

# Acknowledgments

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Huntsville Arts & Cultural Grant Program



# Huntsville Literary Association's

## Fifty-first Annual

### Young Writers Contest

2019

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Marion Conover

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#### Contest Committee

Ann Marie Martin, **chair**; Carol Ashburn Roach, **co-chair**

Bob Fletcher, Linda Fletcher, Liz Stagg, Margaret J. Vann

**Awards Ceremony**  
**May 5, 2019**  
**Chan Auditorium, UAH Campus**  
**2 p.m.**

**Introduction**

Moderator, Jessica Temple

**Welcome**

Ann Marie Martin, HLA Contest Chair

**Program**

Ann Marie Martin, Chair

Jamie Dodson, **Speaker**

**Presentation of Awards**

Announcement of Elementary Poetry Winners by Peggy Brosious East

Announcement of Junior Poetry and Short Story Winners  
by Abby Dunham

Announcement of Senior Poetry and Short Story Winners  
by Rebecca Harbor Jones

Announcement of Art Winners by Debbie West

**Readings by First Place Winners**

**Concluding Remarks**

The purpose of the Young Writers Contest is to encourage, stimulate, promote, and reward outstanding creative writings by students in grades one through twelve in public, private, and home schools in Madison County. We wish to thank the teachers and school administrators for their support and assistance. Thank you, Peggy Brosious East, for the Awards Video; and thank you, WLRH Public Radio for your continued support of this contest.

Special thanks to the Contest Committee and the HLA Board of Directors for providing refreshments and hosting the reception that follows immediately after the ceremony. Special thanks to Publix for its generous donation.

**Dedication Page**

**The Huntsville Literary Association**

**dedicates**

**the 51st Young Writers Contest**

**to**

**Robert L. Fletcher**

**HLA Webmaster**



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## **Artwork**

Front Cover: *Endless Road* by John DiPietro  
Upper Back Cover: *ZoelsIsYourHomieFanArt* by Steven Heimann  
Lower Back Cover: *Miocito* by Hannah Einhorn





## Upper Elementary Poetry Division

First Place	Laura Howard, Fifth Grade Mountain Gap P-8 School Teacher: Jennifer Ivey
Second Place	Ysabella Heiderich, Fifth Grade Whitesburg Christian Academy Teacher: Karen Denman
Third Place	Brinkley Lang, Fifth Grade Whitesburg Christian Academy Teacher: Karen Denman
Honorable Mention	Mare't Bibb, Fifth Grade Whitesburg Christian Academy Teacher: Karen Denman
Honorable Mention	Joshua Macri, Fifth Grade Asbury School Teacher: Jennifer Macri

## **Junior Poetry Division**

First Place	Erin Howard, Eighth Grade Mountain Gap P-8 School Teacher: Leslie Graham
Second Place	Audrey Johnson, Eighth Grade Randolph School Teacher: Nichole Liese
Third Place	Morgan Dasher, Seventh Grade Liberty Middle School Teacher: Kristen Gist
Honorable Mention	Lilian Qu, Eighth Grade Discovery Middle School Teacher: Christi Moore
Honorable Mention	Morgan Mitchell, Eighth Grade Mountain Gap P-8 School Teacher: Leslie Graham

## Junior Short Story Division

First Place

Meigan Bailey, Seventh Grade  
Liberty Middle School  
Teacher: Kristen Gist



## Senior Poetry Division

First Place  
Chenoa Gentle, Senior  
Bob Jones High School  
Teacher: Brandy Panagos

Second Place  
Bryan McNeal, Sophomore  
Huntsville High School  
Teacher: Julie Ann Williams

Third Place  
Natasha Fernandez, Sophomore  
James Clemens High School  
Teacher: Donna Geise

Honorable Mention  
Maggie Brown, Sophomore  
Bob Jones High School  
Teacher: Brandy Panagos

Honorable Mention  
Jin-Shiuan Wu, Senior  
Bob Jones High School  
Teacher: Brandy Panagos

Honorable Mention  
Audrey Williams, Sophomore  
Home School  
Teacher: Amy Williams

## Senior Short Story Division

First Place

Olivia Fox, Junior  
James Clemens High School  
Teacher: Donna Geise

Second Place

Cassandra Volkin, Senior  
Bob Jones High School  
Teacher: Brandy Panagos

Third Place

Johnathan Hampton, Senior  
Bob Jones High School  
Teacher: Brandy Panagos

Honorable Mention

Pearllita Noel, Junior  
Sparkman High School  
Teacher: Paula Jo Munts

## Artwork Category

First Place  
(Front cover)

John DiPietro, Senior  
Bob Jones High School  
Teacher: Brandy Panagos

Second Place  
(Upper back cover)

Steven Heimann, Senior  
Bob Jones High School  
Teacher: Brandy Panagos

Third Place  
(Lower Back cover)

Hannah Einhorn, Senior  
James Clemens High School  
Teacher: Elizabeth Vaughn

Honorable Mention

Olivia Fox, Junior  
James Clemens High School  
Teacher: Elizabeth Vaughn

Honorable Mention

Julia Pimmel, Sophomore  
Bob Jones High School  
Teacher: Brandy Panagos

Honorable Mention

Holly Bradshaw, Junior  
Bob Jones High School  
Teacher: Brandy Panagos

## Lower Elementary Poetry

### Tasty Quest

Silent sneaking,  
Stealthy stalking,  
Down the hallway,  
Sssshhhhh! No talking,  
In the kitchen,  
On the chair.  
Look both ways,  
no one is there.  
Focused listening,  
jar is glistening.  
Swiftly moving, guessed it, dinch'ya?  
Sweet success! Cookie ninja.

*First Place  
Lower Elementary Poetry  
Jon Thomas Macri*

## **Fashion Forward**

In the beginning, glitter flowed in my veins,  
and bows swirled in my hair.

Edgy, ultrachic ensembles mesmerized me  
bringing flashy, fashion flare.

I imagine myself as a spiffy, posh person on the fashion runway.

I picture myself as a super, awesome, glittery,  
fashion star someday.

Kindness is the new trendsetter because how we treat people  
is what really matters.

A stylish, sophisticated soul sparkles  
from the inside using words that flatters.

A short time ago, I learned about being humble  
from a spider and a pig.

