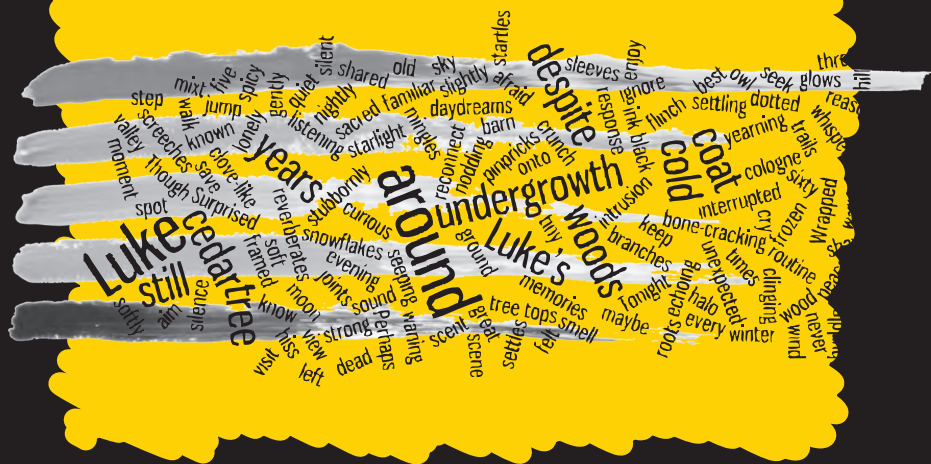


# Our Own Expressions

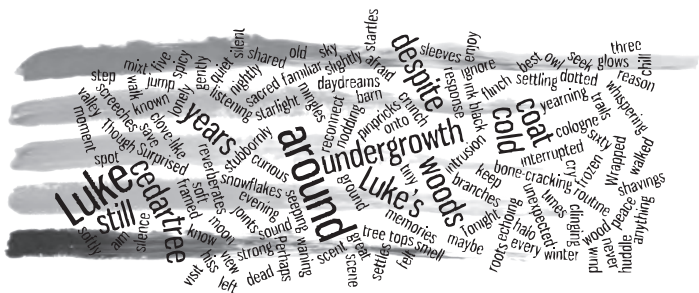


# Pierce County Library System 16th Annual

# Teen

## Writing & Art Contest

# 2012 Winners



## Fostering literary expression and creativity in youth.

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# Winners

Pierce County Library System applauds the amazing contributions from teenage writers and artists in the Our Own Expressions – Teen Writing & Art Contest. The contest began 16 years ago as Our Own Words, a writing contest for 7th – 12th graders. In recent years, the Library added art and photography to the contest.

This year, students submitted 1,233 writing and art entries.

Volunteers, including Library staff and Pierce County Library Foundation Board members, reviewed the entries. Author Randall Platt and poet Kristen McHenry selected this year's writing winners, evaluating originality, style, general presentation, grammar, and spelling. Photographer Alexa King and artist Lucy Schwartz selected the art winners based on composition, artistic skills, creativity, and effective use of media.

Pierce County Library Foundation awarded the winners with cash prizes and the winning entries are published in this book.

Pierce County Library System gratefully acknowledges the support of Pierce County Library Foundation, The News Tribune, Pacific Lutheran University and Print NW to help fund the contest.



# Our Own Expressions

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## *Poetry Winners*

### **Grades 7 and 8**

<b>1st</b>	<b>I Wonder</b> Marin Malich	Kopachuck Middle School
<b>2nd</b>	<b>Grandmas Piano</b> Taylor Holland	Eatonville Middle School
<b>3rd</b>	<b>Brass Knuckles</b> Penny Mae Rhines	Home School

### **Grades 9 and 10**

<b>1st</b>	<b>Unusual Longing</b> Hailey Maher	Bellarmine Preparatory
<b>2nd</b>	<b>Child's Play</b> Jocelyn Gonzales	Steilacoom High School
<b>3rd</b>	<b>Chill</b> Breanna Forrest	Science and Math Institute

### **Grades 11 and 12**

<b>1st</b>	<b>Invisible</b> Noelle Oppenhuizen	Covenant High School
<b>2nd</b>	<b>New Approach to Imagination</b> Renee Taylor	Lakes High School
<b>3rd</b>	<b>The Sound of Music</b> Amber Roley	Rogers High School

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# *Drawing Winners*

## **Grades 7 and 8**

<b>1st</b>	<b>Peter and Lucy Pevensie</b> Sydney Paulsen	Home School
<b>2nd</b>	<b>Story of Life</b> Byron White	Gray Middle School
<b>3rd</b>	<b>Russia in the Night</b> Alicia Schulz	Harbor Ridge Middle School

## **Grades 9 and 10**

<b>1st</b>	<b>Looking Something Close to Tragic</b> Lexy Hobson	Curtis Junior High School
<b>2nd</b>	<b>Taj Mahal</b> Jesse MacKinnon	Peninsula High School
<b>3rd</b>	<b>Beauty</b> Molly MacKinnon	Peninsula High School

## **Grades 11 and 12**

<b>1st</b>	<b>Concrete Castles</b> Kayla Wyatt	Bonney Lake High School
<b>2nd</b>	<b>Beauty</b> Tamala Aown	Covenant High School
<b>3rd</b>	<b>Octopus's Garden</b> Amanda Franz	Bonney Lake High School

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## *Photography Winners*

### **Grades 7 and 8**

<b>1st</b>	<b>Give a Helping Hand</b> Allyssa Metcalf	Key Peninsula Middle School
<b>2nd</b>	<b>Red All Star</b> Dallas Martin	Ford Middle School
<b>3rd</b>	<b>Laugh, Love, Live</b> Breonna Rose	Key Peninsula Middle School

### **Grades 9 and 10**

<b>1st</b>	<b>Kyra</b> Emilie Webb	Peninsula High School
<b>2nd</b>	<b>Visual Reflexion</b> Hannah Squires	Home School
<b>3rd</b>	<b>Tibetan Woman</b> Molly MacKinnon	Peninsula High School

### **Grades 11 and 12**

<b>1st</b>	<b>Illuminate</b> Katherine Meikle	Steilacoom High School
<b>2nd</b>	<b>Rub-a-Dub</b> Jazmine Horne	Curtis Senior High School
<b>3rd</b>	<b>Veronica</b> Savanna Soukey	Spanaway Lake High School

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## *Short Story Winners*

### **Grades 7 and 8**

- |            |                                     |                          |
|------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| <b>1st</b> | <b>Homeless</b>                     |                          |
|            | Matt Patterson                      | Drum Intermediate School |
| <b>2nd</b> | <b>Correspondence in a Cow Suit</b> |                          |
|            | Stephanie Davis                     | Stahl Junior High School |
| <b>3rd</b> | <b>Fairest in the Land</b>          |                          |
|            | Meghan Tiffany Low                  | Bethel Online Academy    |

### **Grades 9 and 10**

- |            |                     |                      |
|------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| <b>1st</b> | <b>Hope</b>         |                      |
|            | Delaney Adix        | Home School          |
| <b>2nd</b> | <b>The Accident</b> |                      |
|            | Anne Gaspers        | Covenant High School |
| <b>3rd</b> | <b>Jack's Yarn</b>  |                      |
|            | Isabel Anderson     | Covenant High School |

### **Grades 11 and 12**

- |            |  |                        |
|------------|--|------------------------|
| <b>1st</b> | <b>Writer's Block</b>  |                        |
|            | Kaley Kiermayr   | Steilacoom High School |
| <b>2nd</b> | <b>O Captain! My Captain!: A Starship's Lament:<br/>Returning Home</b> |                        |
|            | Amanda Gordon  | Gig Harbor High School |
| <b>3rd</b> | <b>Mentos and Offerings</b>  |                        |
|            | Tamala Aown  | Covenant High School   |

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## Grades 7 & 8



# Our Own Expressions

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# I Wonder

by Marin Malich

*First Place Winner*

I wonder about the people I see on the street.

I wonder if they have a family, or enough to eat?

I wonder if they have a place to stay, is it toasty, are the lights radiant, or dead?

I wonder how old they are, when they were born, if they're right in the head?

I wonder how they came to be, if they're brusque, or sweet as pumpkin pie on Christmas Eve?

I wonder whom they'll turn to be, if they live here, or have to leave?

I wonder why they're dressed that way, whether it's couture, or out-of-date?

I wonder if they are organized and neat, or if they enjoy books because they're discreet?

I wonder if they like to play, at anytime throughout the day?

I wonder then why I care, about the person standing there.

I wonder if I'll see them again, could I ever look at them and call them "friend"?

I wonder about the people on the street, even if we never meet.

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# Grandma's Piano

by Taylor Holland

*Second Place Winner*

I have been untouched for years,

My sound.....

Still graceful as a wave

Beautiful as a sunset, over the water.

Yet no one will hear me...

I sit in the corner,

watching familiar faces pass me by, day after day.

Am I just a decoration to please people?

Will only dust touch me? Or will I actually be presented to the world,

With my sound

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## Brass Knuckles

by Penny Mae Rhines

*Third Place Winner*

Cold, cruel and hard.

