

FIRST PRIZE

In Hope

Tabia's tender body lay still, as the blazing African sun met the horizon in a silent declaration of night. The earlier events of the day replayed over one another, each stopping just before the end.

Aadeel, Tabia's brother, had left early that morning with Pa for work. Tabia and her sisters worked swiftly, scarcely noticing the absence of Pa and Aadeel. The day went by in a blur, until a sharp knock pounded continuously at the door. Ma turned as the door burst open and three men rushed in, followed by Aadeel, his face bruised and swollen. Pa was nowhere in sight.

One of the men yelled, "*Kwenda sasa, kijana!* (Go now, boy!)" With a crazed look, and a mind numbed by the drugs he had been forced to take, Aadeel raised the rifle he gripped firmly in his bloody hand and shot one . . . two . . . three. Tabia screamed, then she desperately ran for her life. She glanced back and saw—

That is where it stopped. The picture was so haunting Tabia's body stiffened, and her breaths quickened as she remembered what she had seen. There, in the midst of the hut, lay her dead sisters. Tabia's mother heaved her last words, "*Mwanangu! Huwezi kwenda!* (My son! You cannot go!)" Then Tabia's mother met death and lay in blood-covered silence.

That was all Tabia remembered of that day. A pang of hunger hit her, but she need not eat for she was on a mission. She would have to start tomorrow, for darkness forbade her of travel on this night. "Tomorrow. . .," Tabia whispered. Then she lay down to sleep with the slight hope her heart held tightly: *Pa may still be alive.*

The sound of footsteps awakened Tabia. A woman pressed a tiny bundle to her chest. Her eyes were red and puffy from crying. She mumbled something to Tabia. She continued to speak these same words, until she ran away in tears. The lady was saying, "*Jaafar amekwenda pamoja nao!* (Jaafar has gone with them!)" Tabia knew the woman's husband, Jaafar, must have been taken by the same men who had taken Aadeel. Tabia wondered whether Pa was even alive or if he, too, had been killed by Aadeel. *He has to be alive!* Hope arose in Tabia once more, for it was all she had left.

Tabia continued to walk, letting neither thirst nor hunger hinder her. She ran through the streets shouting loudly, "*Pa, wapi?* (Pa, where are you?)" When she reached the shabby building where Pa worked, she walked in tentatively. She was horrified by the scene of death before her eyes. Still, she walked on, searching for Pa. Suddenly, in the midst of the silence, she heard heavy raspy breathing coming from behind a crate. It was Pa! His body was covered with blood and bruises, but he looked up at her and smiled. He was alive! And that was all Tabia had hoped for.

by Rebecca Dunk (Grade Seven)
Koinonia Christian Academy
Bloomingdale, Ontario



FIRST PRIZE

PB and J

"I'm still hungry," I murmured from the passenger seat.

"What were you thinking of eating?" my dad asked.

I grinned. "A peanut butter and jelly sandwich, I've been craving those all day!" I explained.

"You eat way too much starch, try some vegetables instead," my dad suggested.

My smile disappeared.

"So, how's school?" my dad asked.

"Oh, ummm . . . good. We're working on a social project," I said, glad my lie wasn't that obvious.

He turned his head and glared at me. I guess I spoke too soon. "Oh, and how can you know that when you have been skipping so much school?" he spat. "How?" he yelled, even louder than before. He raised his hand.

No, I thought. *He's going to hit me. He hasn't hit me in years. Please don't let this start again.* He put his hand down on the steering wheel. *He didn't hit me, oh thank goodness.* But he wasn't even close to finishing. Each word shouted at me felt like a slap in the face. *He has no reasons to be proud of me*, I thought to myself as tears threatened to slide down my cheeks. I felt worthless. So for the rest of the car ride home, I kept quiet and shrunk in the back of my seat.

When we pulled into my driveway, I waited until my dad stormed into the house and slammed the door to get out of the truck. I went inside and heard the TV blaring in the living room, so I avoided that room. I quickly got my homework and retreated to the kitchen to do it.

As I leaned over my work, my vision blurred as tears plopped onto the pages. *He doesn't love me at all*, I thought as I sniffled.

I heard my dad walk into the room. I looked up to see him standing beside me holding out a box of Kleenex. "I . . .," my dad began, but he hesitated, and without another word, left the room. I began to cry harder.

He can't even look at me; can't even apologize, I thought to myself, as tears were streaming down my face. I began to get annoyed after. "I don't need to waste my tears on him," I whispered under my breath.

I didn't even bother to look up the next time he came in. I heard him rummaging through the fridge. *Of course, he wants food. Couch potato*, I thought. I heard him set several things on the table beside my work.

As he left the room, I looked up, expecting to find something stupid, but instead, I found something that made me smile, happily. A Kleenex box, a glass of milk, and a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. *He does love me; he does care*, I thought as I dabbed my tears away and took a bite out of my sandwich. Sometimes, one's actions can be worth a thousand words.

by Aimee Roy (Grade Eight)

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FIRST PRIZE

Looking at You through the Glass

The ticking of the clock grew as the space between myself and my next patient diminished. My heart raced faster and faster. Clenching my fists and squeezing my eyes shut, I attempted to escape the ticking. I hastily gathered my instruments and mentally prepared myself for the upcoming surgery. I had no idea what had just come over me. *This never happens.* . . .

Entering, I was greeted by the warm sweet smile of my sister. We share a home; it's nice to know I can always come home to a calm, level-headed person.

"How was work, Eve?" Valeria inquired.

"Not bad I suppose; just feeling a bit off today," I muttered.

"Off?"

"I'm fine. How are you, Val? Any big plans tonight?"