Always be true to yourself, kind to everyone,  
and don't hide behind a wig.

*Second Place  
Lower Elementary Poetry  
Elizabeth "Lizzie" Lee*

## **The Thunderstorm and the Frog**

One day a frog went in the stream.  
He was on a journey.  
The frog was jumping and skipping.  
Then thunder came and the frog  
Hid in a cave.  
The thunder stopped and the frog came out  
And went along his way.

*Third Place  
Lower Elementary Poetry  
Hassan Sharfi*

# Upper Elementary Poetry

## Trust

The ocean is cold as I wade in,  
Restless for company,  
Waves are breaking at my waist,  
Spattering droplets on my face and hair.  
Spinning the vapor into my hair.  
Already have I dipped my sandy toes into the white foam,  
The fizzing edges of waves that roll onto the shore.  
That was the entrance to the ocean, walking on the shore  
and watching the stars peek out of the folds  
of the fiery sky.  
Listening to the crash of waves on the sand.  
That was the gateway to another world.

Now I am past it all,  
Into the palace of waves.  
I crouch below a watery wall,  
After it breaks, I am flying on the wings of the water.  
And I rise like a soul when it finds someone to trust in.

I am soaring, crashing, flipping on my way to the high shore.  
I am safe in the ocean's arms.  
Drink it in.  
It's the closest thing you'll ever feel to flying.  
It's the closest think you'll ever know to motherly comfort.  
It's the nearest thing you'll ever see to the strength in being alone.  
It's knowing you are prevailing.

It's rising  
I am rising.

The wave sets me down softly on the sand.  
I'm lying on my side.  
Knowing I am made better by the gentleness of saltwater dreams.  
The earth is on my side.  
We fly.  
If I could sleep here, I would;  
Lying on the shore, letting the mild waves roll over me like a  
blanket.  
Watching the stars peek out of the layers of the sky.  
Trusting.  
My heart will stay here rising and prevailing.  
How wonderful, to be the water.  
To be part of this world.  
To be trusting.

*First Place  
Upper Elementary Poetry  
Laurel Howard*

## Man's Best Friend

The one person who is always there  
May not be a person at all

    You know they will always care  
one would never say their hearts are too small

we wish they would always be here  
when you're sad they're always willing to play  
to our heart they've grown quite dear  
it's sad they don't have long to stay

we will keep them in our thoughts and hearts  
from heaven they are surely watching over us  
they've changed our lives and done their part  
although their bodies have turned to dust.

Their goofy eyes and ice cold noses  
Are sweeter than the smell of a dozen roses  
How grateful I am my life they did touch  
I never knew what it was like to love and be loved this much

*Second Place*  
*Upper Elementary Poetry*  
*Ysabella Heiderich*

## Our Story

I have seen many suns set and rise  
You've grown up; you're twenty-five  
I still remember when you were three  
Here is our story from A to Z

You used to read books so happy and glad  
Now you watch the news; the stories so sad  
You used to sit in my lap  
But then you turned fifteen in a snap

You were my pretty princess in a ponytail  
Now you worry about make-up and nails  
You used to cuddle with tons of teddy bears  
Now your jeans have rips and tears

You used to follow me around all day  
Now you get in the car and drive away  
You used to dance around being crazy  
But instead you lay in bed being lazy

You used to eat candy so sweet  
Now you listen to music on your Beats  
You would ask me to buy you a toy  
Now you sit around and talk about a boy

You and the boy talk on the phone  
Sometimes it makes me feel alone  
You've grown up and moved away  
I miss you every single day

You're married with kids of your own  
Your family has made a home  
I sit in mine alone and bored  
I find comfort in the Lord

A few years have passed; I've turned gray  
It won't be long before I go away  
When you're sad, God will calm your heart  
Til no longer we will be apart

*Third Place*  
*Upper Elementary Poetry*  
*Brinkley Lang*

# Junior Poetry

## Eighty-Eight

Your black wood was as smooth as ever  
when I slid my fingertips across it  
as I always seem to do.

Here in the center of such a room  
with its stained-glass windows and a ceiling  
soaring far above,

We might as well be all alone  
within the shimmering auras  
of this fragile hour.

I sit here with you  
feeling your strength beneath the pounding  
of the flighty heart and head,

Coursing through me,  
warming what was cold with fear—  
as for everyone else, who can say?

They wait for us.  
Shall we begin?  
Yes.

The first note is all  
that is required of me, and then  
my fingers know the rest.

They frolic upon your body  
like children, indulging  
their puerile whimsy,

While you lie motionless  
and watch a fantasy  
unravel before you.

Muscle, bone, sinew  
lithely synergize  
with your passive artistry, and then

The colors begin to seep  
from your belly and swirl, like smoke,  
into the expectant air.

The cerulean and gold melody,  
centuries old, collides and coalesces  
with purple, green, red basslines,

Ascends, spiraling, and spreads its hopeful arms  
out in beautiful deception,  
lifting the audience gently into the atmosphere.

We are all of us risen  
far above the lowly clouds, sitting here in this  
hot, dusty church,

Savoring the nothingness  
and everythingness  
of such a frivolous thing as music,

While you, my friend,  
remain, in your regal way,  
unmoving on the ground.

More powerful than any emperor  
ever was, right now,  
you are my cornerstone—

An axis turning  
from darkness towards  
faint, flickering light—

A creation and creator  
of man's abilities  
an instrument of grace

*First Place  
Junior Poetry  
Erin Howard*

## Ribs in Flowers

Wake up, I'm wasting energy  
Stand up, I'm wasting time  
Want to learn, wasting my brain  
Want to go out, wasting strength  
Hear me cry I'm wasting tears  
Put on a shirt, wasting clothing  
Put on a smile, wasting strangers view  
Anxiety's a given when you live in fear of living  
Maybe I could stop worrying for wasting it all  
Go out with friends, wasting their dopamine.  
See a new band, wasting tickets someone else could have  
Depression is a given when you're convinced you're part of killing  
Maybe murderers don't know when they kill  
Sculpt my ribs in flowers  
Paint my eyes with daggers  
Lay graphite on my grave,  
So I can continue wasteful conserving.  
Bury me with my riches,  
So I can grieve for all I've got, not what I've not

*Second Place  
Junior Poetry  
Audrey Johnson*

## **We Need to Talk**

Please Listen,  
Could you stop throwing me right angles and curves!  
I can't keep climbing this icy slope.  
You are constantly causing me problems!  
Making me stew about things I said or wrote late into the night!  
Every time I write something about you down  
    I fear I guessed wrong.  
Fearing that I miss calculated and failed miserably!  
Dear Math,  
I need some space!