The brass knuckles glinting in the lamplight.

Merciless, heartless...

The brass knuckles standing out against black pinstripe.

Unsympathetic, harsh, horrid...

The brass knuckles whizzing through the  
inky shadow, toward the helpless hands  
raised in prayer.

Red, warm and stony.

The brass knuckles dripping in the cool night,  
staining the bricks below.

Polished, gleaming, hungry.

They will wait in the pocket until tomorrow,  
when again they will glint in the lamplight,  
cold, cruel and hard.

# Poetry

Grades 9 & 10



*Our Own  
Expressions*

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# Unusual Longing

by Hailey Maher

*First Place Winner*

Living in Florida, I've never seen the stuff—  
Supposed to tingle tongues and numb fingers, I'm told.  
Well, I guess I've noticed the white dots printed  
On billboards and newspaper ads when I run to the mart in December.  
Never in real life though, with my own two eyes I've never held it.

I want to, really.  
Melt between my fingers, I've asked.  
Crunch beneath me feet, I've prayed.  
I will make a ball to hurl at Ginger and Jose.  
I will lie down and be covered, suffocated.  
I will never be bothered by the cold.

I promise.

None of my family has seen it. None of them have ever even left here.  
No desire I suppose, but I'll tell you, I've got some desire.  
At home, I'm teased for this "useless" dreaming of mine.  
My brothers say I'm just stupid,  
That I spend too much time with my thoughts.  
They tell me I should be stronger to help Mama and the girls.  
But I am not like them, any of them. I want other things, better things.

I want out of this place. I want the snow.



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# Child's Play

by Jocelyn Gonzales

*Second Place Winner*

I board the contraption,  
the seemingly alien seat and chains welcome me  
like an old friend.

I glance at those around me, so much younger than I  
still in their Spaghetti-O years.

Slowly, I exhale.  
My apprehensions fluttering into the atmosphere.

I start slow  
a small kick with my legs. Then another,  
relearning my technique.

My stomach twists with every lurch of the monster  
the toes of my sneakers stir up flecks of bark.

The crisp air biting my cheeks  
the world around me blurs  
and disappears.

My uncertainties buried deep within my diaphragm,  
I release the chains.

I fly.  
And then I time travel  
back to my Spaghetti-O years.



# Chill

by Breanna Forrest

*Third Place Winner*

It is a cold day in Tacoma.

My breath fogs out and up, up and away,  
my footsteps crunching quietly on crystallized grass.

I shiver with delight and draw my coat tighter,  
relishing the beauty.

Ice glows in the sun,

Frost glitters, and seems to dance joyous and almost alive.

I stop and breathe in a stinging breath,  
as a crisp breeze enfolds me.

I continue walk and watch the activity,

Birds fluttering by, squirrels chattering back and forth,  
children yelling and chasing each other.

I smile and go on, full of jubilation and content with life.

It is a cold, beautiful day in Tacoma.

## Grades 11 & 12



# Our Own Expressions



# Invisible

by Noelle Oppenhuizen

*First Place Winner*

No one looked, no one saw, no one seemed to see.  
No one listened, no one heard, no one seemed to hear.  
With tear stained cheeks he sat alone. He felt displaced and scared.  
Still no one noticed, no one came, no one even cared.

With shoulders drooping, eyes downcast, his legs didn't seem to move,  
But rather stayed glued to his chair; the place he lived, but feared.  
He was below "they" were above. He felt shamed and unwanted.  
Others stood and walked away leaving him behind and haunted.

At three feet tall he couldn't meet the gaze of people's eyes,  
So gathered strength with all his might and wheeled himself around.  
A war rose up within his soul. A fight for being "normal."  
With one deep breath, he could not stand, but screamed "Invisible!"

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# New Approach to Imagination

by Renee Taylor

*Second Place Winner*

twisting and twirling  
spinning and swirling  
brown hair waltzed through the door

most people just rolled  
tumbled, stumbled  
full of open reluctance.  
some even shielded themselves from it  
the ocean of color-  
the dancehall of dreams  
unwilling to take their chance to leave the cold hard floor behind  
and make use of a brilliant opportunity

leaping and gliding  
sweeping and sliding  
her silhouette dissolved into the music

most people would have paled  
dulled, faded  
transformed into negative space.  
but she was not most people  
and when her feet left the ground she didn't need to fall back  
to know who she was

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# The Sound of Music

by Amber Roley

*Third Place Winner*

It took me over like a wave  
Crashes over sand again and again—  
The crystals gleamed in my eyes  
As the chord shifted to a sixth inversion.  
The best and worst of things happened  
All at once. The secret triplets start to dance  
Around the saddest melody as if it were the wind.  
When the snow falls you hear everything  
Like the grace of perfect stillness  
Like it was at the grand pause off the bar.  
The intensity of knowing a mountain is just  
Around the corner at the end of the phrase and  
Knowing that there will Never  
Be a moment like that small wrinkle  
Of an instant you were honored to be in.  
And when it's all over, the corners of your mouth  
Lift just slightly in expressing the deepest account  
Of emotional impact of the true and utter rawness of  
Euphoric Beauty. And when it ends—  
so does your life long search for contentment.

## Grades 7 & 8



# Our Own Expressions

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# Peter and Lucy Pevensie

by Sydney Paulsen

*First Place Winner*





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# Story of Life

by Byron White

*Second Place Winner*



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# Russia in the Night

by Alicia Shulz

*Third Place Winner*



## Grades 9 & 10



# Our Own Expressions

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# Looking Something Close to Tragic

by Lexy Hobson

*First Place Winner*





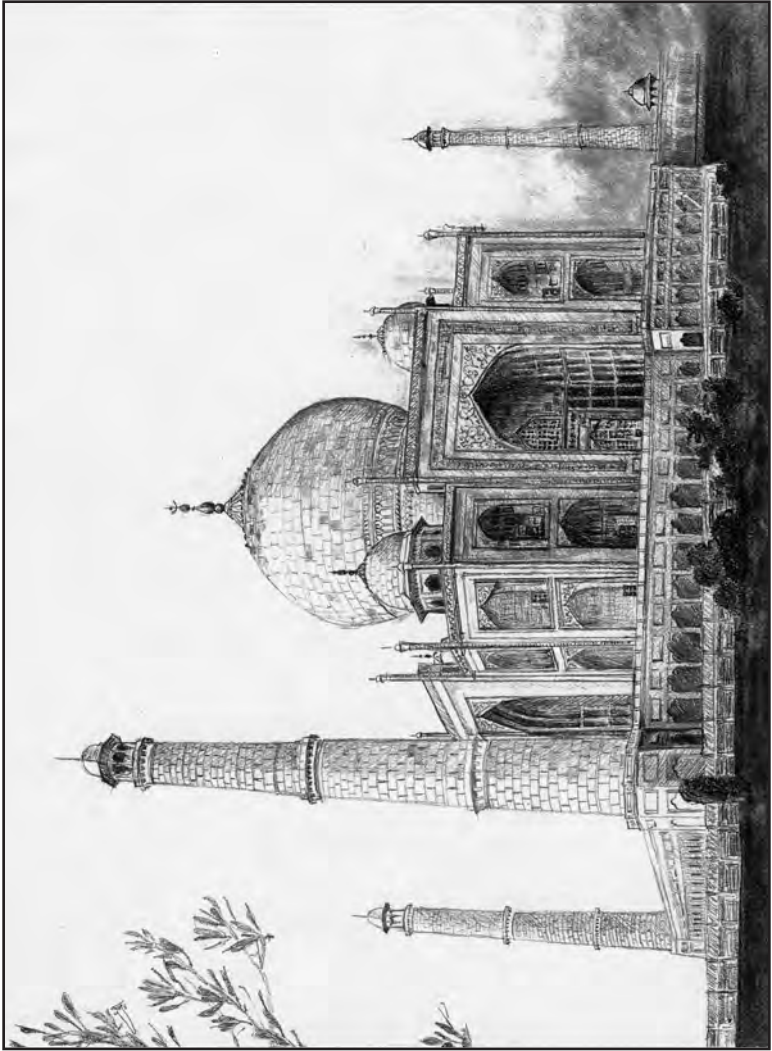
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# Taj Mahal

