THE GUILDED LEAF

20TH ANNUAL
GUILDED LEAF
Teen Writing Contest
OCTOBER 2025

1ST PLACE – POETRY

The Crocodile
Lily Baskin

Mrs. Beth of Worthing-Whiles
Was wading in the brook
To disturb the crocodiles
And get a closer look

Tiptoed she across the stream
As softly as she could
But let out a piercing scream
At a large log of wood

The log begins to wiggle
The log begins to quake
Then it begins to wriggle
And Beth begins to shake

Mr. "Log" lets out a yawn
And opens up his eyes
Only to see that he's on
For a quite nice surprise

"There's a law around for miles,"
He smiled and winked at Beth,
"Don't disturb the crocodiles
By punishment of death!

"Now this lady's against the laws,
And I know what to do!"
Opens up his gaping jaws
And chomps her into two.

2ND PLACE – POETRY

The Eraser

Nathan Yu

Inside the mind, an eraser moves
Slowly, quietly, and unnoticed.

Names once carved in
They are gently polished away.
It is not hard or cruel, but it is unceasing.

A room becomes a maze.
A book becomes a blur.

As the eraser drifts across the pages,
It leaves smudges of the past—
Hazy reminders,
Parodies of an empty island
In life's now-empty kitchen.

The colors leach from life,
Like ink from a page.

The subconscious laps from a cup
Flowing with memories,
As if it had upended all at once,
Like a photo album losing its pages
After being thumbed through by knobbled fingers
That leave streaks of ruin,
Like tears down the faces of relatives
As they speak to those affected
By the silent curse,
The affliction
That causes what is dead
To never die.

Where thought once wandered
Only silence remains.

As the pages reach their end,
Even silence itself forgets to speak.

1st PLACE – SHORT STORY

From Flame to Free

Selah McClung

I was done. I wouldn't let this government control me anymore. If my fire truly was a gift, then I had to use it for what I believed was right.

But I would have to fight for my freedom.

I called my best friend, Ervern, on my aylo, a type of circular device used for contacting people.

"Hey, Eulara! What's up?" I saw her face smiling on the screen, her yellow skin almost blinding me as the sun shone on it through a window. All of us Aephelas have yellow skin. Mine was only a tinge darker than hers, with golden swirls tattooed from my chest to my torso.

"It's time. It's time for me to go." It was hard to tell her that, but I knew it would be for the greater good. I just wanted to live my life, but the Emperor demanded that all Flames must use their fire for the government. This country claimed all these laws were for our freedom, but I only saw walls, used to protect their secrets from the citizens.

"Oh." She was quiet for a minute, her light green eyes looking into the distance. She finally added, "I don't suppose you'd like someone to go with you?"

I hesitated, tugging on my long red hair. I'd grown up with her, trained with her, even gone through our country's mandatory military training with her when we were fifteen. But there were risks. "I can't ask you to do that, Ervern."

She laughed, the image on my aylo shaking slightly. "I'm already packing, so just accept it."

I was partially relieved, partially angry. "Fine. Meet in the spot in half an hour."

She nodded, and the call ended.

The spot was our meeting place when we wanted to avoid the nosy guards always patrolling the streets. It was below the sewers, so no officers, who patrolled the streets, ever wanted to go down there, so it was perfect for us. We never took our aylos, since they were trackable, and this government loved tracking its people.

Thirty minutes later, I climbed down the sticky ladder to where Ervern was waiting in the small hall between pipes and tunnels.

"Ugh." Ervern wrinkled her nose at the thick, rancid smell. "I don't think I'll ever get used to this."

I nodded. "Well, good news! We'll be out of here in no time."

Ervern nodded, her long red hair bouncing in its high ponytail. That's the other thing about us Aephelas: we're all vivid red heads, and the longer the hair, the more honorable we are.

Mine was almost to my ankles, with the sacred side—the left—dyed gold, a sign of fire. It's not like I did anything to deserve the honor, I was just born with this fire in my veins.

"Did you bring the cloaks?" I asked Ervern. These cloaks would be key to getting us out of Aya city safely.

"Yup!" She pulled out two identical cloaks. They were teal, which symbolized life, with gold embroidery on the hems. We both slipped them on, making sure the hoods covered our faces. These cloaks were for the elite citizens who could go from town to town as they pleased. Not for the common folk like Ervern and I.

"Let's go." I led the way out. If anyone questioned us, I'd just show them my fire, and more than likely they'd quickly bow in respect, profusely apologizing. Usually Flames were known to be high elites, so they could usually pass most security without question.