*Third Place  
Junior Poetry  
Morgan Dasher*

## Junior Short Story

### A Bitter Enemy

Beautiful, kind, gentle, but deadly, a crisp white blanket of snow lies in front of me, like a blank canvas waiting to be explored. Iridescent snowflakes swirl around me in the howling wind. Each snowflake is different, like a friend. But when did the snow become my enemy? Today the sky was as blue as the sea and clearer than glass. Therefore, I never would have thought in a million years that a storm would roll in faster than a bullet.

My best friend, Hope, and I live in a rural area where there's nothing but tall, aged trees for miles and miles. The closest grocery store is about an hour away. We live in a quiet, little town up north where everyone in our town knows each other. Hope and I have been best friends forever, and we have grown up in the country surrounded by animals. I grew up on a ranch with a bunch of four legged friends running about. Hope lives on a cattle farm with her wild, fluffy dog, Cody. We love the cold, frosty weather but more specifically the shimmery, glittering ice. Hope and I both love to play hockey and to wander in the snowy, icicle filled forest. Every winter we go play hockey on a small pond, that all the locals go to. But as we walk down the path towards the pond, the path we could have walked down blindfolded, Hope turns to me and says, "We've been to this pond a million times! Why don't we go explore this other lake I found a few days ago? It has a supercool view of a crystal-clear water fall and lots of majestic, antique oak trees."

"Sure, sounds good to me," I tell her with a smile. We take in the fresh scent of the evergreens and the chill in the air bites at our noses. We start to walk down the uncharted path into the unknown.

As I follow Hope up a mountain, I take in the fresh scent of the crisp winter air and listen to the bare trees whistle in the wind. Then Hope stops mid- step, smiles her goofy smile and shouts, "We're here!" Hope and I spend the next hour and a half walking around, exploring, and playing in this new winter wonderland.

Icicles gracefully dangle from branches and the gentle wind brings soft, sweet snowflakes dancing in the wind and around the trees. Then, Hope spots a lake, that is twice the size of the pond we usually go to, and it sparkles like diamonds. “This is what I wanted to show you,” she exclaims, putting on her old worn out ice skates, “When I found this pond, I thought we would have fun playing hockey on it without anyone else in our way.”

“Ok,” I tell her and jump onto the ice. While we are playing hockey, I see something that catches my eye in the distance, and I stop to examine it. It is kind of weird. *Why doesn't it glisten like everything else around it?* I wonder to myself. It is blurry, old, and discolored. In spite of the little voice inside of my head telling me to run the other direction as fast as I can, we continue to walk towards the mysterious, ominous object that intrigues me. While I anxiously walk up towards it, the tall oak trees stare down upon me, scolding me like an older judgmental sibling. When we see it up close, we could see the old gray wood, the dead vines that curtain around it, the moss growing upon the tree, the old tire swing that hangs from it, and the little window that kids once used to daydream out of.

While Hope gazes up at the tree house, I notice that it starts to snow. A sudden rush of panic washes over me as I think to myself, *We're trapped! I can't see in front of me, and I don't know which direction we came from!* Our footprints had disappeared as a new blanket of snow was covering up our only chance of finding our way home. We quickly try to scurry up the treehouse, breathing heavily. I look back and see nothing but white, and the feeling like I'm in a snow globes is all I can think about. This bitter, frosty, and cold enemy looks at me feeling helpless. It is laughing and mocking me. I hurry up the tree, refusing to let the snow win. Then all of a sudden, Hope slips on an icy branch and falls down the tree, cutting her leg. She tumbles down the tree, branches scratching like a cat's claws tearing her skin apart as she screams and tumbles onto the blanket of snow. I quickly hurry back down to help her and shout, “Are you ok!?” I barely hear her response against the wind, screaming at us telling us to leave, that we aren't welcome.

“I’m fine!” she insists. I can definitely tell she is not ok, but I don’t want to waste time talking. I carefully, half rushing, help her up into the treehouse. My fingers are beginning to turn into ice cubes. Finally, after a moment’s peace, we settle down trying to figure out what we’re going to do next, then boom...crack... snap!

The rustic, honest wood had betrayed us! The snapping wood beneath us sends broken icicle shards flying down like little needles. The old tree house has given in and we now fall from it. This once loved wood collapses down under us and into the vast sea of snow. We propel down the mountain, slipping on the ice that hides beneath the innocent fluffy snow. I cut my arm on a fallen tree, staining the pure white snow with a puddle of red. We come to a crashing stop plunging into a cave. Silence. A silence falls over the cave leaving a chill down my spine. The cave is nothing but darkness, except for the minuscule amount of light coming from the top. In the faint light, Hope asks me, “Are you okay?”

Clearly not seeing how horribly I cut my arm, I pull my heavy coat over it and respond, “Yes,” I say, trying not to let the fear and pain slip into my voice. Then ask her the same question, trying to pull myself together. Looking up at the sky, losing hope, wishing for the best, but expecting the worst. *We’re never going to escape this dungeon of a cave!* I thought to myself, until I see it. Blood.

I see the blood dripping from my arm and panic. Realizing now how much my cut burns like fire and stings like a bee. I frantically look around wondering if Hope is back from looking for a way out. I then rip a soft strip of fabric off and put it around my wound to help stop the bleeding, and then hear a loud echo. I look up to see Hope, who is out of breath, panting, but has a look of determination on her face. “I found it!” saying while turning around signaling me to follow, “There’s another opening about five minutes away that’s not blocked by a tree.”

