

FIRST PRIZE

The Sweet Song of Revenge

As a girl with a destination and money to see me there, I boarded the *Nemesis*. I had enough money to convince the sailors to take the risk of bringing me on board, but not enough to rid their eyes of the silent question, *Is the money really worth it?*

No. The storm, rocking the ship to and fro, only continued to get worse, and they got more and more convinced I was the cause of their troubles.

Something in the air changed. The sailors turned from passive-aggressive to charging straight at me. The first to reach me gripped my arm with his meaty hands. He dragged me to the railing. I kicked and screamed obscenities I had never before uttered as he tossed me over the side.

I hit the frigid water, flailing around until the cold set in and my body shut down. The salty water shredding my throat hardly registered. My senses abandoned me.

There was singing. It cut through the haze. The voices sounded painful, like crushed rocks, but the song resonated deep in my soul.

My vision returned, and the afterlife I'd expected . . . wasn't there. I was on the ocean floor, surrounded by girls with fish tails. A breath of pure agony seared through me. I was breathing saltwater, and it hurt.

"What is your name, sister?" a girl rasped.

It took me a moment to find my voice. "Charlotte." My throat was scratchy, making my voice sound similar.

The intense attention of the others forced me to glance down to make sure I was presentable. A breath caught in my lungs. Peeking from the bottom of my dress, where my feet used to be, was a shimmering tail.

"Would you like revenge?" they shouted together. "On those who threw you to the sea out of fear and hatred?"

Something welled up inside me, making it harder to breathe than it already was. Because of the sailors, I would never see the places I had only heard of but yearned to visit. There were many things they had stolen from me. I did want revenge, and I told the girls so.

They swarmed me, grasping my arms. The group swam at a speed I found incomprehensible but exhilarating. We surfaced next to a ship—the *Nemesis*.

The girls ripped the dress from my shoulders, along with all of my underclothes and started to sing. The song came naturally. It rolled in waves of hatred, fear, and a longing for what once was.

The sailors came and jumped into the unforgiving depths with glee.

Saying revenge is sweet would mean I enjoyed watching them plummet to their deaths, but it wouldn't be far from the truth.

by Rebecca McConnell (Grade Nine)

Home School
Whitecourt, Alberta

FIRST PRIZE

Abandoned Dog

The pine forest loomed over him like a brewing storm, crackling and shifting with impatience. He hobbled towards the house to escape the rain; however, there wasn't much shelter. The roof sagged like soggy cardboard, as did the porch, but he sat on it anyway.

Like a good dog, he thought bitterly.

But his anger quickly turned to misery, and that misery burst from his throat. His cry didn't sound human, but it resembled human pain; it was thick with anguish, and it cracked under the strain. It could've been a plea, or a sob, or maybe both. He let out another heart-wrenching wail, and another, but no matter how loud he bawled, his only answer was the hollow echo of his call bouncing off the surrounding forest. Finally, only able to voice a weak whimper, he gave up.

Why did he leave me here? he asked himself.

Craning his head, he looked down the highway. There was nothing but a deserted, dark tunnel cutting through the pine forest. A permanent mud-puddle sat right outside the makeshift driveway; toxic gasoline shimmered on the road as if even rainbows couldn't stay upright. Garbage bags floated like ghosts through the forest, and the acrid scent of pollution stung his nostrils. His only friend was the shadow of a rotting tire that sat beside the crumbling house.

Why did he leave me in this awful place?

The rain fell like there was no tomorrow. He curled all four of his limbs in tighter. If contentment were like floating, he was falling. Down, down, into the never-ending depths of sorrow. Each creak of wood made him uneasy, and each looming pine tree made him growl. He was trapped in the middle of nowhere with no food, shelter, or humans for miles. So, he sat, like a good dog. If innocence were arrogance, wisdom was skepticism. At first, his innocence made him refuse to accept it. But now, having grown much wiser since that truck squealed away, he was skeptical of his logic.

Did he really leave?

He waited. If loyalty were to follow—well, he couldn't do that—so he stayed.

But if loyalty is to follow, is it a betrayal to leave? He left. Why can't I leave too? Why should I wait for someone who won't come back for me? He sighed.

