

*Hills  
and  
Valleys*

Volume XI, Spring 2021



**W**elcome to the eleventh annual edition of *Hills and Valleys*, the Sullivan County Council on the Arts literary magazine.

**The 2021 Literary Contest winners:**

- First Prize: Kyler Burke**
- Second Prize: "Rue"**
- Third Prize: Abigail Ciufu**
- Fourth Prize: Jenna Eberlin**

We have also included the other entries, beyond the prize winners, that the judges considered worthy of inclusion. All winners this year are students in the Sullivan County High School.

**Our judges for the 2021 Literary Awards:**

- Cat Badger**
- Helen Day**
- Karen Meyers**

Before the constraints of the current pandemic, our format for the magazine included the winners of the visual-arts awards from the annual Youth Art Exhibit. However, because of the Covid quarantine, we were unable to hold the Exhibit this year.

But we have included two other major visual arts award winners:

First, the **2021 Choice of Show** award goes to **Zoe Pedro** for her watercolor "Rehoboth." As has been the case since the award started in 1998, the Arts Council has purchased the piece, will frame it, and put it on permanent display in the school's main corridor.

Second, the top prize for the **2021 Student Display** at the spring High School Art Show also went to **Zoe Pedro**. Cash prizes for the top-ten displays were provided by the Bowhunters Festival.

(We wish we could present these delightful works in full color here – maybe next year? Look for them online at [sullivanpaarts.org](http://sullivanpaarts.org).)

Cover photo by The Ancient Lady of the Creek  
Magazine design by The Old Man of the Hills and his Consort



