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2024

Literary & Arts
JOURNAL



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2024 Kamelian Literary & Arts Journal

Realizing that educational institutions should encourage intellectual inquiry and being cognizant that we live in a pluralistic society, the following disclaimer is given.

The ideas and opinions expressed in *Kamelian* are those of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect the attitude of the Board of Trustees, the administration, the faculty, or the staff of Kishwaukee College. Materials for *Kamelian* were submitted by students who have been enrolled in courses at Kishwaukee College during one or all of the previous three semesters. Outside jurors with professional credentials and knowledge in the respective fields reviewed all entries. The pieces selected for inclusion in *Kamelian* and the awards given were based on the jurors' opinions of their aesthetic merits.



On the Cover

**Elsie Gordon
Brooks**

First Place
Two-Dimensional Art

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Jurors

Literature

Rebecca Pate
Literacy Coach
Natalie Gordon
Highland
Community College

Art

Heather Baker
Visual Artist
Heather Houzenga
Visual Artist
Owner of Zenga's

Awards

Literature

Short Fiction

First Place
Cayden Lewis
Almost Out of Film

Second Place
Esh T.C. Phobos
The Story of Nirin

Third Place
Cheryl Seguin
Words for Boys and Girls

Honorable Mentions
Cheryl Seguin
A Conversation

Poetry

First Place
Cheryl Seguin
Image of a Woman

Second Place
Cheryl Seguin
Child Divine

Third Place
Abigail Orr
Domesticating Love

Honorable Mentions
Cheryl Seguin
Personal Power

Meimuna Ibrahim
My Mother

Jessica Lechner
Midnights

Jessica Lechner
The Girl Who Never Gave Up

Jessica Lechner
C'est La Vie

Art

Special Recognition
Outstanding Entry
Two-Dimensional

First Place
Elsie Gordon
Brooks

Photography & New Media

First Place
Chaii Whaley
Warm Spark in the Night

Second Place
Elsie Gordon
Candlelight Skull

Third Place
Abigail Orr
A Woman is More than Her Uterus

Honorable Mentions
Elsie Gordon
Straw-Bear-y

Jennifer Gamez
Un Dia en el Campo

Two-Dimensional

First Place
Elsie Gordon
Brooks

Second Place
Seth O'Rorke
Family Ties

Third Place
Grace Barnes
Annual Anura

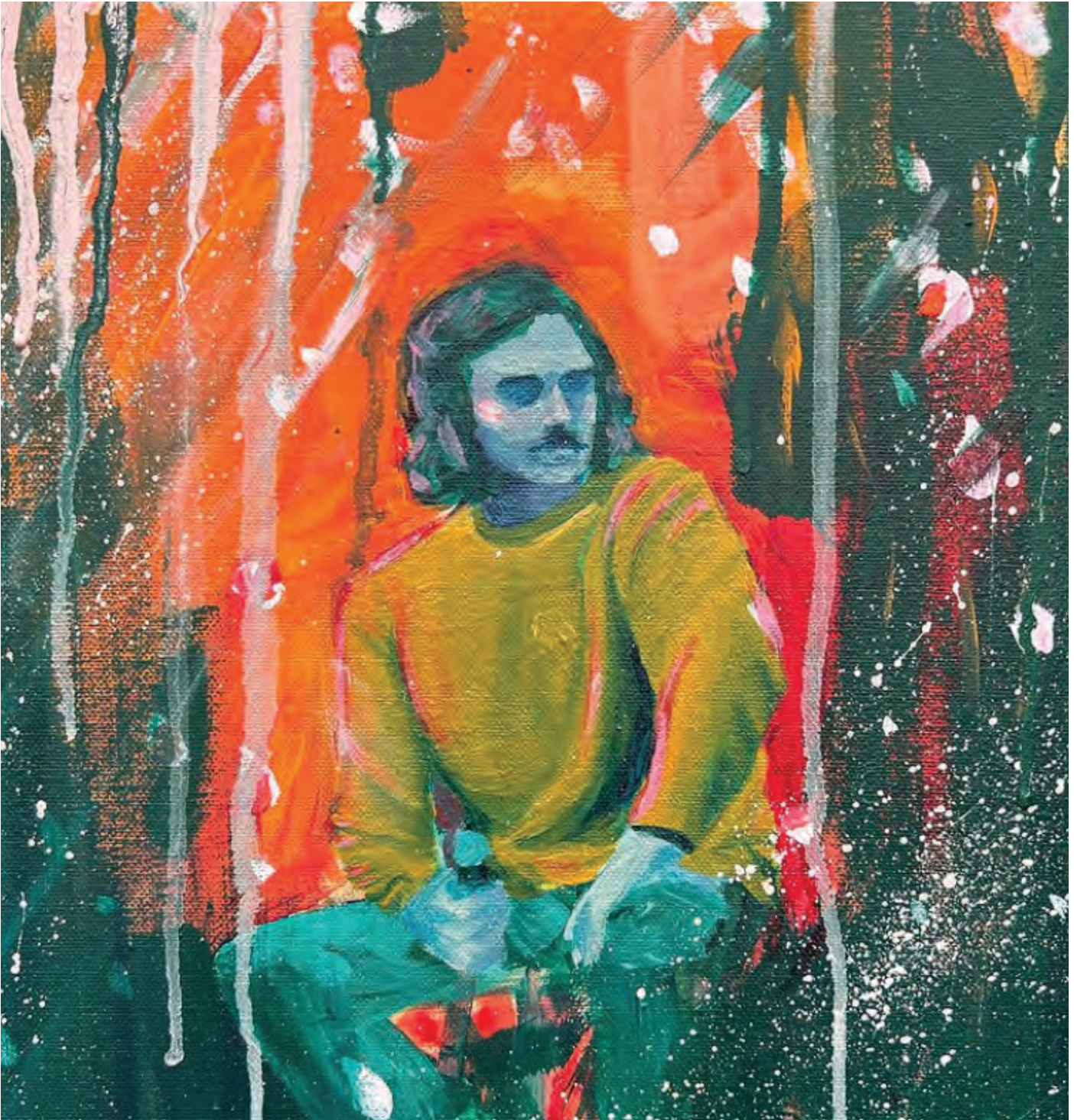
Honorable Mentions
Jaime Briner
Rested and Wicked

Jaime Briner
New Absurdity

Three-Dimensional

First Place
Elsie Gordon
Rooster Mug

2024 KAMELIAN
Outstanding Entry



Elsie Gordon
Brooks

First Place
Two-Dimensional Art

Almost Out of Film

Puny scraps of fractured plastic lay in the mud beside the rock he had tripped on. The young boy's expression paled as he gripped the scrape on his knee, stifling tears from the physical pain of the wound, albeit minor, and the greater mental trauma he felt when seeing the bits of plastic from his camera laying about beside the rock that had gotten the better of him. He jammed his eyes shut, repeating a mantra in his head about being strong, lucky, or whatever would make him feel better in the moment. With a big breath of the fresh spring air, he opened his eyes once more and pushed himself out of the muddy soil of the woods he had just ventured into. He stepped over to the instant camera laying beside that dastardly rock, quickly surveying the pieces of chipped plastic surrounding it. He dropped into a squat to pick it out of the mud, nearly wiping it away with his sleeve before remembering his mother would have his head if he ruined his new sweater with grime. Instead, he wiped the camera on a nearby plant, and pressed his finger on the yellow button with hopes he hadn't rendered it useless. The number one appeared in the corner of the camera's frame, the boy breathing a sigh of triumphant relief as it seemed all was well, even if the camera was almost out of film.