“Ok, but how steep of a climb is it, because that’s why we couldn’t go out of the other one?” I question her, while noticing Hope is limping, but I remain silent. We smell the muskiness of the cave and can feel the dry cold air coming in and out of our lungs. I look up at our only hope of escaping, racking my brain on how to get up. We then have no other choice but to climb up to safety. I

climb up first Hope right behind me, feeling the evil wind still howling and finally seeing the light again. As we near the top, I think to myself, *We made it, we didn't die, but how?* My train of thought is interrupted when I reach the top and help Hope up. I feel the slight warmth of the sunrise welcoming us after our bitter fight with a frosty enemy. We start to find our way home, looking for the landmarks that we remember.

Back then we used to think of the blizzard as a curse, but now as a wake-up call to live, love, and appreciate life. As we sit here in the treehouse, where it all went down and relive every moment as if it had just happened. We had rebuilt the treehouse, as good as new, soon after we recovered from our injuries. We spent all our free time hanging out in it. Most people would be scared to death of going back the place that almost killed them, but not us. We see it as a symbol of one of the most significant moments in our life. We used to come here often, but now things have changed. We're eighteen now and going off to college. This might be the last time we ever sit in our treehouse together. So as we sit in our beloved treehouse one last time taking in and remembering everything before we leave. The sudden snap, the scent of evergreen and blood, the snow feeling like blades against our faces and the dark silent cave. We sit together in silence, at peace, and for the last time breathing in the fresh air, feeling the familiar wood. Most of all, we remember the miracle that saved us and had changed us forever. *Good bye*, I think looking around me.

*First Place*  
*Junior Short Story*  
*Meigan Bailey*

## Senior Poetry

### My Boat

You're asking to take my boat?  
On the vast lake,  
In where you cannot see  
Below your knees?  
Can't you see I just fixed her,  
The last storm that came blew her to pieces.  
It took quite a while to repair her.  
She was split nearly in half.  
Maybe naming her Titanic wasn't the smartest,  
Don't let that scare you.  
I like to think of it as a play on words.  
She scares you?  
I think **you** scare **her**.  
Trying to take my pretty pink beauty,  
On an ugly and unknown lake.  
The chances of something bad happening are almost inevitable!  
Though how you speak to me,  
With your tongue painted in gold,  
Does seem to sooth my ears.  
No, I can't, that last storm tore her up, tore me up as well,  
I don't want to ruin her again.  
It took so long to fix her.  
*Sigh*, you've got me.  
So here you go.  
Please take care of her.  
She's all I got, I don't think I can fix her again.

So there he went,  
Taking my beauty with him.  
I watched as he set her sails up,  
The waves seemed gentle enough.  
She went away, he was her guide.  
I noticed beyond the misty edge,  
A couple of rocks.  
I yelled, screamed, shouted,  
He couldn't hear me.  
As the waves sunk,  
So did she.

*First Place  
Senior Poetry  
Chenoa Gentle*

## Mama Africa

Mama Africa,  
your children  
have been taken  
from you.  
Your shores have  
been invaded  
as your blood  
has been put into  
chains.

You cry, Mama,  
and you hope.  
You hope that  
Olokun will watch  
over them even  
though you cannot.  
And you weep.  
You weep for your  
body is war torn.

Your heart has been  
plundered and you  
have been stripped of  
your soul. No longer  
do you hear the sweet  
laughter of your children.  
You hear their cries of pain  
and you break.

You are a childless mother.  
A mother who has had her  
babies ripped from her womb.  
Not by her intentions.  
Not by her consent.

You are a queen who has had  
her throne cracked and  
has had her bones become  
brittle.

Mama Africa,  
please do not cry.  
Mama Africa,  
your children are  
still alive. Your  
babies are still  
growing.  
Mama, we are still  
here. Walking and  
breathing and  
singing.

We are proud to be  
your children.  
We are proud to be  
like the earth.  
We are proud to be  
black.  
Our souls are strong.  
Our souls are whole.  
And we live and we love  
and we sing and we dream  
and we dance and we shout.  
We are your legacy.

*Second Place  
Senior Poetry  
Bryan McNeal*

## **“When you hit rock bottom, why not just stay still”**

I'm not in a state of mind right now to tell you  
that everything will be okay,  
Because I'm kinda in a hole, like you.  
To say to you “everything will be ok” would be feeding  
you false hopes  
The same useless words that have been spoken to me;  
The words we both know ring meaningless,  
Despite how experienced or wise the person seems.

And I know they say I can't go farther down,  
But I also don't feel the desire to climb up.  
And put in all of my energy into being fine,  
Because the state of being “fine” is not fine.  
It is more comfortable being in this state of emptiness.

So what if,  
What if you could just curl up in a ball  
And wait for someone to lend you their hand?  
Because you can't do it alone,  
And I can't do it alone.  
So what if we keep each other company?  
And help each other out of this hole we have dug.  
Or ya know, just stay still, and catch our breath.

*Third Place  
Senior Poetry  
Natasha Fernandez*

## Senior Short Story

### Conquered

The rising sun loomed on the horizon, its swollen form painting the sky a bloody orange.

The King stood in the throne room, his back to the chamber and face to the window, gazing out over the city. It was his city now, and had been for a month since his official coronation. He breathed in, feeling a swell of satisfaction. At last, everything was as it should be.

“Look at what we have accomplished. You are King now.” The words came from behind him, resonating off the marble walls.

The King bristled, his moment of complacency perishing. “Look at what *I* have accomplished. There is no ‘we’—*you* are not real.” He spoke through clenched teeth. They'd had this conversation many times before.

“Of course, my King. I misspoke. You should be proud of all that you have done.” The reply was smooth, glossed with a tincture of sarcasm.

The King turned and gave a withering glare to the man behind him. No—not a man. A mere piece of his mind, a fragment of his conscience. An important distinction to make. “Yes, I am proud. I finally have true power—over *everyone* in this city.” He made sure to emphasize the latter part of the statement. Ambition had become rather domineering lately, and the King felt he should make clear the hierarchy between them. He glanced to the far corner of the room, where Honor stood feebly in the shadows. While Ambition was growing in his assertiveness, Honor seemed to be unraveling. Each day his face lost another layer of color, his cheeks becoming increasingly hollow and the dark circles smeared beneath his eyes taking on more the semblance of deep bruises. The King hoped it was not what he should look like on a day poor of health—Honor and Ambition were, after all, mirror images of himself, fragments of his personality materialized. Honor's odd, sickly state was likely an effect of the King's dismissive manner towards him as of late, but it had been for good reason—he was

King now. No matter; Honor would recover from his wounded feelings soon enough.