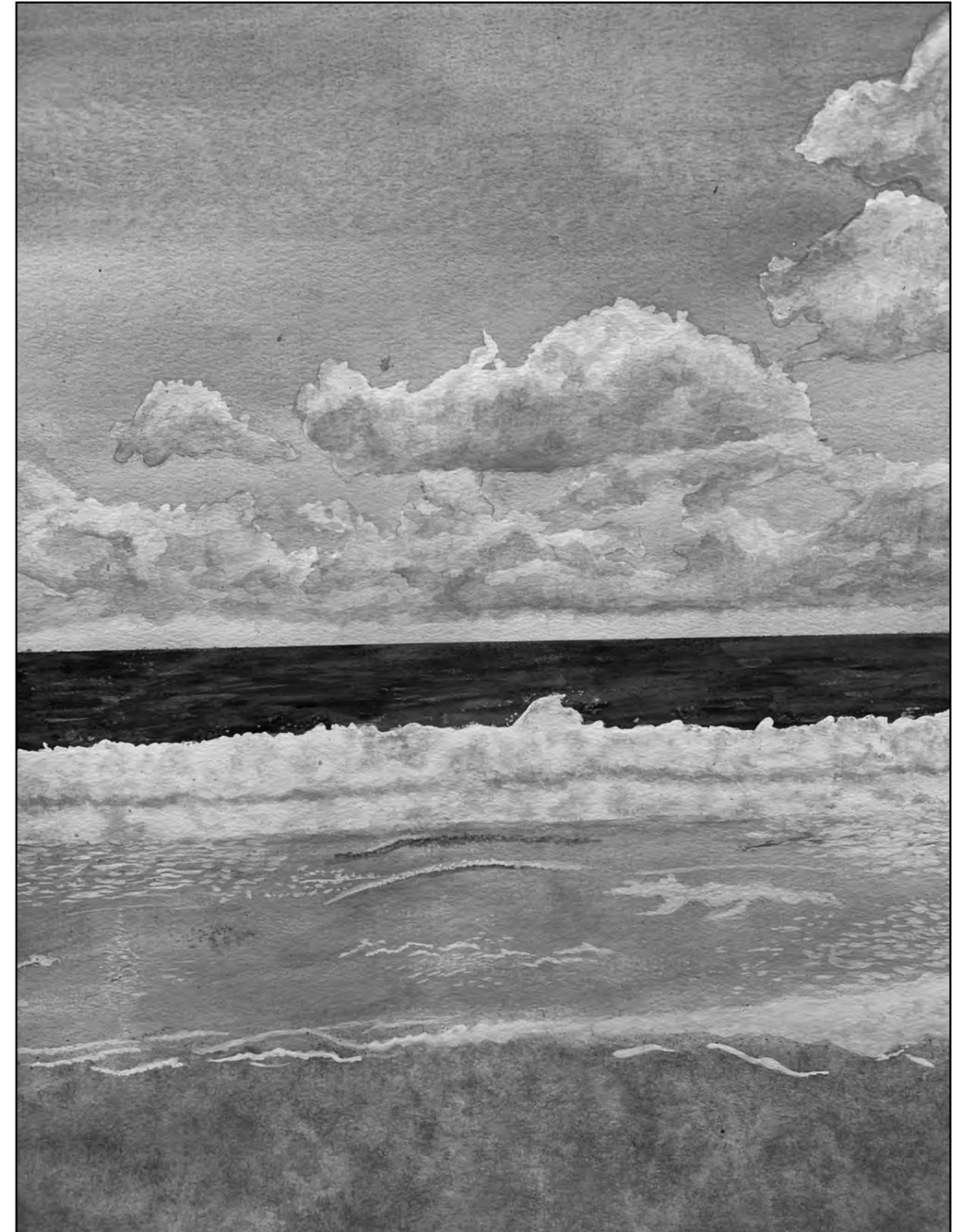
**A Thank You to Our Supporters**

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**2021 Choice of Show**

**Zoe Pedro**

"Rehoboth"



## Best Display, 2021

Zoe Pedro



## The Sandpaper House (shortened version)

by Kyler Burke, First Prize

*[Kyler intends this selection – constrained to meet our space limitations – as part of a longer work which we hope to highlight at some point. Kyler has entered the Literary Contest since seventh grade, and was named First Prize winner 5 of the 6 years she entered. She has graciously agreed to graduate this year to leave the field open to others.]*

The rain was cold and wet as it dripped into the bucket placed in front of the old oriental rug. There was a draft coming through the cracked window, the gales wheezing as they prodded with breezy fingers. Duct tape patched pieces of wallpaper that hung in drooping clumps. Sitting in the middle of the dusty couch, wearing one of her father's old college sweatshirts, was Wren, cuddled in mounds of blankets. Her head poked out from a mismatched quilt and her fingers, tinged blue with the cold, were grasping a notebook. She chewed on the end of her No. 2 pencil and propped the book in between her legs before looking out the window. It was a torrential downpour to say the least. It was raining so hard that the window panes, most cracked and milky, were rattling in their wooden frames.

At the center of it all she could see a comically flapping umbrella and a tall, skinny boy in a yellow rain slicker. She stood up, wrapping a blanket around her thin, bony shoulders, and walked to the window. She rested her palms flat on the pane, breath fogging the glass. Her hair was a mass of blond curls and her face was pale with round, gray eyes. Upon her freckled nose was a pair of tortoise shell glasses, which slid down the bridge.

With her middle finger she pushed the glasses up, watching the boy. He seemed to be struggling with his umbrella, and the slicker was plastered to his body. He wore a pair of big, mud splattered muck boots, which were probably the only thing keeping him grounded. She knew this boy. His house was the only other residence within her area.

She watched him trudge through the muck and the cold into a heated house adorned with electric candles in the windows. She watched his silhouette in the mud room shaking stray droplets off the umbrella's top, kicking his boots into the corner. The inside glowed with yellow light, warm light. Wren's house, in comparison, was blue and cold. What used to be warmth and love was but a shadow of what once was.

