



2023 Contest Winners

POETRY · FICTION · NON-FICTION

CenterForTheArts.org

enriching community through the arts





The Center for the Arts (CFA) mission is to enrich lives by supporting, promoting, and connecting literary, performance, and visual artists of all ages to our communities.

As part of carrying out our mission, the CFA is excited to support our teen writers in their pursuit of creative expression through the literary arts. Each year we offer this teen writing contest to students age 12 through 18 and who live in Andover, Bradford, Danbury, Grantham, New London, Newbury, Newport, Springfield, Sunapee, Sutton, Warner, or Wilmot.

This booklet is a compilation of submissions in short fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction from the 2023 contest. Thank you to all our students, teachers, schools, and sponsors for supporting these talented individuals. *Enjoy!*

Acknowledgements

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- Tom Coverdale of Sunapee Middle High School
- Makayla Gosselin of Kearsarge Middle High School
- Heidi Fagan of Mount Royal Academy

The Center for the Arts would like to extend a Thank You to Megan Baxter. Megan is an award-winning author and creative writing instructor at Colby-Sawyer College in New London, NH.



2023 Winning Entries

Poetry

1. Arianna Garceau, Sunapee, SMHS – “A Short Walk in the Forest of Life”
2. Annaliese Rowell, Sunapee, SMHS – “I’m Busy”
3. Jenna Caron, Sunapee, SMHS – “My Underground Sky”

Fiction

1. Lilah Bartholomew, Warner, KRHS – “Black-Eyed Susans and Forget-Me-Nots” (with thanks to Makayla Gosselin)
2. Arianna Garceau, Sunapee, SMHS – “The Promises She Couldn’t Keep”
3. Gabriella Butler, Sunapee, SMHS – “The Flowers”

Non-Fiction

1. Annaliese Rowell, Sunapee, SMHS – “Life in a Duffel Bag”
2. Jordan Roosevelt, Sunapee, SMHS – “New Eyes”
3. Camden Fagan, Charlestown, Mt. Royal Academy – “The Cologne Duel”

First Place Poetry
Arianna Garceau, Sunapee, SMHS

"A Short Walk in the Forest of Life"

Footsteps trample the forest floor
One step slow

Around me grows fungus and weeds coating the ground
They've grown for almost too long and I can no longer see my feet as they
hit the ground

Two steps, come on speed up

Tree tops shade me from the sun

But the beams peak through and illuminate the wildflowers around me
They glow with colors so vibrant I wish I could paint my life with them They
are perfect in my eyes

Three steps, I'm running

Tree roots grow into the ground

They peak up through, weaving an intricate pattern under the earth

Four steps

I trip

My knee is skinned and bleeding

5 steps

I get up

6 steps, 7 steps, 8 steps

The world spins around me

And just for a moment time stops

9 steps

The world is turning but I am still

Am I moving?

Am I awake?

I must be

10 steps

The flowers don't look so vibrant anymore

And I wonder if this may be it

The wind whispers in one ear and out the other

Then it comes

What once was morning

Turns to dark

10 steps into the eternity of a life

Summed up into just one moment

Second Place Poetry
Annaliese Rowell, Sunapee, SMHS

"I'm Busy"

I lied when I told you I was busy.
Well, I guess it wasn't really a lie,
I was busy,
But not in the way you'd think.

I wasn't studying for some test,
Or memorizing lines for some play.

I wasn't at an appointment,
Or molding something out of clay.

No,
I was sitting at home,
Stuck in my head.
I was silently sobbing,
Overthinking I had said.

From the good mornings to teachers,
To jokes among friends.
From the beginning of the day,
All the way until its end.

These things keep me busy,
Day in and day out.
They'll never go away,
I have no doubt.

So sometimes I can't do things,
If my demons are knocking at the door.
Sometimes quieting my mind,
Can feel like the biggest chore.

So I guess I really was busy,
And I *wasn't* lying to you.

Sometimes I just need time.
And then, then we can continue.

Third Place Poetry
Jenna Caron, Sunapee, SMHS

“My Underground Sky”

you know that saying,

if you're born in a burning house, you think the world is one fire?

well, my house wasn't burning. it wasn't some horrific scene, with hot, crumbling wood planks falling one by one.

my house was underground. i was trapped.

the windows were brown with dirt and rocks, the doors were forced closed and there was no light coming in.

“if i leave this house,” i had thought, i would suffocate.

so instead i wandered through this dark and lonely house, and tripped over thresholds and doorways, stumbled over stairs and furniture, unable to see the light or the hope.

i found comfort in the discomfort, satisfaction despite not having true satisfaction in this life, all while remaining in this dirty, dark house.

i became used to being in the dark. i became used to feeling trapped. i was underground, cut off from the world as i heard everyone else up there having the time of their lives. life felt like a party that i wasn't invited to.

but one day, i saw the brightest beam of light come through my usually brown, ugly and stained windows. my mind became uncharacteristically clear.

i didn't want to live in this hole anymore, i decided. so i took many steps back from the door, adrenaline pumping through my veins and i burst through it, suddenly believing i could dig myself out.

but i wasn't met with dirt and rocks. the door seemed to open too easily. and i was met by a clear night sky.

and that's when i realized. that's when i realized,

that those days i'd been looking out my window,

the window that was supposedly full of dirt and rocks, was truly a night sky and bright, beautiful beaming stars. i admired the sky and laughed.

i was never trapped.

and there it was, i thought.

my beautiful mistake—my underground sky.

First Place Fiction

Lilah Bartholomew, Warner, KRHS

“Black-Eyed Susans and Forget-Me-Nots”

It's one of those perfect autumn mornings, where the air is sweet with the smell of fallen leaves and pumpkins left over from Halloween. I wrap my jacket more tightly around me, admiring the rust-colored swirls sent into the air by the wind. The park, in the mornings, is always a busy place. It's full of people and noise, full of energy. Pathways wind through the trees like rivers of stone and gently curve around flower beds of wilting black-eyed Susans. During the summer, you can hardly see the tall, city buildings above the canopy. I smile. This might just be my favorite place in the world.

Beside me, a young woman shifts to look at me. “Is this what you wanted?” she asks. Her voice is soft, difficult to hear over the chatter of other pedestrians around us. A dog barks as it runs across the fading grass, chasing after a ball. Behind us, I can hear the sounds of traffic as a steady stream of cars pass by the park.

“Oh, it's perfect,” I smile at her. “I love it here. You know, my husband proposed to me in this park. There was a band playing in that gazebo, and he just knelt down at the end of their final song.”

Through the mostly bare branches of a line of maple trees, I can see that gazebo. Its pale blue paint is peeling now. The wooden beams are splintering, but I can still hear the music from that night.

“Henry was a good man,” the young woman says. Her dark hair is tucked under her hat, but a few long strands escaped and are caught in the breeze. The gray ice of her gaze is locked on a distant point, staring, but not really seeing. She seems young, surprisingly young to be working to help care for me. But she comes every week, without fail, to clean my rooms and talk. I blanch as I realize I can't remember her name.

“Honey,” I say, feeling somewhat sheepish, “What did you say your name was?”

The woman tilts her head at me, her mouth twitching into a frown. “Violet,” she says.

Ah, yes. That was it.

Violet gets up from the park bench, stretching her back slightly. “Should we bring you home now? It's nearly time for lunch.”