by Jesse MacKinnon

*Second Place Winner*





# Beauty

by Molly MacKinnon

*Third Place Winner*



## Grades 11 & 12



# Our Own Expressions

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# Concrete Castles

by Kayla Wyatt

*First Place Winner*







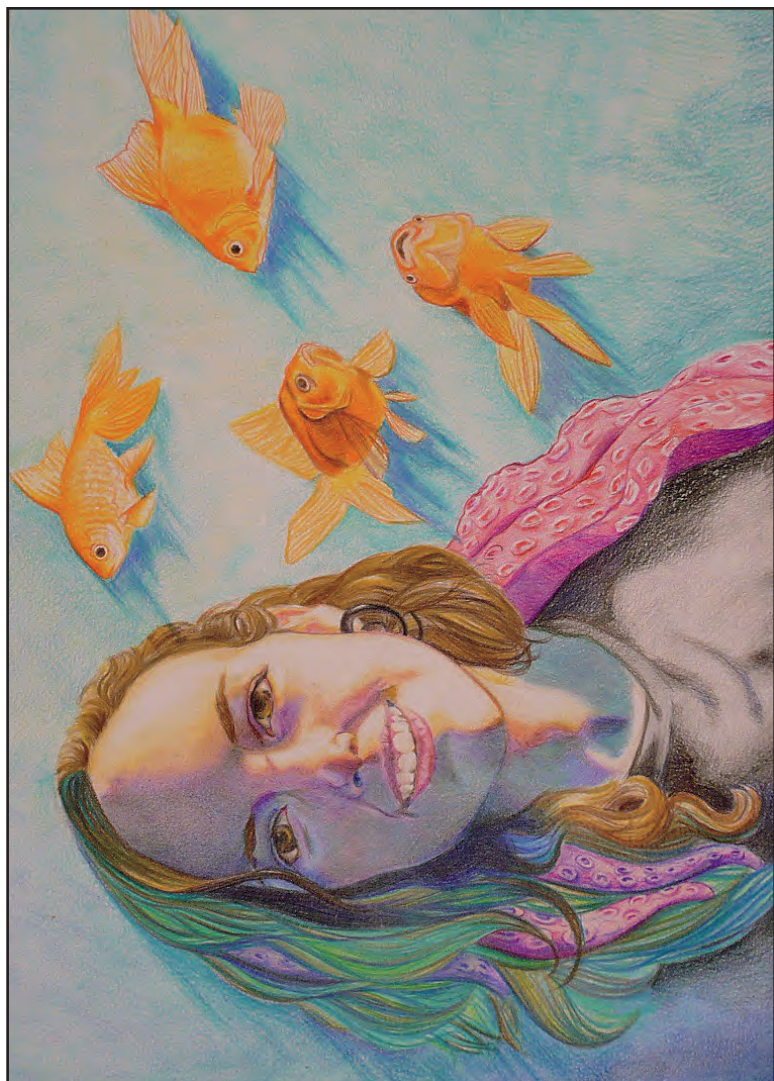
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# Octopus's Garden

by Amanda Franz

*Third Place Winner*



## Grades 7 & 8



# Our Own Expressions

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# Give a Helping Hand

by Allyssa Metcalf

*First Place Winner*





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# Red All Star

by Dallas Martin

*Second Place Winner*



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# Laugh, Love, Live

by Breonna Rose

*Third Place Winner*



## Grades 9 & 10



# Our Own Expressions



# Kyra

by Emilie Webb

*First Place Winner*





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# Visual Reflexion

by Hannah Squires

*Second Place Winner*



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# Tibetan Woman

by Molly MacKinnon

*Third Place Winner*



## Grades 11 & 12



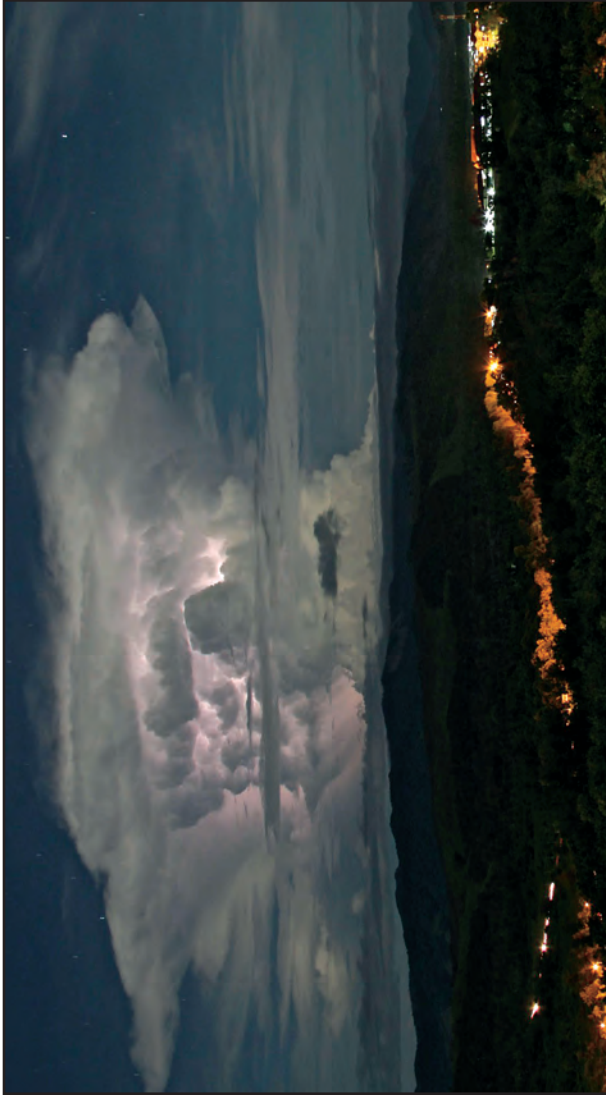
# Our Own Expressions



# **Illuminate**

by Katherine Meikle

*First Place Winner*



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# Rub-a-Dub

by Jazmine Horne

*Second Place Winner*







# Veronica

by Savanna Soukey

*Third Place Winner*



# Short Story

**Grades 7 & 8**



*Our Own  
Expressions*

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# Homeless

by Matt Patterson

*First Place Winner*

"Eliot, get down here! Now!" As usual, the wails from my older sister, Karen, were the first thing I heard in the morning. I moaned as I rolled over to check the time on my navy blue alarm clock. 8:34. "I'll be down in a second," I said as I tossed a shirt on and headed down the stairs. "Mom told me to have you run down to the store and get some groceries." Karen blabbed.

"Good morning to you, too." I said sarcastically. "Do I have to go now? It's not even 9:00 yet!" Karen rolled her eyes. "Yes, you should go now so I could actually eat breakfast!" I almost laughed. If Karen needed anything, breakfast would not be one of them. She's on the heavy side, and the main reason I have to go shopping more than once a week. "Why can't you do it?" I complained. She ignored me and handed me a ten dollar bill and a shopping list. And that was the last part of the conversation before she pushed me out of the house.

When I got to the corner store, I was instantly serenaded with the steady strum of an acoustic guitar. I smiled as Ron came into view. Ron was homeless and usually spent his time outside the store playing blues on his guitar, which was hand-made and handed down to him from his grandfather. He was really a nice guy, and I think everyone in the neighborhood knew him pretty well. "Morning, Eliot." he said in his hoarse voice. I nodded and smiled as I walked into the store. Then I got an idea. I opened my wallet and found six dollars and fifty cents in there. I grimaced, knowing that it wasn't enough for all the groceries. But I did it anyway. I walked back outside and handed the \$10 that was supposed to cover the groceries to Ron. He shook my hand and said "Thanks, pal!" with a grin. I headed back inside the store and bought the groceries. On my way out, Ron stopped me and said, "Wait, you like guitar, right?" Not sure where this was going, I replied "Uh, yeah,



sure." Immediately after my answer, he smiled and said, "Would you like to learn how to play guitar? I could teach you as thanks for the money." I was shocked. I've always wanted to learn how to play guitar, so my response was "That would be great! When will we do it?" He answered, "Tomorrow at ten." And with that, I ran home to find Karen waiting at the door, staring eagerly at the bag in my hand.

Karen frowned at the brown paper bag of groceries. "What, no cereal?" she rudely stated. I quickly came up with a cover story "Sorry, I was a dollar-fifty short. But what cereal do you want? I can buy some on my way up to Jordan's house." Jordan was my friend who lived down by the corner store, but, as you may have guessed, I was really going to my guitar lesson. I didn't want to tell her about it, since she's the only one in the neighborhood who thought Ron was no more than a greedy beggar. "Corn flakes, and when are you going?" she said in a, for once, rather polite manner. I grinned "Tomorrow at ten."

Before I left, I remembered something. My mind told me I'm a complete and utter idiot for even thinking about this, but my heart said it would be the right thing. I lifted up my mattress and pulled out the wad of cash hiding under it. Two hundred and forty-seven dollars that were supposed to buy me a video game console. *He needs it more than I do.* I kept telling myself over and over again, and I headed out.

I made my stride long and quick as I sprinted down the hill to the corner store. When he heard the clapping sound of my footsteps, Ron looked up from his guitar and shouted "Hey, Eliot!" He greeted me with a handshake, then handed me the guitar and taught me the basic chords, notes and keys, ending the lesson by teaching me a bluesy sounding tune that I often heard him play. At the end of the hour, Ron opened a cooler and handed me a can of root beer. "I figured to celebrate, we could have these." he wheezed as he grabbed one for himself. I cracked mine open and took a sip. *It's now or never.* I pulled out my money and solemnly said "Here, you need this more than I do, and you don't know how much these lessons mean to me." Ron just stared at the green bank notes. "You're honestly giving this to *me*?"

he half said, half coughed with awe. I nodded. Ron took the money with a shaking hand and shouted "I'm rich! I'm rich and it's all thanks to you, Eliot!" I smiled. I don't think I've ever seen someone so happy. He shook my hand one last time before saying "Thank you so much!" I nodded and walked home, with the bittersweet feeling I just gave away that much money.