I wish I were a dog treated like a human, the little boy thought as he gazed at his bony hands, the hands of an unloved child. *But I am a human treated like a dog.*

by Nicole Leighton (Grade Ten)

G.W. Graham Secondary School
Chilliwack, British Columbia

FIRST PRIZE

Figures

His new green Nikes scuffed against the uneven pavement until he was kicking a crushed can of pop to the beat of the city night-life. He hummed a simple tune under his breath to keep him company as he searched the usual haunts for his “friends.”

He finally stumbled across them: pale figures shadowed by a nearby apartment building. They were laughing and taking turns jumping off the wall until they heard the sound of footsteps and a crushed can being kicked.

The familiar smell of weed was suffocating. They immediately tensed up for a second only to relax again when they recognized him. He was “King of the Trash” and “Leader of Losers.”

The jewellery on his wrists caught the light from a nearby street-lamp and reflected golden rays onto doped-up faces.

They couldn’t care less about the paper leaving their pockets, as long as he kept supplying what they wanted. Cash was immediately handed over, and he continued on with his nightly stroll repeating the process three more times.

He finally finished his route and strode up to the rusted entrance of his home, hoping that today would be the day—the day he’d be welcomed back.

A man opened the door, his breath smelling of alcohol as it washed over the boy’s hopeful face. “Did you get all of it?”

“Yes.”

The man grabbed the cash with no further words and gave him a hard kick to the gut that had him stumbling back several paces. The sound of a door slamming shut was swallowed by the white noise of cars rushing by.

Nothing had changed.

He donned his mask and headed back out into the night.

The lonely child within fell silent once more.

by Kaida Cheah (Grade Eleven)

Aurora High School

Aurora, Ontario

FIRST PRIZE

All the Water It Needs

As far as Joanna was concerned, Hubert knew all of the universe's secrets. Of course, he had to promise they'd stay right there, nestled at the roof of his mouth, so that nobody, not even the breeze that drifted through the school playground, would take them away.

He even shook on it.

She went up to him. "Nice mittens."

"Thanks."

"Why aren't you playing Red Rover?"

He shrugged.

"It's such a stupid game," she said. "It's good that my friends didn't let me play with them or I would've been running around all recess."

She sat down beside him. "What're you drawing?"

"Just some doodles."

She glanced across the field at the girls playing Red Rover and huffed. "You know what the problem with our class is? Everyone's so loud all the time. Don't you think? I should order a pair of those noise-cancelling headphones from online. I have some cash saved up from my paper route; you wanna see?"

"I deliver newspapers too."

"Really? How much have you made?"

"I dunno. I haven't counted."

"I've made fifty-three. It's not a lot, but I only started last month. There are plenty of ways to earn money these days, you know. You could probably sell those drawings for a couple grand each, now that I think about it."

"I draw for myself mostly."

She leaned in towards his sketch pad. "Is that a rock?"

"It's a *Lithops weberi* flower. It disguises itself as a rock, but it opens into yellow petals."

"Why does it disguise itself?"

A basketball flew into the flower, crumpling it.

"Hey, weirdos," a boy shouted, "pass our ball back."

She rolled her eyes and tossed the ball at the group of boys. He propped his glasses up and blinked at the flower, his face flushed.

"Why?" she asked.

"Why what?"

"Why's it have a disguise?"

"Because. To protect itself."

"From what?"

"Predators, mostly. And it hides into the soil when there's a drought. But it has all the water it needs in its own leaves."

"What's it hiding from?"

"I guess the environment gets like, too much sometimes." He laughed. "Anyway, it's only a doodle."

"I think it's cool."

"You do?"

"Yeah. Smart, even. We have a flowerbed in our backyard. You should come water it sometime."

He smiled.

by Crystal Xue (Grade Twelve)
Olympiads School
Toronto, Ontario

SECOND PRIZE

Deep Forest

I awoke to the unsettling noise of groaning from far under my bed, somehow causing me to regain consciousness. But what was that at the end of the room, through the open door? Could it really be a face on the wall? No, it wasn't; it was simply a mounted pencil sharpener that I had seen and used possibly thousands of times.