We weaved through town. It was easy at first, since we were in the lower-class part of the city. People just avoided eye contact and kept out of our way. But as we got to the wealthier part of the city, people were keener to greet us, or just get a glimpse of us.

But everything was fine.

Until we got to the gate.

The two guards were there, like they were every day, standing stiffly in their gold-armored suits, watching every passing citizen like they were all a threat. Their fingers were always on their gun's trigger. I knew they would shoot first and ask questions later at the slightest suspicion.

We walked through the gate like we did this every day, but the guard on our left stepped in front of us. “Halt.”

We stopped. I turned to him. “What seems to be the issue?”

I was sweating. I could see the path into the woods, and past that, there were the mountains . . .

“I need to scan your aylo, ma’am,” he said, holding out his hand.

I threw off my hood, revealing my half-gold hair. “Do you still need to see it?”

He nodded. “Even Flames must scan. We have to keep track of how many people are in the city, ma’am.”

I caught Ervern’s eye and gave a small nod. She stepped behind me, and we slowly backed out of the city.

“Wha—” But the guard didn’t finish.

I threw out my hands, fire blasting him straight in the face. We began to run, and once we were far enough away, I summoned more fire and shot it into the gate.

BOOM! The gate exploded. We ran. People screamed, guards yelled for backup, but we were free.

“HALT!” We turned to see five more guards lined up, guns trained on us.

I gathered my fire.

“FIRE!” Gunshots blasted. My fire burst forth. Smoke, screams, and confusion followed.

Then the smoke cleared. The ground was littered with the guards’ bodies. Citizens behind the gate were screaming for more guards. Time to go.

“Eulara . . .” A quiet voice came from my right. I turned, eyes widening at the horror I saw.

Ervern dropped to the ground. Blood soaked through her teal shirt. She had been shot.

“No!” I thought I had melted all the bullets with my fire. It had been hot enough, right? I kneeled beside her, using my robe to staunch the blood. I wouldn’t let her die… she couldn’t die . . .

“Go . . .” She muttered.

I could hear the footsteps of more guards. My heart pounded with anxiety. I couldn’t let either of us fall into the government’s hands.

“Ervern . . . I . . .” Tears slipped down my face. “I can’t leave you.”

She grabbed my hand. “Do one last thing for me . . .burn my body . . . they can’t . . . have it.”

Her eyes were already fading, but I knew what I had to do. Through sobs, I whispered, “Goodbye.” And stood up.

“There she is!” There were more guards now.

I blasted all the fire I could muster onto my best friend, my only friend.

“FIRE!” I heard guns blasting again, but I was protected behind the blaze consuming Ervern. What if I could have saved her? A tear slipped down my face, but I couldn’t afford to break down now. The fire rose, expanding and blocking the guards from following me.

“Goodbye, Ervern.” I turned, sprinting into the woods, hoping my fire would spread to the city, to the awful government, to our leader, the Emperor.

I kept running . . . hoping that if I got far enough into the wilderness, I would be safe . . . safe from these people who wanted to use me, my fire, for their personal gain. These woods, this mountain, would be my new home.

Maybe . . . just maybe . . . I would finally be free.

2ND PLACE – SHORT STORY

The Ship

Allison York

One day, in a small village off the coast of a faraway land, the daughter of a merchant and a weaver had a brilliant idea.

"We should build a ship and sail the world!" she cried, her eyes alight. "Mother and you and I, we could see all kinds of things! Just imagine what this will do for your business!"

The merchant patted his daughter gently on the back, a slow smile forming on his face. "You are right," he said thoughtfully. "Perhaps we shall build a ship and sail the world."

"It will be the greatest adventure of all," the girl told him excitedly.

Now, the merchant quite liked his daughter's idea. He possessed a large container of gold coins that he had saved up over the years for a new gate to go around the cottage. But who could compare a single gate to ward off intruders to a tall palace filled with luxurious beds and furniture? His daughter was correct, of course. If they managed to find another land across the sea, it would certainly boost his business and make him as wealthy as a king. After all, he sold only the highest quality materials: jeweled chests made of polished oak and adorned with silver designs, beautiful weavings made by his wife depicting the glory of the skies, stunning gowns handwoven by his daughter . . . the possibilities were endless.

And so, the next day, the merchant gathered up his coins and strolled into the market, approaching the master shipbuilder. "I am in need of assistance in building a ship," he told the man. "Will you help me?"