That night I turned on the T.V. and flipped the channels to the news. The weather man was blabbing on about rain, rain, and more rain for this weekend. Then, a news report flashed on, and the reporter said "A man has been killed in a car accident, just a few minutes ago." That made me listen. They showed a picture of the man, and my heart stopped. It was Ron. "What?!" I shouted, barely believing what was on the screen. "Ron Davis had been walking across the street when a black pickup truck ran him over and was kill-" I turned off the T.V. and sat there for a moment, really trying to swallow what happened.

The next day, when Karen found out I 'forgot' to buy the corn flakes, she gave me two dollars and kicked me out of the house, when I tripped on something. It was a cardboard box, with a note on the side. It said:

"Thanks again for the money, Eliot. I just bought myself some new clothes, and I'm going to buy a tent and tonight's dinner. As thanks for the gift, I decided to give you one, too. Don't try giving it back, I don't need it anymore. I've signed up for a job application at a music store, so I won't need to play guitar anymore for money.

Thanks,

Ron"

I put the letter aside and turned to the box. As I opened it, my eyes widened until I looked like I was staring at a diamond the size of a potato, but it was better. As my eyes began to water, I picked up the contents of the box. It was Ron's guitar and a can of root beer.

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# Correspondence in a Cow Suit

by Stephanie Davis

*Second Place Winner*

To David,

As you may have already discovered through the grapevine I have been in deep cover as a raccoon, lama, then as a cow, my greatest role yet. Lady Ancoavia has recently misplaced a priceless family heirloom, the Jade Apple. I'm sure you have seen it. The ring is terribly unappealing, but apparently extremely valuable.

Milady suspects the old butcher of stealing the jewel as his eatery was the last establishment she had visited before it went missing. The good lady called in a favor and insisted I take a close look at his farm property.

You know how I feel about prying on private property, especially as said property is located in the center of nowhere. I went anyway for the sake of being a gentleman even though I am actually a sixteen year old time traveler.

But now it seems I'm in a bit of a perilous spot. I have been cow napped from a nearby field and shut away in a stall awaiting the slaughter. For some strange reason or another, I cannot remove this blasted cow suit.

I am in need of your assistance as soon as possible. Below is a rough sketch of a map to the property.

Best Regards,

Willard

To Willard,

I'm not quite sure how your letters keep getting into the Agency, and how David knows to come here to pick up his mail. But please,

stop. This is a detective agency not a post office. If my mentor happens to come home while David comes for his mail I'm going to get in trouble. I'm not supposed to let anyone into the house while he's out on business you know.

Please leave me alone,

Leon, Detective's Apprentice

Dear Milady Alice Riding Hood,

The strangest thing happened today, Milady. I ventured down to the Agency to retrieve my telegrams from Leon. I saw nothing at first glance; a few threats from the Society, a box with a single pickle inside, and a letter from the Cioccolato Institute. I also received a telegram from Will, seems he has gotten himself stuck in a cow suit, again, and is in need of assistance.

How Willard even managed to send this letter still in a cow disguise is a mystery.

How strange. Because of the apparent urgency of the matter at hand Alexander and I will be leaving London and catching a train to Italy tonight.

We expect to be gone no longer than a couple of weeks. Be sure to retrieve my mail from the Agency. Leon will not be pleased to see you. Mention my name and he will let you in.

I regret taking Willard's apprentice out of school for this. But he locked me in an extremely dark broom closet until I agreed he could come along. Please deliver the following letter to the Cioccolato Institute at your earliest convenience, preferably by Monday.

To Whom It May Concern,

Alexander London will not be attending regular classes at Cioccolato Institute until further notice, something urgent has come up. To be frank the matter at hand is life or death. And no, I am not going

to enroll in the institute. No matter how many telegrams you send me. I am in no need of any further education as of my 9th year, as I suspect you can plainly see from this letter.

Sincerely,

David (I will not be giving my last name)

Have you noticed that the name of the institute is actually 'chocolate' in Italian? Yet they serve no chocolate in the tea room?

Most Sincerely,

David Vanguard

Dear David,

I am writing to you today because I have misplaced David's letter in the cake shop on the corner. I'm afraid I may have thrown it away along with that poor excuse for a marble cupcake by mistake. Not to mention a member of the Society or one of the Wolves attempted an abduction. No worries, my father and his Huntsmen came to my rescue. Speaking of father I must apologize for all of the several occasions where he has tried to kill you. Anyway, I found one of your later letters in my sugar gliders cage, please do not ask me how it ended up in there, I do not have the slightest clue.

I will be leaving Paris as soon as possible because of the abduction attempt. My father does not know of my trip. I sincerely hope he does not try to kill you again.

Waiting for your safe return,

Alice Riding Hood

Dear Lady Riding Hood,

I have no time to contemplate my impending doom at the hands of the Huntsmen for I am currently attempting to pull Willard's head out of a cow suit. Though I do not approve of a twelve year old traveling alone.

Terribly Tired,

David Vanguard

To: Lady Riding Hood, and Apprentice Leon

I'm happy to announce our safe return. We have discovered the butcher to be the thief, especially after he tried to murder me with an axe. Then proceeded to kidnap Alexander and hide him in a graveyard. Throughout this adventure Willard remained trapped in the cow suit. You can imagine how difficult sneaking a cow on board a train was.

Lady Ancoavia suggested a little get together to celebrate our safe return. The event will take place a week from today in the ballroom under the library.

Also, for your enjoyment I have put together a record of strange things Willard said during the long train trip, while trapped in a cow suit.

In the dining cart:

Willard: David I believe I have left all of my peppermint candy in your broom closet.

Me: It doesn't matter, I've eaten them all.

Baggage Car (midnight):

Willard: David? I think something is moving in this luggage.

David: Oh for goodness sake, be quiet!

In the dining cart:

Willard: And that, Alexander, is why you should not put pepper on a vanilla cupcake.

Alexander: David, Will's saying strange things!

You may read the rest in the book I have written titled 'Strange Things That Willard Has Said and My Responses'.

Best Regards,

David Vanguard

To my contact in Venice that shall not be named,

David and my young apprentice Alexander have been abducted by the Society who are attempting to lure Leon, Lady Riding Hood, and Lady Ancoavia to the ballroom under the grand library. You must warn them before next Friday.

I may be of some assistance to you. Come to the Parisian train station just outside of London. Bring a knife. I'll be the cow standing next to the train tracks.

Sincerely,

Willard

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# Fairest in the Land

by Meghan Tiffany Low

*Third Place Winner*

Rose was of average build, height, and weight. Her hair was not fantastically long or daringly short; simple and stopping half-way down her back. She liked the sound of rushing water and the color of the night sky. But the similarities to normal folk in the kingdom of Norstenthier stopped abruptly there.

Rose was gorgeous. And not just your occasional clear, sweet face that earns an extra smile. No, she had absolutely flawless features. Blue eyes that sparkled like sapphires, always. Perfectly shaped blood red lips that had earned her name, Rose. Cheeks that held a constant blush, framing a straight, pretty nose. Around it all was flowing silky hair the color of pure sunlight.

It was a face that had provoked many jealous and longing looks, and even made Rose used to open gawks. But Rose hated her appearance with all of her heart.

Her memories of her parents were fuzzy, a kind smile here, a shining lock of auburn hair there. That was because Rose's parents had been dead since she was four years old. From the careless murmurs of her many maids, Rose had learned over the years that the king accused and executed her parents as spies that had conversed with an enemy. But that had been after some of the king's men had told him of the angel living in the humble farmhouse.

So that left Rose, now at fifteen, as a princess of no noble blood to be the prize of the king of Norstenthier. There were many court ladies that had been commissioned to train her as royalty who had told her how lucky she was to be so pretty. Rose didn't feel beautiful. She wanted someone to like her just for who she was.



It was probably close to midnight as Rose sat staring out over the distant moon-lit hills, relishing the quiet moments where she could truly be herself. The moon and the stars, sitting on their deep blue backdrop, weren't absorbed with the way she looked.

A small sigh escaped her, as she stared out over the landscape. Rose turned back into her room, but gasped and nearly fell out of the window at what she saw. Several ninjas had somehow appeared out of nowhere. Yes, ninjas. For some reason the kingdom of Norstenthier had been having trouble in years before with the black-clad warriors.

Rose didn't have time to cry out for help as the ninjas seized her and plunged down from the steep tower. The wind whistled past her ears as they made their quick but silent descent. Before she knew it, they were past the gate. The sentries were oblivious to the silent warriors kidnapping Rose.

The group moved quickly and without a sound into the cover of the Dark Forest, finally coming to a rest far within. Rose was placed unceremoniously onto the ground. She drew her knees up to her chest, trembling more with fear than with the chill in the air.