I noticed a shadow, which looked all too real, pass in front of the doorway. I closed my eyes; everything felt cold and hopeless. Carefully, I counted to three in my head and quickly opened both of my eyes. I was shocked and stricken with fear when I saw a person; although, thankfully, it was the grinning face of my little brother.

"Wake up, sleepyhead, we've got to get going!" He beamed, somehow always managing that stupid smile on his face. I remembered that yesterday I'd promised him we'd explore the dark dense forest outside of the house; it hadn't seemed like such a big deal back then, and we only had some time to do it. Our mother and father had left for . . . food? I don't really remember; it was hard to wake fully after seeing those things.

"All right, Killian," I reasoned. At this point, I realized he was wearing those sunglasses again, unusual as it was awfully dark outside, and he must've just woken up to fetch me. I couldn't even recall the last time he hadn't been wearing them. Killian strode out of my room, so I threw on some clothes and joined him out in front of the house.

Killian and I were walking towards the woods; it was incredibly eerie seeing all those huge trees with all sorts of brambles and other sharp plants that I did not want to come face to face with.

"Kevin, hurry up!" hollered Killian. At this point, I realized that I was just staring at the trees, attempting to make out what lay within them through the dark, but the starry night sky provided enough light for viewing surroundings. He practically dragged me through the woods fearlessly and determined, as if he knew exactly where he was headed.

After a few minutes of trampling bushes and the like, we reached an unusual clearing with a gaping hole in the earth, which yawned about twenty feet. Instinctively, I backed away from the hole, but Killian stopped me with his oddly firmly planted foot. His enormous grin turned into something that looked more like a sneer.

"I haven't exactly been honest with you," Killian insisted, and then he took off his sunglasses.

by Benjamin Rudko (Grade Nine)

St. Joseph's School

Coaldale, Alberta

SECOND PRIZE

Seven

One breath would be his last.

Two clicks from my sniper rifle.

Three teardrops fell.

Four quadrants on my scope.

Five fingers trembled, but I only needed one.

Six more seconds.

My daughter was seven years old when she was killed.

I clenched my jaw as the rain drizzled around me. Another wave of agony crashed over me, a constant reminder of what I had lost.

My inner thoughts urged me on, *Shoot. He's right there. Shoot before it's too late.*

My target was the tyrant of our country, Maximus Crown. He had stood by as my daughter died. It was entirely his fault she passed away. She was the only joy I'd had in my miserable life under Crown's rule. I never knew I'd had so much until I lost it all.

Make him bleed. Blood must be repaid. I gritted my teeth as I stared down at his dark silhouette. Here, he was the one who was utterly powerless.

As Crown stood on his balcony, the wind whisked his black hair across his face in the ghostly moonlight. He hadn't detected me since I was concealed in the darkness. My heart thudded in my chest, pounding harder until I was sure he overheard it. I couldn't forget the blood he'd spilled. The devastating loss of my daughter plagued my mind and consumed me until I was desperate for vengeance. Crown had stolen everything from me.

Shoot. He deserves to die. . . .

My finger tightened on the trigger. I could end all the suffering he had produced. I gnawed on my lower lip as my mind raced with inner turmoil. I could rescue the world from his dominion. My lips curled into a smirk as I imagined his body plummeting off the balcony.

But I still have to pull the trigger. . . .

Freezing rain started to pour down, but I was steaming with rage and sorrow. Thunder exploded in the distance, and lightning streaked the sky. I loathed Crown with every part of me, and I craved to see a crimson stain on his balcony door.

Since my time was short, I had to make a move.

One breath would be his last.

Two clicks from my sniper rifle.

Three teardrops fell.

Four quadrants on my scope.

Five fingers trembled, but I only needed one.

Six seconds was all I had left.

My daughter was seven when she was killed, and Crown was to blame.

I placed my finger on the rifle's trigger and aimed, but I froze. Crown slipped into his mansion and slammed the balcony door shut, leaving me all alone in the rain.

by Nyah Nichol (Grade Ten)

Cold Lake High School

Cold Lake, Alberta

SECOND PRIZE

Red Lips

I'm applying a thick coating of red lipstick to my brother's lips when my bedroom door opens, and we both jump out of our skin. The lipstick tube falls from my hand to the floor, leaving a small smear of red on the white carpet.