He peeled his eyes away from the damaged yet functional photography device to examine his surroundings. Of course, he looked to the rock that had tripped him out of what he supposed to be spite, then to the trees of the familiar woods he had played in all of his life, then finally to the seafoam green colored siding of his house that could be made out just barely in the distance. Gathering his bearings, he remembered that he had come out here to photograph the first of the spring flowers in his favorite patch just beyond the pond. He began to skip along the path again, before coming to a pause to sling the strap of the camera around his neck so as to not make the fateful mistake of dropping it again. He curled his lips into a youthful smile at his clever decisiveness before setting off once again onto the path.

The boy couldn't help but notice he was late in his travels. Not late to dinner, or late to a party, but late to spring. The first of the spring flowers had already come to bloom, bringing an elegant array of bright colors to the greenery that surrounded the path he skipped along. He nearly stopped to photograph a beautiful orange lily that crossed his way, though the electronic number one in the corner of his camera stopped him. His mother's instant camera was down to its final shot, so he knew he would have to make it the best picture it would ever capture. He gave the lily one final glance before peering back down to the broken plastic on the side of the camera. That rock, he thought, was such an omen on an otherwise lovely day. Maybe he would explain to his mother that he was chased by a dog, or threatened by mean old Mr. Tetovski next door, and dropped the camera making his daring escape. No, he had dropped the camera carelessly wandering through the woods, but a picture of the most beautiful flowers in Illinois would certainly make it up to Mom.

Continued on next page . . .

He thought more about the rock and its unfair attack on his knee and camera as he neared the pond at the end of the path. The waterfowl that stirred in the lake had not yet returned from their ventures south for the winter, so it would be long before the boy and his father would be able to win their friendship with bits of bread in the summertime, as they had in years past. He nearly photographed the pond, which he had never seen without an array of ducks swimming along the edges, though once again the number one illuminated in the corner of the camera and reminded him that he had one shot. He dropped it back down against his chest, where the strap hung it loose enough for it to swing as he walked off of the beaten path around the pond towards the prettiest wildflowers in the world.

The boy quickly realized why he was always told to remain on the path. The grass was nearly to his waist, poking with every step against the scrape on his knee he had procured from tripping over that rock. He grimaced at the itchy sensation the grass gave to his wound, waving their blades away as he pressed on with more care to keep the plants from harassing his knee. If he had just been looking where he was going, he would have seen that rock and not have put such a dampener on this wonderful springtime adventure. Nevertheless, he finally reached a clearing on where the grass politely remained at a comfortable height. Waving the racing thoughts of what could only be described as disdain for rocks out of his head, he began to scan the clearing. Colors from the countless diverse species of wildflowers flooded the woods like a rainbow, nearly overwhelming the child with limitless choices before his eyes settled on a particular patch.

Fumbling with his camera as he emanated giggles of pure joy with a run towards the patch of bluebells, he sized them up and tried a number of angles to take the perfect picture. He experimented with the lens and the settings on his mothers camera, peeking up at the bluebells every so often with an innocent grin finished with a missing tooth and childish wonder. Finally, settling on what he decided was the utmost perfect shot, he dropped onto one knee and brought the camera up to eye level, resting his finger on the red button and preparing to take the picture. Just before pressing the button, his opposite hand felt the crack in the plastic that he was at fault for. He slowly lowered the camera, glancing to the number one still illuminated in the corner, then back up to the bluebells. The fresh spring breeze blew through his hair as the bluebells stood proud and beautifully. The boy flicked the camera off, and began to walk back home without a photograph of the flowers.

Along the journey back, past the pond void of ducks, past the vibrant orange lily, he came to a halt at a familiar sight. The imprint of his back in the mud, beside a few chips of white plastic and a little gray rock. He knelt down, peering down at the rock with a serious look of thoughtfulness. His gaze turned back in the direction of the pristine wildflowers, then back to the ugly rock that had cursed his adventure from the beginning. He ran his fingers along the cracks that lay where the missing pieces of plastic had once been in his camera. He had forgotten about the lily after passing it. He had forgotten about the pond after

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passing it. Even the bluebells hadn't crossed his mind since setting off back home. No, the only thing that had stuck with the boy for his whole trip was the rock.

He brought the camera back up to his eye level, laying a finger on the red button momentarily before pressing down. The mechanisms inside the camera clicked and a flash illuminated the shady woods for less than a second, before a picture rolled out of the camera. He snatched the picture, glancing once more at the rock before heading back towards the seafoam green house bordering the woods.

As the photograph developed, so did his mind. It was never about getting to the perfect picture, was it? The bluebells wouldn't teach him anything. No, it was the ugly gray rock that had no business laying in the middle of the path that stuck in his mind for no discernable reason. The path came to an end, and the figure of his mother stood enveloped by cloudless spring sunlight on the back porch to greet her muddy little adventurer. The boy continued walking towards her, ready to present his proud mistakes: a muddy sweater, a chipped and empty camera, and a photograph of a rock. Yet despite the photograph in the boy's hand, the number one still flickered in the corner of the camera.

He was still only almost out of film.

Cayden Lewis

First Place
Short Fiction

Image of a Woman

She is our bulwark against patriarchy.
She yells a battle cry fierce that even the dead bones of aged women rise.
She is woman, everywoman.
She is Maiden, and she is Matron.
She is humankind and she ventures through The Wildwood.
Emerging from The Wildwood, an experienced, adept warrior.
Her words are not mere letters combined together, more than thoughts,
They are the sustenance for future generations upon which life will be written.
She imbues us with the energy to care beyond ourselves.
She is beauty and she is strength, she is full of existential valor.
She welcomes you into her dwelling, "enter and be welcome!"
She stands at your side and thwarts off the arrows of hate aimed at your back.
She stands before you and wards off the dagger of malice aimed at your heart.
She crouches about you paving new pathways over the jagged stones at your feet.
She cuts down the insidious vines of ruination that try to bind your courage about your ankles.
She places a crown of scrutiny upon your head, that you may never become complacent in your thinking.
To seek understanding but to not fear the lack of answers.
She will carry you because your burden is halved when on four shoulders.
She strikes your back lovingly, urging your voice to come out!
She is our Shieldmaiden, our matron of cause!
She is the ageless face of knowledge.
The Crone, who stands between this life and the next.
She is timeless in her work because her work grows in you.
She is expansion.

