



April 28, 2022
36th Annual Sokol High School Literary Awards

POETRY



1st prize: Joyce Shi



2nd prize: Elani Spencer



3rd prize: Aries Champion

PROSE



1st prize: Grayce Peltz



2nd prize: Ana Paku



3rd prize: Audrey Cleveland



POETRY

1st place: ***From Tissue Paper Magnolias*, Joyce Shi, 12th grade, Pittsford Mendon High School**

Joyce is a senior at Pittsford Mendon High School. When not scribbling words on paper, she can be found fencing, playing the piano, and searching for magic in everything around her.

**Joyce also won the 1st place poetry prize last year!*

2nd place: ***11 Reasons Why This Is Our Home*, Elani Spencer, 11th grade, School of the Arts (SOTA)**

Elani is a junior at School of the Arts. In addition to writing, she loves rollerblading and gardening. She plans to attend a 4-year university to major in creative writing.

3rd place: ***She Plays with Golden Fire*, Aries Champion, 12th grade, School of the Arts (SOTA)**

Aries is a senior creative writing major at School of the Arts. They love doing anything creative including writing and drawing.

PROSE

1st place: ***Woven Stories*, Grayce Peltz, 9th grade, School of the Arts (SOTA)**

Grayce is a 9th grader at School of the Arts. She loves to be outside hiking with her dog as well as running for the school cross country and track teams. She reads as much as she can and is a very beginner knitter.

2nd place: ***Psyche*, Ana Paku, 12th grade, Pittsford Sutherland High School**

Ana is a senior at Pittsford Sutherland High School. She enjoys cheerleading and playing percussion in her school's wind ensemble and is currently relishing the challenge of her creative writing course. She is considering studying Political Science next year in college.

3rd place: ***Eduardo's Mercedes*, Audrey Cleveland, 10th grade, homeschool**

Audrey is a Sophomore from Fairport. When she's not writing or daydreaming, she enjoys reading YA fantasy novels, researching ancient civilizations, and watching romantic comedies.



2022 SOKOL HIGH SCHOOL LITERARY AWARDS



Since 1958, the Friends & Foundation of the Rochester Public Library has sponsored a creative writing contest for Monroe County high school students in grades nine through twelve (homeschoolers welcome). In 1985, Mr. and Mrs. Eli & Mildred Sokol established an endowment through the Community Foundation, that makes it possible for FFRPL to award monetary prizes to the winners and honoraria to the judges. We are pleased to offer a special performance prize in addition to the traditional prose and poetry prizes. Through the Sokols' foresight and generosity, the Friends & Foundation of RPL will be able to encourage young writers for generations to come.

FFRPL thanks the committee and judges of the 2022 Sokol High School Literary Awards.

Sokol committee members (reviewed all entries submitted): Director, Rochester Public Library and Monroe County Library System **Patricia Uttaro**; FFRPL Board member, Sokol committee Chair, and Senior Writer/ Proposal Operations for Maximus **Andrew Iserson**; retired English/Journalism teacher **Mary Heveron-Smith**; Central Library Circulation & Information Center Supervisor **Chad Cunningham**; Central Library Patron Services Manager **Cynthia Dana**; FFRPL Board Treasurer and Boylan Code Attorney **David Hou**; Owner/Founder, *Serve Me the Sky Digital* and Monroe County Library System Board Member **Emily Hessney Lynch**; FFRPL Director of Marketing and Program Development **Susan Chekow Lusignan**.

Prose judge (reviewed all finalists; determined winners): **Kristen Gentry**, Associate Professor of English and Creative Writing, SUNY Geneseo. Prof. Gentry received her M.F.A. from Indiana University, has been a member of the Geneseo faculty since 2007, and often teaches courses in Advanced Fiction, Creative Nonfiction, Reading as a Writer, Foundations of Creative Writing, and Hip Hop and Contemporary American Literature.

Poetry judge (reviewed all finalists; determined winners): **Charles Coté**, Psychotherapist, Poetry instructor at Writers & Books, author of *Flying for the Window*, published by Finishing Line Press and *I Play His Red Guitar*, published by Tiger Bark Press.

Performance judge: **Joshua Pettinger**, owner/operator of Wicked Squid Recording Studios. Note: there were no performances submitted this year.

FFRPL is the 501(c)(3) charity that raises funds, presents programs, supports special projects, helps create specialized spaces, and purchases supplemental materials & equipment for the Rochester Public Library.