Wren was shrouded in darkness as she pulled on layers of socks and sweatshirts that were two times her size. Her boots, although being too small for her feet, kept them warm in the wetter, colder months. She threaded her fingers through her hair, then threw it into a bun. It sat precariously on the top of her head, secured only by two Ticonderoga pencils.

Her hood surpassed the brim of her nose, making her features darker, more worn. She looked like a lost child standing in the threshold of her own house, a stranger to its faded beauty. She knew, of course, that going outside would mean speculation that had long since been staunch; rumors that floated in the wind like the last of the fall leaves. She shuddered, not from the cold, but of the things that were said of her when her parents disappeared more than a year ago.

All of Wren's umbrellas were moth-eaten and their skeletal frames were sagging, so she went into the rain with her layers, intent upon seeing the boy. The steps of the house were slick with the rain and puddles gathered in the withering, overgrown grass. It tickled her jean-clad legs as she made her way through the front yard, past the rusted mailbox, to the winding smattering of trees. Branches crackled under her boots, the pines above her rustled. She tucked her hands into her pockets and went on her way, smelling the dampness in the earth.

Wren could hear the muffled chirping of birds, the squelch of her shoes through mud and stagnant water. She was soaked to the bone, her teeth rattling. She realized all too late that the boy might reject her company, or even worse, start using biting words that melted into her skin. Keeping her head down, Wren put a numb finger to the doorbell.

She waited on the doorstep, rain dripping from the thin slope of her nose. She twirled a piece of hair that had managed to fall from her bun, trying to think of ways she could conversate. It had been such a long time since anyone was willing to talk to her.

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The girl looked small and frail in the layered ensemble that she was wearing. Her eyes were wide and as gray as the crying sky, and her glasses were too large on her face. There was a rosy tint to her cheeks, in contrast to her otherwise pale white complexion. Wren. That was her name.

Roland was quiet and thoughtful and never let strangers inside of his parents' home. That is, until they disappeared. Over a year ago Wren's own parents vanished without a trace, and that became headline news. What police didn't know was that Roland was now a metaphorical orphan as well as she. His parents disappeared on the same night as hers did.

He stepped aside without a word and let the shivering girl in. Her clothing dripped on his dry floor and her shoes left wet, mud-caked sole prints on his carpet. Watching Wren standing in the hallway, who was lost and downtrodden, Roland walked to her carefully, as if he was trying not to disturb a small, skittish animal. His fingertips brushed the top of her shoulder before she turned away, her eyes misty and small.

No one knew exactly what she had seen that night, but when the authorities came to that house she was almost impossible to console, let alone make coherent sentences. She was covered in what looked like blood, which was later tested as her own, and her fingers held cuts, as if she was trying to escape.

Standing in front of Roland, she looked to be no more of a predator than a newborn kitten, but what was he to say about her character? Who knew, if underneath the facade she may or may not put up, there was something darker, more sinister than he could ever imagine?

Without offering a hand to guide her, Roland ushered Wren by the wood burner in the kitchen. She huddled as close as she could, wrapping her arms around herself. He walked to the hallway closet and grabbed a quilt that smelled of mothballs. When he got back Wren was sitting on the floor, eyes closed.

Trying not to make any noise, Roland placed the blanket over her shoulders. It startled her and she swung her head around, limp curls framing her face. Her glasses were speckled with rain and he noticed that freckles dotted her nose and cheeks. It looked like a constellation on her skin.

"I'm sorry to have startled you. I thought you might want something warm, so I got you a blanket." She nodded her thanks and turned around, staying silent. He stood there, trying to make sense of her. For someone who was suspected to be a murderer, she wasn't anything he had suspected; Roland didn't even think she had it in her to cause any sort of harm. She blended into her surroundings, trying not to disturb the peace.

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Wren noticed right away that this boy was a gentle being. He shied away when she jumped and gave her the space she needed. She had been frightened for far too long. She didn't even think she'd spoken a word since the night the police came to interrogate her. She hadn't told anyone what she had seen, what had been done to her.