Cheryl Seguin

First Place
Poetry



Chaii Whaley

Warm Spark in the Night

First Place

Photography & New Media



Elsie Gordon
Rooster Mug

First Place
Three-Dimensional Art



Jaime Briner
Rested and Wicked

Honorable Mentions
Two-Dimensional Art

The Story of Nirin

The story ahead is an excerpt chapter from an in-progress story written by Esh T. C. Phobos. This chapter is meant to be a collection of memory flashbacks, hence the various cuts. I hope you enjoy this tale from beyond the stars!

A great calamity was befalling the realms.

As the dragons gathered in the Hall of Memory, called by their leaders, their concerns manifested as shared whispers and conversation. Hopefully the Minds had answers for their worries.

Nirin of Phorgoth'Tein flew low, hoping to get a better seat close to Dol'Koroth of Fanas'Taysia. The Greatclaw that led the various soldiers of the dragon realm was a sight to behold, and it was always Nirin's dream of joining his ranks one day. Perhaps this grand assembly would be the chance she needed to ask him to let her join.

The dragons of various shades and opacity flew with her all around, but she made sure to fly in their shadows. Her scales barely let the light from her Fire shine through, so she knew many would not welcome her for friendly conversation.

The buildings of hearth stone, opal glass, and ever metal rose around her and gave her the perfect places to hide her body from anyone who might spot her, ducking and diving around the archways and flight holes until she and the rest of the dragons of the city made it to the gathering pavilion outside the Hall of Memory.

Nirin landed and looked around for Dol'Koroth, spotting his grand dark form easily near the gathered Minds. The crowds were already thick and bustling with activity, so Nirin quickly started scurrying through the bodies to try and find a better place to seat herself.

Luckily, the dragons were far too preoccupied with the calamity and worries thereof to pay her heed, and she was able to shove her way to the front of the crowd where she could see the figure of Dol'Koroth in all of his mighty greatness.

The gemstones of his body were a brilliant mix of black and red, translucent enough to show the bright burning Fire in his chest cavity. It shined bright with his devotion to his people, something Nirin had always admired.

Queenmind Nal'Affert of Desten'Fayia spread her great magenta wings, which brought the crowd to a steady silence.

"Hark!" she roared, her musical voice deep with intense emotion. "The Claws have returned from the outer stars. And they bring... unfortunate news,"

"Indeed," called Clawmind Filatha of Berath'Tell, the only one beside the Queenmind that was above Greatclaw Dol'Koroth. Filatha's scarred and cracked form of golden and blue told many stories of battle. "Stars have been disappearing. Our Eyes reported why. A monster, greater than anything we've ever seen before. It comes from the darkness between the stars, and it seeks to devour everything in its path,"

Gasps and cries of woe echoed into the canyon.

"But listen!" Filatha barked, quieting the crowd once more. "We know of a way to combat it,"

"We have power," Dol'Koroth stood and boomed his voice, sending it across the crowd and beyond. "Our Fire can harm it, drive it back. We saw it when our Eyes got too close and used their Fire to fight it. We have a chance,"

Nirin almost cheered at that, just for Dol'Koroth. But the severity of the situation stayed her voice.

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"We will be gathering Claws for battle," Nal'Affert announced, her rainbow gemscales reflecting the light of their star. "Everyone who can fight shall fight! We will be gathering in the Clawdens to ensure everyone will know where to go. If you have reason to believe you cannot fight, report to the Eyedens to state your case,"

"Teeth will be increasing their hunting efforts," Dol'Koroth also proclaimed. "To facilitate our growing army. Wings will be swift and merciless in paving the way for our armies. Now everyone! To the Clawdens!"

An roaring cheer filled the air and dragons took to the air to fly to the nearest Clawdens. But Nirin was approaching Dol'Koroth's pedestal. Yet her advance was stopped by someone grabbing her tail and yanking her back.

"Nirin!" Barked her father, Venerein of Phorgoth'Tein, his purple gemscales bright and his Fire seething with anger. "What are you doing?"

"I was-!" Nirin stammered, feeling the heat in her chest, her Fire, falter for a moment. But she looked back at Dol'Koroth, who was speaking with the Clawmind and Queenmind, and her determination fed her flame. "I was going to sign up for Dol'Koroth's Claws,"

"I forbid it," Venerein hissed, keeping a firm and painful hold on Nirin's tail. "You are far too weak and simple minded for the army,"

"Just because my Fire cannot be seen doesn't mean it isn't strong!" Nirin argued, using all her power to yank her tail out of Venerein's grasp and face him. "Besides, the Minds said it themselves. All who can fight should fight,"

"I will be the one to pluck your wing plates out myself if you do not return home," growled her father, spreading his own wings threateningly.

But then a dark, flickering shadow loomed over them. Venerein looked up, seething at whoever it was that was daring to interrupt them, but he quickly snapped his wings closed. Nirin turned to see Dol'Koroth standing behind her, glowering down at Venerein.

"What is happening here?" the Greatclaw asked in a slow, hissing voice.

"Nothing that concerns you, Greatclaw," Venerein dipped his head. "Family matters, is all,"

"I highly doubt that," Dol'Koroth turned his attention to Nirin, who was frozen on the spot. "Maybe you can shed some light on this,"

"She had dumb dreams, is all," Venerein barked. "Weak, dumb dreams,"

"Joining your Claws is my dream," Nirin finally found her voice. "I want to do my best for our kin. I want to fight,"

"You have no strength to fight!" Venerein argued.

But Nirin continued. "I don't care if I'm not the strongest or have the brightest Fire. I just want to contribute. In something like this, every little bit helps, right?"

"Stop this, Nirin," her father marched forward, reaching for her arm. But Dol'Koroth smacked it away in a shower of sparks when his claws met Venerein's gemscales. "Greatclaw-!"

"Your daughter is right," Dol'Koroth rumbled, his voice like thunder. "It doesn't matter if someone isn't like the best of us. What matters is their willingness and tenacity. What is your name, blue one?"

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"Nirin of Phorgoth'Tein, your honor," Nirin bowed her head, but Dol'Koroth grabbed her jaw gently and brought her head back up.