TABLE OF CONTENTS



POETRY

1st place: <i>From Tissue Paper Magnolias</i> , Joyce Shi	p.1
2nd place: <i>11 Reasons Why This Is Our Home</i> , Elani Spencer.....	p.3
3rd place: <i>She Plays with Golden Fire</i> , Aries Champion.....	p.5
Judge's comments/Poetry.....	p.18

PROSE

1st place: <i>Woven Stories</i> , Grayce Peltz.....	p.7
2nd place: <i>Psyche</i> , Ana Paku.....	p.9
3rd place: <i>Eduardo's Mercedes</i> , Audrey Cleveland.....	p.13
Judge's comments/Prose.....	p.19-21

Sokol Award Winners posted to SUNY Brockport's Open Access Repository

Thanks to our partners at The College at Brockport, the winning entries for 2022 can be [viewed and downloaded](#) here.

The **complete collection** of Sokol award winning entries (**2015 through 2022**) can be [viewed and downloaded here](#).

Since 2015, winning entries have been downloaded collectively **more than 2,000 times**, from **at least 44 countries!**

FFRPL is the 501(c)(3) charity that raises funds, presents programs, supports special projects, helps create specialized spaces, and purchases supplemental materials & equipment for the Rochester Public Library.

from tissue paper magnolias

i. we wander the streets of jing'an district
and you ask me to tell you a story.

from blossoming yulan magnolias
grow memories i've never lived:

a boy plucking petals in the schoolyard,
a girl peeling a persimmon from its navel,
a woman with a heart as slippery as moonbeams.

you tell me to stop thinking
about a life that isn't mine.

ii. my father grew up on a street nestled
between alleyways.

cigarette stubs jut from cracks in stone,
facing the old man who sells
popsicles and paper kites in the summertime.

statues clutter the entrance,
overgrown with ivy and shaded
by blankets hung out to dry.

i've never seen him love a place
as he loves the crumbling courtyard
of his first home:

a first love vibrating with the chatter
of swollen cicadas and sweet
adolescent nostalgia.

the last time we visited,
the walls were marked for demolition
and flowers littered the cobblestones,

trampled by the gentle padding
of stray cats.

iii. the first time my grandmother forgot my name,
i held her hands and cried.

i shaped flowers from red tissue paper
and thought about immortality—
atrophy remedied by life eternal.

her fingertips were translucent and
her words slipped from breath to air
like the spinning of silk.

she asked about her old home
near the city temple:

i told her it was blooming
at this time of year,

then prayed to the gods
for forgiveness.

iv. the next time, my grandmother
forgot everything.

she kept my flowers (unchanging)
by the bed and asked me about
the woman who lives on the moon:

i told her she was waiting
for the stars to bloom.

v. we stumble into an alley strewn with
lanterns overhead.

i tell you how the story ends:

to close lunar new year,
we light lanterns and let them burn.

i carve magnolias into mine
and watch them float away.

11 reasons why this is our home

Here, we all know the art of hanging,
over porch railing, out of second-story windows,
calling to each other like seagulls
across a vast sea.

Lemme holla atcha for a secnd
How's them babies?

Here, we peek out of closed blinds
like the bars of our prison cell

Here, we put big tires on tiny cars
so we remember how it feels to sit on a throne

Here, we pile into back seats
like cargo in the belly of a ship

Here, children suck on ice cubes
on hot summer days,
greasy scalps sizzling in the heat.

Here, hair beads smacking against a little girl back
sounds like a standing ovation
as she runs into her daddy's arms

Here, we bury our dreams deeper than
the cracks in our sidewalks

Here, our brothers and sisters sleep
on cold park benches,
wrapping themselves in the sorrows
of newspaper headlines

Here, saggy pants men waddle into corner stores
for a six-pack to drown their demons

Here, we carry more guns than children
then point them in the wrong direction

Here, we leave teddy bears for the dead
Then look to the sky, hands up
like we're holding a boombox
and the whole block sings along

She Plays With Golden Fire

She plays with golden fire

Romping and leaping without a care in the world.

The hem of her dress is set alight by playful lies,

promises kept just to be forgotten.

the flames shimmer like the sequins on her bag,

then fades away to nothing but ash.

Flecks of grey fly like the ash

of a phoenix made of flaxen fire.

Feathers gone missing like the memories in her bag.

She swears their eyes are watching from the world

above her, leaving her forgotten

like the promises with her lies.

As the fire dies she lies

on a shimmering bed of golden ash.

Her slumber's broken by the ones she had forgotten

watching as the remnants of fire

illuminates what is now her world.

Yet the memories still are absent from her bag.

The stars in the sky like sequins on her bag
twinkling and sparkling like their lies.
She tries to reach out for their world
yet all she can grab is flaxen ash.
spreading farther from the source of the fire
it is now too forgotten.