Rose tried to think of everything she knew about ninjas. They were the quiet, shadow-like warriors that were the symbol of evil in Norstenthier. Mother tucked their children into bed at night with warnings to be good, 'Don't skip your chores, or the ninjas may get you!' But Rose couldn't really remember anything that the ninjas had done that had made them enemies.

*Well, at least I know they are rotten, kidnapping fiends...* Rose thought to herself. What did they want with her anyway? They probably just wanted to parade her around as their prize like the king had, or even hold her prisoner for a ransom. But as she thought of it, she realized ninjas really weren't like that. She realized something else, which was something of a shock to her: they weren't staring at her. Now, this may seem extremely shallow and self-absorbing on Rose's part, but she was used to everyone she had ever met gazing at her, eyes as wide as daisies.

Rose actually found she liked not being stared at; it made her feel a little normal. Apart from the fact that she was sitting in an inky, decrepit clearing, miles from her home, with a company of sinister ninjas surrounding her and making camp... ok, maybe circumstances weren't quite ordinary, but Rose knew she was going to have to make the best of her situation.

So Rose straightened her spine, arranging herself like her princess lessons had taught her, and looked as prim and demure as could be. She felt extremely silly, but nonetheless sat straight and proud in her dirty, torn nightgown. Before long, she drifted off to sleep.

When Rose opened her eyes, fractured sunlight gleamed down from the forest canopy. She turned and stretched, finding a lone ninja silently watching her. He removed his mask, and Rose recognized him as the leader of the ninjas that had taken her.

She expected some lecture about not trying to escape, or something along those lines, but what he said was much different from what she was expecting. He was friendly and offered her some breakfast, then proceeded to tell her a story that both made her want to laugh and cry. He told her of how her parents had been ninjas, tangled in a plot to overthrow the terrible king and set Norstenthier free.

The ninjas had been unable to free her parents when they were captured, but had received their dying wish: to save Rose from the king and train her too. He paused letting his words penetrate Rose. The story worked its way into her skin, head and finally her heart.

But it was her choice. Rose could abandon her life of royalty to come and be a part of this small revolution, or be returned, unscathed, to her paltry and indulgent – yet meaningless – life at the palace. *It is a simple choice, really*, Rose thought to herself. What could this small rebellion force, however elite, do to penetrate the castle without her extensive knowledge of its inner-workings?

She was about to say no. The word that could end her short, yet exciting experience hovered at the tip of her lips. Then she caught sight of her face. It was a small reflection, really, compared with the full-length mirrors that the vain king had festooned his castle with. She saw herself, bedraggled but beautiful in the reflection of a dewdrop that clung to an old maple leaf. It was enough.

Rose would be something more than just what her face was to others. She pulled on the black warrior mask that concealed her face, grinning behind the black cloth.

She couldn't see if the head ninja was pleased or not with her decision as he donned his own mask. But there was a distinct shine in his smoke-gray eyes as he turned to her. "First lesson, always be ready to fight, and never misjudge anything or anyone." He said.

As she began to train, Rose thought wryly to herself, *even roses have thorns.*



# Short Story

**Grades 9 & 10**



*Our Own  
Expressions*



# Hope

by Delaney Adix

*First Place Winner*

Michael slopped along through the six inches of slushy snow, not even bothering to lift his feet. His normally crisply-ironed slacks were now wet and limp up to his knees. His expensive leather shoes were probably ruined. But he didn't care. Nothing mattered now.

Where had he parked? Never mind, he'd just walk home.

"I'm sorry, Michael," his boss had said. "I don't know if these rumors are true, but I just can't take a chance...it's bad publicity. You understand, right?"

Michael had nodded, taken his last paycheck and left.

A horn blared and Michael leapt out of the car's way, its driver gesturing angrily. For a fleeting moment, Michael wished the car had run him over. But he couldn't do that to Jamie — not now.

*What's going to happen when this baby comes?* He wondered. *Our savings won't last forever. Jobs are scarce in this economy — good ones at least. I guess I could always shuck corn for a living.* He laughed, but the sound was hollow and as cold as the snow flitting down from the soupy sky.

Michael jumped at the vibrating in his coat pocket. He pulled out his iPhone and stared at the display: *Jamie calling*. He hesitated for a moment, and then tapped the screen with a frozen thumb.

"Babe," he said, his voice choked. "I have to tell you something—" he stopped, listening to his wife's urgent voice on the other end. His eyes widened, and he started to run, slipping down the icy street. "Hold on, Jamie," he said. "I'm coming."

He reached his upscale home about the same time as the ambulance. The vehicle screamed to a halt as Michael flung open

the door and ran to his wife, who lay on the couch, clutching her watermelon-sized belly. Jamie smiled when she saw her husband, and then gasped at the pain stabbing her abdomen. Michael knelt by the couch and gripped Jamie's hand with his cold one. "It's going to be okay," he said as calmly as he could — which wasn't very.

Four men in blue uniforms wheeled a gurney into the house and gently hoisted Jamie onto it. Michael hurried alongside it, holding his wife's hand and clenching his teeth to keep from screaming with her.

The ambulance ride seemed to take an eternity. Michael squeezed his eyes shut and prayed so hard tears ran down his cheeks.

When they reached the hospital, the uniformed men wheeled Jamie away and a receptionist with a too-wide-to-be-real smile forced Michael to fill out some forms. Things were so blurry, Michael didn't know if he had put his or Jamie's name down as the one having a baby.

When he had finally fumbled his way through the papers, he tossed the clipboard onto the reception desk and hurried off to find his wife. She was lying in a dim room dressed in a pale green hospital gown — a color that looked very much like the toothpaste Michael had used that morning. He stopped; for some reason, he suddenly felt very nervous to talk to her. What if she asked him about work? What would he say? He was about to turn on his heel and leave, when Jamie opened her eyes and motioned for him to come over.

He gulped and shuffled over to the bed, plastering a smile onto his face.

It didn't fool Jamie, "What's the matter?"

"Nothing," he lied. "I'm just . . . worried about you."

"I'm going to be fine," Jamie smiled. "And you are too."

Michael smiled, but under his breath he whispered, "I don't know about that."

"So," Jamie ran a hand over her belly. "What are we going to name the baby?"

"If it's a boy, Caleb, if it's a girl, Emily," Michael said absently. The couple had opted to keep the baby's gender a surprise.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Jamie started to say, but just then, her water broke. Once again, she was whisked away and Michael scurried along beside her.

The night seemed to drag by, a blur filled with words like "dilated" and "crowning."

Michael sat next to his wife, holding her hand and mechanically coaching her to breathe. Sweat dripped down her face, and tears down his. She was the most wonderful person in the world and he had let her down. It was his job to make the money and provide for her, and now, he couldn't do either of those things. They had enough money saved up in the bank to get them by for a few months, but then what? What if he couldn't find a job? They wouldn't be able to pay the bills anymore. Michael pictured the beautiful yellow nursery just down the hall from his and Jamie's room — a white bassinet tucked sweetly into the corner, and shelves lined with Teddy bears and stuffed bunnies. He pictured the room being demolished by a wrecking ball and a super center being built in its place.

The tears were streaming now; down Michael's face and into his lap. A dark cloud of hopelessness seemed to hover over his head.

*"One more big one!"* A faraway voice ordered.

Someone cried out — it sounded like Jamie.

*Will we have to live in a box in the park?* Michael wondered.

There was a lot of movement, and crying. Somebody shoved a pair of cold scissors into his hands.

He shifted his eyes down but all he saw was a pink blur. He blinked a few times, and the tears cleared. There was their baby — a girl someone said — lying on Jamie's tummy. Michael snapped his head up at Jamie; she was beaming. Michael looked back down at the baby. Her little body was red, unwashed and warm as he leaned forward to



cut the cord. The doctor gently rubbed the baby's legs and back until she squawked like a parrot and opened and closed her fists awkwardly. She had the smallest fingers Michael had ever seen; the tips adorned by even smaller fingernails. Her eyes were scrunched closed and the little bit of peach fuzz she had was matted and wet.

Michael stared down at the baby; this was his daughter... a tiny little life, a person. One day she would walk, and she would talk and sing; she would read and learn. And then one day, a day that would come all too soon, this tiny little person, growing older by the minute, would bring forth her own children and the cycle would begin again. The beautiful, wonderful cycle that seemed just beginning to Michael.

He gazed upon his little girl, all things he had been so worried about just minutes before, seemed rather frivolous now. As he breathed in his daughter's new-baby scent, and felt the weight of her tiny body in his arms, his worries began to fade.

It was then that Michael realized that he had everything he could ever want in his faith and his growing family. And then, inspiration struck. Michael looked up at his wife, smiled his first real smile in hours and said, "Let's name her...Hope."

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# The Accident

by Anne Gaspers

*Second Place Winner*

As I looked back at the gray shingled house with its homey wrap-around porch, I took a shuddering breath, determined not to cry. The house might look drab and dull to an outsider, but to me it never would be. This house held all of my precious childhood memories, and most importantly the memories of my parents. With this thought, I felt a warm drop land on my cheek. I turned away from the house, sighing, and faced the waiting social worker.

