THE GUILDED LEAF

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Teen Writing Contest

OCTOBER 2026

1ST PLACE – POETRY

All Is a Euphony

Amelia Primason

The dead of summer,
when the humidity is thick like honey
and the hum of mosquitos sits upon the otherwise silent plains,
and the moon is high above the tallest of trees,
is when all nocturnal life awakens from its harbored slumber
and in spite of the silence,
all is a euphony.

The sun,
like melting wax in the endless sky,
dips below the horizon,
a candle waning from view.
Darkness envelopes the world,
a blanket of solemn quietude.
Then,
small as pinpricks,
infinite as the grains of sand in every desert,
gleaming like dazzling jewels
against a stark backdrop—
stars emerge from summer's eventide,

the sticky heat no longer suffocating,
the brilliancy of day no longer blinding.
Lightyears away from this realm,
the stars are only so illuminating,
isolated from what's below the atmosphere.
Rising to consciousness beside the constellations
come the fireflies.

In the obscurity of the night,
the owls remain hidden,
the crickets remain asleep,
the wind a nonexistent force.
The silence deafens all that thrives,
all whose heartbeats thrum in tune with the Earth beneath the surface,
reverberating across the switchgrass.
Only whence the shroud of darkness is lifted,
only whence the glint of fireflies take flight
does nature's overture commence.
Like celestial dust fallen upon the canvas that is the world,
the creatures so miniscule,
their ring of light so minutely profound.

As if instantaneously stripped of their fear,
the crickets begin to chirp,
their musicality gathering momentum in the nocturne.
The owls begin to hoot,
bass voices resonant in harmony.
The wind begins to blow,
a gentle breeze tusseling the long grasses,
whistling as the sound ricochets against the tall trees and prairie docks.
The cicadas begin to sing,
their vox a ritual calling to each neighbor,
each friend,
each loved one.
The dragonflies begin to saltare,
wings beating rhythmically against their rigid abdomens.
The doe bounds elatedly,
the rabbits hop in rejoice,
and the fireflies,
in all their melodious glory,
sparkle with the light of a thousand moons,
and all is a euphony.

And when put to finis,
when the crickets begin to tire,
and the doe cradles her dozing young,
and all that was lively and symphonious begins to settle,
the moon droops her heavy eyes
and sinks to her knees,
she folds her hands to lay her hefty head,
and sleeps.

The sun yawns and stretches,
rising to the sky,
creating a blend of meshing pinks
and oranges
and yellows
and blues
among the abundant clouds.
Salvete,
the sun resounds,
et vale Luna.

Until the moon ascends once again,
the plains shall simmer,
the critters shall rest,
and the fireflies will hide themselves from daybreak
till dusk has returned.

Only then shall their act continue,
and all will be a euphony
once more.

2ND PLACE – POETRY

Travel: an acrostic poem

Luke Moller

Traversing this planet we call home,

Reaching new places like Bend and Rome.

Adventures by land on long, winding trails,

Voyages by sea in vessels with sails.

Enjoy each journey with love and mirth;

Learn everything of this wondrous Earth.

1ST PLACE – SHORT STORY

Through Borrowed Eyes

Elijah Dowell

You are stranded on an unfamiliar planet. One thriving with life, with odd creatures living in forests of wood and stone. The very ground beneath you lives; a field of green under dizzying blue sky. You are stranded ... on Earth.

You are a mass of black tentacles, joined with a central eye and maw. You trudge through sticky mud as wildlife flees from your presence. You imagine you look quite strange to them, as they look strange to you.

A light in the distance pulls your attention, drawing you to a stout log cabin. Warm light glows from within. Curious, you approach. A mat covered in alien symbols lies on the porch in front of the door. You brush a tentacle over the mat, and you read "Welcome." You then notice an open window nearby. You're rather small, so you first climb a nearby rocking chair to reach the window, and you tumble clumsily into the house. You slide along the wooden floor, exploring the room. A kitchen, perhaps. You spy a doorway to your right, and a stairwell in front of you leading down.