"My Claws, yes? That is your aspiration?" Dol'Koroth asked. Nirin nodded, her head still in his claws. "Then come with me. We fly to my Clawden,"

Nirin would always remember fondly, and smugly, the look of pure shock and anger on her father's face that day.

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"Have you seen the new recruit?" asked a guard stationed near the gates of Dol'Koroth's Clawden, many months later. "The blue one with the opaque scales,"

"Her speed is unmatched!" complimented another. "Her agility is out of this world and the next,"

"Too bad her Fire is weak, though. Imagine the damage she could do if she could set aflame her enemies at that speed," said the first.

They were watching as Nirin ducked and dodged in the training pit, using mechanical arcane training bots. Their Fire Apparatuses sparked and heaved with effort as they tried to keep up with the smaller and faster Nirin, who zipped all around them, jumped up onto their backs and severed their vital wires that simulated real kill-shots.

Two bots fell to this while the last was blasted with a weak, prismatic fire that barely reached the greens in it's color ranges. The remaining bot seemed to pause, as if surprised by this, and it's whirring gears and clunking servos almost sounded like laughter. But Nirin tried to ignore this, growled, and went to work on severing the cords of the final bot.

When the final bot fell to the ground in a heap of metal and arcane crystal, she felt a little better. A little.

"You're speed and ability are getting more refined," called Dol'Koroth, who was watching from the sidelines.

"But not my Fire," Nirin clawed helplessly at the sand of the training pit. "I won't be able to do any real damage to the Darkness,"

"You can still be of help," Dol'Koroth assured, his Fire flickering in a way that comforted Nirin. It showed her that his words were genuine. "Scouts are an important thing. But let us keep trying with your Fire,"

"How?" Nirin jumped out of the pit, her obsidian steel armor almost making her look like a miniature version of Dol'Koroth. "One's Fire... Can I really make it stronger just by believing I can?"

"The strength of one's Fire relies on many factors," Dol'Koroth spread his wings as he stood. "But that is for later. This was merely an evaluation. Come, fly with me,"

Nirin was giddy to fly with Dol'Koroth. They lifted into the sky, looking down and around the complex that made up their home, the Hallogem Palace. The various dens and caverns they used were bustling with activity, but it had changed. Instead of markets and festivals and games, there were soldiers and smiths and training grounds. The entire city had been transformed into a giant military assemblage ground. It felt like every Claw in the known stars were here.

Four giant pillars had been erected in the recent months around the Palace. Specialized Memory Stones were placed on top of each one. Each one was filled with the flame of the one dragon out of all of them that was honored more than their Queenmind. The Champion of Dragons, chosen by Creation and creator of the Prism Fire in GigahVoryth, was flying out of the central chambers of the Hall of Memories with the fourth and final Memory Stone in their grasp.

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Dol’Koroth had explained it long ago so everyone in his ranks knew of the importance of these Memory Stones. They were modified to “remember” the Fire of the Champion over and over again, producing it infinitely. This production allowed them to utilize the strongest Fire in the stars, using thaumatic apparatuses to shape the fire to create a shield around their home.

Nirin and Dol’Koroth, as well as an audience below the pillar, watched as the Champion opened their maw and breathed their impossibly beautiful flame into the Stone. It flashed and started to produce swirls and whirlwinds of that same Fire as the Champion carefully locked it into place on the pillar and activated the thaumatic machines.

The Fire produced twirled up into a twister that joined the storm of fire above them. It flowed and flickered like a planetary aurora, giving enough space between the flames to see the ever darkening sky. Each day, more and more stars vanished from view. It made everyone uneasy.

Cheers from below traveled far, and Nirin also found herself clapping her wings mid-air. The final pillar was complete. Now the Hallogem Palace was safe in case the Darkness found their world.

“What a sight to behold,” Nirin breathed, looking up at the now complete shield above them. “Imagine flying through it!”

Dol’Koroth rumbled and his Fire churned with mirth. “Perhaps one day, Nirin,” he looked over to the side and watched a passing wing of dragons fly below him, looking shifty. Nirin tilted her head at him as he looked back to her. “Say, would you be interested in seeing something in the Hall? There’s something I’d like to show you,”

“Sure,” Nirin wished he could see her Fire as it bloomed inside her chest. “I’d love to-”

Erratic roars cut Nirin off. The two looked up and saw a dragon flying down from above, having just passed through the shield. It looked like they were burning, or in pain. Something was wrong.

Dol’Koroth and Nirin both dived immediately to catch the falling dragon, but they watched in alarm as the dragon seemed to pivot in the air and shove themselves directly into the Memory Stone that had just been set up. The Champion of Dragons seemed too shocked to move for a moment before they joined Dol’Koroth and Nirin in diving towards the falling one.

Dol’Koroth was the one who made it first, catching the dragon before they hit the ground. He brought the dragon to land and gently set him down as Nirin and the Champion gathered, along with the rest of the crowd, who was in an uproar.

“Who would fly into that?!”

“They knocked off the Stone! Have them fix it,”

“They were flying really weirdly...”

“Are they okay?”

“Silence!” Dol’Koroth barked, and the crowd went quiet. He turned to the dragon on the ground, who seemed to be shaking and convulsing. “My friend. Are you all right? Do you need aid?”

The dragon lifted it’s head in a way that made Nirin think of someone using strings on a puppet. The dragon opened its gemstone eyes.

It was nothing but pure darkness.

It opened the maw of it’s dragon puppet, the Darkness swirling and snaking about its crystalline body and snuffing out the Fire as a voice unlike any other boomed out;

Continued on next page . . .

RECLAMATION. YOU ARE ALL MINE. RETURN TO ME.

The null of the Darkness seemed to rear up from horizon to horizon, swallowing their world in shadow. The shield, weakened, stood no chance.

And pure devastation rained down.

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The first to fall was the Champion of Dragons.

She had soared up at lightning speed, sending a plume of her fire up into the air, as strong as she could. Her powers granted by Creation made her Fire stronger than any in recorded history. Her flame engulfed the sky and the Darkness in an inferno of rainbow fire.

But then claws of pure nothing broke through the fire, using the various bodies of other dragons covering its tendrils to shield it. They grabbed at the Champion's wings and ripped them off in one fell swoop, sending the Champion down to her death, to be shattered on the rocks of her home.

The infected dragon lunged at the closest dragon, Dol'Koroth, their mouth foaming with null and their body cracking and shattering before their eyes. The host never made it to Dol'Koroth before their body fell to the ground in a pile of glass-like shards.

Tendrils of null rose up and lashed out of the dragon's remains, and the crowd all breathed out their flame to keep the Darkness back. It sizzled and hissed, and even Nirin's weak Fire was able to get it to reel back.

They all took to the air as the world warped around them. Chunks of the land rose and vanished into the darkness above. In a matter of only an hour, most of the city was either vanished or torn asunder. There was nothing but rubble.