I look back at the gazebo. The sky beyond it is a misty gray with the barest hint of blue. So much has changed in the last sixty years. The

buildings that surround us, for instance, that reach into the sky as if they mean to touch the sun, they certainly weren't here before, nor were the sounds of car horns or sirens, the lingering scent of garbage that fills the gutters. But times always change, always come and go.

I struggle to my feet which already ache from the walk here. Leaning on my cane, I shuffle alongside Violet, gratefully using the arm she offers for balance.

"When I lived in this city," I tell her, "It wasn't nearly as loud. It was much smaller. The people were kinder, too. There was always someone willing to come fix your broken sink or get your radio working again."

"That was how you met Henry, right?" Violet says.

"Now, how did you know that?" I ask. Violet just shrugs. "Well, you're right," I continue, carefully making my way over the uneven sidewalk. "Henry knew how everything worked. He could fix your watch, replace your door, or even rewire your light switch. When I moved into my apartment, it was a nasty place. The wallpaper hung off the walls in sheets, curling and torn. The carpet was a cockroach's paradise. The kitchen was, at best, unusable, and the bathroom looked like something out of a horror film! All grimy and covered in mold. In the summer, the place would heat up like an oven and all you could smell was age-old cat urine. But it was affordable.

"Well anyway, Henry lived a floor down. One day he showed up at my door - apparently he'd been delivered a letter by mistake that was meant for me - and when he saw the place, he offered to replace the carpet in my living room. Then, later, he fixed the shower. After that, he said he'd help me tear down the wallpaper. When he arrived, he'd brought flowers. He said they were to cheer the place up, but he kept bringing them. He always gave me flowers, even after we were married."

I sigh and watch as my breath forms a faint cloud. I can almost taste the promise of winter in the chill air. My scarf flutters in the breeze, a blue ribbon that stands out against the sepia tones of the city.

"That was sweet of him," Violet says.

"Yes, although..." I pause, thinking. "Henry hasn't sent me flowers in a while."

Violet presses the button at the crosswalk, watching along with the crowd for the sign to cross. "I'll have to remind him."

"Tell him to come visit too," I say. "Ever since I moved into that assisted living place, he hasn't come around."

"I will," Violet says, her gaze focused on the ground. The walk light flashes on and we move across the street, pushing through the opposing traffic like fish trying to swim upstream. The sounds of hundreds of different voices surround me, speaking in languages both familiar and not. As we reach the opposite sidewalk, the traffic roars back to life.

It doesn't take long to reach my home; although, it is still difficult to call it that sometimes. The building is little more than a box. Windows scatter across the gray walls like chickenpox scars, and the garden is a jungle, its only caretakers being the colony of ants who dutifully gather pieces of windfalls from the scraggly apple tree in the corner. On either side of the building are massive skyscrapers, pressing in like they want to crush the wood and concrete walls flat.

I wish Henry would visit. He'd take one look at this atrocity and he'd take it upon himself to make it beautiful. Only Henry could make a place like this look like home.

"Careful on the step," Violet says as she helps me through the doorway. We move slowly down the dim hall, my cane clicking sharply on the checkered linoleum tiles. The fluorescent lights flicker and hum as Violet swings open my apartment door to let me through.

My rooms had been as drab as the rest of the building, but I have tried my best to brighten them up. I hung pictures on every inch of the walls, creating a quilt of colors and canvas. I sewed throw pillows and blankets and heaped them onto the brightest armchair I could find. I even hung little colored crystals and glass around the lights to cast rainbows on any spot that didn't already have a touch of color. Violet tells me it's a bit much, but it makes me happy.

Then, of course, I'm lucky enough to have a window. It's the first thing I look at when I walk in the door. The natural light filtering into the room is what really does the trick to cheer this place up.

Eager to rest my sore legs, I begin shuffling to my chair. My gaze drifts to the bright window and I stop, suddenly enough that Violet puts an arm out as if to catch me.

"Are you alright?" she asks, concern lacing her voice.

"Look," I say.

In the window is a glass vase of the deepest blue. Black-eyed Susans and forget-me-nots pour over the top, each competing with the others to escape their container. The petals are limned with sunlight. They glow like gems, like diamonds and gold.

"What's wrong?" Violet asks.

"Nothing," I whisper. "Henry brought me flowers."

Violet says nothing as I go over to the bouquet and run a finger along one of the stems.

How thoughtful of Henry. He got my favorites.

The clock on the wall ticks, counting each second pass. Violet stands beside me and wraps an arm around me in a half hug. Caught in an invisible breeze, the flowers shake and shiver as if they might blow away entirely.

"I hope you like them," Violet says.

"Oh, I do. Tell him I say thank you."

"He didn't get you the flowers," Violet says. "I got them for you. Do you remember seeing them this morning?"

"Don't be silly," I say. "I would have remembered if I saw flowers from Henry."

"No-" There's an edge of impatience in Violet's voice. "Henry didn't get them. I got them for you. I bring you some every week."

"Why would you do that?"

Violet sighs, shaking her head. "Never mind. I should go. Let you rest."

"Alright." I look back at the vase. Violet couldn't have bought these for me. Only Henry knows what my favorite flowers are.

Violet buttons her coat. "Goodbye, Grandma," she says, and closes the door behind her as she leaves.

Second Place Fiction

Arianna Garceau, Sunapee, SMHS

"The Promises She Couldn't Keep"

I spent most of my time by the shoreline. Crashing waves eating away at everything they come into contact with, loose sand in the midst of it all. It's delicate and intricate; careless and destructive. One wave enough to bring a whole castle down before your eyes. The waves offered violence and passion to my mostly peaceful mind. The cacophony was so painful, so wild, but it felt better than feeling nothing at all; sometimes even silence needs a little noise. My collection of seashells grew each time I visited the waters. Each one looked almost the same, and I had yet to find one special enough to call "unique."

Since I was six years old, Lilly would take me down to the ocean to sit while she filled her notebook with descriptions of all that inhabited the shoreline. She had a special interest in the plants that grew near the water, and rambled relentlessly about how and when they grew. While she watched and observed, I would collect seashells and rocks. I've always wanted to find what she found in the water and the plants, I was never sure if it was peace or curiosity. Now, I go on my own and observe the plants, shells, and animals that live there. Someone has to since Lilly can't anymore.

My parents told me we were getting an exchange kid a few weeks before she arrived. Where we lived in Veurne, Belgium was a popular spot for kids learning environmental sciences. Our climate was steady and perfect, we had beaches and mountains and amazing overlooks of the rest of the city, and our house, in particular, was ideal for hosting students.

They only tell you so much about the exchange student when you sign off on housing them. They tell you their name, age, study-major, and where they come from. They don't tell you what kind of person they are, what kind of attitude they'll have, or how attached you'll become once they settle in.

"Just try to be nice to her, Liam," my mom had said. This was easy for her to say, she had always been more welcoming than anyone else, and she loved it when the exchange students came each year.

"Yeah mom, I'll try," I sighed.

Anything to get her off my case.

"It can't be easy for her, you know. She's in a completely new place and your new attitude definitely won't help her feel welcome here." Her voice checked her usually nurturing tone. I glanced at her face. Mom has never been passive aggressive or mean. I couldn't imagine how one

less child in the house could make her feel, but I supposed an exchange student could be good for her.

The day CeeCee arrived was the first anniversary of Lilly's death—one year since I lost my mentor, my idol, my big sister. My parents had seemed to accept her death already, and it broke me that they didn't care anymore. It broke me that while I was still hurting inside, they had done their healing. I didn't meet CeeCee until dinner that night—I had spent the day at the shoreline. When I got home, my parents were already eating dinner. I walked through the door at a quarter past 6 and dropped my books and backpack at the door—I hadn't been home since I left for school this morning. I walked through the living room into the dining room and sat down.