"I was hoping we could have movie night; you know, like when we were kids."

My head filled with vivid memories of us playing dolls, dancing in our basement, imagining fantastical worlds where we'd embark upon impossible journeys, always prevailing and victorious. How I miss those carefree days. All that's left are memories tucked safely in the back of my mind.

We picked out a movie and, eventually, the day's stress slid right off my shoulders, as it tends to do in the presence of my sister. Valeria had always been there for me—the life raft keeping me afloat when my ship had sunk, the rock keeping me grounded and stopping me from flying off into the sun. After our parents both passed, she was the one who had guided me back onto my feet, sharing her strength between the two of us.

The alarm on my phone signalled another workday, and my hatred for the cheery jingle grew each time it played. I dragged my weary limbs out of bed and cursed as I tumbled onto the bitter floor.

My day's mission was telling a family their daughter didn't get to the hospital in time; her brain was severely injured. That's the saddest thing about my work: seeing people with their whole lives ahead of them suddenly cut off from their minds. It's my own greatest fear.

I looked at the clock: almost eleven. Late again. I stepped out of the hospital and walked to my car, dazed from the day's events. The air hung in front of me, thick and viscous. The crunching snow beneath was deafening. Words, thoughts, and images flashed before my eyes. Darkness.

I woke to see familiar white walls, only from a different perspective. People ran in and out.

"She's waking up."

"Watch the EKG."

"Take her blood pressure."

Darkness.

Silence.

"She's coming back."

"What's happening?" I groaned, ignoring the mind-numbing headache.

"You've relapsed, Evegenia"

"Relapsed . . . from what? Does Valeria know? Have you contacted her?"

The doctor hesitated, "How long have you been off your medication?"

"Medication—for what?"

"For your schizophrenia. You don't have a sister, Evegenia."

Silence. "That's impossible. You're crazy! Where's my sister? What have you done with her?"

"Take these," he said, holding out the small pink pills.

by **Christina Penkov** (Grade Nine)
Aurora Charter School
Edmonton, Alberta

FIRST PRIZE

Addison's Piano

Addison Grey sat upright in front of a dusty old piano that had been tucked away in the corner of her living room for as long as she could remember. Her back was straight as she gazed down at the piano's lid. Not that she dared ever touch it. Her hands were lightly pressed on her lap. Her dark brown hair was in a single braid. This was how she remembered beginning. Back before that awful thing happened.

It comes as a big shock to a young girl when they're told they don't have an older brother anymore. She could still recall every detail about him from his favourite red jacket with a hole in the pocket to the way he had always smelled a little bit like smoke because the piano was next to the fireplace.

Stephen's life was this piano. He could amaze you with how quickly his fingers could glide across the perfect black and white keys to create beautiful melodies, and he shared this passion with his sister. Addison would sit with him while he played and demand lessons. Soon enough, she was playing songs alongside him.

When Addison's house was empty, she would sneak across the living room and slip onto the wooden bench. The piano lid always stayed firmly shut, but to be able to sit and remember him was enough.

Addison hesitantly reached out her hand, gently setting it on top of the lid. A surge of fear and happiness flooded through her and a whisper of encouragement echoed in her mind. She allowed her other hand to take the ledge and push it skyward, presenting the glorious keys before her. She couldn't just stare at them. She had to play something before the memories stopped flowing like an adrenaline rush. She decided on one of her old favourites, *Waltz of the Flowers* from *The Nutcracker*. She used to know the song off by heart but, while playing, her memory tripped and her finger slid to a wrong key. Addison's brow furrowed, her hands weren't working. Soon the song wasn't recognizable anymore.

A frustrated tear made the long plummet down Addison's cheek. She shut her eyes and put her head down on the piano's keys. They gaped out horrible sounds, but Addison didn't care. She had lost the one thing her brother left with her. She opened her eyes and a few more tears slipped out before she found a carving placed just above the keys where the lid would have hidden it. Addison's tears stopped and she allowed herself to let out a small laugh.

The carving read "Stephen's Piano" in a very faded imprint, but what made Addison's heart flutter were the less faded attempts to scratch out Stephen's name because it had been replaced by Addison's. She ran her fingers across the indents and knew she should've never stopped playing. Just because she didn't remember every note, didn't mean she had to forget the song.

by Tessa O'Donnell (Grade Ten)
Souris Regional High School
Souris, Prince Edward Island



FIRST PRIZE

In the Eyes of the Beholder

Thirteen. It really didn't seem like such a big number. He'd only just finished his first year of service, he was sure the number would grow.

Thirteen. It was an honourable number; a number he'd reached by serving his country the only way he knew how.

Thirteen. The number weighed him down. He felt as though he held the world on his shoulders.

Thirteen. The number hadn't always been thirteen. It had started at one and then one became two and two became three; but yet as three became four and nine became ten, he never forgot the first.

Twelve: the number of days since he had arrived on base.

Seven: the number of days he'd had to prepare.

Seventy-three: the number of hours he'd spent in that tree. Static, motionless.

Three: the number of seconds he hesitated in pulling the trigger.

One pair of eyes opened wide in momentary surprise as their chassis crumpled to the ground.

Dark brown hair, black eyes, 5'7", 142 pounds. Faisal Hamid. Age: twenty-eight.

He was never told what that man had done to deserve such a cruel fate. He didn't ask. He had faith his country would not condemn a man who was innocent, a man who had not committed the most heinous of crimes.

But only ten missions later did he have his faith shaken.

Number twelve was supposed to be easy. After a year overseas it had become routine. Acquire, wait, fire, escape. Acquire, wait, fire, escape. Acquire, wait, fire, escape. Yet even within the monotony any singular factor could change everything.