She wanted to say something to him, anything, but she bit her lip and twisted the fabric of one of the sweatshirts between her cold fingers instead. His hair was dark and wild, his eyes light and searching. He

made no move to come toward her, but he didn't back away from her either.

Wren noted the pots and pans in the small, but cozy kitchen scattered on hooks upon the ceiling. She was surprised that with the boy's stature he didn't hit his head off of them. Instead, he ducked underneath them and went to a cupboard filled with miscellaneous cups. One had the face of Winnie the Pooh, another covered in Christmas decor. It made Wren think of a home that she had never gotten; her family always used crystal glasses, nothing more.

He palmed one with Hershey Park characters staring straight at her and poured Wren a cup of coffee. When he handed it to her she shivered; its warmth spread through her limbs. Taking a sip, Wren tried to disguise her disgust. She hated the bitter taste of it, wanted loads of cream and sugar, but sipped quietly, keeping her nose low in the mug.

She cleared her throat, trying not to disturb him. He turned, hair flopping in his face.

"Perhaps you could give me your name?" The first words she had spoken since the incident. Her mouth felt dry, so she gulped another mouthful of coffee and nursed the cup between her small hands.

The boy leaned against the counter, lean body stretching. He smiled at her, the first genuine one she had seen in a while, and said, "Roland."

She tapped a finger against the ceramic of the mug, then placed it next to her. She crossed her arms, trying not to let her lip wobble. Roland was treating her like a person instead of a monster. For once she wasn't a murderer in another's eyes.

She gulped, turning her head away. She realized how crazy she looked, with her unkempt hair and ragged clothing. No wonder she was deemed unstable; she looked as if she hadn't eaten for a long time, her cheekbones high and prominent on her thin face. Her eyes were stormy, dark.

Roland spoke after a long pause between them, which was stretched and awkward. He didn't know what to say to Wren; she looked so worn out and old sitting there.

"Why don't you come sit by the fire? I'm sure that will warm you right up." He placed a hand on the small of her back, which she jumped at. Touch was something Wren had despised for a long time.

The couch was covered in a fine layer of dust. When Wren sat down a cloud rose before her, dingy and suffocating. It held the smell of mothballs and disuse, but Wren wrapped the quilt tighter around her shoulders and pressed her spine against the back of the couch.

Roland sat at an armchair, rocking back and forth. She

## Honorable Mentions

### Winter

by Amber Kelly

Your eyes are dark like the night.  
They are usually very bright  
They sparkle and shine.... Sometimes  
Othertimes, they just look like vines  
Most of the times your hair is bland  
But I still think that it looks grand  
Like winter, your heart is cold  
But you are also very bold  
The snow on the ground is cold and bitter  
Which is the opposite of a river  
Sometimes you remind me of the wind  
You unwind and twine like thread  
On a winter night, you would sit by a fire  
You also remind me of a liar  
When you run, you remind me of a goose  
I don't know why, you just do  
The best thing about winter is hot cocoa  
By the way, my favorite gas station is sunoco  
Besides all that, you're my favorite person  
Even though you hide behind a curtain

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### Going Home

by Jordan Laroe

She walked and walked alone  
Covered in dirt with a chill in her bones  
She was going to a new place  
Away from the pain and hate

She did not expect  
To find a new place so quickly  
That would love her so greatly  
She was surprised

By other people's actions  
The kindness and happiness  
Burst through the house  
Full of young and old souls

But when she awoke  
She realized she was not home  
She was watching over her family  
She stood on the cloud  
Looking down  
She finally allowed  
A single tear drop to slide