“Hi, Janie, I’m Tara.”

“Hi,” I replied, nervously, pushing my hair behind my ear.

“How are you? Sorry to rush you, but we better get going. We have to get to the airport on time.”

“I have my bags all packed and ready.”

“Good! We’ll get in the car and we’ll be on our way.”

I hesitated, and then slid into the waiting car, giving a last look at my home. My life had changed so drastically since the accident. Usually I break down in tears when any little thing happened, from skinning my knee, to getting a bad score on a test. But now after my life change in those few seconds, I had not cried. What’s wrong with me! My throat felt blocked, my eyes red, yet there were no tears for my parents or myself.

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Three hours later the Pilot’s voice came over the loudspeaker, “Now landing in the Minneapolis St. Paul International Airport. Please stay seated until the plane has come to a complete stop. Thank you for choosing National Airlines.” I had arrived. My Aunt Faith, Uncle Sam and my cousin were supposed to meet me here. Not that I was excited

to see them, or excited that I'm going to live with them in Spring Grove, Minnesota.

I reached up to get my bag, pushing past the throng of people. After jostling through the crowd, I got off the plane and saw a sign that said, "Welcome Janie! Under the sign stood my Aunt and Uncle and Cousin. I stood there awkwardly, but they smiled warmly.

"We're very happy to have you come stay with us," said Aunt Faith.

"Janie! I can't wait for you to see our house and farm," said my cousin Charlie. "We've got tons of horses and land and cattle, and it's so fun to go riding, you've just got to try it! Have you ever ridden a horse before? "

"Fun," I said. "I rode once in New York."

"Come on, we'd better get on the road, we've got a long drive," said Uncle Sam.

Finally after many distractions, we got out of the airport and filed into their suburban. The drive from the airport to the farm would take around two hours. I sat facing the window, thinking. Then slowly my eyelids grew heavy.

"Is she asleep, Faith?" said Uncle Sam.

"I think she is."

"Poor thing, she has had a rough couple of weeks."

"Yes, she seems to be holding a lot inside of her."

"We better tell Charlie to leave her alone, and not pester her with questions."

"I can't even imagine losing one's parents. I don't know as Charlie would be coping as well as she is."

"I know. We'll just have to give her all our love, and help to make her part of the family."

I awoke two hours later as we arrived at the farm. The house seemed homey enough, but it was not my own and never would be. I missed my house.

"Janie let's get you some food and then right into bed," said Aunt Faith.

"Thanks," I replied.

After the soup I felt so sleepy that I could hardly manage to get up and go to bed. But I did and the next thing I knew the sunlight was streaming into my green room. My bedroom was at the very top of the house. And from there I could see the whole property. There were cows and horses grazing lazily on the rolling pastures, and a huge cherry tree was blooming right outside the window. I sighed; and then I frowned.

"Breakfast!" yelled Aunt Faith.

I hurried down the stairs, surprised at how hungry I was.

"Today Charlie is going to give you a tour of the house and farm and maybe even a riding lesson.

"Ok," I said feeling a little timid. I had never especially liked horses.

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Two weeks had passed since I first arrived at the farm everyone. I still can't sleep, remembering the accident and the reason I'm here. I am more timid than I used to be. I imagine disaster in everything I do. Before the accident, thoughts like this never occurred to me. I never really thought about death. I always took my life for granted, never imagining that it could change in a matter of seconds.

After breakfast I went and saddled up April, the sweet old mare I had been riding. The day was pretty nice through there were a few dark clouds in the sky. I started off through the woods and down towards the river.

After an hour of riding I got to the river and dismounted. I uncinched April and loosened the noseband on her bridle so she could graze. Why did the accident happen? I wish I had my parents back! Aunt Faith and Uncle Sam have no clue what I've gone through, they just don't understand me, I thought angrily, but I didn't cry. Then I felt and few rain drops land on my head and then a few more. Hurriedly, I got on April and set back to the farm. The clouds had covered the sky. I could hear thunder in the distance. The rain was now pelting down.

"I have to get to the farm before this storm gets any closer," I thought to myself. "Come, on April, let's go," I said. April's body had gone rigid and then she bolted. I clung to her sopping wet mane, hanging on for dear life. She tore towards the farm. Then she suddenly decided to jump the fence into the pasture. I slid, falling, until I hit the ground with a jolt.

"Ouch! That Hurt," I yelled. I felt tears on my face. I started to cry. All the tears that I had held back since my parents died in the car wreck came flooding out. I stood there, covered in mud, sobbing.

Aunt Faith and Uncle Sam came running out. They hugged me asking what was wrong.

"They died and I couldn't cry. I loved them, why did they have to die! I felt that if I cried I was accepting that were gone and would never come back.

"Honey!" said Aunt Faith.

She pulled me into a hug, her large frame engulfing me. I felt warm and safe for the first time since the car accident.

I smiled, knowing everything was going to be alright. I had not forgotten my parents, and I never would. Nothing could tarnish their memories. I hugged my Aunt and Uncle and headed back to my new home.

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# Jack's Yarn

by Isabel Anderson

*Third Place Winner*

"I have something for you." Jack's grandmother handed him a ball of yarn. It felt cool and smooth in his hand. Not like yarn should. He looked quizzically up at her. "I want you to unwind it," she continued, "and make it as tangled as you can."

Easy. Jack thought as he pulled the ball apart. After a few minutes, he was done. A disordered mess of yarn littered the floor.

"Now I want you to untangle it," his grandmother said, "and wind it back up."

"But Grandma!" Jack protested. "That's impossible! It would take years."

She smiled sadly down at him. "Listen Jack. The ball of yarn represents your life. You've made a mess of things. You need to change." Her voice wavered as a tear rolled down her cheek.

Jack awoke in a cold sweat. He rolled over and tried to go back to sleep, but couldn't. He thought about his dream, and of his grandmother, who had suddenly died earlier this year. She had been his guardian, the only loving and caring person he had ever known. She died from a heart attack, leaving him alone in the world. He never knew his father, and his mother had abandoned him when he was seven years old. Jack squeezed his eyes tightly shut and tried to block out the painfully vivid memories of the night his mother left, but they flooded in anyway.

He was sitting at the little wooden table in their kitchen, trying to do his homework, when his mother came in, carrying a small suitcase. Jack knew that she didn't really love him, but he didn't think that meant she would leave him.

"Mommy, how do you spell Mississippi?" he asked.

"I don't know." She seemed flustered. She glanced at the kitchen clock and picked up her bag. A horn honked outside and, taking a breath, she started towards the door.

"Where are you going, Mommy?" Jack hopped off his stool. "When will you be back?"

She stopped and turned around. "Goodbye Jackson." She kissed his forehead and then she was gone.

Jack, still tormented by the memory, lay in his bed, tears streaming down his face, feeling like he did that night, lost, helpless and utterly alone. He missed his grandmother and wanted to hear her tell him she loved him and that everything would be all right. Jack thought about the past year. He had been put into a Youth Care Center while people looked for another guardian, since he was only fourteen. But it was dreadful there. Jack was teased and bullied, the food was terrible, and the beds were rock hard. He ran away multiple times until they finally just gave up on him. He was told to come back when he was eighteen, or when he found someone to be his legal guardian to get the small inheritance his grandmother had left him.

He was living on the streets when he met Sam. Sam was a middle-aged volunteer who worked with the Rescue Mission going around giving food, winter clothes, and blankets to people on the streets and telling them about Jesus. When Sam found Jack, he persuaded him to live in a Mission's home for teens. Jack was reluctant to go, remembering the Youth Care Center, but he was tired of being sick and hungry all the time, and finally went. That was three months ago, and things were going better for him until this morning. Jack rolled over again in his bed, wishing he could take everything back.

It seemed ages ago he had got out of his bed, and tripped on someone's tennis shoe, twisting his ankle. He limped downstairs to breakfast and grumpily made his way through the line, getting eggs, bacon, hash browns, and some orange juice. As he sat down to eat,

he spied Bruce, the strongest, meanest boy there, and his group of “friends” heading his way. Bruce towered over everyone at 6’8, and weighed around 300 pounds. No one ever dared to mess with him. Jack scowled. What does he want? They came up to his table and Bruce squeezed himself onto the bench.

“Hey Jackie. How many of you does it take to screw in a light bulb?” Jack frowned, but kept silent. “Hey, I asked you a question, dummy.” Jack chugged the rest of his juice and stood up. “Why so quiet this morning? Huh?” Bruce also stood up. “Got something you’re hiding?” Jack started to walk to the garbage bin to throw the rest of his eggs away, but Bruce blocked him. “Where you going?” Bruce pushed him backwards. That was it.

“Get out of my way you fat pig,” Jack yelled, his eyes blazing. Someone gasped and the room went silent. No one had ever had the guts to stand up to the huge bully, let alone call him a pig.

“What did you just say?” Bruce narrowed his eyes. Everyone held their breath.