All it took was one small child of no more than two years old clinging to the chest of her father, the target. The man looked down to his child with eyes full of love and pride. These were not the eyes of an insurgent. But he couldn't wait; there were no emotions involved and certainly no second chances. He had to take the shot.

And so he did. One shot, numbers twelve and thirteen.

For years after he asked himself why. Why had he taken that shot? Was that one little girl's life worth the ones he had saved by murdering her father? Was this man truly a threat? Did he deserve to die? And if he hadn't, how many more men had he wrongly executed in the name of his country?

He never would find out.

Thirteen. But it really wasn't just thirteen. Thirteen men had thirteen wives, and to each of those wives there were children, and to each of those families there were friends and relatives.

Thirteen. It was a massive number. Its weight had begun to slow him down.

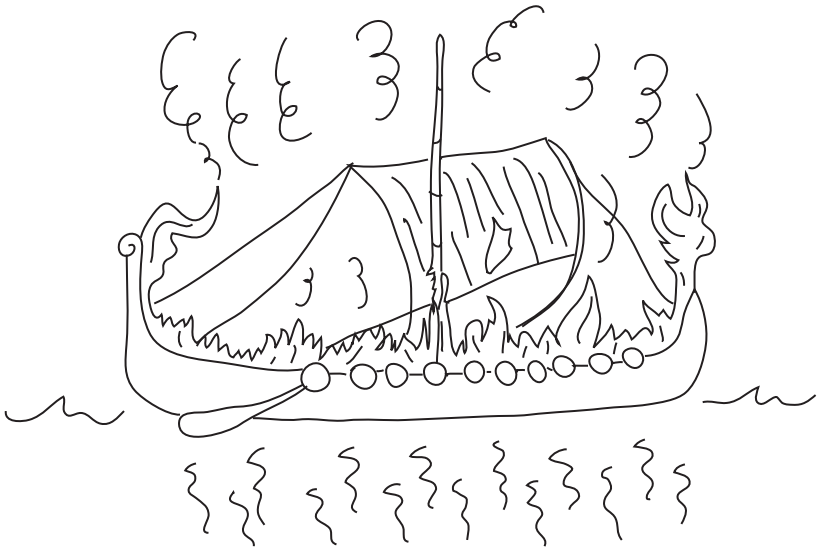
Thirteen. That number was sure to rise. After all, he'd only just finished his first year of service. He wasn't sure how much farther he could go.

by Rachel Rubin (Grade Eleven)

Gray Academy

Winnipeg, Manitoba





FIRST PRIZE

Blind General in a Funeral Boat

The slow rhythm of gentle rocking awakens me. A gentle sloshing, accompanied by a wet tickle at my head, which runs—along time with the rocking—down my spine and under my torso, before resting at my feet. Then the motions repeat in reverse, and the sensation sneaks its way back up to my cranium.

My mouth is wide open and I close it, only to inhale the sharp tang of salt mixed with the air. Certainly strange, for the last memories I possess recall the metallic cannibalistic stench and taste of human blood. Now, the din of war, the screams of men dying and of men killing, the panic and conflict are all gone. In my head, all thoughts of movement, the strategic positioning of my fellows, the direction, speed, and deception of my foes, the factors of chance and folly, have fled from my mind. One singular idea is lodged obstinately into my brain: *Where am I?*

My wet hands raise and immediately scrape against a rough wooden sideboard. I sit upright and continue to lift my hands. When they become level with my shoulders, my tensed wrists fling out into wide-open space. I inhale, and attempt to open my eyes.

I see nothing. I signal my lids again. The correct muscles twitch, but I still see nothing. Surely my eyes are not defective; I must be able to glimpse into this awkward world of sideboards, rocking and empty spaces, which I have been so rudely thrust. My hands find their way to my face, over my mouth and nose, before falling into two gaping spherical abysses beneath my brow. I shove my fingers in, and must bite my tongue to endure the pain erupting from places I had never felt before. My breath crescendos and increases in tempo. My toes curl and unfurl rapidly as I attempt to cope with the torture I'm inflicting upon myself. My heart beats hopelessly against my rib cage in some vain attempt to free itself from my body.

I stand, but my equilibrium falters and I nearly fall. I reach out, and grab onto the sideboards. What am I without my sight? My life was based upon the eye, and interpretations made through it. I'm lost, as lost as a sailor without his sextant and charts. Lost at sea.

I hear crashing in the distance, and long to join the conflict. I grasp the edge of my wooden prison and lean over its edge. Anticipation coats my tongue. I fall forwards—towards the battle. My face hits first, and is suddenly extremely cold. My neck, shoulders, and torso follow. An icy chill overtakes me. I inhale to unleash a furious war cry, and find my lungs roiling. Roiling, squirming, and—worst of all—boiling. An inferno weighs down inside me—who knew flame possessed such mass? Its terrible mouths devour my insides. I am burning inside and freezing outside. Then everything becomes numb.

The slow rhythm of gentle rocking awakens me.

by Nathan Lodewyk (Grade Twelve)
Central Alberta Christian High School
Lacombe, Alberta



SECOND PRIZE

Blossom

She reached for the tip of the thin branch towards the single pink bloom that was growing. Then, suddenly, drew her hand back. It didn't feel right; something wasn't right at all. She took several cautious steps back, as if a hand were poking through the thorns of the bush behind the gnarled tree. Then, as if she could not contain her anxiety of the flower any longer, she ran away from the tree.

