

2025

Lakefly Writing Contest Winners





Lakefly 2025 Winners

The Lakefly Conference Committee would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to everyone who shared their work with us. A special congratulations to our winners! Your participation is what makes this contest a success.

I personally want to thank the judges from both the community, including the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, for their dedicated efforts on behalf of the contest. Additionally, we are grateful to the Wisconsin Writers' Association for sponsoring a one-year membership for our 12 winners.

Keep writing, and we look forward to seeing you all again next year!

Sincerely,

Susan Imbs

Chair, Writing Contest Committee

Lakefly 2025 Winners

A stylized illustration of a green lakefly, shown from a side profile. It has a large, rounded body, long antennae, and long legs. The text "Flash Fiction" is overlaid on the fly's body.

Flash Fiction

Flash Fiction

1st Place

Snap!

Yvette Viets Flaten

Gar ran before the red wind like he had never run from anything before. Wild, terrified, he flung himself left and right as the flames sprang up at his heels, licking around his calves and thighs, singeing his loincloth, curling his hair with its molten intensity.

He pounded on toward the little valley's rocky wall where there were ledges of sandstone. If he could reach the wall and climb up, maybe he could escape the burning wind chasing him like a fanged beast.

He had lost his spear, his atlatl, his spirit poke. He had lost his brothers. His feet were bloody from the rocks, rough gorse, and spiney undergrowth. His stubbed toes sang with hurt, but he knew if he stopped for one moment he would die in the jaws of the red heat.

The ledges! Gar pulled himself up, hand over hand, the fire licking at the soles of his feet. He gasped for breath. The heat stole every mouthful of air away from him. He struggled up, and up. Finally, he reached a larger ledge that protruded out farther than the others. He shrank back against the soft wall of the sandy hill and buried his face into its darkness. His terror was complete. He had no wetness in his mouth, no tears, hardly any breath left for his lungs. He opened his mouth to scream but had no voice. He closed his eyes and beat his chest in terror.

When Gar awoke black night had descended from above onto the valley. He stirred slowly, like old men do, in their bedding. He tried to swallow, but his throat was strangled with dryness. He looked about him in disbelief. Below, the little valley was aglow with winking red eyes. The wind was still present, but far, far less. Not steady now, but gusty. Gar watched as the red eyes glowed stronger at times, then less. Were they beasts? Waiting for him? His brothers' eyes? Seeking him?

Gar watched. He was one of the family's hunters. He was known for his patient kills. His ability to wait at a waterhole, or rub, or den. He sat on his haunches and watched through the night.

As dawn came, the winds suddenly strengthened. As Gar watched, one or two round masses of gorse rolled across the valley floor. When they came in contact with a glowing pile of embers, they suddenly caught light. He watched. Another rolled in, touched, and exploded into flames. It burned until its fuel was gone, and then went out.

Gar got down from the ledge cautiously, testing the ground beneath his hurt feet. It took him a long time to approach the piles of embers that had once been a tree, even a bent and scraggily one. He watched the valley as the wind began again in earnest. He saw another ball of gorse rolling toward him.

He knelt near the embers. Slowly, he nudged the ball toward them. Nothing....nothing.... Then, Snap! There was a sudden crackling sound and the dry gorse sparked up with such intensity that Gar threw himself back. Fire! He had made fire! He! Not the wind. He!

Slowly, Gar rocked back and forth on his knees. He began to keen, calling his brothers to help him, the spirits to help him. Here was fire!

“Help me,” he intoned. “Help me catch the fire. Help me keep the fire before the spark is gone.”

###

Yvette Viets Flaten writes award-winning poetry and fiction. She and her husband Dan recently moved to the village of Colfax, WI, after residing in Eau Claire for over 50 years. She enjoys the quiet village life, rising early to write, while watching the birdfeeders and brewing her morning tea.

Flash Fiction

2nd Place

On The Hill

Leslie Bellavance

Even though it's an urban residential neighborhood the house sits atop a too large hill, setting it apart from the other houses and distant from the sidewalk and street. It's as if the Earth heaved up a great sigh and could not release its breath again. The structure is of Italianate design, but it's not the house that captures attention. In the pale gloom of the overcast sky two women bend over to pull the weeds out of the blue creeping thyme, which covers the entire hill. They stoop over near one another, talking quietly as they pull the weeds. They wear similar grey linen dresses that are long with long sleeves and short boots. They have identical buckets to collect the weeds in. They look like sisters, but the younger sister looks older, and the older sister looks younger. The number of weeds to pull is enormous, as if Sisyphus's boulder had been crushed to sand and scattered over a meadow for him to retrieve. The old younger sister stands up to stretch her back. She's clearly frustrated by the task. She looks exhausted. "This is too much, it's impossible," she declares. In a calm, unperturbed voice the young older sister reminds her, "You told me you would help me with this." "Yes, I did," the old younger sister whispers as she stoops down again to continue weeding, "I thought you were dead." "I am," said the young older sister. The old younger sister looks at her and from her eyes fall tears more numerous than all of the weeds or the grains of sand.

Leslie Bellavance is a visual artist and writer. In her forty-year career in higher education she has served as a professor of art and in leadership roles at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, at James Madison University, at the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University, and at Kendall College of Art and Design in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Her published writing has consisted of essays on contemporary art, and she has recently started to explore categories of creative writing. She is currently president/professor emerita at Kendall College of Art and Design and lives in Neenah, WI.

Flash Fiction

3rd Place

Who Knows?

Louise Endres Moore

I glanced up from my desk at the front of the room when I overheard a conversation between two students. Twenty-year-old Robert was telling Angela about his neighbor's unexpected death and the surviving house cat. He just knew that cat was still in the house.

Robert was so pleasant and so distractible. Angela was a willing participant in the conversation, but this was a math class, so I moved to the back of the room to redirect their focus. Angela returned to math, but Robert was firmly planted in a different place.

He asked me, "Did your grandfather wear a red flower at his funeral?" Robert motioned to his lapel.

"I never knew my grandfathers, so I wouldn't know." I expected that would redirect him.

But Robert continued, "Did anyone close to you die?"

My reply was almost a question, "My sister died in Boston Store."