The only things that somehow stood were the Hall of Memories and the pillars of the Champion's Memory Stones. So many dragons took refuge in the Hall, Nirin and Dol'Koroth included, creating a wall of Fire from everyone's flame so that it was strong enough to keep the Darkness out. For now.

"Over here," Nirin called. "It's the Queenmind!"

Dragons came racing to aid their leader, who stumbled in with one wing hanging on by a shard and a leg having been broken off. Nirin quickly pushed herself on the Queenmind's bad side, letting the Mind use her for support.

"Thank you," Nal'Affert wheezed out. Her Fire was weak, dim. Barely a lick of fire left. Nirin and another soldier led her to an open nest, which was barely just a few rags and rugs that were scavenged from the Hall. But it had to do.

"Queenmind..." Nirin muttered as she helped Nal'Affert settle down. "You're injuries. Let me--"

"No, no need," Nal'Affert sighed as her body seemed to go limp. "I've not much longer,"

"No! Not you!" cried many dragons.

"We have lost this..." Nal'Affert closed her eyes as her Fire flickered solemnly. "The Champion was our only hope..."

"No, don't say that," Nirin hollered out. "Please, Nal'Affert!"

Normally, calling a Mind by their name was offensive. But on this day, all of them were equal. No one cared about titles or the opacity of their scales. They were all torn from their lives and forced to watch as an enemy greater than themselves destroyed everything around them.

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"Nirin, young Nirin," Nal'Affert's eyes opened a small bit, and her one good wing opened. Nirin slotted her wing plates with Nal'Afferts as the Queenmind spoke. "Your hope shines brighter than any Fire... Keep that hope... For all of us..."

Nal'Affert's fire flickered out, and her body collapsed into a pile of gemstones.

Everyone cried out that day in equal anguish.

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"What do we do? Without Queenmind..." Filatha growled as she and Dol'Koroth and Nirin and a few other survivors hid deeper in the Treasure Chamber, the last refuge thus far. The Darkness had found its way into the Hall above.

"There has to be a way to drive it back," Dol'Koroth swiped at a pile of gold, sending coins and gold pieces scattering like splashed water. "Our Fire hurts it! Don't tell me it's somehow found a way to resist it,"

"I doubt it," Filatha said. "It needs to find ways around it. Like when it broke through the rooftop of the Hall, or how it used the bodies of our kin as armor to guard it from the Champion's Fire,"

"Even then, even it cannot withstand the Champion's Fire for too long," Said someone else. "It acted quickly. But how did it get through the initial barrier?"

"That infected dragon!" barked Filatha. "When the Stone was removed without proper protocol, it weakened the entire shield as it was developing. That gave it the opening it needed,"

"So, what about the Stones now?" Nirin was thinking hard and didn't even realize she had spoke out loud until she looked up and saw everyone staring at her. "Oh, uhm... Wait..."

She thought long and hard.

The Memory Stones were used to recall the Fire of the Champion in infinite loops. The Champion's Fire was still with them!

"If we get that Pillar fixed, we can drive the Darkness back," Nirin stood, determination filling her body. Her Fire burned hot and bright, and though it did now show through her scales it showed in her eyes, which flickered with a rainbow of colorful facets. "It remembers the Fire of the Champion. Use it to drive it back and fix the Hallogem Palace!"

"That's insane!" Filatha flared her wings, knocking over a chest filled with various gemstone samples. "No one will survive out there long enough to get to the Pillar,"

"Not alone," Nirin countered. "Have someone in charge of putting the Stone back while others focus solely on keeping the Darkness away. We may lose a few more dragons, but if it saves the rest..."

"Nirin is fast, one of the fastest in the trainee program," said one of the old guards. "If anyone can dodge the Darkness long enough to fix the pillar, it's her,"

"This is the most dull-minded idea I've ever heard," Filatha seethed, but she stepped forward. "But call me dull-minded then. I'll go,"

"I will, too," Dol'Koroth stepped forward, but Nirin stopped him.

"No," Nirin said. "Koro, your Fire is strong, but so is your spirit. Everyone looks to you for leadership now. You need to lead everyone out of the chamber to the portal rooms and get everyone out of here,"

"But-" Dol'Koroth started.

"Please," Nirin pleaded, slotting her wings with his. "If anything, I need to know that everyone else will

Continued on next page . . .

be safe. With us trying to stop it, the Darkness may focus on us and give you all the moment you need to get out,”

“Nirin...” Dol’Koroth bumped his horns with hers, his body shaking and his Fire flickering with conflict. Eventually, he sighed. “Very well. We will use the mass portal. I will not close it until you return,”

“Close it if the Darkness tries to get through,” Nirin barked with such an authority that it made the others jump. “I will do my best, but please, make sure everyone else is safe,”

“I will,” Dol’Koroth promised.

<><><><><><>

Nirin and Filatha flew out of the Hall into utter chaos.

There was no rime or reason anymore. Just things flying about in a storm of null and being vanished into nonexistence. It was sickening, but the Hall of Memories was still standing somehow on a slab of stone that floated above the vortex of darkness. On smaller stone islands were the Pillars, all of them but one still feeding fire into the sky and keeping the Darkness from fully engulfing everything. For now.

The final pillar was wrapped in tendrils of darkness that looked like it was trying to pull the pillar apart brick by brick, but the leftover power inside it was making it difficult for the Darkness to achieve its goals.

So that’s where they flew.

The Darkness snapped down at them with mouths full of null teeth and tried to beat them out of the sky with giant wings and tendrils of inky nothingness. Waves of nothing rolled to try and swallow them, but Filatha was true in her aim and kept vaporizing the Darkness away with her Fire and kept Nirin safe.

They flew, ducked, and dived until they reached the last Pillar. They landed on the stone slab surrounding the base of it with Filatha nearly pouring an endless stream of Fire around Nirin as Nirin tried to find the Memory Stone.

There!

It was there in the stone, surrounded by shattered dragons. Perhaps they had died protecting it. Nirin and Filatha chased the Darkness away from the stone it was trying to dig up and Nirin grabbed it and pulled it out of the gem pile.

Her metaphysical heart sank.

The fire within had gone out.

“No... No!” Nirin shook it as if it would help.

“The other pillars,” Filatha huffed in exhaustion, blasting the Darkness away between her words. “If we can just take it to those...?”

“No, no time. It is too far! Curses!” Nirin cried out, her fire fading and the heat in her chest growing colder. She hugged the Stone close as Filatha did her best to keep the Darkness away.

It took a lot to get a dragon to cry. Even in her last moments, Nal’Affert didn’t cry. The dragons back in the Hall didn’t cry when their home was destroyed. Nirin didn’t cry when her family was infected and shattered before her.