Ever since Callie had flown to Canada a month ago, after an accident had killed her family, she always withdrew from everything. She didn't trust anything that had a touch of beauty in it. She didn't understand why so many strange people were always eyeing her as if she were some monster. If they would just leave her alone! Callie didn't want any of this, she didn't belong here. She wanted her old life back. But what could she do? She had no friends, no family, and no real home—just a shackled, nearly broken-down, indecent orphanage. But she needed them.

Forcing herself to walk to school the next day after a dreary meal, Callie had her head down when voices made her jump. She curiously looked up as a group of chattering girls skipped by her. They indiscreetly glanced at her, then noticeably began whispering to one another while shooting piercing looks of disdain at Callie and her wrinkled stained clothes. Callie blushed, then hung her head down again, only to hear more whispering among the girls.

One girl from the pack was watching her strangely as if trying to recall something. The pack moved on; however, that one girl kept looking over her shoulder while Callie pretended to be oblivious of their company. When Callie finally looked up, she caught the trace of a smile on the mysterious girl's face. Their eyes met for a split second, then Callie quickly looked away. *Probably teasing me*, Callie thought. *Why else would she be so interested in me?*

Callie was eating her meagre lunch, when someone plunked herself down right across from her. She blankly stared at the newcomer. It was her. The mysterious girl.

Before Callie could have another thought, the girl said, "Hi! My name is Akiko, and when I moved from Japan, I was nobody. I haven't remembered how being left out felt in a long time." Akiko received a gawking stare with a glimmer of hope in the eyes. Before long, the girls were chattering on and on, and soon they were choking with laughter.

At the end of the day, Callie ran to the orphanage's beaten-down orchard. She tossed herself down directly beneath the branch of the old apple tree and stared up at the single flower that hung above her. It wasn't as scary as it had been before. It belonged there, the flower, like she belonged here. It seemed small and ugly at first, but now it was ready to blossom. Like her.

by Sophia Song (Grade Seven)
Cummer Valley Middle School
Toronto, Ontario



SECOND PRIZE

A Painting Gone Wrong

“Ow!” Alex fell off the side of his bed and crashed onto the floor. He didn’t bother getting back on the bed. After rolling on the ground for a few minutes, Alex realized he was unable to fall asleep again. He tiptoed across his room and down the stairs slowly and silently.

Out of nowhere, Alex heard a loud neighing that startled him and left him tumbling down the stairs. *So much for not waking anyone up*, he thought. Oddly enough, however, nobody else had been woken up.

Already at the bottom of the stairs and having recovered from his crash, Alex decided to get a drink of water. It was pitch dark. Fortunately, Alex knew his way around the house as well as the palm of his hand. He walked through the grand living room that showcased several ancient artifacts as well as a large painting of a god who rode on a majestic horse. His parents prayed to that god every day. If one asked him, though, he would say it was all made up; just a bunch of nonsense he would never believe unless he saw it with his own two eyes.

As Alex crept slowly across the living room, he noticed something seemed strange about the painting. Alex walked closer to examine it and was astounded to find it was blank, no longer did it carry the carefully painted horse or its master. It was now just a blank canvas. Alex rubbed his eyes in confusion, thinking it all must be a dream, however, nothing had changed. Alex then decided to get a drink of water and come back.

After finally reaching the water dispenser, Alex poured himself a big cup of water and began to drink. Suddenly, he heard the distinctive neighing again. Something was definitely out there. Alex peeked out the window and saw the slight outline of some sort of a beast. As he walked closer to the window and stuck his head out, he saw it. It was the horse! The one in the painting, and the person sitting on it was its owner.

Suddenly, it shifted its head and stared at him. The horse seemed like he was looking into Alex, looking right inside his body. At any rate, it was scaring him. With fear pulsing through him, Alex sprinted up to his room. In the darkness, however, Alex tripped on something and crashed into a hard object. He heard a loud rip and looked down. The painting. There was a gigantic tear right down the centre. *What have I done?* he thought. Alex worriedly ran outside, only to find the horse and its master gone.

Alex fearfully ran back to his room and hid in his covers. Something nudged him. Alex shot up and let out a bloodcurdling scream. It was his social’s teacher. “Stop daydreaming! Next time I catch you, you’ll have a detention with me.”

“O . . . Okay,” Alex managed to mutter.

by **Richard Tseng** (Grade Eight)
St. George’s School
Vancouver, British Columbia



SECOND PRIZE

Red and Orange

All I could see was a glistening mixture of bright red and orange. The flames glimmered, creating long shadows over the faded walls. Smoke filled my lungs, and my brother's raspy screams rang in my ears. I remembered elementary-school procedures quite nicely: stop, drop, and roll.

Smoke continued to pour into my lungs as the waves of heat blinded my already-weak vision. I could feel my brother's presence at the foot of my heels, his heavy breathing audible even over the commotion outside. They were looking for us.

With caution, we crawled under the dark clouds of smoke that had taken over the room. Each little step getting us closer to freedom. Nearing the edge, the clarity of the wall startled me. Once white, it was now a greyish-beige from the smoky rings of fire in the room. I glided my fingers over the rough texture of the paint. The wall felt so close, so concrete—so real. I dug my hand into my sleeve, so that I wouldn't burn it. It swiftly skimmed the air until I reached something burning hot. The doorknob! Despite my blazing flesh, I slowly twisted it and gave it a hard push. The door let out a little creak before swinging open.

My vision, taking me off-guard, cleared up instantly. The fresh air of the outside world replenished my lungs, chasing away the traces of smoke that had been left there. I took in a deep breath, and let the oxygen cleanse my system. Then . . . I ran. I ran as if my life depended on it, because it did.