It had been two years since my sister left her three daughters, 17, 19, and 21 years old.

Then Robert began a sort of monologue, “She passed out and fell before she got out of the doors. Everyone was upset.”

I became absorbed and immobile.

“She died before she was in the car.” I assumed the car was an ambulance.

He mentioned electric shock, and I knew the paramedics struggled in the store to revive my sister, but there is little hope of deterring the dissection of an ascending aorta. A person can die if it happens on an operating table.

Robert continued, “Her tennis shoes were not very worn. She was wearing blue pants and a jacket and a button down shirt.”

Later, I asked about the jacket because I already knew my sister regularly invested in good tennis shoes because her feet were a mess. “It was a black or purple North Face.”

Robert continued, “She was on her way home after shopping. She was happy about what she had bought.”

My sister had been in Boston Store to pick up an altered dress she planned to wear to a wedding. According to Robert, she had also bought some food. That didn’t make sense to me, but Robert said to himself, “Ya, Boston Store sells some food.”

Later I was told, “Mom would buy brownie mixes and chocolate there.”

And then Robert finished, “She was going outside to the parking lot.”

I corrected him, “Into the mall.”

“No, into the parking lot.”

Robert was right, and I was wrong.

“She had light brown hair and was pretty. She had a big impact on others.”

There were a few generic comments. “She didn’t want to leave, but she had to. She had no choice. You got along well. She is fine. There is no pain, and she wants you to be happy.”

Robert said, “Some people say I have a gift, but they have to prove that to me.”

The class ended, and Robert moved on to his next class as did all my other students.

I immediately returned to my desk and wrote down everything he had told me. Years later, one my sister’s friends said matter-of-factly, “Oh, he entered your aura.” So this is normal for some people? I am so basic and boring.

I stumbled upon Robert in the hallway the next day where we could speak for a short time before he had to leave.

I asked, “What happened yesterday...does that tire you?”

Robert answered, “It stresses me.”

I asked, “Do you see things or sense them?”

Robert replied, “See them. Sometimes I feel I am just guessing too much.”

Robert didn’t want this ability. It seemed to cause conflict within his family and went

against their religion.

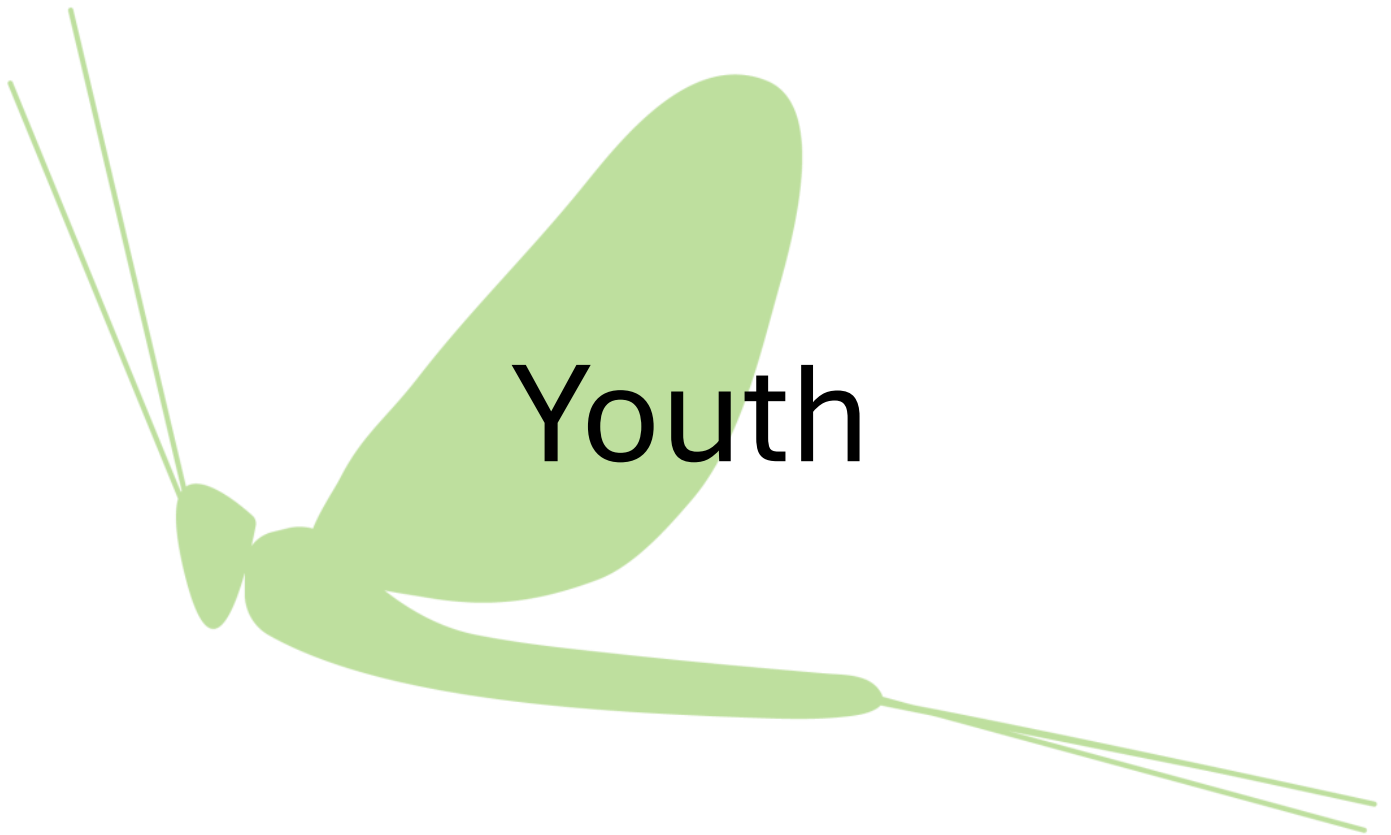
“If something happens, I go in, and then I want to come out.”

Toward the end of what had been basically a monologue in my classroom the previous day, Robert had said, “You have an angel with you,” and he pointed to my left shoulder.

Who knows? But if I have an angel near me, that angel is loving, enthusiastic, and encouraging. She had impact in quiet, discrete ways. She was generous with her humor, her spirit, and her time, especially with those who had little.

