.edu

“Hey, Ms. Haeli Renee; You will never fade away; You...will always be” – Eternal Heartbeat

“Pink petal, yellow petal, watch it fade into blue Smiling...I know it’s you” – Petals

“The huge skirt spun like a top as he made his way from table to table, encouraging audience participation.” – Khan el-Khalili

“Yet The Mirror stood tall and unharmed. Were The Mirror's answers right all along,” - But the Mirror Said

“Defeat and survive this calamity; To remain strong-willed, and earn my degree.” – Collapse with the Dawn

“You love her craziness; Together yall were blessed” – Dear John

“Together on the waves of the sea, so glad you were there with me,” – Hello Goodbye

“Gotta be this or that, so I gotta know!” – Hello, World

“I have been forgiven; You have been forgiven;” – My Psalm 23

“Tell me, why is this not working?; We’ll just keep trying.” – Parley

“Should its body be hard as a shell yet so soft on its inner core.” – Summer Fails

“You know what, this is it; I will not lose here! I’m going to beat you no matter what it takes!
“ – Please, just call me Ton.

“To a writer, words mean so much; But nobody would understand his.” – The Glass Sentence

“If we come together, we make the sum.” – Two is Better

“I am free; Express Me; Without confinement.” – Who Am I?

“BEING FREE FROM MONSTERS LIKE YOU IS WORTH FIGHTING FOR!” – The Storm Within