And dragons? They cried fire. Their Fire. It took only the purest form of an emotion to form into a dragon’s tear.

Nirin’s dread formed a tear and fell onto the Stone.

Continued on next page . . .

The Stone's inner opal glass exploded into a brilliant light that drove the Darkness around them away. The two dragons stared at the Stone in awe.

"Nirin... You're the new Champion of Dragons," Filatha gasped.

Nirin wordlessly stood, then looked up. The Pillar was still standing, the Darkness squirming away from the base where they stood to avoid the light.

"Cover me!" Nirin barked.

She and Filatha launched into the air. The light and Filatha's fire kept the Darkness away, but the higher they went the stronger it seemed to fight. Filatha screeched as shards were taken from her wings, and Nirin tried not to cry out when she felt the scales on her tail be yanked away.

The stone was starting to flare with fire now, twirling around them and singeing the Darkness and even their own scales. It was hot, hotter than any Fire they had ever felt. Were they biological, they would've been burnt to ashes by now.

But they flew to the top, where the pedestal the Memory Stone was to be. It was partly shattered from where the infected dragon had smashed into it, but its power supply and nodes were still functional.

Nirin raced up without a second thought and slammed the Memory Stone back into place.

Pure Fire erupted from the Memory Stone and the various thaumic machines, sending the Darkness screeching away in bellows of static keening. The other pillars were beginning to glow brighter and brighter, reacting to the Darkness' presence.

"Nirin!" Filatha cried out, the winds picking up and sending the Clawmind into the air.

"I have to hold it!" Nirin roared over the sounds. "It's unstable otherwise. Get to the portal! Get out of here!"

"I'm not leaving you behind!" Filatha tried to land again, but couldn't. The winds kept throwing her off.

"I have to do this!" Nirin told her. "Close the portal and make sure everyone is safe. Make sure Dol'Koroth is safe! Please!"

Filatha's Fire shone with sorrow and understanding. There was no saving Nirin now. Nirin needed to stay.

"May the stars sing to you, and may your name be sung forever more! Hero of the dragons! Hero of the stars!" Filatha sang out with all her might as she turned and flew back to the Hall of Memories.

Nirin's claws were hurting with how tightly she was gripping the Memory Stone. And as she watched Filatha fly away, all sound seemed to fade away. Perhaps her ears had stopped working with all the noise.

She recognized the flash from the portal chambers a few minutes later. The portal was closed.

Nirin was alone, holding the Memory Stone as it and its kin grew brighter and brighter. The Fire was getting stronger, the flames getting bigger and overpowering the storm above, below, and all around.

Be safe, everyone.

And then there was only light.

Esh T.C. Phobos

Second Place Short Fiction

Child Divine

Tiptoe gently over to my bed
That familiar flavor rolling in my head
Sanity spews forth from my veins
Scenting my breath, sweet metal migraines

Mute sentience of bequeathed heresies
Consume all that are all my memories
Fragmented images of my body awry
Repleat my dreams with morbid supply

Laudanum gathers the soft twilight
Melodramatic tears race from my sight
Poison blossoms come to ponder
My endless night spent in somber

Pothering sentiments seem to outsmart
The better workings of the human heart
Masochism flaunts in tactful lines
Where God is not, and the Devil dines

Cheryl Seguin

Second Place
Poetry



Elsie Gordon
Candlelight Skull

Second Place
Photography & New Media



Seth O'Rorke
Family Ties

Second Place
Two-Dimensional Art



Elsie Gordon
Straw-Bear-y

Honorable Mention
Photography & New Media

Domesticating Love

Honey I'm a stray dog
Lapping up puddles in the alleyways
Wild and free on my own
But god I am so alone
And so in love with you
That if you give me even an inch
I'll forget how I used to breathe without you
Bring me home or leave me forever
The choice is yours

Darling I'm a stray tomcat
Snatching up mice, sleeping in sunlight
But god I am so cold
And so warm when I see you
That if you give me even a glance
I'll follow you home, I won't sleep without you
Bring me home or leave me forever
The choice is yours

I'd give up all my little bachelorette freedoms
Just for an ounce of you
I'd strain my heart like tea leaves for you to drink
Just to know a little more
I'd give up all my little bachelor schemings
Just for an inch of you
I'd strain my heart like coffee grounds for you
Just to see a little more

I'm a wild little crow
And you an angler fish in the shallow
The light you carry I value more than my safety
Your sharp teeth, my talons
Both dangerous and harmless
Both of us beautiful and wretched
I thought to steal your shiny heart
And with no effort you whisked mine away
But you seem so unsure
And I have to know;
Am I yours? Am I yours?
Beloved, you must either clench your jaws around me
Or give back what once I owned
Leave me now or bring me home
The choice is yours
and yours alone

Honey, I sincerely hope that
One day I'll fill the empty cushion on your couch
Domesticated only for you
Darling, I sincerely hope that
One day I'll warm your lap and heart
Wearing a collar only for you
Beloved, I sincerely wish that
One day you'll see fit to share your light with me
And I'll share my life with you
Bring me home or simply don't
The choice is yours
Bring me home or leave me alone
The choice is yours
The choice is yours
And yours alone.

Abigail Orr

Third Place
Poetry

Words for Boys and Girls

"I'm sorry." Prudence lowered her head in contrition. "I lost my temper and spoke without thinking." She was referring to having caused a ruckus outside with the neighbor boys. They had called her ugly and she retaliated by shouting off at them about their deceased mother. Her younger brother happened by and told them to fart back to their stinky house. Prudence lost her gut laughing, but they tackled her brother to the ground and a fight ensued.

"Why would you worry about that?" Gruffed her grandmother languidly.

"Well, Wyatt said a bunch of things and got punched by the neighbor boys."

"Oh, I'm sure he did." She rolled her eyes, arduously fanning herself in the uncomfortable haze of the sunroom. Prudence furrowed her brow at her grandmother. She continued: "So... I said a bunch of things too and I thought I should be careful not to say any old thing that comes to mind."

"Why the heavens would you need to?" Her grandmother said, baffled by Prudence's train of thought.

"Well, Gran," offered the twelve-year-old, "If Wyatt got punched, I might get punched too."

"Good heavens that would never happen!" Her grandmother sounded truly offended by the thought, waving it away with her fan.

"But how do you know?"

She chuckled. "Isn't it obvious child?" Prudence's brow furrowed deeper, trying to perceive her grandmother's next words.

"You're a girl." The old woman grinned inscrutably.

"I'm a girl," she repeated.

Her grandmother preened. "That's right."

"Wait, you mean I'll never get punched for what comes outta my mouth because I'm a girl?"

"Surely not!"