My head was so wrapped up in the blanket of my thoughts that I barely noticed the new addition to our usually uniform dinner setting. I glanced towards the end of the table where she was seated.

She was sitting in Lilly's seat. It's been untouched for a year. For 365 days the seat had been empty.

I ignored it and said with a smile, "Oh, hey, I'm Liam."

"Hey," she reciprocated. I couldn't tell if she was taken aback by me or just shy, but her forest green eyes saw right through me. They saw through my fake composure, straight to my pain. Her stupid, beautiful, mind reading eyes really saw me--and for a moment, I was scared.

My mom chimed in, "This is Cecilia--"

"CeeCee," the girl interrupted, "You can call me CeeCee."

"Welcome CeeCee," I said.

For the rest of dinner, I was silent. Besides the occasional nod or "Mhm," I showed no evidence of my presence at the table. My mind screamed, muting the environment around me. It screamed for Lilly and the memories she inhabited and screamed of the worry that I would forget her voice, her eyes, her hair, her face.

Has everyone else already forgotten?

I watched as everyone cleared their dishes and went to sit in the common room. I didn't feel like sticking around, so I left to the seashore. The shoreline was walking distance from home, so I grabbed my sweat-shirt and backpack and took off. I reached into my backpack and pulled out a notebook. It was already full and worn. The pages were curled and frayed on the edges and photos and drawings were pasted on the inside cover. It contained 7 years of research thoroughly completed by Lilly. I made my way to the edge of the seashore and fought through the tall grass. My eyes glued to the pages upon pages about Limonium Vulgare;

I knew they were Lilly's favorite. I brought myself to the water and sat; I didn't study the plants or the rocks. My mind was too full.

I traced my fingers through the sand and sorted through my thoughts and memories. Memories of sand castles and sand mansions with moats. Memories of creations made by Lilly and I and how eventually they all washed away, and prayers that memories of her would not. My fingers made circles in the sand and grazed over the pebbles mixed in. I felt a tiny seashell buried within the sand. It was small, round and blunt. It wasn't like all the others. It was striped and had streaks of metallic silver drawn throughout. It was unique. It was perfect.

I put it in my pocket and started to walk home through the rain-coated streets, street lamps flooding the crumbled brick with light. I walked in and out of the spotlight cast by the top of each lamppost, and as I took each stride into and out of the darkness, my consciousness came rushing back. And with each step, I realized that I had never felt more alone.

For the next month or two I was rarely at home. I had school and sports and the shoreline. Besides, CeeCee hadn't really talked to me much. I passed by her in the shared hallway to our bedrooms and sat through dinner some nights, but hadn't had the time to get to know her. She seemed to be a nice girl: very smart and studious, more so than our past exchange students.

Four months in was when everything started to settle. CeeCee didn't feel like a stranger anymore, my school work was less intrusive, and seeing Lilly's seat at the table be filled didn't feel so wrong anymore. CeeCee's birthday was on the 14th, three days from Lilly's. My mother baked a small cake for dessert with pink frosting on the border and a candle that said '18' on the top. I decided to stay for dinner in honor of CeeCee's birthday and helped my dad hang up streamers and balloons around the house. For the first time since she got here, she seemed to be at ease. She looked happy. We sat around the dinner table and talked about CeeCee's past birthdays. Her third birthday when she put her head face first into the cake her mother had made, her sixth birthday that didn't feel much like a birthday since three days before her dog had passed away, her 13th birthday when she broke her arm at the trampoline park. Suddenly all at once the stranger who lived in the room down the hallway didn't feel so unfamiliar anymore.

After dinner and cake we played a round of Monopoly and watched as CeeCee opened the card her parents had sent her. It was small and yellow and had some kind of message that made her smile when she read it. I hadn't really seen her smile since she got here. Well, I saw her smile on the first day she got here, with her eyes looking so separate from the rest of her face. But tonight, her smile seemed to illuminate the room, as if the card had been the key to sunlight. It was the real kind

that makes your heart warm when you see it because you know it's a real type of smile.

I haven't smiled that kind of smile in a long time.

I didn't leave after the game was over. Instead I went up to my room; I lay in the bed that I've laid in for seventeen years and stared up at the ceiling that I've become miserably familiar with this past year. I felt uncomfortable in my own home, my own skin, my own clothes.

I stood up and grabbed a pair of shorts and a hoodie off my dresser. I pulled the sweatshirt over my head and something fell out of the pocket. It was the shell. The picture-perfect shell with silver streaks and a perfect round shape. I stared at the silver chain lying on my desk across the room. It was Lilly's necklace, she had left it in my room when I was young, and I had kept it ever since. I took the chain in my hand and laced it through the middle of the hollow shell. Part of me wanted the chain out of my sight. The other part of me wanted to put it to use—it looked so lonely and worthless sitting idle on the desk. I placed it in a small white box and took the little pink bow I had found in Moms box of wrapping supplies and placed it on the top. I wandered down the dimly lit hallway to the guest room. It was a quarter past ten, and my parents had already gone to bed; the house was silent except for the ticking of the clock at the end of the hallway and the sound of my footsteps.

I cracked open the door to CeeCee's room and peeked my head in. I saw her eyes drift near the door. She was awake. I walked in as she rolled over to face me, and I approached the end of her bed, holding the box.

"Hey, I wasn't sure if you were sleeping," I whispered.

I knew she wasn't.

"No," she shifted to sit up and fixed her hair a little, "I couldn't sleep."

"Yeah me either." I held out the box and she took it in her hands, "It's your birthday. I got this for you."

"Really? Thanks," she whispered. She untied the ribbon and opened the box. She smiled that real smile once more and looked me in the eyes. Shivers ran through my body as my eyes met with hers.

"I noticed the seashell while I was studying the rocks at the shoreline the other day, and thought it would make a good present."

"It's beautiful, thank you." She put the necklace back in the box and placed it on the side table next to her.

I turned to the door and started to open it before turning back to her, "I'm glad you're here; sleep well, Cee." I closed the door and wandered back down the hallway feeling pleasantly sick to my stomach.

I decided to stay home more during the next month. I enjoyed the company of my parents and CeeCee for the first time in a while. The month had gone by faster than usual but I couldn't figure out why. Was it the weather? Season change? CeeCee had made friends from her school, and Mom grew closer to her each day. My presence at home helped my situation with Cee. I talked to her about her life back where she lived in Nebraska, and about her friends, and the reason she had come to study biology here in Veurne. She was always kind in manner and funny without being mean. She was the kind of person that you could spend all day with and never get tired of. The kind of person that made time fly by and make hours turn to minutes. The kind of person that just clicks.

She mentioned once at dinner that she was studying plants at school, so the very next night I took her to the shoreline and watched as her eyes absorbed every speck of beauty that drew me back to it each time.

"This is *Limonium vulgare*," I said to her, "It grows annually and hasn't sprouted yet."

She looked at the green stems that separated the sea from the land. I walked along the water as she trailed behind. I slowed my pace as she fell back and looked over my shoulder to find her short of breath.

"You okay?" I asked.