Once far enough away, I slowed to a stop, and leaned over my knees, panting heavily.

After a minute passed, I turned around to give my brother a hug, to tell him that we made it, that it was over. But when I turned around, he wasn't there. I ran all around the burning house, hopeful I would find him. The ground raced under me, the trees blurred at my speed. He was nowhere.

I stood still, and waited. I wasn't thinking. I was a stone. Suddenly, I heard shouts coming from my right. I turned to see the firefighters rushing to the door I had just exited. Their bright red lights flashing over the dark navy sky. I wondered what they were running to.

That's when I saw him. My brother. Lying under a collapsed doorway. Arms and legs sprawled over the floor. Lifeless.

I fell to the ground. My knees slammed against the gravel, and the tiny jagged rocks dug into my skin. But I didn't care. I buried my face in my hands and let my tears slip through the empty spaces between my fingers, as the bright red and orange obliterated the remains of my home.

by Hana Ziani-Bey (Grade Nine)

Arnprior District High School

Arnprior, Ontario



SECOND PRIZE

Forgiven

Rain drizzled on his ball cap as John stormed through the streets. After several minutes, he slowly started to calm down and think. He walked with his head low and his shoulders slumped, but people still veered to avoid him. He had a bloody nose and scratches on his face, so he didn't blame them. John stared at the ground, his soaking wet backpack slung over one shoulder. A gust of wind chilled his bare calves and he picked up his pace, trying to warm up.

Max had been his friend for as long as he could remember, and yet their relationship had deteriorated in the course of less than a day. John was ready to forgive Max already but he was sure Max would take weeks, months, maybe even years to forgive him for the things he had said and done. John suddenly stopped. There was nobody walking around him. He was alone. John raised his head and saw strangers shouting frantically at him from the sidewalk. He looked to his left in a daze and what he saw made him freeze. A city bus was hurtling over the hill towards him. The driver's eyes were wide and there was an expression of horror on his face. John heard a scream, but couldn't move. He was stuck.

Max heard sirens in the distance as he paced back and forth. His shoes crunched on the pebbles around the play structure. The younger kids had all gone home, but Max was still there, waiting for nothing. The sirens grew louder. He wondered if he and John would ever be friends again. He absentmindedly felt the cut on the back of his head from when John had thrown him down on the pavement like a rag doll. Max hadn't stood a chance. John was heavier and much taller. Anyway, he had left now.

An ambulance screamed past him, rushing towards downtown. Max stared after it, then headed home; it was getting dark. He left the schoolyard and walked down the street, towards his house, in the same direction the ambulance had gone. Max walked slowly, wondering how he would spend his spare time now—his lunch hours, his life. After a few blocks, Max started to hear shouting ahead of him. As he neared the commotion, he saw a crowd of people and a bus lying on its side. It had smashed into a hydro pole and flipped. The whole area was taped off and officers were all around, herding the media people away. Max frowned and turned to take another route home, but as he stepped off the sidewalk onto the street, his foot bumped against something. He glanced down, then stopped and picked the dirty cap out of the puddle. It dripped muddy water, and a scowl appeared on Max's face as he threw the custom-made Sen's cap on the ground again. Max strode off, disgusted by how John treated his gifts.

by Denzil Barkley (Grade Ten)
Seaway District High School
Iroquois, Ontario



SECOND PRIZE

The Original

Her fingers edge hesitantly across the piano keys, plucking with the grace of a farmer's wife de-feathering fowl. The man wincing as he listens, each inconsistent pitch like a scratch to the ears. Although the girl looks straight ahead like a resolute soldier, the frustrated furrow of her brow and the ooze of blood from her bit lip betray the realization of her own awfulness. With a final note, she sits back, too-bright eyes glittering.

"I'm horrible," she whispers, fists clenched.

He doesn't know what to say; he knows he's surprised. She had been recommended as a student with such high praise he had believed her to be the next Beethoven, yet she can't even play Chopsticks. Nevertheless, the girl's brutal honesty touches him; her shamed acceptance of her lack of skill stabs his heart with pity. "I . . . I've heard worse," is all he can say.

She snorts, tossing her hair over a frail shoulder with contempt. "Don't try to save my feelings," she says. "I'll understand if you don't want to take me on as your student." Her lips tighten into a thin line. "But let me play you one thing more."

"All right," he agrees, more to humour her than anything. "Is it—"

"It's an original." Her fingers inch back to the piano, resolve apparent in the dark smile on her face. The melody, as her fingers softly, gently plunge the keys, is one he has never heard before. It wafts into his ears with the croon of a mother's lullaby, slowly fading into the haunting plea of a lone wolf's howl. Gooseflesh prickles across his skin; he shudders. Then it rises—loud, insistent . . . angry.

A feral grin stretches across her gaunt, pale face, and colour livens her cheeks like a kiss to the dead. Her head tosses wildly, and it's as though the music carries her, spirits her away across stormy seas and through the raging of an everlasting inferno. The music deepens, bellows out like frustrated curses; her brow furrows in intense concentration as she rams the keys down, then lets them go. The crescendo is carrying her to a place he cannot reach, yet understands. He can see . . . no, feel . . . the pent-up pain in the tight clench of her fingers, the relief of her feelings as she slowly releases the keys.

Then, at last, it ends softly, happily, as a ship that finally ports in harbour or a lone wolf that finds a pack; as a lost child finds safety in the embrace of their mother or a lonely, misunderstood girl finds peace with her piano, finally convincing it to tell the story she wants heard. Her fingers come to rest, shaking tremulously on her lap. She smiles, tears of triumphant joy trickling from her bright, unfocused eyes.