"But boys will have consequences for what they say," Prudence muttered.

"Oh well, girls have consequences, but ain't none gone thrash a girl." Prudence pondered her grandmother's words a moment, then remembered seeing her little brother getting beat on by the other boys.

"Gran?"

"Yes, dear?"

Continued on next page . . .

"Don't you feel bad for Wyatt?"

"Why would I do that? He needs to be strong! Be able to defend himself! A sock in the eye never did no man no permanent harm." She nodded at the rightness of her own words and fanned herself with more zeal.

Prudence gaped at her grandmother a moment, then excused herself. Leaving the sunroom, she passed by the kitchen where she overheard her aunt's hostile voice.

"Your boy is weak Kenny!"

"Leave my boy alone, Grety." Grety was short for Gretchen. Prudence never liked her aunt, she was pleasant enough to her, but otherwise was always complaining loudly about anything and everything. While she recalled her aunt's unpleasant disposition, Prudence had never paid much attention to the words her aunt spoke until this very moment.

"He's a sissy! Them Davis boys beat the lovin' tar outta him, no trouble!" her face was flush and animated as she spat the insults about her ten-year-old nephew.

"It was two against one!" retorted Prudence's father.

"Oh please! You're too soft on him and you know it," she said, crossing her arms in a lofty stance.

"I'll not have you speak badly 'bout him."

"I'm only sayin' what's true."

"You may be right, you may be wrong, but in my house," he stood up from the table and lowered his voice, "you'll respect each member - weak or otherwise."

"Don't go gettin' all serious Kenny." Gretchen said dismissively.

Prudence entered the room without realizing it, clenching her fists at her sides.

"Oh, hello darlin'!" Her aunt's face unscrewed itself attempting a lovely smile, and in a saccharine tone she asked, "want to bake some pies with your aunty?"

"No!" bellowed Prudence. She turned hot on her heels and stomped off. Leaving both her father and aunt blinking in stunned silence.

"Kenny."

"Yeah Grety?"

"You're raising one fine girl." He raised a brow at the comment but shook his head, not wanting to engage with it.

Continued on next page . . .

Prudence stepped out onto the porch. Wyatt was sitting on the steps, nursing his fat lip. She sat down next to him, and he shifted away from her, hunching his small body.

"I ain't cryin' or nothin'."

"Wyatt..."

"I said I'm fine!"

"Wyatt, look at me."

"Why are you fussin'? Just go away already!"

"Please," she offered softly.

Wyatt peeked over his small shoulder and was stunned by the sight of his big sister's tears.

"Pru! What happened? Did someone hurt you?!" he exclaimed, turning around to face her completely, forgetting his injuries. She saw the damage: a fat, bloody bottom lip, bruised eye, scraped cheek, ripped sleeve, and missing buttons on his shirt. Her tears flowed harder as she watched him, beaten and ignored, worrying over her simply for crying.

She reached for him, "come here you grubby!" pulling him into a desperate hug. He froze momentarily then fully leaned into it.

"I'm sorry!" she said with feeling, repeating the words under her breath over and over. She held her little brother to her chest, smoothing his mussed hair tenderly. It was not until Prudence had finally stopped saying sorry that she noticed Wyatt's hot tears soaking her shirt. The scorching summer sun was no match for the fire in those small drops.

"Pru..."

"Yeah, Wyatt?" She looked into his true blue eyes.

"I don't think you're ugly."

Cheryl Seguin

*Third Place
Short Fiction*



Autumn



Spring



Summer



Winter

Grace Barnes
Annual Anura

Third Place
Two-Dimensional Art



Abigail Orr
A Woman is More than Her Uterus

Third Place
Photography & New Media

Midnights

Midnight.
It is a beautiful time.
The time when everything resets.
00:00
The hope for a better day has arrived.
It is the perfect time to let go of yesterday's burdens.
Exhale the past
And inhale the future.
It may seem impossible to imagine a new day that is better than yesterday,
But if that better day is not today,
There is always tomorrow at midnight.
It will get better one day
When the clock strikes midnight.
Keep moving forward to the next day
Until you reach your midnight that gives you a better today.
One of these days when the clock strikes midnight
You will finally get your clean slate.
Let that be the reason you keep moving towards your next midnight.

Jessica Lechner

Honorable Mentions
Poetry



Jennifer Gamez
Un Dia en el Campo

Honorable Mentions
Photography & New Media

Personal Power

You see what I want you to see of me.
Not calculating to be manipulating, but to protect,
The little girl inside who's still screaming.
You see a woman put together; the truth is stranger still.

People tell me "you're so strong" all the darn time.
What they really mean is they can beat me because I can take it.
I'm a beast, I'm so powerful because I keep rising above,
The garbage, and the expectations that have nothing to do with love.

This is my armor; I am wearing a shield out in public.
You say, "nice dress," as though I'm doing it to impress.
Maybe I am a little, but underneath is visceral.
Underneath is a little girl pretending to be a woman.

Make-up on point, eyebrows being sisters not twins,
Hair smooth and glossy, don't forget my accessories.
My rings, are gemstones because I don't believe in much,
But if they can give me positive energy, I'll take it.

You say, "you're so put together, you keep it together."
That's only my bulwark that protects me from the vultures.
Who ate my childhood and the smiling faces full of assumptions,
About me, looking at me like "wow, she can handle anything."

We all handle ourselves, who else is going to?
Got to get through the day of perfect, perfect, put together.
Woman of confidence, woman of strength, I'm so fierce!
Wait until you see me stumble, see me.

The truth is I am terrified every time I hear those words,
Someone will look at me and notice, I'm an imposter.
I'm not put together; I'm assembled from pieces of shame and hurt.
I'm the formation of childhood neglect, I'm wearing my cloak of invisibility.

"So strong," when I've got this sucking wound in my chest,
That feeds off me, day in and day out, yeah, I'm breathing.
It's the discomfort that drives me to keep putting myself together,
So that people only see what I want them to see of me.

I'm wearing the emotional waste thrown on a child,
Everything neat and proper I'll make you beguiled.
It looks good to you because you see the packaging.
A sight better than the internal ravaging.

So yeah, all put together, looking like I've got it down.
Taking the beatings, orchestrating myself, investing.
I'm adulting as best as I can because that's what I'm supposed to be.
At this age, at this time, I'm still a little girl in a woman's body.