"Yeah, I'm just gonna sit for a minute." She sat down on the sand as I stood beside her. She stared at the ground and clutched her side as she waited for the oxygen to refill her lungs. She was in pain. I knew she was in pain but even if I asked, I knew she wouldn't tell the truth. I lowered myself onto the beach next to her. The setting sun casting the reflection of the small silver chain dangling from her neck, "Hey, the necklace. You're wearing it."

"Yeah, why wouldn't I?" she answered as her eyes stared directly into mine.

"Anyways, *Limonium vulgare*." I changed the subject. All of a sudden I was nervous.

"Right."

"They grow in the summer and shed their flowers in the fall." She nodded attentively. Birds flew above and spoke to the sound of the crashing waves while a cool breeze arrived, turning day into dusk.

"You have to come back and see them in the summer," I said. I knew she would have to leave before they bloomed. At that moment, the realization struck me—she wasn't going to be here forever. Once the school year was done she would go back home and I'd have wasted so much time not knowing her. And just like always she'll leave; except this time she won't be gone, just out of reach.

"Yeah, no totally," she vowed.

"Promise?"

"I promise."

For the rest of the night we sat on the beach and talked. We talked about anything and everything. Talked about Lilly and the reason we don't bring her up at home. Talked about how empty the house is, my heart is, how empty every feeling I feel is. We talked about her parents and school. We talked about everything. My mind had been screaming for so long and it was now quiet. Not with the numb type of silence that I had been feeling all along, but the type of silence that came with peace.

The next month was Cee's last month with us. It was the shortest and most painful month. Each day went by as I grasped for just another minute, another second with her. I spent some time at the seashore even though the weather was getting colder and Limonium Vulgare had shed its leaves. The plant would bloom once more during the summer, but just like all good things, its beauty had come to an end.

The day CeeCee left was the day my heart shattered for the second time around. We ate breakfast before we took her to the airport and I stared at the end of the table and tried to comprehend that this would be the last time the seat would be filled. What once was Lilly's seat was now CeeCee's, and sooner than I'd like, it would be empty again.

In the afternoon, we piled in the car and drove to the airport. She said goodbye to Mom and Dad as they cried into her shoulder. She was leaving. Really leaving.

"See you next year?" I urged.

"See you next year," She replied. Her face was red and puffy and tears rolled down her cheek. She turned away and started walking towards her terminal.

Not yet.

I grabbed her arm and pulled her in for a hug. A hug like I've never felt before. The kind of hug that makes time stop. The kind of hug that makes you want to stay right there in that moment and never leave.

The intercom calls for her flight one last time as she pulls away. She looks through my eyes right back into my mind one last time and smiles. Then, just as soon as she got here, she was gone.

About a month later, we got a call from the states. Mom pulled the phone off the hook immediately. She had been waiting for this call since we watched CeeCee walk across the airport floors and out of our sight. Dad had been practicing greetings in English since she had arrived here on her first day. His English had never been very good. They handed me the phone once they had gotten caught up but all I could do was wonder. Why now? Why after a month is she calling now? Why, after no sign of her safe departure home or of her thinking about us, does she call now?

"Hey," I said, putting the phone to my ear. Even though I was concerned by the timing of the call. It was all surpassed by the joy that flooded my body when I heard her voice.

"Hey," she pushed out. Her voice was raspy and weak.

"How are you doing?" I asked. I knew by the sound of her voice that I would soon regret asking.

"Liam..."

"I know, Cee." She had been in pain the whole time she was here. She was hurting and I didn't say anything. I ignored her sickness in hopes of dismissing it. I knew the whole time and said nothing.

There was a moment where neither one of us said anything. Heartbreaking silence and everything that came with it.

"You said you'd come back," I whimpered.

"I know, I'm sorry."

"You promised," I said with all the strength left in me.

Her words nauseated me. My hands started to shake. I dropped the phone and left it dangling by its cord. I heard her calling out my name faintly on the other line. Mom came near with a warm embrace but, I turned away and headed for the door. I couldn't be here. Not right now.

I walked down to the shoreline, tears streaming down my face, *Limonium Vulgare* separating me from the waters. I searched for myself within their newly blossomed purple petals. I bent down and snapped one off at the stem. I inhaled the sweetness of its aroma and lost the part of me I had just found again; and I broke a little bit more, knowing she never got to see the flowers bloom.

Third Place Fiction

Gabriella Butler, Sunapee, SMHS

"The Flowers"

Light waves splash against the shore playfully. They race in and then run away—a constant chase. The sun is beaming hot, not a cloud in sight. Humid, sticky air causes my forehead to sweat, dark pieces of hair cling to my face. I slowly open my eyes, squinting from the light. I wipe my face with the towel lying beside me and rollover. And there she is, freckled and sun kissed, soaking up the sun. A small smile creeps onto my face as I realize she's fallen asleep. A light burn is developing on her shoulders, as she lies peacefully.

"Liz wake up! You're gonna burn!" I shake her shoulders and she groans. I try again.

"HELLOOOOOOO!" She sits up finally and frowns.

"You're burning! Put on more sunscreen." I toss the bottle at her and she rolls her eyes. "You woke me up for that?" She gets ready to lie back down, but I grab her arm.

"No c'mon, let's go get some ice cream!" She groans, but stands up and grabs all of her stuff.

We run across the scorching pavement, jumping to avoid burning our bare feet. She tosses her bag into the trunk and then hops into the passenger seat of my car. I start the engine and plug my phone in. She snatches it from my hands and turns on our summer playlist, so I start to drive. The perfect day with my best friend.

"Brooke, are you even paying attention?" My teacher's cold tone pierces through my daydream and sends me spiraling back to reality. I open my eyes to the harsh fluorescent lights hanging above.

"Yes Mrs. Williams, sorry," I mumble. She shakes her head and continues to drone on about our upcoming finals. Another pointless test to fail. I'm failing almost every class, and have made no effort to change that. Letters to my parents about my slipping grades pile up on the kitchen counter. Unopened, unnoticed. A crumpled-up piece of paper hits my head and hushed whispers fly. I sigh and pick the sticky note off the floor to throw it away. This isn't new. The last three months have been filled with hurtful words disguised as jokes, hidden behind fake smiles.

"What do you think happens to us when we die?" We lie side by side in the fields down the road from my house. We lie in silence, except for the sound of the river across the stretch of land. The stars above us twinkle, and a light breeze creates a chill in the air.

"I dunno, Liz," I sigh. I hate when she asks deep questions. I hate thinking about those kinds of things. The kind of things that everyone

thinks about, but nobody wants to talk about. Her eyes flutter open and she rolls over, facing me. She stares at me, thinking.

"But there's so many possibilities. You don't ever wonder?" She questions. "Nope."

She shakes her head, clearly annoyed. I watch her roll back over and stand, brushing grass off her faded jeans. My eyes shut, and I hear her footsteps slowly become more faint as she walks away. All that's left is the rushing sound of the river.

The bell rings, and I push through the crowd of kids in the hallway, trying to make my way to my locker. I finally reach it, twist the dial to the combination, and the lock clicks. I pull it open, the rusty metal hinges creaking. As soon as it's opened, I'm overwhelmed by the amount of pictures of us together that cover the walls. Suddenly she's everywhere. She's next to me in my car, screaming the lyrics to her favorite song. She's sitting across from me, complaining about how gross the school lunch is. She's pacing the floor of her bedroom, ranting about the latest drama in school. She's everywhere. I slam the locker back shut, and somebody laughs. I storm off to the office, my cheeks burning and my eyes wet.

Ugh where is she? She said she would be here soon.