"If paid, I will aid you," the shipbuilder answered.

The merchant slid a handful of coins into the man's hand. "Now my part is done. Come with me, and we shall build a ship together."

The shipbuilder and the merchant walked to the house, where his daughter was working in the garden with her mother. "Come and build a ship with us!" the merchant called, and his family dropped their shovels and ran to the shipbuilder.

It took a few hours, but once they had made the plans for the ship, the shipbuilder directed the merchant, his wife and his daughter to the woods. "Go and cut down fifteen oak trees," he ordered. "Then bring them back to me."

So the merchant and his family went into the woods and cut down fifteen trees. Hearing the commotion, their neighbor, the blacksmith, opened his door. "What goes on here?"

"We are building a ship to sail the world!" the girl declared.

"A ship!" the blacksmith exclaimed. "Shall I come too?"

"Yes, yes!" The merchant waved a hand, beckoning him closer. "Call your son, too, and this ship shall be built sooner."

And so the blacksmith and his son gathered their tools and ran into the woods, helping to carry the oaks to the shipbuilder, one by one until they were laid out in a neat row.

"Now," the shipbuilder said, tapping his chin, "we must build the boat itself. To do this, we must cut the wood into the parts of a ship." With this task in mind, he commanded the merchant to make one part, the wife and the daughter to make the other, and the blacksmith and the son to make the third. As the noise of the buzzing and cutting filled the air, the baker and his wife came over to investigate.

"What goes on here?" they asked.

"We are building a ship!" The weaver answered.

"Oh, a ship!" the baker's wife shouted, filled with curiosity. "How wonderful! May we help?"

"Yes, yes!" The merchant took them to the shipbuilder, who told them to make the fourth part.

The construction of the parts took the rest of the day, and the night, and the day after that. And as the ship grew, so did the number of people building it. First came the lady with the goats, then her daughter, then the milkman, then the priest . . . on and on and on they came. And still there was more work to do. So they labored under the hot sun late into the month, hopes in their hearts and energy in their hands.

Then, exactly five weeks after the daughter had first suggested the idea, the shipbuilder examined the ship and announced, "It is done."

The people of the village cheered and gasped, celebrating as one should celebrate after their hard work. Hats were thrown into the air; tears were pushed out of eyes; and shouts of happiness encompassed the group.

"Everyone, we shall be leaving soon!" the merchant cried. "Gather your belongings! We will go and see the world!"

Excited by the news, the townspeople scattered to their homes, packing what they could bring on the trip. Once they had all piled onto the ship, the merchant turned to the shipbuilder. "I cannot thank you enough. This will be the greatest time of my life!"

"It was my pleasure. But be careful out there," he warned. "The sea is a tempered lady. She will do what she wishes when she wishes."

The merchant nodded gravely and gave the shipbuilder half of his gold coins, bidding him farewell. Then, joining his wife and daughter on the ship, he faced the horizon with wide eyes.

The trip itself was relatively boring. As the people of the village sailed and saw open waters every day, they comforted themselves with the thought that land was on the other side. Every night, the merchant prayed for a miracle of green that would appear on the horizon.

And, eventually, it did. One morning, just as the sun was starting to wake, the merchant's daughter peered out into the distance and cried, "Land ho!"

They sailed a bit more into the harbor and stopped at a port, where the villagers elatedly stepped off onto new land. The place was bustling with activity: foreign smells filled the air, new sights and people of all types wandered the markets, and they were quite happy to be there.

"Shall we see the king?" the weaver asked.

"Yes, we shall!" the merchant told her. So he, his wife, and his daughter journeyed by foot to the palace, where the king greeted them warmly.

"Where have you come from?" he asked.

The merchant, shaking with awe, took his hat into his hands and bowed. "We come before thee from a village in a faraway land!" he said breathlessly. "And with us, we bring gifts!"

The king was surprised and beyond satisfied with the jeweled chest, the beautiful weaving, and the stunning gown, which he instantly gifted to his youngest daughter. "You have pleased me very well," he said to the merchant. "I shall offer you a chance to be my personal merchant."

The merchant was delighted by this and agreed to take the job. He, his wife, and his daughter were given rooms in the palace and plenty of luxury, along with enough coins to provide support for the villagers who had come along with them. They moved into the royal house and lived as well as they had dreamed, watching the stars come out every night like an answer to the prayer that he had whispered so long ago that night on the ship.

And he never forgot it.