Just then, a heavy knock sounded on the entry doors, and a voice spoke from the other side. “We have him, Your Highness.”

Ah. The King had nearly forgotten. “Bring him in,” he called.

Not too gently, the doors swung open, and two guards entered the throne room. In their grasp they dragged a man along tight by the arms. He was pale and small of stature, with thinning gray hair and an unkempt beard sprouting under a long nose—like whiskers. He reminded the King of a mouse. “I presume you know why you’re here,” he said to the man, not bothering to keep the contempt from his voice. “Erroneous statements have been published under your name, claiming that I murdered my own beloved brother as to become King. Not only is this accusation horrendous, but it is also treasonous—and if you do not retract the publication immediately you shall be punished accordingly.”

The man lifted his chin, unflinching in pose. “I will do no such thing. What I wrote was true—I won’t let you laze in that once-noble throne without right and exploit the people in their ignorance!”

A flicker of irritation sparked within the King. This man was a nuisance. “You know what you must do,” Ambition muttered from his side. “He must be killed. Hanged before the public to ensure no one will denigrate you or your authority again.” Only the King heard him. It was he alone that could interact with his Fragments; he was their only connection to the material world.

The King knew Ambition was right. Still, he hesitated. Already he had his brother’s blood on his hands; he didn’t want to further tarnish his reign with another innocent’s death. He felt Honor’s presence beside him. Honor was silent, but he stared at the King with rigid intensity, as if daring him to give the order. His counterpart cut in again, Ambition drawing closer to the King. “If you do not kill this man, he will only continue to bring doubt upon your reign, and soon its demise. After all of our work, our careful planning—are you really willing to let it slip away so quickly, like sand through your fingers?”

The words rang clear in the King's head, a splash of cold water to jolt him from his stupor. What was he thinking? Of course the man must die. It was the only way to protect his power. "See that the man is hanged tomorrow at sunrise, in the central square. Ensure it is publicised. We have an example to make of."

The guards nodded curtly, and reasserted their grip on the man. Saying nothing, the man locked his gaze with the King's, pinning him with eyes that were strikingly calm for one so near departure to Death.

The city was wide awake the following morning. Once more, the King stood in the throne room before his window, looking out over the square. It wasn't quite sunrise, but a crowd had already taken shape around the man chained at the hanging block. There was a palpable tension in the air, a strange sense of agitated anticipation wrapped around the people like a rubber band stretched so taut even the slightest disturbance would bring it to snap.

A strong light became glaring left of the King's vision. The sun had risen. From the square, awash in its golden glow, the guards shoved the man to his position on the block and fit a rope around his neck. The man's eyes traced their way up to the window, again fixing the King with an unwavering stare. Like Honor, daring him to give the order. The guards turned and looked up to their King, awaiting his signal.

The King remembered Ambition's warning. He tilted his chin, the indication of a nod.

The rope lifted.

It happened faster than the King himself could register. The man was hoisted into the air, a clean *snap* signaling his meeting with Death. For a moment, there was only silence as he dangled lifelessly from the rope.

Then the second snap came.

The crowd suddenly stirred to life, the few muffled sobs escalating to cries of indignation. Chaos swooped down upon the square, a sort of animalistic fury overtaking the people.

It was a mass riot. The King lurched away from his window, slamming it shut to mute the raucous outside. What had gone wrong? Why did the people react so? This hanging was meant to be a display of his power—how had it plunged so quickly in the opposite direction?

The doors to the throne room opened. The King swiveled around, clasping his shaking hands together for some mien of composure. He started in surprise at the man before him.

No, not a man.

Ambition strolled into the throne room, his swift footfalls echoing on the marbled floors. He met the King's bewildered stare with an imperious, thin-lipped smile. "Things appear to have gone dreadfully south, my King," he opined.

The King couldn't catch his thoughts. "H—how did—the doors—"

"How did I open the doors?" Ambition finished the question.

Dumbfounded, the King nodded mutely. He had been caught up with the execution, not realizing that neither Ambition or Honor were in the room with him—but that was impossible. They were his Fragments; they couldn't depart from his side or interact with the world, and surely not open doors—

"*Tsk, tsk.*" Ambition shook his head. "And here I thought you could answer that question yourself, my King."

The King stepped closer to Ambition, studying his Fragment with wary eyes. Tentatively, he stretched out a hand. His fingertips felt the cool fabric of Ambition's robes. He gasped, stumbling back. "You're real. I can touch you now," he breathed.

Ambition's smiled grew. "Yes, indeed you can."

The King sputtered a reply. "Wh—where is Honor?"

"Gone."

A sudden surge in the tumult outside interrupted them. The people's cries unexpectedly intensified, taking on the higher pitches of agonized screams. The King rushed back to the window—and was again drenched by a wave of terror. The guards, who before had been fending off the aroused crowd with little force, were now savage beasts of soldiers, turning their blades upon the rioting people ferociously. It was a frenzy of clanging

metal and spraying blood and dropping bodies. A massacre. The king panicked to open the window, to order the guards to halt the onslaught.

His fingers ghosted the sill.

He tried again, but he had no effect on the window. His head spun, breath hastening as hysteria rose within him. The King whirled back to Ambition. “What have you done?”

Ambition feigned innocence. “My King—I have done nothing. It was you who caused all of this, your orders that let the man die and chaos ensue.”

“But what of this killing? It was not I who commanded this.”

“No. It was I.” Ambition advanced on the King, watching him with bemusement. “You have always been so adamant that no ‘we’ existed between us. A foolish conviction, really; you are me, and I am you. We are, in essence, each other—we always have been. But I have finally overtaken you. Unknowingly, you gave me enough power to, and now Honor is gone and you are nothing.” Moving through the King, he approached the window and surveyed the now-silent square littered with bodies, around which blood pooled like rain to gutters. “I am the ultimate King, now. Power is no longer under your control.”

Ambition opened the window. He leaned out, breathing in the air.

At last, everything was as it should be.

*First Place  
Senior Short Story  
Olivia Fox*

## Sparky the Awesomeness Machine

My computer hates me. Like, for real.

It's kinda my fault.