And I always remember Robert’s comment, “She wants you to be happy.”

Lakefly 2025 Winners



Youth

1st Place

You Just do

Elizabeth Kolp

A wooden coffin sat alone in the white church. Inside laid Bianca Walsworth, accomplished professor and wife. Bianca had been diagnosed with stage four pancreatic cancer only six months ago. Since the diagnosis, Bianca had begun to decline until she passed in her sleep, leaving her husband and executor to plan her funeral and continue on without her.

That husband was Rudy Walsworth.

“Sir, would you like the photo placed here...” The pastor waddled over, carrying the large framed image of Bianca. “...Or here?”

Rudy just wanted this over with. “Just put it wherever looks best.”

It had been a week since Bianca had passed and Rudy still had not returned home. He had distracted himself with planning a funeral at a local church Bianca had gone to when she was young. Thinking about Bianca just made it feel like she was still there, that she hadn't left Rudy alone.

“Rudy!” A female voice yelled, “How are you?” Taylor ran and wrapped arms around him.

“Hey, Taylor.” Rudy muttered, “You came early.”

“I thought you could use the help.” She grinned. “And with how it's looking now, I was definitely right.”

How could she be happy right now? Rudy was irritated, but she wasn't wrong. The church space included her coffin, a large photograph, and some chairs. Rudy was not the best decorator.

“Did you order some flowers for her at least?” Taylor asked, grabbing some of the decorations from the Target bag Rudy had bought.

Shoot. Rudy had forgotten the flowers. They were still at the gardener's shop and Rudy was running out of time before the funeral began and people arrived.

“I-I need to go pickup the flowers from the store. I'll be right back just keep decorating.”

Rudy grabbed his keys and quickly scrambled to the door. He quickly hopped into his car and raced to the flower shop.

When Rudy arrived at the flower shop, there was a Golden Retriever sitting outside. It was matted and dirty. *A stray?* Rudy approached the dog, there was a collar on the dog. The tag read *Spark*, with no other details. The dog laid his head on Rudy's bent knees. *Poor guy must not get a lot of pets.* Rudy rubbed the dog's head, but stood up and walked into the flower store. *Hopefully, he finds a good home soon.*

"Hello, welcome!" The cashier smiled., "What can I help you with?"

"Hi, I have a pickup for Rudy Walsworth."

"Oh yes, let me go grab the flowers." The cashier walked to the back and came out with gorgeous white roses. "These look right?"

"Yes, they're perfect." Rudy took the flowers. "Thank you."

"Of course!"

When Rudy left the store the stray was gone. *Whatever.* Rudy loaded the flowers into the back of his car and left.

“About time you made it back!” Taylor joked. She had decorated the place beautifully. Marvelous lights hung from the church's ceiling and polaroids of Bianca's life lined the walls telling her story.

“You did a really great job, Taylor.” Rudy handed the flower to Taylor and stepped aside.

“Told you you needed help!” Taylor laughed. “And Bianca deserves to be honored marvelously. She left us too soon.”

Rudy nodded. Taylor placed the bouquets around Bianca's coffin.

“It really does look amazing.” Rudy shed a tear. “I know she appreciates it.”

Taylor walked over to Rudy and hugged him. She knew how he felt; Bianca was her best friend.

“I know it may not feel like it Rudy, and it won't for a while, but you will be okay.” Taylor smirked, “I miss her too, but she would want you to be happy.”

Rudy began to cry, “But she left me. She was my best friend, how am I supposed to m-move on and live life without her?”

“You just do.” Taylor grabbed his hand.

Rudy sighed, tears still streaming down his face. *You just do.*

—

The funeral had finished and Rudy was exhausted. Bianca would be laid to rest tomorrow and Rudy would truly be alone after that. The thought was terrifying.

Rudy grabbed his keys and made his way to the door when he heard jingling. He turned around and saw Spark. His tail was wagging as he made his way to Rudy.

You just do.

Rudy picked up Spark and brought him to his car. It was with this dog that he would just do it. He would find his spark. His spark of inspiration to continue his life.

Elizabeth Kolp

W237N604 Oakridge Dr. Waukesha, WI 53188

(262)-433-0161

Elizabethkolp2008@gmail.com

You Just Do 750 words Youth Contest: Fiction

Youth 2

2nd place

Edge of the World

Hannah Aylsworth

Southern California is an enigmatic place. It makes me feel like I am falling off the edge of the world, while being grounded all at once. Driving through Los Angeles tastes like dopamine. It tastes like sweet candy, and wet earth. Under the interstate lights. They shield the world from the cold, dark, sky. When the windows of the rental are down, the air whips me in the face but yet it feels like a crisp pillow to rest my head on.

Carpinteria feels like the misty sand under my feet. The bitterly cold, salty waves of the Pacific feel warm and sweet. It smells like tar spilling over the sand, and wind rolling over cliffs that are begging me to look over them. The rare sound of rain pounds on the thin, delicate walls. Filling my ears. Like I left the front door open, welcoming the raindrops into my borrowed home.

And Oceanside. Oceanside is the edge of the earth. The sunsets over the piers swirl around me like melted Starbursts, the boats in the water slosh. They taste metallic. The Red Hot Chili Peppers are earworms, singing “Californiacation” incessantly. Pelicans and seagulls beg for food, and they are friendly when they ask. Taking a boat off the coast to watch the dolphins twirl and spin, in the cold wind and waves. I look behind me and the shoreline dwindles. And the sun rises to reveal its tie-dye of colors. Am I really looking at the edge of the world? Am I truly falling off the edge of the world?

Hannah Aylsworth

349 N Oak Crest Dr, Wales, WI 53183

(262) 968-6200

Edge of the World

261 words

Youth Contest: Essay

Youth 3

3rd Place

Hooked

Brady Weston

Bruised and muddy, I finally reach a clearing on the banks of the winding and heavily vegetated Fox River in Waukesha. It's a late afternoon, and the sun reflects perfectly off the river into my eyes. It's blinding, but pretty. I'm not here for the views though. With two fishing rods, a backpack, and a net all on my person, I'm here to catch a Northern Pike, a gorgeous fish that has evaded me and my lures every trip. I find a calm spot on the water and begin casting. Around me birds chirp, wind blows, water rushes, but my senses focus exclusively on my bait, as it plops so lifelike against the surface of the water, conspicuously as possible.