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### Silken Elbows

by Tori Marotti

Your eyes sparkle like the moon  
Your sclera is shiny and quite a nice sight  
That's a science term because I know you're not very bright  
Your iris is very nice to see  
Because they are so very blue like the sea  
Your hair is like silk  
I think it is because of coconut milk  
In case you didn't know, girls put it in their hair  
Your elbows aren't dry  
This shows that you try  
You take such good care of your skin  
You don't even have blemishes on your chin  
You float so graciously on the water  
You look like such an otter  
You are like the lightning  
Sometimes you are nice but others you're frightening  
You are like the rippling waves  
I think you will even look good in the grave  
Not that you should die though  
I think we would be such a nice combo  
I hope you are not gonna act like a crab  
But I could pick you up in a cab

I blindly follow the call of nature,  
The soft crunching of the leaves.  
When it finally shows what I've been searching for,  
Time had been lost in the leaves.

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### **Autumn**

by Abigail Ciufu, Third Prize

Her name was Autumn  
She was also known as Fall.  
Some people thought she was small.  
Everyone drove miles and miles to her see her colors  
Autumn left all her green to fashion in reds insteads.  
When the strong winds blew  
She often flew  
Throughout the sky  
Her best friend  
    Winter was on his way.  
Autumn told him to stay away.  
Autumn felt the chill  
    And take a warming pill  
She thought of her sister  
    Much better than that Winter mister  
Summer was her favorite sibling  
    She was like a warm friendly hug  
    And she loves to eat bugs  
She's a little crazy  
    Some say she's lazy  
Autumn and Summer are never far apart  
    The love of sisters is always close to heart.

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### **Autumn Evening**

by Jenna Eberlin, Fourth Prize

I believe that you are an autumn evening.  
At times you may seem warm and cozy,  
But others your chill makes my cheeks feel rosy.  
    If I am being completely true,  
    I never really know how I feel about you.

There are times when you fill those around you with joy.  
    You will make your leaves change colors,  
    Just to bring happiness to the hearts of others.  
    And sometimes your skies are so very blue,  
    Reminding me of summer days when I always knew.

But you are not always filled with changing leaves and  
    blue skies,  
There are times when you fill those around you with

cries.  
    Eventually, you start to become cold,  
    And your emotions balled up become unrolled.  
I know it may be hard for you to keep it together.  
Especially when a depressing time is approaching  
    around the corner.

I believe you are an autumn evening.  
    You may seem bitter,  
But that thought is nothing but deceiving.  
    You hold everyone together,  
Just like fall nights do before cold weather.

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could hear the tendons in his long legs popping.  
"I'm glad you decided to come to my house, whatever  
the reason may be. My parents have gone missing as  
well. I need your help finding them." Wren's eyes  
widened. She shook her head, curls falling into her face.  
Roland tried again. "You don't have to talk about it. I  
just need to find my parents." There was a desperate  
air to his voice, and it chilled her. Hairs rose at the  
nape of her neck. She cleared her throat again, trying  
not to sound panicked.  
"How can you be sure that their disappearances were  
connected with my parents? Why are you asking for my  
help?" He eyed her warily. For someone that wanted  
nothing more than to stay out of the speculation of  
others, she didn't jump at the idea to figure out where  
her parents were.  
"Don't you want to find your parents?" Roland tried to  
look into her eyes, but all he could see was the  
reflection of his face in her glasses. Her eyes were  
pointed at the floor.  
Her face was resolute when Wren was pinning her gaze  
upon his rumpled clothing and disheveled hair.  
"No." That one word was all it took for Roland to  
rethink the notion that Wren was anything dangerous.  
The way her eyes flashed, the steadfast determination  
in her face. As if she didn't want her parents to come  
back.  
Without a word she pulled herself to her feet. She was  
unsteady, as if she wasn't used to her own legs. She  
pushed her glasses tentatively up the bridge of her  
nose.  
"I have to get going." She didn't say another word to  
him; just evaded his questions, and him, as if he were a  
plague on her own moral compass.  
She pulled her hood over her head, then stalled as if she  
wanted to say something. She searched his eyes for  
something, and he recognized a flash of something in  
her eyes before she went through the kitchen and left  
through the front door.  
What he saw in her eyes was pure, unabided fear.  
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Wren didn't know what prickled at the base of her spine  
when he asked why she didn't want to find her parents,  
but all of a sudden she felt a sick knot in the pit of her  
stomach. As she trudged through the rain for the  
second time that day, she felt more than alone. After  
all, she'd spent more than enough of her childhood that  
way.  
The house was frigid when she stepped inside. All of the  
firewood in the dilapidated shack behind their house  
was probably soaked through, and there was never  
enough money to pay for heat. Wren went up flights of  
stairs, the air getting colder as she went. Her breath