Cheryl Seguin

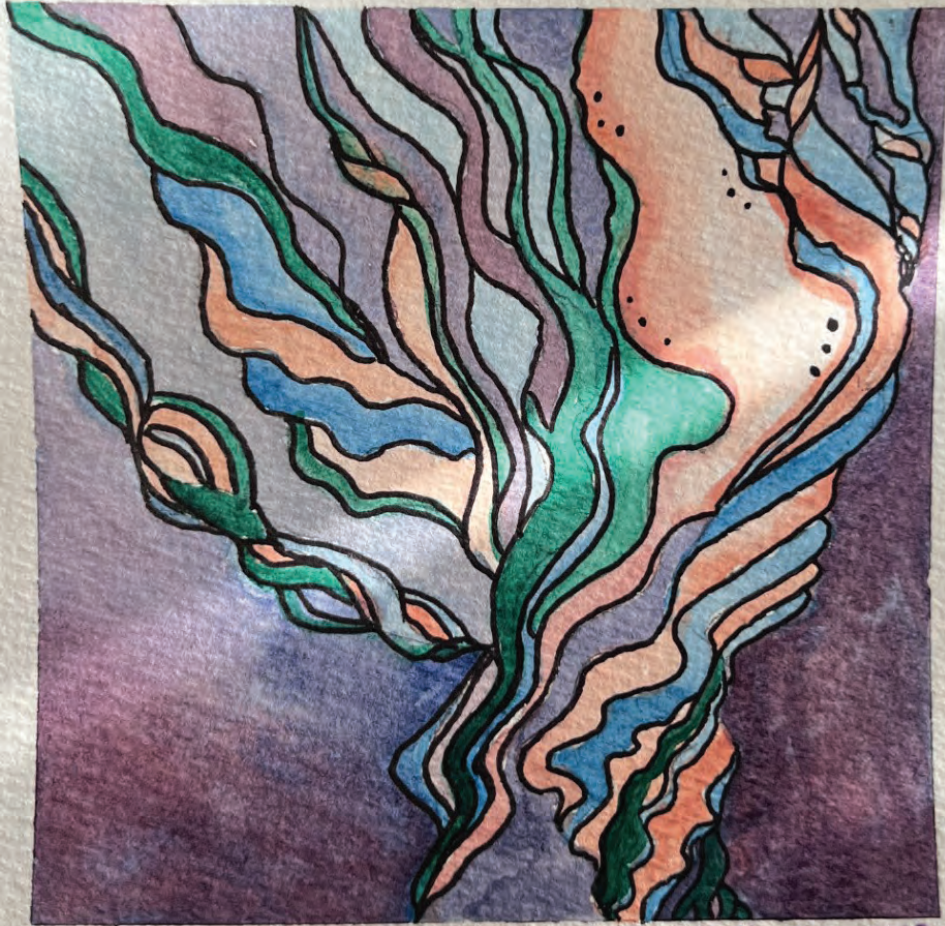
Honorable Mentions
Poetry

My Mother

You are the coolness of my eye.
My first love, my heartbeat.
Your womb was my place of survival,
What a miracle of the Almighty.
You are my strength and weakness.
I breath today because of your sacrifices.
I owe you my every success.
I will die for if I must,
You thought me how to survive.
You are indeed my strength.
I love you Mama.
May you live long!!!
To enjoy my achievement in this world,
I love you Mama,
I love you Mama.

Meimuna Ibrahim

Honorable Mentions
Poetry



Jaime Briner
New Absurdity

Honorable Mentions
Two-Dimensional Art

The Girl Who Never Gave Up

I have a story to tell.
In fact, it is my favorite story.
It is about a girl who never gave up
Even though she had so many mountains to move
Just to be where she is now.

Giving up was never her thing.
Crying in front of other people,
She saw that as a sign of weakness
So she just held in all of her emotions
Never asking for help.

In her short lifetime,
She lost so much.
But, when she ended up losing things,
Somehow
She'd end up getting something better.
It never happened right away,
But eventually, it did.

She thought she felt all the possible human emotions
By the age of twenty-three
That she was so overwhelmed.
She knew
She still had her entire life ahead of her
To feel even more emotions.
Both good
And bad.

She loved
And she lost.
She got hurt
And she healed.
She lost herself
And she found herself again.

She is the girl who never gave up.

I am that girl.

Jessica Lechner

Honorable Mentions
Poetry

A Conversation

"Do you like Harry Potter?"

"I love Harry Potter," she smiled. Why, because I'm a witch?

"I should show you where I'm going this summer." He took out his cell phone, the webpage was already pulled up when he presented it to her.

"Oh wow!" she exclaimed, and flipped from one image to the next, viewing the different Harry Potter themed hotel rooms.

"You should come."

Why would I do that? is what she wanted to ask, but instead, she tried to mentally process the invitation.

"Who all is going?" she considered it might be a group thing.

"My daughter," he said without looking up from the photos. She had never met his daughter.

She settled on saying: "have a good trip with your daughter, take photos."

"I wish you would," he insisted.

"You can show me photos when you get back," she said again.

He puffed up himself up in his seat like a bird trying to look bigger than it was. They sat in silence for what seemed to drag on too long.

He spoke first, "I'm waiting for my daughter to confirm."

"Have a fun trip." She had no idea what more to say on the matter and decided to change the subject.

"I'm currently analyzing a piece by Kate Chopin called Desiree's Baby, have you read it?"

"I don't think so."

She unfolded two pieces of paper with the printed short story on it and handed it to him. It was full of annotations. He took it, glancing over it then handing it back. Their interaction seemed forced at this point.

"Are you wanting to head out?"

"Sort of." He said quietly, with an expression she could not place.

They headed down the stairs of the café, and as they tossed their rubbish into the designated bin, he patted her shoulder lightly while saying something. It distracted her from whatever he said, and she turned her shoulder away from the contact. After parting, her phone buzzed with a text message: "Next time is my treat." It read. There wouldn't be a next time.

Cheryl Seguin

Honorable Mentions
Short Fiction

C'est La Vie

There has never been a time I have felt more lost than now.

I feel numb

I feel like crying

But I can't

I have the tears in my eyes

And I want them to flow finally

But they won't

It's like they are just stuck there

This is a horrible feeling

Like everything is falling apart

And you can't help but think it is all your fault

That every part of your world

It's falling

It's changing

The ground beneath you is trembling

Then it feels like you have nobody to talk to

You want to tell someone how you are feeling

But you can't seem to find someone who will listen

And you want to scream at the top of your lungs

But you feel like if you do

Nobody will hear you

Or you'll feel like a burden

Everything is falling apart

All out of control

Suddenly

When you least expect it

You notice time has gone on

And you have been healing

Somewhere along the way

You might have found someone who reaches out
their hand to grab you when you need it
You have let those tears go
And the ground beneath you will have stopped falling

Because that is how life is
We break
We heal
We repeat

Take deep breaths in the instance you need it
Close your eyes
Think of the times when you were breaking
Then think of the time you healed

Know that is how life goes

Jessica Lechner

Honorable Mentions
Poetry

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KAMMELIAN