I toss and turn in my bed and then finally, I hear the sound of pebbles hitting my window.

I rush over, and I see a blob of light hair pop up right outside.

"How did you get up on the roof!?" I whisper-shout. She shrugs and laughs, climbing inside.

"So, are you ready," she whispers. I shake my head. "I don't think I'm gonna go."

"WHAT!" She shouts. I slap my hands across her mouth.

"SHHH you're gonna wake up my parents."

"Sorry," she mumbles behind my hands. She tip-toes over to my closet.

"You can't wear that to the party," she gives me a once over and then rolls her eyes. She rummages through my dresser, throwing potential outfits at me.

"Liz I don't want to go." She doesn't even respond, just keeps searching, "I SAID I'M NOT GOING!"

"SHHH you don't want your mom to wake up." I glare at her, but she just giggles. She holds up a black sequined top and breaks into a fit of laughter. To her, it's all a joke. She goes about life with a bounce in her step as though she doesn't realize that all of her actions have consequences. Maybe none that affects her, but there's always a consequence. She just didn't realize that until it was too late.

"Mom, can you pick me up, I wanna go home?" My hand grips the phone. "Brooke, you can't keep missing class; you're falling behind," her voice crackles through the old office phone.

"Mom please," I beg. I briskly wipe the tears falling down my cheeks.

"I guess it's fine." I hang up the phone and walk back over to the office secretary. She greets me with a practiced smile. She pities me.

"My mom said I could go home." "You're all set, sweetie."

"Thanks," I mumble. My hand dips into her candy jar and comes out with a handful of peppermints and hard candies. She eyes the sign on her desk that reads Take one, and I shove the candy into my pocket.

"Liz I don't think this is a good idea." I do my best to focus on the road, but she keeps distracting me, showing me videos of the party we're on our way to.

"It's going to be so fun! I'm so excited!" She hums along to the song blasting from the radio and dances around in the seat beside me.

"Knock it off, it's dark and I need to focus," I snap. Out of the corner of my eye, I see her smile drop. The rest of the drive is silent except for the radio. About 10 minutes later, she finally says something.

"We're almost here."

"Okay." I pause. "I'm sorry for snapping. I'm just super tired."

"It's okay." She smiles at me, and the stress fades. We're going to be fine.

The air is cold. I shiver, despite the layers covering me. I pull my jacket closed, and cross my arms over my chest.

Just a little bit further.

My feet drag across the rocky, dirt road. The sky is getting darker, and the day is almost over. I pick up my pace.

I just need to go back.

After about ten minutes, I come to a stop. The field in front of me is the same one we would always hang out in. A field full of flowers. During the day, we would have picnics, and during the warm summer nights, we would lie there and look at the stars, saying whatever was on our minds.

I hadn't been back here since that night, I was too afraid. I didn't know what being back here would do to me. Now that I'm here, all I can think about is what happened that night.

"Brookie do you want something to drink?" Liz shoves a plastic cup with a mystery liquid into my hands, but I push it away.

"I have to drive us home, remember?" I shake my head. She doesn't care.

"C'mon, we can just find a ride. I'm sure Sandy would give us one," she says, her words slurring. She grins at me and tries to give me the cup again.

"No, Liz. My parents will kill me if they find out. Plus, we can't just rely on other people for rides. I don't want anything."

She's really starting to piss me off. I didn't even want to go.

Her smile fades, and she storms off, stomping across the grass towards the river. I follow. "Liz it's not safe for you to be near the water."

"WHY DO YOU CARE SO MUCH," she yells. Clearly, she's had too much to drink. But that's how she always was. She never had a care in the world about the consequences she might face after the night was over.

"Time to go home, Lizzy." I grab her arm and start to pull her back to the field. "STOP IT!" she shrieks, smacking my hand away.

"Fine, but I'm leaving, and don't call me when you can't find a ride back home tonight." I storm off, across the field and into the road, searching for my car. Why does she have to be so immature? I finally find my car and head home for the night. Once I'm home and in my bed, I stop thinking about Liz. She'll be fine. She's done this a million times before, we'll just talk it out in the morning.

I realize I've crossed the field and now stand in front of the river. I gaze down at the rushing water. The water that took Liz from me. As the hours passed that night, she lost more and more control. People stopped paying attention, and eventually she wandered off alone and fell into the water. Nobody noticed. Nobody cared. She was alone, and upset, and I left her there. I should have made her come home.

The water is angry, racing down the hill, desperate to get away. I didn't notice until now, but tears are streaming down my face. It's dark now, the sun has set, and the stars have begun to come out, popping up across the sky. I walk back to the center of the field and drop to the cold grass. I lay flat on my back on the hard ground, and I stare up at the stars. The flowers are gone now, they've died out from the cold. I take it all in for a moment, then I let my eyes flutter shut.

First Place Non-Fiction

Annaliese Rowell, Sunapee, SMHS

"Life in a Duffel Bag"

The day had begun like any other. I woke up in my pink-walled room, my princess night light still shining from the night before. I groggily stumbled down the stairs to the awaiting Eggo toaster waffles I had every morning. I had nothing to do; I was 8 after all. My morning was simply filled with Polly Pockets cluttering the hallways and American Girl Doll clothes sprinkling the living room. The only thing off about the day so far was my sister getting in the way of my Polly Pocket's car.

I was playing under the table (like all kids do) when I heard my momma call my and my sister's names.

"Abby, Annaliese, can you come in here so we can talk to you?"

"Yeah, just one second!" On the outside, my 8 year old mind was simply frustrated my play-time was being interrupted. But somewhere inside I could tell, something wasn't quite right.

Walking into the room, my eyes skipped over my ever-precious Bitty-Babies (any other time I would've stopped and picked them up) and immediately settled on my distraught parents. No smiles, no laughs, just--sad. I climbed on Dad's lap, laying my head on the perfect groove in his shoulder, listening to his heart beat in his chest.

"I'm sorry, girls. Your mom and I are getting a divorce."

Tears spilled from my eyes without thinking. I didn't know what they meant. As they explained what would happen, the sounds rang through my ears like I was underwater. I didn't want to listen. I couldn't listen. I don't think I even processed the words until later. I was only 8.

From that day on, my life looked a little different. On Tuesdays and Fridays I would pack my clothes, toys, and stuffed animals into my green duffel bag. I would take the 15 minute car-ride to Newport that would become second nature in less than a month. Every week I walked through the doorway of a house I was supposed to call home, but I couldn't make the words feel natural coming from my mouth.

School became my outlet. It was the one place things didn't have to feel different. My math homework didn't care that I was now from a broken home.

From that day on, I was no longer 8 years old. The minute I no longer had both of my parents to protect me, I changed. I had to learn how to take care of myself. I reminded myself of when homework was due. I reminded myself to take my asthma medication. I tucked myself in at night. I was responsible for making my lunch in the morning. I was responsible for communicating about sports schedules. The responsibility was mine now.

But that's not all that changed. The words people said to me meant something different now. Play dates were no longer on a drop-in basis--we had to plan them depending on which house I was staying at. Making Christmas ornaments at school felt like I was cheating out one side of my family when I was only allowed to make just one. And the worst: overhearing adults talking about how well I was doing "all things considered."

The other kids my age didn't understand what I was talking about when I told them I was switching houses. It was the adults that hurt. When they tried to make things better, but had no idea what it was they were talking about. When compliments on my success just turned into pity parties about how I "rose above adversity."