I sit for thirty minutes repeating my cast, taking in the environment. Crawling through the brush was strenuous, but the reward—a completely undisturbed and natural habitat—was well worth it. I never imagined finding an area this peaceful within a short walk of my own home.

Suddenly, as I repeat my cast once more, a fish slams into my bait, causing the surface of the water to erupt, reflecting the sun off its burst. This was the moment. All my patience

culminated into this now or never chance to retrieve an unbelievably aggressive fish from the depths of the untouched river. A pike.

Panicking, I reel with as much might as my arms, as shaky as they were, could muster. The calm river had now become a battleground between me and this fish, and I didn't intend to lose. The beast got closer and closer, until the hardest part, getting it on land. With a quick grab of my line, I yank up, and the battle is decided.

A gorgeous pike sits on the end, and I stop to admire it. Bright and pale bars span across a slender, dark body, with fins of a contrastingly unnatural orange. I had finally found one. The fight was over, and the river became calm once more as I returned the fish back to its home as safely as I could. And I was filled with joy.

Brady Weston 262-443-4540 Address: 563 A.J Allen Circle, Wales, WI 53183

Word Count: 353 Category: Youth Contest

Lakefly 2025 Winners



Poetry 1

1st Place

My Rubicon

Yvette Viets Flaten

Sitting in Latin class

turning the pages

de Bello Gallico

one word springs up

at me from the print

--impedimentum--

and I am stunned, already

knowing its meaning

without looking at the

footnote..

I say it out loud

--impedimentum—

and suddenly feel

the ponderous weight

of the Legions' creaking

baggage train dragging

on their steps, hobbling

their march along the via,

slowing their advance, losing

advantage over an enemy,
Aquitanii, Belgae, or Gaul.

It's all here. In one word,
I hear the order to drop packs,
shake off their burdens, form up
for the quick march, to become
expeditii, leaving the lurching
impediment behind.

It is my igniting moment.
A bolt of connection. A flash of insight.
The die of deep understanding cast.

Yvette Viets Flaten, Colfax, WI, writes fiction and poetry. Her award-winning poems have appeared widely in journals, calendars, and online. She writes every day, even if only a line or two, always ready for that spark.

Poetry 2

2nd Place

The Season Within

G. Anthony

Beneath my feet, a universe stirs—
a snail drags its fragile home, trusting the earth,
ants carve relentless paths, feeding the invisible.
Life hums here, intricate and unyielding,
a quiet persistence we never pause to see.

We are giants, rushing, stumbling,
breaking threads we'll never feel,
tearing apart the delicate without a thought.
But the world doesn't falter.
It bends, it mends, it reweaves
the fragile web we owe our breath to.

If life had a heartbeat, it would pulse like summer,
where roots stretch deep into the soil's embrace,
and blossoms reach for the sun, too unafraid to burn.
The cicada sings, defying its fleeting time,

and the night hums back—the harmony of resilience,
of the things that know how to endure.

But even summer bends to autumn.

Its golden leaves fall—sacrificed to the soil—
not in death, but in promise.

Nothing truly ends. Everything transforms.

Winter comes, not to kill, but to cradle,
holding spring's heartbeat in her frozen palms.

This is the beauty we trample past,

The life beneath our feet,
the roots we crush, even the stars we fail to see.

Step outside, where the walls you've built can't follow.

Feel it with me.

You are not above this; you are not apart.

You are a thread in the infinite tapestry.

A vital note in the eternal song
of all that was, all that is, and all that will be.

Bio: G. Anthony is a poet and author from Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, whose work reflects his passion for healing, family, and nature. His debut poetry collection, Nobody's Words, explores trauma, healing, and self-discovery through raw, expressive writing. Writing

primarily for himself, G. Anthony reveals the complexities of personal transformation with authenticity and emotional depth. As a devoted father, husband, and advocate for mental health, he draws inspiration from everyday life, continually seeking deeper understanding and connection through his poetry and storytelling.

Poetry 3

3rd Place

Escape Velocity

G.A. Scheinoha

ENTRY UNAVAILABLE

Lakefly 2025 Winners

Short Story



Short Story

1st Place

I Sing A Song

Gail Sosinsky

“We got one, Coach!” Clio heard as the bag was pulled from her head. She blinked in the sudden light and reached up to push back the laurel wreath that had fallen over her eyes. The movement jostled the scrolls she held, and one fell, unrolling to the feet of a gray-haired man with a lined face and fierce eyes. Obviously the leader. The other four men – no, boys – in this musty room certainly couldn’t claim the title. She doubted any of them even needed to shave yet.

Clio drew herself up to her full dignity and met the fierce elder’s eyes. “And why exactly have you kidnapped me?” She smiled inwardly as a couple of the youths shuffled their feet and the one seated on a bench fidgeted with an oddly shaped brown bladder, staring at the floor. But the old man didn’t flinch.

“You haven’t been kidnapped, you’ve been invoked,” he said, stabbing his finger on the page of the book he held open. “It says here that when people need to write something, they invoke a muse and the words just pour out of you and through their pens. Is that right?”

“Crudely put, but essentially correct.”

“That’s what we need,” the old one said. “I’ve got an English teacher that’s had it in for me and my boys ever since they pulled a harmless little prank on her last month.”

“Harmless prank?”

He pointed at the two boys who had dragged her to this smelly, humid room with a concrete floor and metal cabinetry. “Jake and Dakota here shaved her dog and painted it green.”

Clio lifted an eyebrow.

“Hair’ll grow back,” the old man said, jutting out his chin.

“Yes,” Clio said, “and what curse has she rightfully flung back at you?”

“We gotta write a poem,” said the dog painter named Dakota. “If we don’t, we’ll flunk English, and we’re off the team.”

“I’m afraid I can’t help you,” Clio said.

“Now, wait a minute,” the old man said, shaking the book at her. “This says you have to. You get invoked, you gotta inspire my boys. Those are the rules. I don’t care if you’re upset about the dog. You have to follow the rules.”