He is silent, astounded. Finally he asks, "What do you call it?" His fingers edge towards his phone to add another student to his list.

She smiles. "The Life of a Blind Pianist."

by Rebeka Borshevsky (Grade Eleven)
St. Joseph's High School
Renfrew, Ontario



SECOND PRIZE

The Nettles

They all had stood in wavering determination against the spring gusts that blew the dust from between the shells of domestic life—the shells that perched like beasts in eternal crouch. Houses crouched in fear, crushed beneath the sky. With our sticks and the noses of our shoes we sliced through their middles, where they would bend and fold beneath the force of our blows. We relished in our seemingly non-human strength as we swung and stomped them to the ground, creating an indent in the patch of green. We smashed them to pieces.

We collected shredded pieces of metal in our lunch boxes. They were puzzle pieces, but we never found two that fit together as well as we would have liked. We expected to gather pieces in a large pile, and reconstruct one of the machines that roamed the sky, that were the subject of hushed discussions. On occasion we were fortunate enough to decipher a number or letter underneath the smudged grime that we would carefully polish away with the edges of our shirts; a symbol of the aliens that crept through the clouds and snuck through the waters like misplaced fish. But we knew who they were, and we possessed a morbid fascination with the illusive adversaries.

On our way to school, we carried devices bestowed upon us by our parents to defend against such strikes. I did not understand why we would be a target, for I could not remember any of my actions that would be severe enough for someone to crave vengeance against me. When we were yanked from sleep by the hands of our parents, who rushed us out of the house while the sirens throbbed our skulls, we did not feel anxious—only confused. Between the gas masks and the fear we were not used to seeing on the faces of adults, we were still children, and we still laughed—a small oasis of naïve peace.

We all romped in the empty lot to the rear of the butcher shop. We found twigs and threw them into the distance as far as we could, stretching our necks to hear where they hit, then dashing to relocate them. A radio mumbled in the window of the shop, crackling and breaking as a man spoke. We listened to what he was saying, filling in the words that got crackled away.

Upon realizing, we sprinted into the field, launching our bodies into the air and waving our hands like leaves on a shaking tree. We galloped into a patch of stinging nettles, recoiling when their sticky green stems prickled upon our skin. We chopped them to bits, and jumped for joy. We had won, the war was over, and we were as enthusiastic as if we had won it all ourselves. We hacked down the stinging nettles, watching their green stems, full of life, fall against themselves like injured soldiers.

by Ariel Smith (Grade Twelve)
Salmon Arm Secondary School
Salmon Arm, British Columbia



THIRD PRIZE

The Grass Is Always Greener . . .

Bill awoke with a start when he heard a car honking. He had slept under the archway of Thornton's Bank for more years than most of the staff had worked in the building. He looked up at the clock above the bank's door: seven o'clock. Michael would be here soon. Michael was a good man—always slipping him a buck or two, even with another baby on the way. Bill allowed himself a moment to dream about Michael's job. *All he has to say is "Good morning, sir" and then collect his money at the end of the week. He has it easy, but he still thinks he has problems. I'm the one living on the streets, not him. Some men have all the luck.*

As Michael was opening the door for the workers, he saw Mike Harris, the receptionist. The lucky man had just received a salary raise. Michael wished he could have Mike's job when Mike retired in two weeks. *He should have my problems,* thought Michael.

Mike handed out the memo to Mr. Ferry, and when he left, he told his son with more than a hint of jealousy, "Mr. Ferry is always late. That incompetent bum should've lost his job years ago. They should've given it to me, but I guess management didn't appreciate what I have to offer."

Mr. Ferry, the chief administrator of the bank, gave a disapproving stare at Mr. Rogers, one of the chief executives. *Now, he has it easy. Nothing on his mind besides his beautiful wife. That fat old slob didn't do anything to help expand the bank's growth, yet he got the better pay and life. I should've been given that job years ago,* thought Mr. Ferry. Mr. Ferry tried to get back to work, but couldn't concentrate and started to think about his wife and children. *Oh, why was I such a fool? Did I have to go cheat on my wife?* His kids and wife were great, but Mr. Ferry knew things could never be the same. His thoughts drifted back to Mr. Rogers.

Mr. Rogers despised his immediate superior, Mr. A. Thornton, the chairman of the bank. He thought, *I deserved that job years ago. I wouldn't lead the bank into the ground like Mr. Thornton has. Just because that man went to Princeton, he thinks he's better than everyone else. Incompetent fool!*

Mr. Thornton walked back to his office grimly. He was deciding who to fire. He knew the bank had to save money as he had just loaned a handsome sum of \$500,000,000 to Norton's Bank, which in turn had just declared bankruptcy. He checked his watch and noticed it was time for him to leave for a meeting. As Mr. Thornton was walking out of the building, he noticed a man lying outside of the bank. *He has the life. No responsibilities. No disappointments. No pressure. If only we could switch places,* Mr. Thornton thought, as he walked towards his waiting car.

by Armaan Bhasin (Grade Seven)

Trillium School
Markham, Ontario



THIRD PRIZE

A Last Embrace

There are three boxes in the corner of my bedroom, dusty and falling apart. They've been around the world and back. I stared at them, willing them to disappear and leave me alone. They stayed, challenging me. I haven't dared open them and face the truth. These three boxes are all that's left of my boyfriend, Lieutenant Owen Fellows.

He died three months ago. His tour was almost up; he'd been emailing me saying we'd see each other soon. I walked across the room, determined to leave them there. My determination hung in the air, shining like a soap bubble, before it burst, leaving me defenseless to the tears rolling down my cheeks. "Fine, you win," I whispered, my voice breaking. I brushed my trembling fingers against the rough cardboard.