Not to mention the infamous, "You're so mature for a 9 year old."

Most people, when they are told they are mature for their age, or look older than they are, they take it as a compliment. For me, it is a bitter reminder of a childhood that never was. I didn't play pretend until I was 10, because my pretend was always real. I didn't get to reminisce on the family dinners when we shared about our days, because they didn't exist in my world.

Hallways that were once cluttered with Polly Pockets were now clean. Living rooms scattered with dolls were now blank. In one day, my innocence was pulled from my grasp. While everyone was still playing with dolls and Legos, I was carrying my life in a green duffel bag.

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Second Place Non-Fiction
Jordan Roosevelt, Sunapee, SMHS

“New Eyes”

I sat down on my giant foam chair, the right arm of which was disheveled by my dog’s use of it as a bounce pad for his laps around the house, to begin playing a game of (of course) Mario Kart Wii. I picked up my phone, next to my water glass that keeps me hydrated throughout my intensive races, and began texting one of my friends. I heard she recently had a rough breakup, so I wanted to make her feel a little better.

Hey

I heard about everything.

How are you doing?

I’m ok

At this point, I saw that she wasn’t in a good mood, so I tried to get her to laugh a little

Look

If anything ever happens we’ll always be there for you.

I know my brother and I can be assholes but we’ll always be your assholes.

Thanks.

That means a lot.

He’s such a liar you guys are really important to me.

I know I just made her day a little brighter and a little more devoid of what was wrong with it, so that made me happy too. And then I thought to myself—When I was in her shoes, people did the same for me.

When I was in the situation she was in, I was devastated. My stomach was churning all day, making it impossible to eat even two-thirds of what I normally eat (albeit, I eat a lot in general, so it wasn’t to the point of

being unhealthy), the red arteries in my eyes were just a little bit bigger than normal, insinuating a day of near-crying, and I was drowsy from my inability to get a thorough sleep. Of course my parents went out of their way to help me, but that makes sense. It's the sheer quantity of other people who went out of their way to help me that astonished me.

In the early stages of the seemingly-unbearable grief, one of the most impactful examples of someone helping me occurred. I was about to go to bed (early, of course, because I knew it would be almost impossible to sleep), and was about to fill my water cup.

I was clearly distraught, and when my brother, who was sitting on a chair watching YouTube videos on his laptop, saw that, he asked, "What's wrong?"

I decided to tell him everything that happened. I was about to walk away, but then he "unplugged" himself from the computer, stood up, and gave me a hug. I never would have expected that from him. But it happened.

The next day, one of my closest friends talked to me about it in the locker room before school started. He told me that for the day, I needed to focus on myself rather than on school, and made me feel better by reverting to jocular comments making me laugh at his own reputation's expense.

At my swimming practice that day, my coach noticed something was wrong, too. She made the workout easy on me so I wasn't overloaded, and then she talked to me after practice, following the pattern of the other two, able to make me feel better.

Over the course of the next week, I told two other (very different) friends about it, and both of them immediately stood by my side. They both, without any additional information other than the effects on me, immediately snapped at the girl who broke my heart that week. "She's not good enough for you," and "She doesn't have her priorities straight," were common phrases from both of them. Without even meeting or knowing anything about exactly what happened, they were on my side.

I knew I had friends, and I knew that I could always talk to them. But up until this point, I didn't realize how utterly important they are. They were right there the whole time, but this revealed a new side of them. Automatically, these people became invested in doing good for me with nothing in it for them, just as I had for the first friend. I learned over the course of this week that I don't need to look far to find good people; they're already there.

Third Place Non-Fiction

Camden Fagan, Charlestown, Mt. Royal Academy

"The Cologne Duel"

March 6, 1945, Cologne, Germany

Staff sergeant Robert Earley was in command of the newest American tank, an M26 Pershing called Eagle 7. Throughout the war, Nazi Germany held superiority in armored warfare, utilizing guns that cut through the American M4 Sherman tanks at ranges over two kilometers, and had thick frontal armor that was far stronger than the Sherman. The Pershing was supposedly capable of destroying any German tank, but it had yet to be tested in genuine combat, and Eagle 7 was the only one in Cologne. They were tasked with claiming the Cologne cathedral and gaining control of the bridge that spanned the Rhine. The Germans deployed one Pz Mk IV and two PZ Mk VII Panthers to halt the American advance. The Americans sent the entire Third Armored Division, which consisted of 232 tanks, along with infantry troops. Eagle 7 was sent directly to the cathedral.

M26 Pershing Tank

Robert Earley drummed his fingers on his leg. It had been too long since he had heard from Kellner, the commander of the Shermans who had taken another route to the cathedral. He was experienced enough to know that something foul had happened, and he was also experienced enough not to turn back and follow their path. They were almost at the cathedral. He looked out his view port and saw one of his men waving. He opened his hatch and saw Jim Bates, their military cameraman.

"What's the matter, Bates?" said Earley.

"There's a tank around the corner, in front of the cathedral," he said.

"That could be a problem. Let's find a vantage point and take a look."

Earley climbed out of the tank, rifle in hand, and gestured for Bates to lead. They walked along the street, close to the buildings to avoid being seen. Just before they reached the corner of the street, they entered a building that had a clear view down the road.

As he climbed the stairs, Earley thought back to the first tank they had encountered in Cologne.

They were traveling down a street, one that curved slightly. Eagle 7 was coming up on an intersection when a speeding car came around the corner and turned left, traveling away from the Pershing. Unsure as to who was in the car, with tensions higher than the moon, the Eagles gunner, Clarence Smoyer, opened up with his secondary machine gun. Then, from around the bend, someone else started shooting at the car. It came to a halt, its driver injured or dead. Earley looked through his periscope in the direction of the other gunfire. He caught a glimpse of a German tank backing behind the corner of the nearest building.

"Smoyer," the sergeant had said, "did you see where that tank was?"

"Affirmative sir," Smoyer had responded "what have you got in mind?"

"I want you to shoot the building he's hiding behind. Keep firing until it comes crashing down."

"Copy that," he called to the loader, "Diriggi, AP shell."

John Diriggi hefted one of the twenty four pound shells into the breach and slammed the cover over it.

"Clear!" Diriggi called.

Smoyer rotated the turret to the left, aiming the barrel directly at the corner of the building. Then he pressed the trigger at his feet. The recoil from the 90mm gun shook the whole tank. Diriggi had already loaded another shell. Smoyer fired again. Each time he fired, Smoyer felt like he'd been hit with a sandbag. The pressure from the cannon was so strong that the crew had to keep their mouths open, otherwise it would burst their eardrums. The fourth shell brought the building down. As the dust settled, they could see a Panzer Mk IV covered in rubble.

Earley peered through his viewport. The hatches were opened and it seemed that the crew had decided to run. Still, better safe than shelled. He opened his hatch and gestured to the infantry men.

"Someone put a grenade in there!" he had ordered. One of the men quietly walked up to the tank. He pulled the pin and tossed it in one of the open hatches. He ran as soon as the grenade left his hand, not waiting for a result. They heard shouting from inside the tank. Evidently some of the crew had decided to stay. There was a flash and a puff of smoke, then one of the Germans crawled out of a hatch, and as he stood they all saw that his arm had a chunk missing from it, right where his elbow had been. He must have drawn his arm around his face, like how one covers a sneeze. As Earley looked closer, he could see

that the only thing holding his forearm was the man's jacket sleeve. The man's chest was also riddled with cuts and holes, the shrapnel from the grenade most likely. Yet he sat there, calmly looking at the column of enemy troops that had just done this to him. The man was clearly in shock and his mind was so frazzled that he failed to receive any messages from his pain receptors. In a few minutes, Earley thought, he's going to feel it. Earley had often seen soldiers let the Germans die horrible deaths, letting them burn, making them dig their own graves.