“You misunderstand,” Clio said, shifting her load of scrolls. “I am the Muse of History, not Poetry. You need one of my sisters.”

“Aw, heck, Jake!” the youth on the bench groaned. “You grabbed the wrong one.”

“Don’t blame me, Tyler,” Jake said, his face turning almost as red as the number 89 on the white shirt he wore. “It’s not like they had name tags and play books taped to their foreheads.”

Their voices rose in a cacophony of blame and anxiety that struck her aching head like the hammer of Hephaestus. She took a deep breath. She wasn’t a daughter of Zeus for nothing.

“Enough!”

Silence flooded the room as the knot of frustrated masculinity felt the naked power push through them. They held their breath, the only sounds, the drip of a shower and a hiss from the radiator.

Clio looked at the dark-haired youth sitting on the end of the bench. “You! Tyler! Retrieve my scroll!”

She sat, carefully piling her remaining scrolls so they wouldn’t be damaged. Calmly, she raised her hand to her head. Her hair smoothed into place, and the laurel wreath settled attractively. She arranged her disheveled clothing, crossed her ankles demurely, and folded her hands in her lap.

“Now,” Clio said, “you have invoked me, and I must help you, but I will do that by helping you understand which of my sisters you need.” She nodded to the old man. Grudgingly, he nodded back.

“What type of poem are you supposed to write?” Clio asked the boys.

“Tell her the assignment, Noah,” the old man ordered, nodding to the boy wearing the number three.

“A really long one,” Noah said.

“Ah, Calliope –” Clio started, but Dakota chimed in.

“Yeah, the teacher said it has to be eight to twenty lines long.” A collective groan filled the room.

“Oh. That leaves Calliope out,” Clio said.

“What’s wrong with Calliarpee?” the old man demanded.

“She’s the muse of epic poetry.”

The room remained silent.

“Really, really long poems. Like a whole book.”

Eyebrows rose in disbelief.

“The Iliad? The Odyssey? Beowulf?”

“I saw that movie,” Tyler said. “It’s almost two hours long.”

The others stared at him with suspicion.

“Angelina Jolie was really hot,” he said, defensively. The others nodded their forgiveness.

“Could we write about Angelina Jolie?” Jake asked.

“Forget her. Did you see what Jenny Strebig was wearing in gym yesterday?”

“Oh, man, and those jeans Lili McKay wore –”

“Hey, that’s my cousin –”

Clio held up her hand and pushed a little silence through the room. “Such poems would require inspiration from my sister Erato. I’m afraid she has appointments booked out at least three months in advance. I might be able to persuade her to help one of you, but certainly not all of you.”

The boys looked eagerly at their leader, but the old man was too smart to show favoritism. “Who else you got?” he asked.

“I’m reasonably certain Polyhymnia would be available.”

“What kind of poems does she inspire?” the old man asked.

“Sacred poetry and hymns.”

The old man eyed up the boys as they started examining the walls, the ceiling, their shoes. His eyes narrowed.

“Yeah, my boys can do that,” he said. “How long will it take to get Polly here?”

“Um, Coach,” Noah said. “We just got done with the news channels running those stories about us praying before games.” He looked around the room for help, but no one met his eyes. “Well, Coach, if we all turn in religious stuff, the principal and the school board are gonna think we’re makin’ fun of ’em. Three of the school board members have kids in band, and if they think we’re makin’ fun of ’em, they’re gonna buy a new tuba instead of replacing our tackle dummies.”

“Damn!” the old man said, slapping Noah on the shoulder. “You’re right.” He met Clio’s eyes. “How many sisters you got?”

“There are nine of us altogether, but only four of us inspire great poetry.” She watched the old man tick off three fingers.

“Who’s the fourth?”

“Thalia. She inspires comedy.”

“Hey, I got one!” Jake said. “There once was a full back named Bart, who let an incredible –”

“Can it, Jake,” the old man ordered. “You’re the reason we’re in this mess.”

Clio watched the leader scan the boys, his eyes calculating.

“If this Thalia inspires them, will their poems be clean enough for an English teacher?”

“Clean?”

“Polite.”

“Well, a muse inspires you by allowing you to see connections within the knowledge and emotions you already have.”

“Meaning?”

“Thalia will be working with what your boys find funny.”

“Can any of you knuckleheads think of a joke that doesn’t have to do with sex or bathrooms?”

“Sure, Coach,” Noah said. “There’s the one – oh, wait. Can any of you other guys?” Heads shook.

“Ain’t that just the –” the old man caught himself, but the realization that the muses could not really help them was sinking into the boys’ brains, and their anxiety and anger mounted.

“It’s not fair,” Tyler said. “This is the first year since my dad was in school that the Warriors have a real chance of beating the Spartans.”

“We all gotta be in the game, Coach! I’ve be waiting all my life to crush the Spartans.”

“C’mon, Coach, there’s gotta be something!”

The cacophony rose, but instead of enforcing quiet, Clio listened to their rhetoric. Crush, beat, kill. The battle banners hanging on the walls used the word “football,” a term she did not know. As the boys about her worked themselves into a froth, she unrolled one of her scrolls, ran her hand across the papyrus to clear the words and watched as it refilled

with strategy diagrams full of X's and O's. Statistics appeared, and historical records of battles. Names, dates, and men worth making famous.

Clio looked up at the chaos around her and swept the noise away with an impatient hand.

“Mr. Coach,” she said, “tell me please, does the poetry need to be good?”

“The boys need to get Cs to pass.”

“But if it is too good,” Tyler said, “she’ll think we copied it off the internet.”

“Then I believe I can help you,” Clio said. “You, yes you with the tablet and stylus. We’ll start with you. Write this down.

“I sing a song of the wrath of Lombardi.”

Gail Sosinsky Wickman (writing as Gail Sosinsky) 89 Golf Course Road, Unit B Madison, WI 53704 715-559-3555 story.maker@yahoo.com

Short Story 2

2nd Place

Sparks Fly

Jennifer Garcia

“It can’t be him.” Tara tossed the letter onto the floor. Camp Wildwood was her summer reprieve, and she’d been waiting all year to return. This was her second year, so she thought she’d have a say concerning her co-counselor. The name on the paper seared into her brain. Brad Johnson. A name she could go without reading for another year, or forever.