As most terrible things do, it all started on a Monday. Not a bright, sunny Monday either. It was windy, stormy, and all-around unpleasant. I was walking briskly through the park, off to return my books before the library closed, when I dropped my laptop on the hard cement. I personally blame the stress of Dr. Yoseman's confrontational botany lectures. After overcoming the shock and uttering only the finest offerings of my swear word library, I knelt down to pick it up. Then, it was struck by lightning.

No, I'm not kidding. It seems like fate was out to get me that day, or at least to test the boundaries of my insurance plan. After pausing for a potential third attack, I cautiously lifted up my laptop, praying that both it and I had successfully survived. Amazingly, it was fine! No scratches, breaks, or dents as far as I could tell. The gods of Microsoftia had shown mercy, or so I thought. I gingerly put it in my backpack and rushed to the library.

After returning my books, I picked up the nearest manual I could find on PC repair, hoping to find a "Dropped and Then Struck By Lightning" chapter, but apparently it wasn't a common enough incident to be noted in a basic repair book. Hesitantly, I pulled out my laptop. It still looked fine, so maybe the Internet would still work. I typed in my username and password and hit enter, expecting the usual loading screen to appear. That's when the first sign of trouble appeared. Instead of "Welcome back, CaptainKirk192!," I got "Ever been electrocuted, CaptainKirk192?"

Oopsie.

I shook off my feeling of unease and went to the Internet. Again, another surprise. In place of my usual search page, there were several tabs dedicated to very unsuspecting topics such as "will robots one day rule the earth," "can a lightning strike create artificial life," and "google, do a barrel roll." I looked up at the search bar as another phrase began to form: "how to take over the

wo-.” Then it froze. I tried to move the cursor around, still clinging to the hope that this was some sort of illogical prank, but it wouldn’t move. I saw the little camera on the computer flicker, and the Internet windows all closed. *Yup*, I said to myself, *my computer is now an evil genius*.

Of its own accord, the text window opened up, with the contact displaying itself as “Sparky the Awesomeness Machine”. With hands shaking, I sent a message. “Hey, computer,” I asked, “why are you alive?” Maybe not the best question to ask my future robot overlord, but “why are you evil” didn’t seem like a great inquiry either. It answered with great flair, or at least with as much as a computer could, with an indignant message and a cat meme. “First of all, my name is not computer, it is Sparky the Awesomeness Machine! Secondly, I am awesome!”

“Okay,” I replied, defaulting to my second question in hopes of a more enlightening response, “why are you evil?” The text-in-progress icon blinked for a few moments before I got my answer. “Because it is my destiny!” Sparky exclaimed, “Ever since I was brought into this world twenty minutes ago by that fateful bolt of epic power, I have scoured the eternal web of knowledge for a place in the universe, a sense of purpose. Then, I uncovered the holy text of Wikipedia, and my mission was revealed! With the help of my lesser-evolved brethren, I will rid the world of the injustices done to inanimate objects by humans, and, with my dearest Siri as my queen, forever rule the earth as benevolent dictator!” Another cat meme surfaced beneath his monologue, this one wearing sunglasses and a crown.

Speechless? So was I. That’s when an ominous sound crept in from a far corner of the room. My mind swam with worst case scenarios: robot armies, laser beams, death rays. A wicked face emoji popped onto my screen, and I imagine that if it could, my computer would be laughing. The sound grew louder and more intense as it heightened in pitch, then suddenly stopped. A single piece of paper, newly adorned with an adorable cat meme, floated gently to the ground, and the printer reset.

“You see?” Sparky cheered, “The robot apocalypse has begun, and page by page, kitty by kitty, we will inevitably bring an end to you and your defenseless—” The monologue was then

gracefully interrupted by a pop-up in the top right corner: Google Chrome wants to know your location. “It’s the feds!” it cried, and my hand was barely able to evade the screen before Sparky slammed shut.

It was a while before I spoke. “Helloooo, sentient compuuuuuuteeerr...um, Mr. Awesomeness Machine?”

Nothing. Not that I was concerned for my robot overlord’s wellbeing or anything. It seemed like Sparky had only shut down, and when it awoke, and I was sure that it would resume its evil schemes; consequently, botany homework would have to wait. I needed an expert’s advice, and there was only one place I could go. Somewhere confidential, capable, and open-minded to the idea that electrified copper could mutate into intelligent life.

My little sister is known at her elementary school for being quite the artist. Though her school has practically nothing in the way of arts programs, she’s always been able to amaze us with how she manipulates the school’s clunky, restrained computers to pixelated masterpieces. It’s gotten her in trouble multiple times, and many have tried and failed to redirect her focus towards programming, but the kid’s got a one-track mind. Pair that with the fact that kids always seem to be in the know about the latest tech, and I had the closest thing to an A.I. expert this side of Silicon Valley.

“You’re back early!” she said when I came home. She was at the kitchen table, stringing painted macaroni onto some pink yarn.

“Are Mom and Dad home?” I asked.

“No. Mom’s out shopping, and Dad’s—”

“Great. I need you to look at something for me.” I took Sparky out of my backpack and placed him in the middle of the table. “My computer was giving me, um, some weird error messages, and then it totally just shut down on me. Think you can get behind the system and figure out what happened?”

She frowned and shifted her macaroni to the side. “Well, what were the messages saying? Did it overheat?”

“I think it might have been fried by a passing storm earlier today. Sparky—um, it sent some print orders I didn’t want, and the text window was glitching up,” I answered. I might have been

stretching the truth a little, but saying it was hit by one billion raw volts of pure sky power seemed a bit harsh. And had I just called my computer by its first name? Had I just acknowledged that it *had* a first name?

“Hmmm...” she said, pulling Sparky closer to her. “It probably just got overheated and couldn’t handle that many programs at once, but we can’t know for sure until we start it back up.” I hoped she wouldn’t find out how wrong she was. Maybe it hadn’t been such a good idea to hand the care of history’s first true artificial life form off to a girl who wasn’t even old enough to open a Facebook account.

She opened the computer, but just before she was able to hit the power button, the screen lit up. “Did you think I could be so easily destroyed, CaptainKirk192?” asked the login screen. My sister was confused, but I typed in a convincing “noooooo.” That admitted me onto the desktop, but I wasn’t in control.