He had always frowned upon that behavior, except for SS officers. Besides, many soldiers of the German army were not Nazis. Some had enlisted because they had agreed with Hitler, about how Germany was shamed in the resolutions of the Versailles treaty. Others were simply backed into a corner by recruiters and if they refused to enlist, they were threatened with the death of their family. Granted, there was no visible way to tell if the man on the tank was a loyal Nazi or just a desperate father, but regardless of that he was definitely suffering. He wasn't about to smile in torment now. Earley opened his hatch, raised his rifle and shot the man clean through his head. A quick and painless death for a man who served his country to the end even when his country was failing. He was worthy of respect, even if he was wrong.

They pushed further down the street.

Diriggi snorted. "You shoulda let him feel it."

Earley pretended not to understand. "Who?"

"The Nazi soldier. He deserved it. You've always been too soft on the Krauts. They're a bunch of fascist fuckwits with no regard for human dignity."

Earley had never bothered to explain his views to Diriggi, mostly because he knew it would fall on deaf ears, but he had to try.

"Did it ever occur to you that making the Germans suffer excessively is why we're in a second world war? Hitler got most of his political traction from the general hatred of the Treaty of Versailles, since it made Germany refund all the countries they damaged. They were globally shamed and stripped of whatever kind of national pride they had. Then, this great patriot steps up, raising their economy, building up their army, giving the Germans a shot at revenge. If that had happened in America, you would have felt the same as the Germans. If we keep taking vengeance on each other, we will never have peace. Now, as far as the SS and high ranking Nazis go, they can be tormented for what they did to the Jews. These frontline men had no control over what they did in

those camps, so neither you nor I will make them suffer for doing their jobs. Clear?"

Diriggi nodded in acceptance.

"Good. I won't be explaining this again."

Earley stopped his thoughts on the past when he saw Bates turn into a room adjacent to the stairwell. Upon reaching the third floor, they looked out the window, staying as far back as they could. What Earley saw was both frustrating and comforting. It was a Panther. Earley had thought it was going to be a King Tiger, a tank which the Pershing was vastly under equipped to tackle. He breathed a sigh of relief.

Unbeknownst to Earley, this Panther had knocked out a group of Sherman tanks that had also entered Cologne. The commander, Wilhelm Bartelborth, had elected to move from his hiding place to sit directly in front of the cathedral, which allowed him to see down three different streets or directions of attack. This was also a very risky move, as this also meant that he could be fired upon from three different angles. Bartelborth had his tank facing down the main road, which meant his right side was pointing towards the direction that Eagle 7 would arrive at. It also meant that the Panther's main gun was not pointed at them.

"Look at that smug son of a bitch," said Earley, pointing at the tank. "He's just sitting there, like he owns the place."

"Well it is a German city." Bates pointed out. "He could definitely say he owns the place."

Earley turned to him. "That's besides the point," said the sergeant. "Here's my plan. His gun is facing away from us, so I'll go back to the Eagle. You stay here with your camera and film the whole thing. If we get hit and start to run, I can't guarantee that we'll come get you, so be prepared to get out of here."

Bates protested. "You want me to stay here? What if you're injured and I can help? Wouldn't you want me to help?!"

Sgt. Earley smiled gently at him. "Apart from the fact that you just back-talked a direct order from a commanding officer, if I get injured while I'm in the tank, I'm already dead. The Panthers commander wouldn't have lived this long if he assumed the first shot finished off his target. Anyone with experience would fire two, three, four or maybe five shots if it meant peace of mind."

"What if he's a new commander and he doesn't do all that?"

"That would be quite a miracle. The Panzer Corp values their advanced tanks too much to let a fresh commander run them. The only tanks that the Germans value higher than the panthers are the King Tigers, but I doubt they still have any more of those in Cologne at this point. If they did we would be neck deep in shit."

"What do you mean? Isn't the Pershing the best tank in our forces?"
Asked Bates.

"It probably is, but I highly doubt we could stand up to a King Tiger. the only safe and consistently successful way to take out those things would be an aerial bombardment."

Bates' jaw dropped. He had never heard of anyone using an air strike to take out a single tank.

"Regardless, a Panther is no walk in the park." Earley rose to his feet. "I'm going back to brief the boys. Stay here and for the love of God don't get spotted. If they see movement or a reflection, they'll bring the whole building down."

Bates nodded "Understood sir."

German Panther Tank

Bartelborth sat in his tank, watching the narrow streets for some sort of activity. He had seen the crew of the Shermans that they fired at running away, most likely back to their main force. He had ordered his driver to head to the cathedral, since their position may have been revealed. Once they reached the square in front of the structure, he faced a dilemma. There were three separate routes the Americans could approach from. He had decided that they should face down the middle road since that was where the Shermans had come from, so they would need less time to rotate the gun to either side.

Bartelborth was an experienced officer, holding the Iron Cross medal, first and second class. His crew were all equally seasoned. He frowned as he thought about his crew. It had been some time since he had heard from the crew of the Panzer Mk IV that had been sent with him. He had considered going to find them, but he wasn't eager to risk his own crew in the effort. He had told his men that they would survive this war at any cost, including surrender. The problem was his gunner.

His gunner was new to the crew, as the prior gunner had suffered a heart attack and was deemed unfit for combat. The new gunner, Karl Eriksein, was an SS soldier. The SS, in Bartelborths eyes, were complete maniacs and unreasonably loyal to the Fuhrer. If Bartelborth tried to surrender, Karl would undoubtedly do something to get them all killed

for being traitors, like drop a grenade in the ammo racks. What confused Bartelborth was why Karl was so loyal. The war was coming to a close, with Germany as the loser. There was almost nothing left to be loyal to. Almost, but not nothing. He reached into his jacket, pulling out a photo of his wife and daughter. He smiled at the memory. He thought of his house. His farm with the little brook through it, the wheat waving in the wind and the gentle breeze as it brushed his cheek. Soon, he thought. Soon I will see you again.

Suddenly he snapped back to the situation at hand. Something felt wrong. He listened, hearing his own breathing, the soft rumble of the engine, the breathing of his crew. They sensed it too, whatever it was. He gave a quick order. "Gunner, rotate the turret to the right. Driver hold position." Whatever he had felt, it made him very nervous about the street to the right.

...

Earley approached his crew, who were at a casual ready, leaning through their hatches.

Smoyer leaned forwards. "What kinda tank is it, sir?"

"We've got a pussy cat at the cathedral, and I don't think he's there to pray." Earley said. "Lucky for us, he's facing perpendicular to our street, armor and all. If we catch him on the side, he'll be cooked before he knows what's happening. All clear?"

"Yes sir!" they chorused. They climbed back into the Pershing and started up the 500 horsepower V8 Ford engine. The tank rumbled forward slowly. The infantry stayed well back as they would be of little use in the battle of machines that was to come. Smoyer called to the loader, "Diriggi, APCR." APCR was short for armor piercing composite rigid, a type of tank round that was heavier and carried considerably more force behind it. They were made with a tungsten carbide core which, consequently, meant they were expensive to produce, so a tank would only have 15 to 20 rounds of APCR. They were also 40 pounds each.