Tara had returned a week early to help clean buildings, chop firewood, and create signs to make campers feel welcome. Today the other counselors arrived for orientation, and the kids would come tomorrow.

A bell rang through camp; time to meet in the mess hall. Tara straightened her Camp Wildwood hat and stepped out of the cabin she shared with three other counselors. She stopped short. Brad Johnson sat on her porch sparking a lighter, fusing the ends of a handful of purple paracord lengths. The flame made his crooked smile look fuzzy. She looked away avoiding his face.

“Hey, Tara,” Brad said, standing up. “I wanted to talk to you about some ideas for camp activities. We could make paracord bracelets. I still wear mine from camp when I was a kid.” A green bracelet slid down his wrist while he stuffed the lengths of cord into his backpack.

“That’s a good idea.” Tara smiled, but it wasn’t real, since just seeing Brad knotted her stomach.

She hopped down the steps using the momentum to get ahead.

“I have some other ideas, too.” He jogged to catch up.

“Um hum.” Tara quickened her pace.

Brad kept talking, but Tara hardly listened. How could he act like nothing happened between them? They had been good friends in high school. He asked her to prom a year ago, almost to the day. Tara was returning from checking her makeup in the bathroom when she saw Brad kissing Selena Flagstone beside the bleachers. How could he kiss another girl while on a date with her? That was an insult and just plain rude. Tara called her mom and left the prom, vowing never to speak to Brad again. It wasn’t that she had wanted to kiss Brad. Or maybe she had. Who knew, it was last year.

Tara made it through the orientation and planning meetings, saying as little as possible to Brad. She left the evening campfire training with a curt “Goodbye” before practically running back to her cabin to go to bed.

The campers arrived the next morning, making a great buffer between Tara and Brad. They were never alone, and whenever they talked, it was related to following a camp rule or completing an activity with the campers. When he waved for her to sit by him at lunch, she sat between two of the girls in their group. At the end of the day, he asked to walk her back to her cabin. She declined, instead cleaning up the s’mores leftovers after their first campfire program.

Brad was great with the kids. Tara was, too, but Brad had this way of letting each one talk about what they liked to do, then brought their interests into the activities and conversations of the group. *Maybe it wouldn't be so bad working with Brad.*

At the end of the first week, the campers were ready for their first big hike. Everyone wore hiking boots, stuffed their backpacks with lunches and water, and some kids carried walking sticks they'd whittled in their spare time; Brad's idea to get them excited for hiking.

Brad led the way with an enthusiastic "Hoorah," and Tara took the rear. The trail gained elevation until they reached a beautiful mountain lake. A few campers grumbled in the back about the steepness of the climb, but when they arrived everyone was excited to remove their shoes and dip their feet in the cool water.

"The view is spectacular," Brad said, sitting beside Tara.

"This is one of my favorite places," Tara snapped a couple of photos of the kids with her phone. "Do you want a granola bar?" she asked. *If he's chewing, he'll stop talking and being so nice. I don't want to like him.*

"How many times have you been here?" Brad asked.

"Too many to count. Every year when I was a camper, and several times last summer when I was hired at Camp Wildwood. Coming here helps me forget about my problems." This time Tara bit into a granola bar to stop talking. She was not going to tell Brad about her problems.

"Nick, stop throwing rocks at Maddie." Brad got up and redirected Nick, teaching him how to skip rocks.

Tara's head was in the clouds as they headed back to camp. *How could Brad be so friendly, but not say anything about the prom incident?* Maybe he thought she was over it. She wasn't over it, but perhaps she should be.

Tara didn't see the tree root on the trail.

Her screams filled the air as she tripped and fell. Everyone on the trail stopped.

Brad appeared instantly by her side. Wasn't he leading the group?

"Where are you hurt?" he asked, his hands hovering over her.

"My ankle," Tara said between gritted teeth.

"If I help you up, do you think you can walk back to camp?" Brad examined her for injuries, gently brushing dust from Tara's leg.

That little touch injected electricity into Tara giving her energy to get back up.

Brad helped her to stand. The second she put pressure on her twisted right ankle, pain shot up her leg.

Fear reflected in the eyes of each camper as they watched her.

"Let's help Miss Tara," Brad said wrapping his arm around her waist and pulling her arm over his shoulder. "Cameron, please take her backpack, and Maddie, pick up her water bottle."

The kids scurried to help.

"Alex, you take the lead and yell when you see the turnoff to Camp Wildwood."

"Yes, sir," Alex said saluting Brad and me. He marched to the front and kept on going.

The first step was the worst, but soon Tara could tolerate the jolt that came with every step.

“When we get to the end of the trail and onto the flat path, I can carry you back to camp,” Brad whispered.

“Not on your life,” Tara spat out the words. She was not going to appear as a damsel in distress rescued by the strong man.

Brad changed the subject but kept talking until they reached the end of the trail. Tara tried to ignore the feel of his hand around her waist, his muscles flexing as he lifted her slightly with each step, and his other hand, holding hers as she clung to his neck. The shots of pain were becoming less frequent, but they did their job of restarting her brain when she was thinking of melting into Brad’s muscular arms.

Despite Tara’s initial refusal, Brad picked her up when they reached the flat path and carried her the last half kilometer.

As they neared the camp, Brad whispered to the now relaxed Tara, “I’m sorry.”

She perked up. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“But it was, and I’m really sorry.”

Before Tara could protest, the nurse and a flood of excited kids still chattering about Tara’s injury met them at the camp entrance. The nurse directed Brad to bring Tara straight to her car so they could go into town for x-rays.

When Tara and the nurse finally got back, dinner was over and their campers, under Brad’s direction, were preparing to light the campfire for that evening’s gathering. Tara hobbled over with her crutches, and the kids swarmed her asking if her leg was broken and if they could borrow her crutches.

“It’s not broken, just sprained. I need to keep weight off my ankle, but if I give it time to heal, it’ll be good as new.”

Brad met her eyes and nodded.