"What do you two think you're doing?" Dad barks.

"Nothing," I reply quickly. Michael violently scrubs the lipstick off with the back of his hand.

"Don't lie to me, Heather," Dad spits. "Your brother's got makeup on his face."

"Heather was just using me to practise, Dad," Michael explains. "She's in charge of makeup for her school play." *When did he get so smart?*

Dad grunts. "You couldn't practise on yourself?" he asks me. "I don't want Mike getting any ideas." He turns to my brother. "Wipe that mess off your face. Now. And close the curtains." He hurries to my window and draws the curtains closed with so much force, I'm afraid they might rip off their pole. "You don't want anyone to see you like this."

Michael doesn't want anyone to see him like this? Or is that just you, Dad? I almost say it, but I bite my tongue. What would Dad think if he thought Mike wanted people to see him with makeup on? Because I'm starting to think he might.

As soon as Dad leaves the room, Michael gets up and shuts the door. When he returns to his seat at my vanity, I see that the mascara I put on him is smudged from tears.

"Hey . . .," I soothe, sitting beside him on the bench and giving him a hug. "It's okay. Don't listen to him. We were just having fun, right?"

"Can you w-wash it off?" he blubs, ignoring my words.

I sigh. "Of course, I can." I reach for my makeup remover and start to clean his face. By the time I'm finished, he's stopped crying.

"Heather?"

"Yeah?"

"What do you think Mom would have thought about all of this?"

"She would have said you look absolutely stunning with red lips."

by Miriam Felman (Grade Eleven)

Nepean High School
Ottawa, Ontario

SECOND PRIZE

Highway Hypnosis

It is often said that a long drive without much obstacle or stress produces a sort of dreamlike state where the driver remains aware of their world and the passage of time but cannot recall exactly the drive itself as if they would another memory. That the state of the driver could be comparable to that of someone under a trance, their brain malleable but still working as normal. It is because of this that the condition is referred to as “highway hypnosis.” But maybe this state has nothing to do with driving at all and comes from within rather than without.

Perhaps Mary is just like this. As of this time, it is 10:32 p.m. She is driving home from work along the highway and, like any responsible teen, is speeding just below the ticketing range. The road is straight and empty, with no cars in sight. Through her speakers, some lo-fi R&B type song is playing just loud enough to demand a portion of her attention, which is barely spent keeping the light of her high beams between the lines. With her cruise set and one hand at about four o’clock on the wheel, she sits comfortably reclined in the seat.

This is just how Mary is. The drive is long, and once she gets going, nothing goes through her mind as the dashed yellow line beside her pulls along. As for a sense of purpose, some sort of de facto sense of pleasure for the open road or resentment to be forced to drive again, there is nothing. The drumbeat is numbing inside her skull, failing to make any sort of meaningful impact on her. Although her eyes are fully open, she is dead tired. There is no conscious sense of meaning or awareness of what’s before her. Perhaps if one asked her where she was going or why, she couldn’t answer. This is a dangerous way to be, but this is simply the way Mary is.

As a bend appears in the road ahead of her, a small gathering of deer suddenly appears in front of the car. The beady glowing eyes and startled stances do nothing to affect Mary, who fails to even stop cruise control as she sails into the buck at 105 km/h. Maybe the spirit of the highway is to blame, or maybe this is just the way Mary is.

by Nathan Hoar (Grade Twelve)

West Elgin Secondary School

West Lorne, Ontario

THIRD PRIZE

Forgotten

You go into the classroom and sit where you always do, right beside your best friend. She's not there, in her usual spot, sitting in the desk beside you. You look around the classroom and notice she's over talking with the popular group. She notices you're there and comes right over; she greets you with a big hug and asks how you're doing. You simply forget the fact she was with another group of people and just go on with your life normally. *Maybe they were just talking about a group project.*

The next day, you go to school, and this time she doesn't come right over; she stays with them for announcements. After announcements, you see her get up. Your heart starts to race in excitement as she comes over to you, but then, something you never thought would happen happens. She says, "Hello," gives you a hug, takes her binder, and goes to sit with the popular group. Your heart sinks into your stomach; you feel a horrible sadness overwhelm you.