A sharp sound alerts you to the occupant of the cabin; an alien. He has four spindly limbs connected to a central torso. He stands upright on his hind legs. His face is pink. A human, you think to yourself. The human screams in an undecipherable language. Words of surprise, you figure—some things are universal. The human sprints over to a safe on the wall, furiously inputting a passcode, throwing open the safe door, and drawing a metal object from within. As you approach curiously, he points the object at you and fires rounds of bullets. Your tentacles sting with pain as the bullets bounce off. Panicked, you swim around the human, and he jumps back, falling down the stairs almost comically. He only stops screaming when he slams into the basement floor. Nervously, you look over the ledge. Somehow the human's fragile bones managed to find EVERY STAIR

on their way down. You wait for a few minutes before you crawl down. It's clear nobody will trust you in your current form. You need a puppet. You slip under the human's clothes and attach yourself to him, absorbing his memories. The human stands up.

You have a name now; Oliver Watson. You live alone in your cabin, having always preferred isolation over company. You like hunting in your spare time, but hobbies won't pay the bills! Luckily, you happen to like your job as a software engineer and have a really nice computer.

Wait, what's a computer?

You walk upstairs and approach the strange box in the office. You switch it on, and the screen flickers to life. You enter the password and are greeted by a game design engine. Oliver's dream was to develop a video game, and while he had finished nearly half of the project, he tragically never finished. You feel a strong urge to finish the game. It's what Oliver wanted, and you ARE Oliver.

So you work hard at your job, programming your game on the side while leaving the house every now and then to make some friends. It's fascinating to see how humans converse, and you enjoy using Oliver's ears and mouth to carry out conversations.

One day, while you are preparing food for your mom, you accidentally cut your finger. Your mom notices and asks if you are alright, so you feign pain. Your mom doesn't press questions, but it reminds you of the fragility of your disguise. As the days pass, Oliver's body decays. His skin becomes discolored, and his bones become rigid. No amount of showering can remove the stench of death.

You lock yourself in your house and focus solely on coding the video game; you intend on abandoning Oliver afterwards to find a fresher corpse, but first you must achieve his dream Even when the game is close to completion, you add your own additions to the game. Little secrets you hope players will find. When the game is finally finished, you self-publish it, and finally let Oliver Watson die in his chair. It's not easy leaving; you had countless friends as Oliver, and it's difficult to give up all your connections.

The next few days are lonely and tedious. You miss being able to communicate with humans, and now everyone fears you again. One day, while exploring the garage of some suburban home, a human boy spots you as you look for food. However, he doesn't scream or run away. He has a kindness in his eyes that tells you that you are safe. He carefully places a blueberry muffin he was eating on the ground in front of you as a tribute. You take it as a token of friendship.

You decide to stay in the garage, hunting rats to pass the time. One time you found a book full of colorful photographs of the boy and his friends and family. You don't understand it but enjoy staring at it, contemplating its purpose. You learn to hide in the cupboard when the boy's parents come, but you always make yourself known to the boy. The boy continues to visit you each day, sometimes bringing food and other times just telling you stories. You listen patiently. You need a human host to speak, but you still remember language from Oliver. The boy doesn't know you can hear him, but he likes sharing things with you. He becomes your best friend.

After about a week, the boy stops coming to visit you in the garage, and you feel lonely again. His parents still come to use the car, and you stay hidden as usual. Until today. You must have absorbed the personality of an extremely reckless and dangerously curious rat or something, because today you crawl onto the car as the parents try to drive out of the garage, using your camouflage to evade detection. After a short drive, the car stops in front of a large white building, and you silently follow the parents as they exit the car and walk into the building. They navigate a maze of passageways towards a room they've clearly visited before, and open the door to reveal the boy unconscious on the bed. You slide into a nearby cupboard and listen.

"The infected area is spreading. He'll be in a coma for a few months, perhaps years," a doctor says with reluctance. The room falls to silence as the parents hang their heads in sorrow. They kiss the boy's forehead and follow the doctor out of the room.

Cautiously, you emerge from the cupboard. The boy looks asleep. You won't lose him. You will preserve him. You attach yourself to him, becoming one with him, and the boy stands

up. You learn that your name is Robby Jacobs. Your tentacles are visible under the hospital gown, so you make a mental note to change clothes as soon as possible. You crawl out of the window and look for your parents.