Tara sat on a log bench and listened to Brad’s instructions as he and the kids knelt by the firepit.

“All you need to start the fire is a little spark, but you have to protect and nurture it, or the spark will go out, and you’ll have to start over again.” Brad looked at Tara for confirmation. Or was it something else?

Tara shrugged, and her heart fluttered. It was probably from her ankle pain. She needed rest.

The campers, with Brad’s help, took care of Tara. One got a plate from the mess hall loaded with leftover tacos, while another brought a blanket. Two boys found a log the perfect height to elevate her foot, while another got a pillow to put under it. Brad and the others slowly fed the flames as the rest of the camp groups congregated around the fire for the program.

Tonight was the talent show. A buzz of excitement spread as campers and counselors arrived with instruments and props. After an evening of cheers and standing ovations, Brad retrieved his guitar from beneath a picnic table.

“I wrote a little song I’d like to share before I record it and get famous.”

The campers snickered and one counsellor shouted, “Is it a sappy love song?”

“Maybe,” Brad said while tuning the instrument and starting into the melody.

We met a long time ago and I thought I loved you then,

But sparks flew and you walked away.

You came back into my life and my heart began to mend,

Your smile told me I'd be okay.

I see you across the fire,

Flames dancing in your eyes.

You're all that I desire,

When the sparks fly.

I want to give you my heart but I'm afraid that it'll break,

When sparks fly pushing you away.

I reach my hand out to you, together we'll be strong.

I'll love you forever and a day.

Brad sang the chorus again, staring outright at Tara. She stared back, eyes wide. Frozen in her seat, ankle throbbing, Tara couldn't breathe.

The camp director cut the tension, thanking Brad and the other performers for sharing their talents. Beneath his words, everyone around the campfire pointed and whispered comments about Brad staring at Tara while singing a love song.

Tara whispered to whoever was nearby, that they were just friends. *If that.*

The campers dispersed leaving Brad and Tara alone to tend the fire.

"Are they right?" Tara asked through the sparks popping above the fire.

She couldn't see Brad. *Did he leave her all alone with an injured leg to put out the fire?*

"I've missed you every day for the last year."

Tara turned toward the voice approaching from her side. The past week proved she, too, missed his friendship. She couldn't say the words though, not when she still felt the sting of his betrayal.

"I didn't kiss her."

"But I saw with my own eyes."

"The only person I wanted to kiss that night was you. I'd never kissed anyone and was nervous. Selena grabbed my face and kissed it to show me how easy it was. Her prom date laughed hysterically. I didn't know you saw until someone said you left the dance."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Tara squirmed; the bench suddenly became more uncomfortable.

"You wouldn't talk to me. Selena said you wouldn't listen to her either. Graduation was the next day, and we both were surrounded by family. Your camp counselor job started the following day, and I never saw you again until this week."

"You could have written me a letter." Tara said with a smile in her voice.

"Would you have read it?" Brad asked, scooting closer.

"Probably not." Tara admitted. "I might have thrown it in the campfire."

"Will you accept my apology?"

"Do you want me to?" Her eyes found his ... he didn't need to answer.

Brad tentatively slipped his arm around Tara's back, and she leaned into him relaxing. They sat watching the fire sizzle and crackle as sparks ignited between them.

JENNIFER GARCIA 584 BERWICK DR SUN PRAIRIE, WI 53590 PH# 708-250-3263 EMAIL:

JENNIFERDGARCIA@GMAIL.COM

Short Story 3

3rd Place

The Consequences of Ignoring Gus and Gladys

T. Parker Steele

On Saturday mornings, my young children frequently accompanied me to the university's psychology laboratories where I studied memory in rats and pigeons.

My two boys liked to visit the dungeon while I set up mazes for the rats. The dungeon was the Psychology Department's basement storeroom. This repository contained a treasure trove of old equipment spanning eight decades. Few people dared step into the haunted dungeon. My boys were the exception. They enjoyed rigging the door so that when it opened a rope threaded through a pulley system moved ancient kymographs and chronoscopes in the far recesses of the room. The scraping was terrifying. One of their most creative endeavors was placing a chair so that it inconveniently blocked a passageway. When moved, the Department's forgotten skeleton dropped in front of an unwary visitor's face.

When tired of the dungeon, my boys would stroll into the automated pigeon lab to watch the birds peck colored buttons for grain. Peck the red light. Now the blue one. Turn in a circle and peck the blinking white light, but only if it's Tuesday.

When the boys realized the birds could not remember which sequence of buttons needed to be pecked for rewards, my oldest son stuck a pencil through the mesh of the cages and pressed the correct buttons for the birds. The unsuspecting professor running

the study believed he had made a significant breakthrough in pigeon cognition and published an influential article on his research. I read the paper and was astounded to learn how smart my boys were.

Meanwhile, the only entertainment my daughter needed was a lab coat with a rat stuffed into each pocket. She attempted to dress the rodents in Barbie doll clothes, but soon realized that Barbie's anatomy differed from that of rats (as well as normal human beings). She would reluctantly stow the rats back into her pockets, sit next to me at the lab bench, and ask, "What are you doing?"

This was a difficult question to answer.

The biology of memory is complicated. It involves neural circuits, synaptic connections, chemical transmitters, memory processors, carburetors, serpentine belts, and much more that I can't remember. And the more I learned about memory, the more muddled my understanding became. Early on, I realized a simpler method was needed to grasp how my brain managed my memories. Thus, while still in graduate school, I created Gus and Gladys.

Gladys supervises the part of my brain that pays attention to everything taking place around me. She's the nosey lady who keeps an eye on the neighborhood. Gladys is slightly on the plump side. She wears hornrimmed glasses, a high-waisted polka dot dress, and fuzzy purple slippers. Gladys sits in a rocking chair on my brain's front porch, sipping ice tea while knitting scarves and taking note of any person, thing, or event that might impact my life. If she's suspicious of a situation that might require more of a response from me

than, “I’ll get to it later,” Gladys sets down her knitting and picks up the phone to call Gus. Gus manages one of the back rooms of my brain.