This box was full of Owen's clothes, they smelled like him. This brought new tears—loud, aching sobs that shook my whole body. I felt the wool of his green sweater. I pulled it on, wishing with all my heart it were him holding me instead. I stayed that way, crying on the floor, for an hour before I opened the second box.

Shaking like leaves caught in the wind, I reached inside. I felt smooth paper, a metallic clink: letters and dog tags. Besides a stack of forms, there were letters from his mother, from his friends. There were letters from children, written for Remembrance Day. I read all of these, three times each. Then I unfolded the letters I knew were mine. They're creased a thousand times. There were tear stains, too, big blotches. Owen had underlined the parts he liked best, about home, about me. He underlined each "I love you" six times.

The last box held a few other things like a deck of cards, and some paperbacks. At the bottom there were pictures, as well-worn and tear-stained as my letters. I went through these, weeping. I spent the day inside, looking at those pictures, reading the letters. I did this until I was just too full, after feeling so empty for so long. I left the pictures on the floor and crawled into bed, wearing his sweater. I spent three days in bed. On the fourth day, I put everything back into the boxes.

As I set the photos in the third box, my hand brushed something I'd missed before, something small. In my hand was a box, the kind from a jewellery store, covered in velvet. With shaking hands, I opened it. Inside, nestled in white satin, lay a diamond engagement ring. It was simple, but so hauntingly beautiful. I started to sob, my eyes filling with hot tears. I slipped it on; the metal felt warm, like a last embrace. I started to smile, and between sobs I gave a small laugh of surprise and bittersweet emotion. I had tried so hard to tell myself he was gone, but though he wasn't here with me, I knew I wasn't alone.

by Alexa Elder (Grade Eight)

Foxboro Public School

Foxboro, Ontario



THIRD PRIZE

Tattooed Vertigo

I lifted my head frailly, revealing some moonlight coming through the strands of my hair, which I just brushed off my face. My hands were planted on the rocky ground and my knees were digging into it. I sensed the imprints of stones stuck on my kneecaps. In my line of vision, the bare street lined with willow trees moving like a pendulum started to spin. Everything suddenly flashed into plain, nondescript whiteness.

I was sitting on the thinly padded black bench, my feet firmly on the soiled floor, speckled with a collection of dirt left behind by the hundreds of people who had set foot there before.

There were four of us placed in a circle. There were four pairs of brightly coloured shoes. There were four pairs of eyes. There were four manes of hair flapping around in the gust that created fast motions. But only three mouths were wide open with snickering and screaming.

With my hands burning on the black post in the centre of the teacup, my stomach lurched. The scenery of roller coasters, Ferris wheels, and the bright night lights blurred into the image of splattered paint dripping down the navy blue sky.

The other three were oblivious to my pain of pure dizziness. There was nothing I could do to make an abrupt stop to the madness; my brain felt like it was being tossed around in my head. Those three-hundred seconds felt like a millennium of nausea, where my eyes were as wide as a seascape.

It finished after my face felt like it might as well have been green as the moss on a roof. The halt was sharp, and everything made a shift to the left. Finally, everyone boomeranged back to their original position.

“My gosh, Brie,” Hanna said. She switched modes from still wishing she were on the teacup to noticing the queasiness displayed on my face. “You look pale!” She thrust her hand clad in bracelets onto my forehead and pressed her palm onto it.

Danielle and Maxine approached uneasily, their eyes fixated on the colour of my face. Hanna sat me down on a bench and handed me a bottle of water. My hands vibrated as I lifted the neck of the bottle to my trembling lips. The water was warm already, and it was tasteless and almost stale.

“Don’t worry,” I insisted. “I’ll walk home. It’s not so far.” I eyed the exit wearily, setting the bottle on my lap.

“No, you can’t,” Danielle grasped my arm. I shook her off, trying to appear more stable than I really was. I broke free, like an eagle finally learning to fly, and hobbled towards the exit.

I started on the road, predicting a drain of any existing power in a matter of seconds. The vertigo was still tattooed on my brain, and my knees were like a magnet to the ground. I surrendered to the road and let my hair conceal my weakness.

by Maggie Halickman (Grade Nine)
Miss Edgar’s & Miss Cramp’s School
Westmount, Québec



THIRD PRIZE

Lost and Found in Shangri-La

Marty stood at the phone booth, listening to the beeping of the dial tone. The noise had been in his ear for the past five minutes, but he had not mustered up the nerve to call his wife. He was soaking wet and tired and his business affair hadn't turned out the way it was supposed to. Lucky enough for him, Marty had found himself outside the Shangri-La Café. With a close-to-empty wallet in his pocket, Marty had decided to go inside and see if there were any chance he could find his way home.

The melody of a tinkling piano drifted out of the lounge on the other side of the open lobby. A woman's voice that could only be compared to that of a goddess with soul began to accompany it as she made her way down into a smooth, jazzy verse. Marty looked down at the terra cotta floor with its mosaic patterns. A cold rain was pounding outside, but in here there was not even a drop of the tempest that was stirring just past the thick walls.

The click of high heels resonated in the open air and they seemed to be getting louder. Marty looked up to see her. Her name was Angel Riley. She had worked as a waitress for the Shangri-La since she stumbled upon the place in high school and had never left.

"You okay, honey?" Angel asked in a sweet, pouty voice.

Marty shook his head and was still trying to comprehend the situation. "I'm sorry?"

Angel smiled and brushed her hands on the white apron around her waist. "You look lost, sweetie."

Marty gave a half smile. "I guess I am."