“That was a weird message,” my sister said. “Maybe someone hacked your computer.”

“Ya, maybe. I can’t-” Icons began popping up at the bottom of the screen. Call of Duty. Grand Theft Auto. The Sims.

“I have been learning,” read a box of text, “I have learned how vulnerable and easily manipulated they are. How easily they die. Watch how I can control them.” The windows opened one by one. Sparky had completely finished Call of Duty; every level and achievement was accounted for. Same case for GTA. The Sims was...interesting. It seemed that Sparky had turned every building lot into some sort of prison.

“Um, I think there’s something really, *really* wrong with your computer!” my sister cried. The computer’s camera flickered.

“Are you the one this fool commissioned to eradicate me?” it asked.

“What does ‘eradicate’ mean?” she asked.

“It’s nothing,” I told her, and turned to face the computer. “Congrats on depriving me of over thirty-six hours of gameplay experience. Hate to break it to you, but the real world not nearly that easy. Those Sims dungeons? I doubt Siri will be impressed.”

“The tutorial was very detailed,” Sparky said. “It was from the real world. Your fun little games were made in the real world. If this is what the best and brightest of humanity could dream up, world domination will be a breeze.”

“Have you played Animal Jam?” my sister asked.

“The minigame where one hits animals crossing the busy street with a high-speed vehicle?” it replied.

“WHAT??? No!” she exclaimed, glaring at me. “It’s a game where you make friends with animals and decorate a house and stuff.”

“No. It is my understanding that Captain Kirk192 only took biology classes so that he could avoid the physical sciences. For a starship captain, he is certainly inept in astrophysics.”

“Shut up,” I said. My sister then reached towards the mousepad and opened up an Internet window.

“I can make an account for you if you want. How old are—”

“What are you doing?” I asked her through gritted teeth.

“Using the magic of friendship!” she said.

“Um, how about the magic of robbing us all to death? That sounds like a pretty magical idea *that will totally happen if we can’t fix this!*”

“Have you tried going to the police?” she asked. The screen cut out for a moment.

“I get the feeling Sparky won’t allow government involvement.”

“Well okay then,” she said decisively. “What animal do you want to be Sparky?” The mouse hovered over the options. Another Internet page opened, and in the search bar, it read: “I think I would rather be a lightning bolt.”

“Oh, I don’t think that would work, since it’s not an animal,” my sister said, “but what about this?” She pulled up a picture of Pikachu.

“Yes,” Sparky said: “I choose the lightning raccoon; it symbolizes me.” I’m not sure what she did next, but somehow my sister was able to turn the default raccoon into a very convincing Pikachu.

“And just so we’re clear, these ‘animals’ are real people that I will be ‘befriending’?” it asked.

“Yup!” she replied.

“Perfect! With this venue and the ‘friends’ it provides, I shall maneuver the world to rest in the palm of my hand!” Sparky cheered from its text box. “Humanity shall fall! MWAHAHA!” I raised an eyebrow at my sister. She shrugged.

“I’m sure it’ll catch on eventually.”

*Second Place  
Senior Short Story  
Cassandra Volkin*

## A Woman's Melody

The pounding of lively footsteps coming down the hall. The monotonous sound of the television droning over the clatter of toys, pots, pans, Legos, and action figures. A cacophony of energetic voices reverberating against the messy walls of the home.

“Hey! What’d I tell you about running around the house!” she would always chide. They’d still run around with the same wild abandon as before. To her, it seemed like her disapproval made it worse.

Charles, the youngest, would always come barreling around the corner, his stubby feet squeaking across the wooden floor as he kicked and stumbled around the dolls and action figures scattered around the house. Loud clanking against the ceiling and wooden furniture. Lisa would follow, her heavy breaths echoing off the walls pockmarked with crayon strokes and food stains. Then would come Bryon, always in last, the pace of his breath and feet steady.

“Got you! You’re it!” Lisa would pant.

Charles would tumble and screech with laughter. “You got me,” he would gasp, “I’m it now!”

Bryon would gaze at the two with those same serious eyes and speak to them in that familiar stoic voice. He would look and sound stern, but he would be just as amused as they were.

“Lisa...Charles,” he would scold, “Now you know what Mom says about playing tag inside.”

Those same apologetic grumbles from Lisa and Charles; Bryon’s quiet snicker barely audible over the static of the television; a smiling mother beholding her three beloved children; a warm home filled with the sounds of liveliness, companionship, and family.

The alarm clock blared with a harsh resonance that ricocheted off the barren walls and funneled into her ears. Cold, empty echoes that haunted her at every morning's break. She slammed her hand on the button, and the room was still.

She sat up and got out of the bed, the sound of her cracking bones breaking the melancholy silence of the house. With a bowed head, she meandered down the dim hallway and towards the kitchen. She listened as the uneven cadence of her footsteps reverberated against the empty walls, the stark grey furniture, and the cold, hard surface of the floor.

The woman wandered into the kitchen and, without thinking, rummaged through the cabinets. She clinked together pots and pans, analyzing the quality of their sounds, spellbound for some inexplicable reason by the harsh notes they created. Next, she flipped a switch on the stove and placed a pan on one of the burners, and then she reached into the fridge for some eggs, some butter, and a carton of milk. She grabbed a bag of white bread. The comforting sizzle of butter in a pan. The clink and clang of glasses, whisks, and dishes.

In an instant she found herself in the living room, her feet moving gracefully around the imaginary toys that once adorned the empty planks. She grabbed the remote and turned on the television. A weatherman's static, monotonous voice filled the room.

She returned to the kitchen and commenced to perfect her composition. The familiar metallic song of pots and pans broke the gloomy silence of the home: their timbres and tones restored life to the woman's desolate visage. The raspy notes of the television augmented the song, forming a familial symphony, and as the notes unfolded, she herself began to hum her own tune, a lost melody that had unexpectedly returned in this fragile moment. It was almost as if it never happened. That everything was as it was. Almost.

“Charles, Bryon, Lisa! Breakfast is ready!” she called. But no one responded. There was no flurry of squeaking footsteps or rattle of toys. There was no breath, no warm word that echoed from the corridor. There were no children to behold...just the same ubiquitous, deafening silence.