Gus is the Director of Memory Affairs. Rather than wearing a three-piece suit that would be customary of someone with such a title, Gus wears bib overalls, a red flannel shirt, and heavy leather work boots without laces or socks. He clutches an unlit cigar in his mouth (I don’t allow smoking in my brain). Gus compares current events called in by Gladys to memories of similar events I experienced in the past.

Gus, dear, he’s about to pet a rather nasty looking three-legged dog. Don’t you have something on that?

Lemme look. Gus pulls himself off the couch with a groan and shuffles over to rows of card catalogues stacked against the back wall. Card catalogues are a relic of the past. Yet considering that my brain is also a relic of the past, they persist. He opens several drawers and flips through yellowed index cards until he finds one labeled “Three-Legged Dogs.”

He grins. Yep, he tried that in 1964. Dog almost caught him. I’ll remind him to avoid three-legged dogs.

Now and then, Gladys will receive a phone call from the Office of the Amygdala, a congested room on the fifth floor of my brain where toxic and negative emotions churn. Workers in that room are outfitted with hazmat suits and Geiger counters. The stew of emotions they manage is intended to keep me from doing something reckless.

We’ve got a lot of anxiety up here, a voice reports to Gladys. He’s going on a date with the judge’s daughter. Tell him to be a little more vigilant tonight.

Gladys decides to assess the situation. She sniffs the air, then picks up her binoculars from the end table and turns up her hearing aids. A minute later she calls Gus.

Gus, dear. He's really nervous and I have a feeling he might do something incredibly foolish this evening. Again.

Okay, Gus sighs. *Keep me apprised.* Gus is eating lunch and would rather not be bothered.

Gladys hangs up and takes another peak through her binoculars. She gasps. She quickly redials Gus. *Oh goodness, just as I suspected. He's about to lock his keys in the car. On a first date, no less.*

Gus snorts. *I'm not surprised. Stay on the line and I'll see what I can find.*

Gus tosses his bologna sandwich on the coffee table and slips on his boots. He rolls off the couch and meanders to the stacks of card catalogues. After a quick search, he finds the drawer he wants and rifles through the cards. He pulls out a card, squints, and reads the label. Gus returns to the phone.

You're going to love this. Keys left in locked car on first (and last) date." He chuckles. *Looks like we have a box full of these in the cellar. I'll be back in a bit.*

Whereas simple memories are scribbled on fading index cards, complex memories consist of so many events, emotions, and associations that they need to be preserved in storage boxes. Cartons of pleasant memories are neatly stacked on shelves opposite the card catalogs. Each fragment of those memories is tenderly wrapped in tissue paper, precisely labeled, and carefully packed in a sturdy wooden box. Gus takes pleasant

memory boxes off the shelves whenever I reminisce with good friends or look at old photos of family vacations.

But unwelcome emotion-laden memories are locked in a chamber in my brain's cellar. The "Gallery of Regrettable Memories," as I call it, contains moldy cardboard boxes haphazardly heaped into every available space in that acrid chamber. Many boxes contain embalmed specimens of flawed decisions from the past. (I could give examples, but I'd rather keep those boxes padlocked.) Other boxes are open, allowing dank memories to ooze out onto the floor. Gus must walk carefully in the Gallery to avoid stirring up a memory he was not searching for.

I had often suggested we do a little house cleaning and throw out boxes, but Gus is a hoarder and insists this is not permitted. He refers to Section 5 of the "Handbook of Neuronal Affairs." It details numerous regulations that can be summed up in a few words – "Once in a box, it's a keeper." This makes me wonder who's in charge of my brain.

Thus, stacks of deteriorating boxes multiply. Each box contains a tangle of memories, like knotted bundles of Christmas tree lights peppered with burned out bulbs. Now and then, Gus opens one of these boxes and attempts to unravel the memory. But retrieving a regrettable memory often causes the release of powerful negative emotions that entwine the memory like tinsel. Regardless, Gus seems to enjoy stringing these lights throughout my conscious brain.

Gus slips on his old woolen sweater and lumbers down the dusty staircase. He unlocks the thick door leading to the "Gallery of Regrettable Memories." The basement is chilly and the

walls are damp and the gray paint is peeling. He scans stacks of mildewed cardboard boxes, each labeled with a specific memory. Gus shuffles containers until he finds the carton he's looking for. It smells of mold. Gus loads the aging box onto a hand truck with a grunt and lugs it up the steps.

Back upstairs, Gus dumps the box's contents onto a large table and sorts through the sizable clutter of items. Each stores one element of the unwelcome memory. Gus pulls the cigar out of his mouth and holds up a dusty recollection.

You don't want to make this mistake again, Boss, he tells me. You didn't just lock your keys in the car. Left your wallet in there, too. Let's see – missed dinner, late to play, amorous advances spurned... Ouch! There's more... You better pay attention to this one.

Of course, the reason these memories had been relegated to the cellar in the first place is because I desperately did *not* want to pay attention to them. Yes, I could learn from the experience and avoid another embarrassing situation. But the strong emotions that were interwoven into these memories battered my self-esteem. I prefer repression.

As a result of not listening to Gus on that particular occasion, once again I locked both my keys and wallet in the car – and parked in front of a fire hydrant for good measure. Although my date tolerated my borrowing money from her for dinner, she was extremely annoyed about the long walk home due to my car having been towed while we dined. Gus wrote "Last Date" on an index card and filed it.

Although I frequently ignore his advice, Gus is persistent. And clever. For example, he knows I pay close attention to my dreams. Whenever I refuse to consciously attend to an

embarrassing incident, he slips one memory at a time to the simmering soup that the dream chef will serve up that night.

Fellow graduate students appreciated my attempts to simplify the neuro-circuitry of memory. Several suggested that new characters and rooms should be added to my brain. The entire affair soon read like a novel about a dysfunctional family's outing at a zombie carnival. This made it tough to explain to my daughter what I was doing in the lab with rats and pigeons. Thus, while she scratched the ears of the rats lounging in her lab coat pockets, waiting for the answer to her question, I simply answered, "I'm studying memory."

"Why?" my daughter asked.

Another thorny question. Folks working in the "Division of Motivation" would need to clarify why I wanted to study memory. Since there was significant reorganization and repairs occurring in that division at the time, the explanation would have to wait.