“Still hungry? Here, have these.” And with that Jack threw his half-eaten soggy eggs into the bully’s face.

Bruce roared and stumbled backwards, trying to wipe the eggs out of his eyes. “You’re gonna pay for that, Jackie!”

Jack was too angry to be scared. He was just about to let his fist fly into Bruce’s face, when Sam, who was the supervisor of the boy’s quarters, walked in. Everyone shuffled away. Jack then spent the rest of the day cleaning the entire cafeteria alone. Sam also made him apologize to Bruce, who brushed past him on his way out, and whispered, “You’ll be way more sorry when I’m through with you.”

But Jack couldn’t help but feel grateful to Sam now. If Sam had walked in the room 10 seconds later, he would have already been beaten to a pulp. And if he had to clean up the cafeteria with Bruce... Jack shivered. What was I thinking? What an idiot I am. I’m probably gonna be dead before the week is over. I’m so glad Sam came in



though. Jack sighed and got out of his bed. I wonder why he volunteers here. Does he not have a family? Why does he care so much about these horrible kids? He walked to the window, watching the cars zoom past on the freeway, and listening to the sirens in the distance. He thought about Bruce, and sighed again as he pulled his dirty, gray backpack out from under his bed.

As Jack was eating his breakfast the next morning, Sam walked over to him carrying a cup of coffee. "Hey Jack," he sat down at the table. "I heard what Bruce said to you yesterday, and I'm really concerned."

Jack blushed. "I'll be fine," he mumbled.

Sam stared at his coffee, then looked up. "How'd you like to get out of here?" Jack stopped chewing, his eyes wide in surprise. "I've actually been thinking about this for a while," Sam continued, "and talking with my wife. We don't have any kids, and always wanted some. And so I was wondering if you want to join our family."

Our family. An actual family. Jack started to smile. "Yeah. I've never had a real family before."



# Short Story

**Grades 11 & 12**



*Our Own  
Expressions*

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# Writer's Block

by Kaley Kiermayr

*First Place Winner*

On the third day, he went around the house and gathered up all the clocks. He put them in the closet where they would stay, along with all three television remotes and the two laptops. On his desk, the unplugged phone lay on its side, displaying its dark screen. Its cord draped over the desk and sloped down to the floor where it gathered next to the trash can, which served little purpose anymore. It overflowed with bad ideas, uninspired dialogue, and characters that had been discarded. Their personalities, like the paper they were written on, had been recycled into other characters who'd survived the drafting process.

Over the unmeasured hours, his eyes continued to creep to the places where clocks would have been. He was forced to conclude that he had never been at the mercy of time. He had unknowingly found himself at the mercy of his own creation. He had been betrayed by a character so unlikely that he had been too slow to react. The mutiny had stirred slowly until each word was naming its terms, asking for his surrender. He was too exhausted from his battle with syntax and punctuation to do much more than struggle feebly against the swift and rising rebellion of the plot.

He dutifully placed his last period and shut his notebook, reverently adding it to a pile of similarly bound notebooks that lined the bottom of a deep drawer. His back ached as he stretched in his chair and stared at the notebooks that had taken years to fill. Not for the first time, he was unsettled by the idea of leaving the plot lines tangled and unresolved, the characters left to their own devices for the night. He felt that maybe it would not do to let the characters grow bigger or develop motivations while he slept, unaware, that maybe tonight he should stay and make amends. He thought of his wife

across the hallway in their warm bed. He had not seen her for days, but he had heard the ghostly sounds of her beyond the door to the study, phantom footsteps, the shower turning on and off, her singing as she folded clothes and cooked meals which she left where he might find them. Her soft and unobtrusive presence reminded him of the existence of a world beyond the door to the study, which had remained closed to him for the past three days.

He lingered at the door handle, his head heavy and restless with the voices of characters clamoring to have their stories told. The loudest voice was that of a villain whose refusal to cooperate had resulted in a standoff. The writer couldn't help but feel betrayed by the would-be villain, whose desire to fall in love defied his creator and his entire purpose. The villain only existed because he, the writer, had cannibalized bits and pieces of other characters in order to create a monster. He knew exactly what the villain was capable of because he knew the character inside and out; he could have conversed with his character, and had done so several times before.

He began to doubt he had any more power over the story than the characters themselves. He took his hand off the door handle. He would not let the villain win.

It was not clear if this thought was his alone or simply twin to the murmurs of the individuals that shared his consciousness and demanded more from him than he began to believe he was capable of. His hands began to shake as he realized the weight of the responsibility he had to all of them. He owed them his success, his days and nights spent building them up and tearing them down. *Now let us speak*, they begged. He licked his pen and began, tasting their words in the ink. The sudden rush of words began as an exquisite zinging down his spine. He became a conduit, the metallic tang inciting words like lightning. His hand dragged endlessly back and forth across the paper, but he could not stop while they demanded justice. It was easier this way, he thought feverishly, barely awake and slowly consumed.

He looked on with mild interest as the villain fell in passionate love with a gentle young woman who had been destined for a tragic death since the early stages of character development. The writer thought smugly that this was only just. The villain was not meant to be distracted from the work he was intended for.

The villain buried his love in an open field and swore revenge on the one who had killed her. He traveled through the night until he reached a house that was dark and silent, its inhabitants at rest, and crept through the silent darkness until he reached a set of doors at the end of a hallway. The villain turned away from the door to the left, where light still shone underneath. He entered the door on the right, which opened into a room that was quiet and still. Within, a woman slept unaware. Her soft breathing was loud in the silence. Gently and deliberately, he smothered her with a pillow still warm from her head.

Content, the writer closed his eyes for just a moment. It was still dark when he awoke with a start, his head resting upon a soft cushion. His eyes still searched for a clock in the dark, but calmly and without anxiety because he now understood he had all the time in the world. He must have fallen asleep for just a moment, and his wife had come in and left the pillow under his head as a gentle reminder. She knew not to disturb him, he thought fondly, and watched his cramped hand float across the notebook page with a placid smile.

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# O Captain! My Captain!: A Starship's Lament: Returning Home

by Amanda Gordon

*Second Place Winner*

If starships could sigh, then the *Odysseus* surely would have. Finally, she thought, her people, her crew, her *captain*, had found the way back home. Back through the wormhole that had thrown them all into this strange universe. It had been a long, hard road. Her primary operating systems hadn't been in regulation-spec repair for nearly eight years, and her hull was dented and torn from the attacks she and her people had weathered. *Odysseus* had been old long before this mission-gone-wrong. Her bones ached, and sometimes, in the dead of Gamma-watch, the great engine that was her heartbeat strained and faltered- not even her Engineer could fix that, not entirely.

But, she mused quietly, it had not been an all-bad journey. Her operating systems weren't regulation-spec, but having integrated so many new components, they were better than anything back home. Her hull was damaged, but strong, repaired many times over by her engineers. Then, she rumbled with gentle amusement, causing her Engineer to look up suspiciously before turning back to her diagnostic scans with a frown, then there were her people. Some had died, *Odysseus* acknowledged- space travel was a dangerous occupation - but most of her original crew were alive and well. They'd picked up a new crewman along the way- *Odysseus* liked him, this little alien Starsailor boy- the only one who knew she was alive and spoke to her as such. And her people had such adventures, in this new place. *Odysseus* had heard her Captain say that it was like the stuff of fairytales. Privately, he'd told the silent ship that he'd tell his son and daughter about their adventures. They'd like that, he'd said.

Yes, *Odysseus* concluded, with another melancholy hum, yes good had come from the journey. She'd be happy to get home, though, to more familiar stars and the blue sky under which she was constructed.

Still...

For a moment *Odysseus'* engines faltered. When they returned home, the ship thought with a tremor, most of her people, her friends, would leave. Some would move away, to serve on other ships, and maybe she'd see them again in the line of duty. But others, others had confided to her that they'd be retiring from starship service, forever. Not because she was a bad ship, they'd assured her, but because on this eight-year journey they'd realized that they had responsibilities back home. Things they had to do. Her captain, too, had responsibilities- a wife and two children. *Odysseus* would be very sad, to see him leave her. But she supposed that she was ready, now, to let him go.

He'd been sleeping, *Odysseus* thought brokenly, propulsion systems sputtering to a full stop. Her captain had been sleeping, after the re-crossing of the wormhole, as they'd begun nearing Earth. So that he could disembark, in full uniform and with a jaunty grin, the words, "Did you miss us?" on his lips. That's what he'd told her before he'd gone to sleep.

And she'd just left him alone for a little while!, just a moment while she checked up on one of the primary navigational sensors, just to make entirely sure they wouldn't accidentally pass through *another* wormhole and start their journey all over again. But when *Odysseus* had looked back in on her captain, her beloved captain, because of a bad feeling she'd had, his heart was still.

She'd raised the alarms, of course, called in her Chief Medical Officer and the 2IC, just as all starships had been taught. Somehow, her Engineer and the little alien boy had known something was wrong. They'd appeared silently by her CMO's side.