was a cloud in front of her face and her feet were slick  
with rain pouring through cracks in the ceiling onto the  
floor.  
Her bedroom used to be a sanctuary, but lately she'd  
taken to sleeping on the couch, snuggled in old quilts  
and patchwork blankets with one of her father's old  
college sweatshirts engulfing her tiny frame. The  
thought of spending the night in that room caused her  
to shiver, fear swelling in her brain.  
She changed, her wet clothing plopping onto the floor  
with a squelch, and grabbed a pillow from her bed.  
"You shouldn't have left him like that," she muttered  
under her breath as she walked down the stairs. As  
soon as she had looked into Roland's eyes she knew  
that he could actually care for someone like her; that  
was when she knew she had to run.  
As Wren sat on the couch, her hair messily piled over  
her thin shoulders, blankets taking over her body, she  
slowly drifted off to sleep. Hopefully in the morning she  
could forget about the encounter and go on with her  
dreary days alone. That was just how she liked it  
anyway; she couldn't hurt anyone that way.

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Roland knew as soon as he placed his foot anywhere  
near Wren's property he would be in danger. In fact,  
every part of his body was warning him to stay away.  
The look in her eyes...the pure terror in her stature, her  
fingers latched tight on her hoodie. She was like a deer  
in headlights. Curiosity won him over, and as he stood  
on the front porch of the mansion, he couldn't help but  
wonder if something nefarious had happened here. Why  
else would she react that way? There had to be  
something he was missing.  
He knocked on the door, waiting for her to peer out of  
the many windows on the front and side of the house,  
but she did no such thing. He sat there for almost  
twenty minutes, the pelting rain turning into sleet,  
before he decided to try the knob of the door. He had  
gone from worried to mildly irritated, but it was an  
unwarranted feeling. He had no reason to be impatient  
with someone he barely knew.  
To his surprise the door was unlocked, a cold gust of  
wind blasting him in the face as it was opened. It  
seemed as if the inside of the house was colder than  
the outside.  
The first thing he noticed was the lack of heat, or  
dusting. He didn't know how Wren could live  
comfortably by herself. Especially since she was so  
small; how did she create enough body heat to survive  
temperatures like this? She barely looked a hundred  
pounds soaking wet, and her clothing was loose, baggy.  
It was obvious that she needed to be taken care of, but  
it didn't seem like she wanted to be.

Roland made sure to wipe his feet on the dingy  
 Welcome mat before making his way to the living room.  
 He was in awe by the sheer size of the house, as well as  
 the disuse. He may not be the cleanest person, but  
 this place was a dump. He wondered if it had always  
 been like this, even before Wren's parents disappeared.  
 He felt ashamed for not seeing it sooner; the outside  
 of the house wasn't much better than the inside.  
 He found her on the couch; the only thing visible was  
 her hair. It puffed out in frizzy ringlets, snaking their  
 way out of a withered old blanket. He could see her  
 body shaking from underneath and all he wanted to do  
 was get her somewhere warm. He wanted to get her to  
 open up about her past. He wanted nothing more than  
 to get her out of this place, even if it was her home.  
 Creeping to the blanket was the biggest challenge he  
 had ever faced. Wren was skittish, that much was for  
 sure, and he could tell that the floorboards of the  
 house were ancient. She was accustomed to the  
 groans and screams of its skeleton; he was not.  
 "Do you really want to step any closer?" He froze in his  
 spot, arms and legs stiff at his sides. He felt as if his  
 body was constricted. All Roland could see were her  
 wide, gray eyes, brimming with tears.  
 "Leave before you do something that you can't find  
 your way out of."