The next day, you're hopeful. *Maybe it was just a one-day thing and now, today, she'll sit with me.* You go to school and see her binder's not beside your desk; you assume she's sick, so you sit down and text her if she's coming to school today. You see she reads it, starts typing, and stops. You hear laughing from the other side of the room—familiar laughing. You look over, only to see her talking and laughing with her new friends, the popular group. Once again, that same sadness as yesterday overwhelms you, but it's worse this time. You don't know what to do, so you just sit there, holding in the tears.

From then on, it just gets worse and worse. She never talks to you, never sits beside you, she doesn't even say hi to you in the mornings. It's almost as if you don't exist to her anymore. You start to wonder why she left you for them. She always said she hated them; now, she's sitting with them, laughing with them, best friends with them.

You're at home getting ready for bed. You look in the mirror and start thinking about the whole situation. *Why? Why did she choose them over me? Is it because they're prettier than me? Funnier than me? Cooler than me?* All these thoughts come rushing into your head, and you just stand there, staring into your eyes in the mirror. You feel something go down your cheek; it's a tear—you're crying, breaking down. *Why did she choose them over me?* You just stand there staring at your reflection, tears pouring down your face, feeling forgotten.

by Emma Gamble (Grade Nine)
South Colchester Academy
Brookfield, Nova Scotia

THIRD PRIZE

Tiger's Worst Nightmare

"Thank you for having us over. Congratulations to you both! I heard Henry received many praises after his recent violin performance at Carnegie Hall."

"Why, thank you. My Henry also scored 1560 on his latest SATs, has a 4.0 GPA, is the captain of his school's chess team, debate team, and rowing team, and is going on tour with the National Youth Symphony. Harvard and Stanford are his goals, so nothing is too much. Am I right?"

As soon as Mrs. Chang finished listing the glamorous achievements of her son, Mr. Chang, afraid that his wife had gotten too excited again with their legacy advertisement, quickly added, "Mrs. Lee, I heard your son, William, is quite a success in his senior year."

"Yes, my William scored a perfect SAT, also has a 4.0 GPA, completed eight AP courses, is the captain of his tennis team and business club, a scholar artist, won five national piano festivals, and is the student body president at his school. He has been accepted to Harvard, Cornell, UPenn, and Stanford. What a hard decision to make!"

The gasconade continued for the remainder of the night till the wine bottle slowly drained to the dregs and the civil spit battle of the sons dwindled to an end. As soon as the Changs said their final goodbyes to their guests, they released the smile they had held on to for so long.

"Harvard? Stanford? William? He is not half as intelligent as Henry! How did he get in? Just look at how they sugar-coated William as if he is so magnificent. They must have donated millions to the schools for that good-for-nothing to get in!" Mrs. Chang griped.

"Honey, I am sure William has put in his fair share of work. Nevertheless, from now on, Henry is not allowed to go out with his friends even on breaks. We need to sign him up for more AP courses so that he can complete nine in total. He needs to run for student body president. I am sure then Stanford and Harvard wouldn't bat an eye in selecting our boy."

"Yes, indeed. We need to readjust his priorities."

As the couple put the final rearrangements on their son's schedule, a knock on their door startled their planning. At first, they thought it was their son, but the figure was too muscular to be Henry. The naval blue uniform and shimmering badge sent a shiver down their spines. The policeman's words were like knives to their hearts as the dumbfounded couple struggled to understand. Just like the smooth wine sinking down their digestive tract, the hopes for their legacy plummeted deep into their gut, never to be found again.

by Nicholas Yu (Grade Ten)
St. George's School
Vancouver, British Columbia

THIRD PRIZE

Second by Second

It was 6:17 p.m. when the clocks stopped ticking. All around the world, everything simply stopped; phones froze, the hands on the clocks slowed until they didn't move, and the stovetops started flashing "Error." It was the same everywhere, not a second off on anything. And then, the sun failed to rise or set, and at the edges of the horizon, the stars began to fall.