It was a quick diagnosis. Her captain's death had been peaceful, the CMO had told the 2IC (Acting Captain, she supposed now, a sad note rumbling in her engine). A heart attack, in his sleep. The captain had not been a young man (and if the *Odysseus* could have shaken her head, she would have; all her people *were* so young, compared



to her own age), and the CMO speculated that, now that the crew was home, whatever it had been in their captain's heart that kept him going for all those years had finally stilled, and allowed him his rest.

It was finally time for the funeral. The return of Odysseus and her people to Earth was marked with much scrambling and paperwork- she had been mutely grateful that she had none of that to do. So funerals, even for the Captain, had to be put on hold for more joyful things, like reunions years overdue and introductions of brand-new friends. But now, after all the paperwork was finished and the introductions had been done, it was time. And something was about to happen.

As per her captain's will, his funeral was to take place on Odysseus' bridge, with all the crew in attendance. And Odysseus had submitted the first request she had ever made to her government (much to their surprise; they had not expected one of their ships to be intelligent, she guessed). Odysseus had requested to do her captain one last service. To give him her words.

And so, after the formal elegy had been said, and the crew (but for the little alien boy, and her Engineer, who Odysseus thought now might have had known about her all along) stood in mild confusion, stock still on her bridge, Odysseus dimmed the lights and projected her voice- the rumbling voice of all starships, with a lilt that was distinctly her own- over her speakers.

"O Captain! My Captain! our odyssey has done  
Look, see, we've made it home at last  
Our battles have been won.  
O Captain! My Captain! we have returned to the surly bonds of earth  
Where buttercups and tortoises lie  
There is no greater proof of your success or worth.  
But Captain! O my Captain! Silent falls your heart  
To my hearing, all throughout my halls  
Empty without that single part.

For you the honorary shots into the air were fired  
When there was no air but stardust to fire among.  
And the crewmen wept, and my lights dimmed  
And by the lone Starsailor, a mourning song was sung.  
Then we journeyed forth, for the last time  
Across the black of space t'word home  
My Engineer and confidante cold comfort spoke  
That thus you'd not be buried here alone  
In the depths of space, no flag to stand  
Where only starship-pyres like me do light the way  
For souls of sea-fare star-fare captains  
To journey on from where their bodies lay.

My Captain, oh, that you could see  
The blue sky of your Earth-en place  
One last time, with eyes that, bright  
Shone, lively, on your face.  
O Captain! My Captain! Would that you could speak once more  
Breath in lungs, command my sails, to flee to other shores.  
But now, my captain, still you lie  
Upon uneven, home-like ground  
Upon my bridge, a fun'ral dirge  
On my speakers, the only sound.  
The Starsailor is crying, and my Engineer, too, weeps  
Your crewmen are all grieving  
As you lie in final sleep.

O Captain! My Captain! Your body, cold and dead  
Rests lonely, in its State  
And my crewmen and my people  
Weep and are full of hate  
For that great enemy, coincidence, that they cannot revenge upon.  
And, sun on my hull, grief on my bridge  
I will hold my own vigil for you  
My Captain."

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# Mentos and Offerings

by Tamala Aown

*Third Place Winner*

Growing up as an attendee of Joy Bible Church, where welfare and tattoo are considered cuss words and starch is subconsciously considered a sacrament, dressing for Sunday morning service was largely an unattainable routine. My mother and I had it virtually mastered however; to the point where I would sleep in my beloved Calico dress the night before, giving myself a few extra, blessed moments of sleep. Twelve-year-olds do that kind of stuff, I would inform my mother, who would occasionally catch me in the act. She slept in her hair curlers.

“Let’s quiet our hearts and confess our sins,” the Reverend began, with the stereotypical prompt, the words dripped like honey, sickly sweet from his lips and dripped onto his well-trimmed beard, “Please kneel.”

What he actually meant by all that phraseology was that the congregation had a brief moment to bend their knees and examine the attire of his neighbors in a two-to-three-pew radius.

“Mommy, I want my hair braided like Rachel’s, with a large pink bow,” I said.

“Hush Amelia, and confess your sins, I don’t even know where Mrs. Straightforth buys such nonsense. If I can’t buy it at Target, it’s not worth buying.”

In my mother’s mind, Target was a sacrament. Scanning the congregation, I noted that everything was as usual. The Everwoods in the front row, all seven children in place, heads bowed. My mother said that Mrs. Everwood was a celestial angel, and her children were her heavenly hosts. And *boy*, did I believe it.

"Please rise," the Reverend announced, slowly his toupee lost visibility as he moved from his rigid kneeling posture to stand.

As I left the comforts of my kneeler, I noticed something peculiar and utterly jaw dropping out of the corner of my eye. A plump, underdressed middle aged woman, appearing as a sort of eccentric pastry in layers of fluff and gaudy colors. I almost expected her hair to go off in fireworks, with its corkscrew curls dancing in every direction, orbiting her head in a golden halo. She stood, barely perceptible over the pew, stuffing the space between herself and her nearest neighbor. With a voice that nearly doubled her magnitude, reminding me of an elephant I saw at the zoo once, she trumpeted,

*"AMEN!"*

I hiccupped with surprise. Silence. Slowly, people turned to peek in her direction, first with shock and then distaste. I noticed that Mr. Williams, in the third pew behind her, re-adjusted his sophisticated suit jacket and turned to his wife with a grunt. The general public was reeling from the bizarre outburst.

In efforts to pull the congregation together, the Reverend stammered, "Let our praises be heard, hymn number 456."

Not believing the hymnal was necessary; the woman began bursting forth in song, nothing particular, just an animated combination of praise and clapping, which escalated into a passionate "hallelujah!" The congregation, utterly scandalized, attempted to sing "Amazing Grace", but none could sing with such astonishing gusto as she.

Throughout the remaining service, I gawked at her, much like a tabby staring at a fishbowl. Occasionally she would shout "Amen!" and cause the elderly in our congregation to wake from their quiet stupor.

It went on in this way, for several weeks. The typical members would assume their positions regardless of the, "wolf in flamingo skins," as Elder Peterson would frequently remind us all. On a regular basis, she would be asked to relocate to the quiet room and stand with

the mother's of howling infants and antsy toddlers. Never opposed to the idea, she made her way to the sound proof room and continued with her exuberant worship. My mother, who volunteers at the local soup kitchen, informed me that this woman, Ms. Laurie, was a regular volunteer there, although no-one knew if she even had a home of her own.

On one particularly dreary, wet fall service, I woke from my normal end-of-the-sermon daydreams to find a plump hand resting on my shoulder. I was surprised to see Ms. Laurie standing over me with a heartwarming smile. Pressing a pink Mento into the palm of my hand, she patted my head, and drifted away. From that day forward, I was captivated.

Sunday after Sunday, Mento after Mento, this continued, until I eagerly awaited the end of the service in anticipation. I started paying more attention to the sermon and mimicked the different odd expressions of Ms. Laurie. Now throwing my hands in the air, now wringing them with fervor during the confessional, and then inaudibly whispering, "Amen," when she would shout it, all to my mother's chagrin.

"You know what Momma?" I remarked leaving church one morning, "Ms. Laurie doesn't fit in with the rest of us."

"No, she really doesn't, does she," my mother agreed haughtily.

"It looks like she buys her clothes from the clearance section at Value Village," I continued, "maybe we could have a special offering for her so she could buy herself some new clothes?"

"Honey, what a lovely idea," my mother sniggered, "Ms. Laurie is *clearly* less fortunate, I'm sure she would greatly appreciate it."

In no time, mother spoke to an elder, who in turn had a few words with the Reverend, who then announced to the entire congregation that a special offering was to held to clothe the poor and needy in the church.

When the appointed day arrived, I had all my spare quarters collected in a coin purse, each saved with romanticized thoughts of the surprise Ms. Laurie would feel when she received the money and how lovely she would look in her new clothes. As the offering plate was being passed around, I kept my eyes fixed on Ms. Laurie, wondering if she suspected. Much to my bewilderment, when the plate past before Ms. Laurie, she quietly slipped two crisp hundred dollar bills into the pile of lose change. Mystified for the rest of the service, I puzzled over how Ms. Laurie could give so much.

The following Sunday, the Reverend proclaimed with pride, "Thank you all for your generous denotations on behalf of the needy in our congregation. As a whole, we raise two hundred and twenty nine dollars!" He continued with a knowing smile, "I'm sure the specific family or individual who receives our funds will be very grateful indeed." Perplexed, I glanced over at Ms. Laurie, still flamboyantly dressed in her strange raga-a-muffin ensemble.

In response to the report, Ms. Laurie jumped up, clapping enthusiastically and shouted, "Hallelujah!"

After the service, Ms. Laurie came up to me, with her usual wide grin, and handed me a Mento. I received it with a blush. As she turned away, I grabbed her arm with a strange since of urgency.

"I saw you do, I saw you put in that money."

Still smiling, she replied, "sweet child," putting her hand on her own chest, "Those who were given much, much is required."

I had never felt poor until that day, I felt poor and cheated, and for some reason, I wanted what Ms. Laurie had, I wanted it, and I wanted bad.