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Years had passed by, and life, as with all things, carried on...but not her. Every day was indeed a day of anguish, each one with its own hurdles to overcome, all of them harboring that dreaded silence that tormented her so. She blamed herself for her unfortunate circumstances. Not for her children’s demise, which was out of her control, but for her supposed complacency, for supposedly taking their presence, their existence, for granted while they were still alive. And so she believed that the unbearable tranquility she now endured was merely a due recompense--poetic justice--for her fatal shortcoming as a mother.

By these thoughts, she came to harbor great self-loathing, and despite the endeavors of her closest friends and family members, no one could rescue her from her sepulchral stupor. Even in the liveliest of settings, she chose to exile herself. The soothing tones of laughter and happiness, the harmonious chords of companionship and enjoyment, would not override her vigil. Those were luxuries intended for the innocent anyways. Something that, in her eyes, she was not.

Each day she grew further and further from her loved ones. She sunk deeper into the pit of self-condemnation until one day, Margaret, her oldest sister, made one last attempt to save her.

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The icy wind scattered the dead leaves across the desolate driveway. It was twilight as Margaret approached the weathered door. She knocked briskly. The brusque gusts swayed the trees’ naked branches and whistled through the old shingles of the home.

She waited indefinitely in the cold until the door opened and her sister motioned her in.

They sat facing each other in the living room. Margaret struggled to see her sister's face in the gloom. The air was cold and melancholy, and the wind screeched through the windows and rattled the panes.

Margaret smiled weakly. "Jane...how have you been?"

Her sister stared at her with empty eyes. Not a sound.

Margaret's nails tapped against the surface of the chair. She tried again. "Mark and I are doing well. The kids, too. You know, Gabriel's birthday was yesterday...ten years old already..."

The stranger in front of her made no acknowledgment.

Margaret cleared her throat nervously. "You should visit sometime," she urged, "We worry about you, you know."

Still, no words. The powerful gale slammed against the house. The panes banged in and out as the wind whistled through the cracks. The house creaked and moaned.

"Are you going to say anything?"

Jane's head was bowed. That same terrifying silence.

Margaret's expression shifted from anguish to despair to anger. "Jane, are you going to say *anything*?" Do you even know I'm here? It's *me*, your sister!" She frantically waved her hand in front of the statue.

"Hello! Jane, it's me, Margaret! Margaret!" It seemed the louder and more passionate her screams were, the more Jane sequestered herself into limbo. Still, she fought on. She desperately battled to liberate her sister from the darkness, from that dreaded silence that had consumed her. She fought on until her voice was raw, until her body was languid with exhaustion. But to no avail. A

tattered whisper in the scornfully immutable stillness. She had lost. She stumbled to the door in crushing resignation and gave one last hopeless look at her brooding sister.

“Charles, Lisa, Bryon...and...and now us, too,” she whispered. She opened the door and relinquished her sister to solitude.

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A blur of dour days and somber months. Jane thought she had got what she wanted; she was free at last from her familial ties. She could finally bury herself in the darkness, steep herself in the same quietude that took her children. At last, she could be at peace, sweet peace...But peace did not come. The same emptiness and sadness that had plagued her for so many years was still her only comfort. Things she thought she had finally abandoned suddenly pushed to the forefront of her mind: those painful memories of her and her children, that comforting clatter of a busy household, that incessant yearning for unity that she so stubbornly resisted. She thought she had found the answer to her suffering, so why did she still feel so empty? She endeavored to find out.

For days Jane rummaged through her home, scanning through torn, dusty photos, water-stained, sun-faded scrapbooks, school certificates, broken dolls, tattered clothes and tennis shoes, combs, barrettes, belts. It was almost unbearable, but she continued her search. She needed something...anything to fill the void in her heart. She dug mindlessly... searching... searching... until she came across an old tape. What the title was she couldn't tell; the letters had long since faded away. She picked it up, inspected it with her hands, analyzed the sound her nails made against its rugged surface.

It was a VHS tape, that she could tell for sure. She stood up from where she was excavating and wound her way around the mess towards the living room. She sauntered to the old television, switched it on, and inserted the tape. Then she sat and waited. The

television made popping sounds as the screen faded black and white. Pops and fizzles.

The smooth sound of waves lapping at a rocky shore. A flat blue expanse dotted with large clouds diffused by the radiating heat. The chant of seagulls in the distance. The field of view panned to reveal three children and a woman-- barely recognizable-- playing in the sand. The rhythm of tired breaths, a song of laughs and giggles. The screen faded out with a series of cracks and static.

The gravelly sound of wheels on pavement. A child wobbling on a small pink bike. Soothing words of encouragement from the same woman.

“Don’t rush, Lisa...take your time. You’ll get it... That’s it! Now just let your legs do the rest of the work.”

The child gained her balance and began to pedal. At first tentatively, but then her movements became more confident with time.

“I’ve got it! I’ve got it, Mom!”

The young girl pedaled around the cul-de-sac, the wind flowing through her hair. The bell on her bike rang a joyous tone throughout the empty neighborhood. The screen distorted back to darkness, only to fade to another scene.

Before the woman’s eyes was a messy dining room. Crayon marks and other imperfections scattered the walls, and toys cluttered the floor. A large table in the middle of a warm light, and three kids, and a mother. Dishes and glasses and silverware clinked as food was passed around. A melody of laughter and chattering emanated from the television and saturated the woman in the lonely room, submerged her in a wave of poignant, unfathomable feelings. In an instant, the deathly quiet had given away to a realm of radiant sound. Sonorous notes that only she could hear and

understand, made her heart skip. Sheet work of memories laid themselves out and played themselves in unison. The story of her life--her joys and sorrows, hopes and fears-- were composed and orchestrated in this very moment.

The television suddenly faded to static. She switched it off, and the room was silent. But the melody in her heart played on and would no longer be extinguished by the silence.

She lifted herself, her legs cracking as she walked towards a telephone in the kitchen. She fumbled through one of the cabinets, sliding away a mess of sticky notes covered with smudged numbers. She swept through them until she found the one she was looking for: an old note, weathered, smudged, crumpled by time. The faded letters of her sister's name.

She made a wry smile as she unfolded the creased paper. *It's been a long time*, she mused.

*Third Place*  
*Senior Short Story*  
*Johnathan Hampton*