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### Three Poems

by "Rue" (pseudonym), Second Prize

*[Our judges agreed that all writers retain the right to use  
 the name that suits their needs and desires.]*

#### I Meet Life

Born from the darkness,  
 we open our eyes to the light.  
 Life stands right in front of us;  
 as we take our first steps Life urges us on.  
 We step slowly, feeling the pain of walking  
 right before we learn to run.  
 Putting one foot in front of the other,  
 we can walk through the land of possibilities.  
 Joy calls us left and right,  
 She takes us down a beautiful path  
 Introducing Love on the way.  
 We gain little treasure in the memories we make.  
 In our blissful jubulence we meet someone new,  
 Someone easier to get along with, Fear.  
 He takes my arm, and I let go of theirs.  
 From here, Joy, Love, and I part ways.  
 Together Fear and I take the path Life went down.  
 This is where I meet Greed and Jealousy.  
 Together the three of us push everything away,  
 thinking we know what we want.  
 In our conquest to find what we lost, we stumble upon  
 Forgiveness.  
 Forgiveness convinces Fear, Greed, and Jealousy to  
 disappear  
 back down the path they came from.  
 It feels much lighter to be walking with Forgiveness.  
 I'm taking my first steps over again,  
 but I had to give up many precious pieces to get here.  
 The sun is going down, and the sky is getting dim.  
 In the fading daylight, I look back and see Life and Joy.  
 They seem so far in the past.  
 I passed by Life without even knowing it.  
 Maybe Joy would like to walk with me once again.  
 I turn around to see the end of the path ahead of me.  
 I walk slower, dropping more pieces of myself to buy me  
 time.  
 Life and Joy catch up on the path, coming to wish me a  
 farewell.  
 I leave them in their early mourning with a new friend,  
 Gratitude.  
 Giving up the last of what I had,  
 without anything or anyone, I walk back into the  
 darkness.

#### Solidarity

As I sit here listening to your breathing,  
 I've finally come to realize why it was so hard to do the  
 right thing.  
 With the rise and fall of your chest,  
 My breathing falls in time.  
 Together we lay peacefully.

It's knowing that you're safe,  
 Free from the grasp of the world  
 Even if it's only for a few fleeting moments,  
 I know that in them you're found, that you're okay.

Within the safety of the night under my guard,  
 you let yourself slip into the sweet embrace of sleep's  
 solidarity.  
 As the hellish dreams threaten to take you captive,  
 you trust me to help fight them off; You trust me to  
 chase the dark away.

With my presence you finally allow yourself to let go,  
 to drift away down the stream of your subconscious  
 into the deepest parts of your mind where you fear to  
 tread alone.

If the gift of a good night's sleep is all I can give you,  
 Then I'll stay awake for hours to give you mine.  
 I'd give anything for the promise of your happiness and  
 peace...  
 Even if it's only a series of fleeting moments.

Your solidarity becomes my own.

#### Lost in the Leaves

My breath freezes staining the air a patchy gray.  
 I step lightly, met with crunching under my boots.  
 All around me is orange and death.

The leaves are slain by the harsh bite of frost,  
 and the unyielding whispers of the wind.  
 They strike with such vigor and silence seldom seen  
 within the welcoming hands of mother nature.

Relentless wind blows, leaves, innocent victims  
 plummeting to the ground,  
 there they will breathe life back into this Earth.  
 They layer the floor, forming a road  
 Deep into the heart of the woods.

It lures me in, I take a step forward  
 Down on the path I begin  
 I need to know what this orange death sings,  
 It's a siren to all living things.