Suddenly a fleet of humvees surround you, and armored soldiers emerge. One holds a tracking device, while the others point rifles at you. They see right through your disguise.

"Come with us, anomaly!" one screams. You know their guns won't hurt you, but they will certainly hurt Robby, so you surrender peacefully. You are restrained and driven to an isolated research facility, where you are locked in a padded room. Scientists visit to speak to you, poke and prod at you, learn your secrets. They use Robby as a leverage to buy your loyalty, but you dream of escape. One day, as a scientist opens the door to your cell, you act; detaching from Robby to sprint into a nearby laboratory. When the evil scientist approaches, you jab her leg with a bundle of syringes, and she collapses like a marionette puppet. You absorb her memories, learning of the facility's defenses and layout, and quickly return to Robby. You use the scientist's knowledge to flee the facility undetected, carefully navigating the labyrinthine halls and avoiding security checkpoints. After driving back to the hospital in the scientist's car, you walk over to Robby's room to find his distraught parents staring at the empty bed. When they notice you, they pull you into an embrace. Human emotions overwhelm you, and you weep involuntarily.

" You're not Robby," says the father after a period of silence.

"It was wrong of me to take him," you confess, "but he was my friend. I just wanted to stay with him."

You lay Robby on the bed and detach yourself from him. He will get better. As you prepare to leave, the mother suddenly stops you.

"Thank you for bringing our son home."

You stare at the smiling woman in amazement. For the first time since you visited Earth, you can experience life without borrowing someone else's. You have found what you have truly wanted: acceptance.

2ND PLACE – SHORT STORY

Heart of Steel

Ashley Hunnicutt

"Remember to smile, dear." The queen leaned over from her throne and tilted her daughter's chin up.

Princess Alexa pulled her lips into a half-hearted smile, but as soon as her mother turned it fell. Even her mother couldn't understand.

It was more than just the people for Alexa. She was an Empath. She could feel every emotion swirling through the room as if it were her own. She could tell the Duke of Evoch, on the other side of her father, was jealous watching his wife dance with another man. She could tell the servant against the wall behind her had a crush on Lady Aria. And she could feel her mother's embarrassment that her daughter shied away from the spotlight.

Feeling tears well up in her eyes, Alexa excused herself and moved the three steps down off the raised dais her parents sat on. Slipping through the gaps in the crowd, she grabbed a glass of wine off a passing tray. If she was going to be miserable, she might as well let loose.

Leaning against the wall, her eyes caught on a man entering the ballroom. He looked ordinary, with brunette hair and a black suit,

but Alexa's heart leapt. Instinct told her to drop her gaze and press against the wall, but she forced her quivering legs to still.

Staring closely at the man's face, Alexa realized his eyes were fixed intently on her parents. Heart beating out a tune livelier than the dance music, she pressed through the crowd toward him. Bodies closed in all around her, and the accompanying emotions were cloying in her throat. She had to stop constantly just to get a breath in. But she kept pushing.

As she drew close to the man, she discovered there were small flashes of yellow energy coming off his body. They swirled around his head, constantly moving. Alexa's father was a Pyromancer and her mother was a Telepath, and nearly every royal she had ever met had powers, but she had never seen anything like this. She noticed that when the sparks hit one of the dancers, they seemed almost drunk on it, dancing with more and more energy until the man passed and they returned to normal like nothing had happened.

What the hell? She needed to get closer. If she could just read his emotions, maybe she could find out what this mystery man was planning.

"Princess Alexa!" a gentleman to her right called warmly. "What an honor, we so rarely get to see you."

Heads turned toward the sound of the noise, and gasps echoed at the sight of the elusive princess on the dance floor. Alexa felt fire in her cheeks and tears pressing against her eyes. She couldn't breathe.

"Excuse me, excuse me," she exhaled breathily, but it was no use. The surrounding nobles were closing ranks on her.

"My gods! Feels like last time I saw you, you were this tall!"

"Have you been meeting any handsome men, dear? Your 18th birthday is coming up!"

"Perhaps you would like to dance? Or grab a drink?"

Thank the gods her vocal cords worked better than her mind, for as her thoughts tumbled like a waterfall her voice cut through the noise. "I'm so sorry, I can't talk right now. I must be going. All the best!"