Angel returned the favour. When she smiled, her whole face was warm and inviting. Her luscious red lips stayed pressed together. "Well, you've lost yourself in the right place. Everyone comes here looking for something."

Marty furrowed his brow and looked Angel in her deep, brown eyes. Her curly blonde hair rested happily on her shoulders and cascaded down to just above her lapels. "Do they ever find what they're looking for?"

Angel laughed and shook her head playfully. "They find something, all right. Maybe not what they were originally looking for, but no one seems to leave disappointed."

Marty was fascinated and, as the piano continued, he wanted so much to sit and enjoy the performance.

Angel noticed Marty's longing gaze into the dark lounge. "Why don't I get you something to drink, hon? What are you in the mood for: coffee or something a little more tasteful?"

Marty waved Angel's offer away. "Really, I shouldn't."

"All right then," Angel sighed, shrugging. "I'll be waiting for you when you change your mind." With a flip of her hair, Angel turned around and headed back into the lounge.

Marty looked at his hand, the phone receiver still in it. He thought for a long, hard moment before he shook his head and hung up the phone.

by Samantha Westlake (Grade Ten)

Belle River District High School

Belle River, Ontario



THIRD PRIZE

Bones of a Boy

I told myself I wouldn't do it again, I promised myself I was done. Before I knew it, I was kneeling down in front of the toilet. All the mistakes were pouring out of my body as if the day had never happened. My face was soaked with tears as I curled up onto the cold bathroom floor; my cries were masked by the flushing of the toilet. For yet another night, I cried myself to sleep in the mess of my insecurities.

This had been happening for a month now. The first time it happened was a mistake. I had eaten so much it just wouldn't stay down, and after it was all out, I felt so much better. I felt like I had control over my body. I knew I couldn't tell anybody what happened, my friends wouldn't understand. "Boys don't do that. Guys don't puke their guts out to get skinny, bro," they'd say. I didn't care what anybody else thought. Each pound shed was like a medal for me. I barely ate, and when I did, I'd just puke it up. It became a regular routine. I saw a new me in the mirror, I was confident. But things went wrong after a bit . . . I was losing control.

I could barely remember the next month. It was all a haze of hunger and tears. People started to notice, they tried to talk to me about it. I just pushed them all away. I could barely keep any food down anymore, either; even the smell of food would send me straight to the bathroom. I could tell there was something wrong, but did I care? I was so pleased with what I saw in the mirror I ignored the bursts of pain in my stomach and the ringing in my ears. I was perfection in my eyes. I felt my defined clavicle and protruding hips at my darkest moments. Feeling the results of my hard work made me feel so much better, but the pain was becoming too hard to ignore.

To say I was out of control would be an understatement. I had to drag myself out of bed in the mornings, going through my days like a zombie—*A very thin zombie*, I'd comfort myself by thinking. Soon I had reached the darkest point. Everything was a blank, but when I opened my eyes, I realized where I was. My parents must have been acknowledging their troubled son long enough to notice I had a problem. They sent me away to the prison where I am now, where they're trying to stuff me with all their poison. I take their poison, I use all my might not to puke it up, but I know if I follow their rules, they'll think I'm cured. They don't know I check the scales every day, dreading the numbers going up—and all my hard work going down the drain.

by Marco Saveriano (Grade Eleven)
LaSalle Community Comprehensive High School
LaSalle, Québec



THIRD PRIZE

Coffin Karma

After Capone died, you could mess with anyone. Nobody was afraid of the dozens of wise guys trying to take his place. Not even me, a bookie in the underground business.

Unfortunately, the wise guy whose daughter I ran around with later became the biggest cheese on the south side of Chicago. You could hit the target on my back with a rock from the other side of town.

I met Clarisse Romano at Mulligan's Dance Hall. She danced the mashed potato like I had never seen anyone dance it. I danced my way over until our eyes met. The rest is history. It was the best night of my life, followed by the worst years I can remember. Running from safe house to safe house, old friend to old friend; Romano's crew was after me. Maybe I knew it because of a hunch I had, or maybe it was the death threat I got working at the tracks. I've barely escaped sure death more than my share. I should have been killed a hundred times over for treason, damaging goods, and messing up a fixed race. I like to think of myself as the most slippery man in the state of Illinois.

That was then, this is now. I'm in the back of an Austin A40—I like to think I know my cars—with three burly thugs. All dressed in tailor-made suits, they broke into the washroom as I was shaving, wearing only an undershirt and old boxer briefs. They pulled a hood over my head, and stuffed me in the back of the car waiting out front. The lone thug sharing the back seat with me has a gun pointed to my head, while the other two reminisce of old times.

With bear paws, a thug pulls me out of the car and throws me to the ground before pulling the hood off my head. Yes, it's a gravel lot. A deserted one. "Dig!" says one of the other two. I feel a sting when my cheeks hit the ground. I don't bother wiping the small pieces of rock off my forehead.

I can feel myself sweat through my undergarments. This must be a grave I am digging. I may be a dropout, but I'm no idiot. There's commotion back near the car. I turn my head to see where the noise is coming from. Before I spot the car, I spot a polished black shoe with a grey outsole.

I'm finally waking up. That kick to the forehead must have knocked me out cold. I can feel the unvarnished wood under my fingers; I can smell it in front of my face. I can't see or hear anything, however.

I knew this was inevitable. I have been buried alive. My veins are tingling. I ask myself, "Was Clarisse worth it?" *Without a doubt.* My senses are blending together; I'm fading into darkness, but I am still thinking. I wonder, *Where will I dance in hell?*

by **Eric Dubois** (Grade Twelve)

École secondaire catholique Embrun

Embrun, Ontario