They fell and cratered lawns, splintered houses, and burned up the forests where they landed. When the first people came to see what had happened, what was revealed was not fire and gas but a dome of steel and bolts—hot to the touch—a physical creation of metal and screws.

It started as word of mouth. An idea: sail to the edge of the world. It was the sort of thing bored conspiracy theorists dreamed up, but then it stopped being word of mouth, and it became an actual plan. People were buying boats and cans of food, and thousands upon thousands of people flocked into the sea to find the edge of the world, as if it were some sort of story you read in an airport novel.

It took twelve days for the first boats to reach The Edge; their rafts and catamarans rushing ever onwards—until they couldn't; until they did nothing but bob in the small space separating what looked like one foot of space from another. (And reality became that we were all living the fictitious truth.)

The Edge was unobtrusive, looking for all the world as if there were nothing there but more of the endless ocean. It was the sort of thing no one would notice until there was a sea of boats gathered along The Edge; a labyrinthine mix of languages and people and food, all trying to learn how to break the barrier.

Maybe it should have been more surprising that the thing half the world had spent weeks trying to solve was solved by fireworks. It was a spectacle broadcast from one side of the globe to the other, and when The Edge shattered, it rained down glass in a billion shades of fire from the fireworks exploding overhead. I was there, and I saw it all.

If you ask me, we should have never dared to wonder what was beyond the doors of our homes. I watched as the ocean flooded through the cracks into a wasteland, where the sky was red with clouds and history repeated itself. (The human desire for adventure has never been for the unknown—it's been to possess and conquer, even now, even here.)

by Heather Law (Grade Eleven)

Fort Nelson Secondary School

Fort Nelson, British Columbia

THIRD PRIZE

The Future: A Simpler Time

In 4042, a young girl asked her friend, “Have you ever heard of a cell phone?”

“Shh, my mommy said I’m not supposed to talk about that, especially in public!” a boy whisper-yelled.

“But I wanna—”

“Quiet!” General Sherry Moore walked past the children, a small smirk on her face. *Always discussed, but never openly*, she thought to herself as she brushed off the badges on her uniform.

She walked down the ash-coloured sidewalk, taking in the scenery. Children playing outside, teenagers talking to one another. *Good, that’s how it should be*. Except all that ceased to be whenever Sherry passed by. The kids stopped dead in their tracks and stood tall. Some even saluted. “Hello, children,” Sherry greeted them. “Isn’t it a fine Wednesday afternoon?”

“Yes, ma’am!” they yelled in unison.

Sherry smiled. “Good. Now go on, continue playing,” she told them before walking off, looking around.

It wasn’t the prettiest town; there were blackened doors, broken windows, and overflowing garbage cans that left a pungent odour in the air. Even still, there were people of all ages outside, laughing and talking, which always made up for the unpleasant exterior. As Sherry walked, she hummed quietly, her feet leaving footprints in the ash-covered sidewalk.

Soon enough, she reached a tall, modern building with security cameras lining each wall. She walked to the door and pressed her hand against one of the silver bricks. Suddenly, a scanner emerged. She placed her forefinger and thumb on the cool metal surface. “Sherry Moore,” she spoke smoothly into the seemingly empty space.

“Welcome back, Sherry,” an automatic voice responded. The black metal doors before her opened, and she entered.

Sherry walked into the main “motherboard” of the building; computers lined every wall, and a big, holographic world stood in the middle of the room, with red Xs on each of the continents. “How is our plan going?” Sherry addressed her crew, who were heavily focused on their screens.

“Perfectly, General. We have every continent and almost every country. Except for Germany. They refuse to give up their technology,” Lieutenant Eric said.

“And what are we doing about that?”

“We have already sent in tanks and infantrymen, ma’am. If they won’t give up their technology, then we will take it away from them!”

The group cheered.

Sherry grinned. “Perfect. Well done, Eric. Continue on,” she told him before walking down to the holographic world, her steps echoing throughout the room.

Gently clasping her hands behind her back, she observed all of the red Xs. “Soon enough, all of their technology will be ours,” Sherry spoke confidently, “and the world will be a happier, simpler place.”

by Shayla Rowsell (Grade Twelve)

Eastdale Secondary School

Welland, Ontario