Alexa shot like a rocket through the crowd as grumbles sounded behind her. She wasn't even sure she was heading towards the man anymore. She kept her head down as she tried to latch onto some semblance of calm. *It's alright, Alexa. The judgments of a bunch of entitled nobles mean nothing. You're doing fine.*

Alexa looked up and realized she had made it back to the dais with her parents' thrones atop it. The mystery man was nowhere to be found.

Her heart clenched. *Come on, Alexa.*

She started walking, when all of a sudden he melted out of the crowd, mere feet away. Alexa froze mid-step. She reached out to him with her power—and stopped cold.

There was nothing.

No happiness, no anger. The man was completely devoid of emotion, an empty bottomless pit.

Like every Empath, Alexa had heard the tale of Romero as a kid. He was a powerful Empath, but bearing the weight of everyone's emotions proved too much for him. So he shut them off. His heart became cold and black, and he learned to use emotions as weapons against people. He murdered his entire village before he was taken down by a group of heroes. The story served as a lesson for every Empath: keep your emotions under control, or else you turn into a monster.

The Empath fixed his eyes on her parents, and her heart dropped through the floor.

The attention of everyone in the near vicinity had turned to the Empath, and finally the king and queen noticed too.

"May we help you, sir?" King Adrian asked with a frown.

"I do not need your help." The man's voice was unnaturally flat and even. "I am here for justice."

Alexa frowned. Without emotion, a person is left with only logic and reason, but justice doesn't fall under either category. It's a strictly emotional concept.

The king looked just as confused. "Justice for what?"

"You allowed many villagers under your care to die in the war. By law, that means you must be punished." And with a flick of his

hand, everyone in the room dropped to their knees.

Alexa gasped as only she and the man were left standing. The entire room was on their knees, clutching their heads in their hands. Her parents were doubled over in their chairs. Everyone was groaning. It was a state Alexa recognized quite well from her own life: emotional overload.

The man's dark eyes roved over to her. "You are an Empath." A statement, not a question.

Alexa forced a swallow around the lump in her throat. "What did you do to them?"

His head tilted. "Emotions are a weapon. I used them as such."

"They're not meant to be."

"Hmm. That is because your emotions are clouding your sight. It is an inefficient way to live." He began walking toward her parents.

Legs quivering, Alexa stepped in front of him. He stopped.

"Stay away from them."

"I am not here to hurt you, but if you get in the way of justice your life is also forfeit." Red energy began to slash violently around him.

It was then that Alexa realized she could see the emotion in the room. Everyone on the ground had swirls of color around their heads. The man's energy was pulled from the anger of everyone around him. And, much to her surprise, her own body had swirls of color around it. There were slashes of red from her anger, orange sparks from her anxiety, and shuddering purple dots from her fear.

The man raised his hand and the red energy lashed out toward the nearest nobles. It caused them all to clutch their heads, but Alexa also saw visible cuts open up on their arms. She gasped. "Stay away from them!"

A flash of red and pink burst from Alexa, her anger at the man and her love for her people combining into fierce determination. As it shot towards the Empath, he tried to absorb it.

And it passed right through his fingers.

He looked at Alexa, who was reeling with shock. "This is unexpected. You are a variable that must be eliminated."

Red energy poured out of him. Alexa raised her hands, expecting to feel blood run down her arms. But it didn't.

Alexa raised her head and saw a shield of energy in front of her. It was built largely of red anger and pink love, but orange anxiety and purple fear danced across it to patch up cracks.

The man fired again, but Alexa felt her boldness growing. She threw the shield wider, covering the nearby guests. But she made the mistake of looking back at her parents.

The anxious energy doubled, and instead of patching cracks, it made them wider. "No!" Alexa cried. The cracks widened.

I need to stay calm. That was the only way out of this.

The man saw her slip. "It does not matter if you protect these people. They will still shun you as different."

Sadness poured from Alexa, but instead of widening cracks, it mixed with the love. The shield thickened, the man's red energy bouncing off it. He tilted his head. "How are you doing this?"

"These are my people." Her voice was calm despite her trembling body. "I will protect them. You may have given up your emotions, but mine are my power."

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