Diriggi grunted. "I really feel that y'all just makin' me do more lifting since I won that Texas holdem game last night."

Smoyer grinned at him. "Don't complain so much. Eagle weighs 47 tons. That'd be much worse if you had to pick that up. Besides, You won that dutch chocolate bar in that game. If anyone ought to complain, I should complain about that bullshit royal flush you got."

"Enough of the chatter boys," Earley called. "We're coming up on the cathedral square. Smoyer, don't wait for me to give the order. You fire the second you have a clear shot."

Smoyer nodded. He turned to his traversing lever. He swung the turret all the way to the right, so that once the buildings ended, he would have an immediate shot on the Panther.

He quietly whispered the prayer he always said before he entered combat.

"Thank you lord for the strength you have provided. Thank you for guiding me to victory time and time again, and thank you for helping me make sure the men around me go home. Grant me clear sight and clear thought. Guide me to victory once more, and if we fail, guide us to your gates. Amen."

The driver, William McVey, pressed down on the gas pedal and the Pershing slowly gathered speed. They were almost at the corner of the street. The corner that would reveal the Panther. The corner that would result in one dead tank crew.

Up in the building where they left him, Bates was preparing his camera when he heard a noise. He cautiously rose from the floor and looked out the window. He saw Eagle coming up the street. He looked back at the panther and almost had a heart attack. The Panther's gun was pointed directly where the Eagle would emerge from! When he looked back, the Pershing had almost reached the corner and would place itself right where the Panther was aiming. Too late now, he thought. Might as well get it on camera.

Bartelborth heard the sound of another engine. He looked through his viewports. Nothing moved in front or to the left of him, the streets were completely empty. He looked to the right just as the Eagle turned the corner, only that wasn't what he thought at first. Because of the dim light and clouds of smoke from the buildings that burned, he could only see a faint outline, one that looked more like the Mk IV that was also deployed to Cologne. After all, the Pershing was largely kept secret and wasn't a tank many Germans had seen before.

"Don't shoot!" He said. "That looks like Sergeant Millitzers tank."

As the Eagle came around the corner, Smoyer looked through his scope. He saw the tank, and the cannon that was aimed at him. Without hesitating he slammed his foot down on the trigger. At a range of only 100 meters, which was obscenely close range for their cannon, The shell

went straight through the side panel of the Panther, but he couldn't see whether the shot had penetrated.

Smoyer shouted, "AP!"

"Clear!" Diriggi responded.

Smoyer aimed a little lower. He fired again, this time hitting the panther in the treads.

"AP!"

"Clear!"

Smoyer fired the next shot directly into the gun mantlet. Shortly after, there was a small explosion, then a bigger one right after it, sending a burst of flame out of the top hatch. Smoyer leaned back from the scope.

"Target destroyed," he said. "I think some of the crew exited the tank before the ammo racks went off."

In fact they had abandoned it. As soon as the first shell hit them, the driver and radio man of the Panther opened their hatches and jumped out, running for cover in the ruins of the city. The loader was killed by the shrapnel from the first shot. As Bartelborth opened his hatch, the second shell hit the tank. He had just gotten out of his hatch and was standing on top of the tank when Eriksein grabbed his arm.

"How dare you abandon your post!" he shouted. The veins on his face were pulsing with rage. "You dare accept defeat from those American whoresons?! You're an embarrassment to the fatherland!" He drew his side arm and was about to shoot Bartelborth when Smoyer's third shell struck. Not only did it cut through the turret, it cut through Eriksein. Eriksein had struggled to keep a slim waistline in his former job as a desk officer for the SS, and even as a gunner he had always been a portly fellow. Lucky for him, Smoyers shot removed this problem by separating his upper chest from his waist. His abdomen simply became a spatter stain on the inside of the tank. Bartelborth, seeking to avoid this fate, vaulted off the tank and ran after his crew. As he reached the building they were waiting in, he heard the ammo racks explode.

Earley and Smoyer sat on the roof of the tank, relaxing after a tense and almost disastrous situation, and watching the infantry file past them. Bates, who had returned from his vantage point, beamed at them.

"Excellent shot, Smoyer!" he said. "Though I must admit, I missed the first shot you fired. It made me jump clean out of my shoes! I did

get the other two shots on camera, but I stopped recording when I felt a bigger blast.”

Smoyer and Earley looked at each other. They had been somewhat distracted by the fact that the panther might shoot them if they did not demolish it completely. Then Earley’s heart sank. He jumped down from his seat and ran towards the cathedral, with Bates and Smoyer close behind him. When they reached the cathedral, they had a view of the Rhine, and the demolished bridge that was half submerged. The Germans had blown up the only bridge that spanned the Rhine within 100 kilometers.

Earley rubbed the bridge of his nose. “That’s just fan-fucking-tastic.” that bridge was the only reason he had been sent here, and now it was gone.

When they returned to the cathedral square, he saw three German soldiers, hands raised, standing by the cathedral wall. Earley walked over to the guards, who saluted him once they noticed him.

Earley grunted a greeting. “Where’d these boys spring from?”

The guard gestured past the Panther. “They were hiding in a building down the street opposite the one we came from. They were unarmed so we followed protocol and brought them back. I’m fairly certain they were the crew of the panther. When we searched the tank, there were only two bodies. Additionally, Bates told us that he had seen three men climb out of the tank while he was filming.”

“All right then.” Earley nodded in thought. “We’ll bring ‘em back to base when we’ve cleared out the city. Then we can let the higher-ups decide what to do. Perhaps they can be helpful and tell us how much longer the Germans can hold out.” he walked over to the German who was clearly the commander. “Do you speak English?”

“I do,” he said with a fair bit of an accent.

“Staff Sergeant Earley. You are?”

“Lieutenant Bartelborth. To be blunt, are you going to shoot us Sergeant?”

“No. nor will any of these men. We’re going to take you to our base outside the city. Then our superiors will decide what to do with you.”

He smiled faintly. “Are your superiors going to shoot us?”

Earley returned with a wry grin. “Probably not. You haven’t done anything that would warrant an execution. If you cooperate with them,

you will be released when the war ends, which will probably be rather soon.”

Bartelborth’s face relaxed once he knew he wasn’t facing an execution.

“Yes, this war is closing faster and faster. I’m just happy to have survived it in one piece.”

“I’ll leave you to inform your men what I’ve told you. If you behave and don’t try to escape, you will go home. But some of these boys aren’t as accommodating as I am. I’ll order them not to mistreat you, but they will be looking for any chance to shoot you, so tread lightly.”

Bartelborth, while still looking at Earley, reached up to his left shoulder, grabbed the swastika patch and tore it off.

“I’ve been fighting for one thing; my family. Now that I’ve got a chance to be with them...” he threw the patch on the ground and stomped on it. “I’m done fighting this war, I’m done pretending to give a damn about a superior race, and I’m done risking my life for a maniac’s ideals. The last thing I want to do right now is fight.”

Earley nodded. “I know the feeling. Good luck Lieutenant.” they shook hands, then each turned away. Bartelborth began speaking to his men, and Earley climbed back into Eagle 7.

The Pershing trundled forwards. As they passed the Germans, Earley stood up and saluted them. To his surprise, and appreciation, they returned with the American salute. Maybe the world isn’t completely broken, he thought. Maybe there will be peace when this is over. He slid back down his hatch and ordered the driver to turn down the far street.

Hopefully they were done with surprises.

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