Her eyes close slowly as all is forgotten once more.
her thoughts drifting from her empty bag,
to the flaxen fire
left now as an empty source of lies.
she drops the ash
feeling it falter as she reaches for the world.

She freezes as the world
closes in on her form now forgotten
Covering her in ash
and pulling her free from her bag.
She sits and takes it like the lies
that came from the roaring fire.

Once her eyes are open she collects her bag of lies from the fire,
and treks on in the world left forgotten, covered in flaxen ash.

Woven Stories

In all the scarves that my grandmother has made, there is a story. Stories flow from her fingers like water, flow from her hair like sunshine, flow from her mouth like song. The scarves that my grandmother knits are beautiful and full of color. Red from the bloodiest heart, blue from the most vibrant flowers, yellows that seem straight from the sun. They mesh together into a collection of beauty that takes your breath away and at the same time gives all the oxygen needed. These scarves, when worn, tell the wearer fantastic adventures of love, of loss, of friendship, and of life. The scarves, made with the softest wool, wrap the wearer in warmth with the stories that creep silently into their ears and crawl into their memories.

On my 10th birthday, I was given my scarf woven with strands of silver and gold from the trees in our backyard, the ones that I sit under to think and reflect. The mix of deep ocean blue and parrot green tells others about my secrets, the ones that I don't even realize that I have.

My mother's scarf is purple and red. Orchids and cherries wind through my memories, like filtered sunshine. My father's is black, so deep that it goes on forever with slashes of marigolds that look like they might be swallowed up if you stare for too long. The scarves tell my family's stories. We put them on and the words wriggle up from the woven strands of memory and out into the world. The cherries tell of parents lost too early. The orchids tell of the pain receding. The darkest and deepest black show life with no true family and the orange there hints at family is who you choose. The scarves tell your most sacred secrets to the whole world but still keep them close to your heart.

There is bravery in letting others wear your scarf. The secrets will dig themselves out from their hiding place in the wool and go into your head and heart. They will share themselves with the wearer. They will make a nest in that person's heart and will not leave. The scarf is forever. There is bravery in wearing someone else's scarf.

The scarf is woven from love and loss. The pain is shared between the wearer and the maker. The giver and the receiver. The scarf only comes to you when you have secrets though. It could come at 10, 20 or 30 years old. Everybody has secrets. These scarves help us to acknowledge that. Without your scarf, you are safe. But with your scarf, you are protected.

No one knows how my grandmother makes such wonderful stories. No one knows how she knows all our secrets. No one knows how she weaves them together. No one knows except for me. I am the one who knows.

I know that you have to take filtered sunlight from the afternoon sun. That you must know the person inside and out before their scarf appears. That the making of the scarf takes only minutes even though the secrets last for lifetimes. Those memories are the hardest part to grab. They are like spiderwebs. Sticky and icky to touch. You have to reach out and pluck --*not grab, not pull, not extract, not jerk, not yank, not tug, not twist and certainly never snatch, she tells me*--the memories from the mind. *This is a slow process, she tells me.* The winding of this memory thread into wool, the weaving of the wool into a scarf, the giving of the scarf to the receiver. That I have not learned yet. When to start it and when to give it has not been taught. *This is a slow process, she tells me.* But I am willing to wait. The stories will one day flow from my fingers like water, flow from my hair like sunshine, flow from my mouth like song. The scarves will be my gift to people, a relief from the burden of carrying their secrets around alone.

psyche

Somebody once told me that each time we remember something, our memory is not of the event itself. Rather, we only remember the prior reimagining. Then, each time we revisit that memory, it becomes less of a lens for us, and more of a mirror. A sort of rebuilding. Like Theseus's ship, but why should we only replace the rotting planks? What if we replace the planks that squeak as we walk over them, or the planks stained by alcohol, or the planks with nicks in the wood, from when we threw ourselves to the floor and breathed bloody air into each other's mouths? Is it still Theseus's ship if we changed it simply because we *wanted* to?

I'm trying to picture a few days ago, when you told me you *couldn't do this anymore*. Funny, you said it in the corner of the café we always sat in when ordering breakfast. You used to say such pretty things in that booth, preaching in the morning while the light sucked shadows from your skin: *Poetry and music must be close for either to be really well done. We must imagine Sisyphus not happy but persistent. You could be so smart if you'd only speak a little more.* That would make me laugh, and then I couldn't say anything at all.

Your face smudges now. You were mad, at first, and then I thought you might be afraid, and then I saw a tiredness that melted you into your seat. I wished you would rage. I wished you would color brilliantly, your teeth flashing, your eyes burning bottomless. When you got angry, your vision narrowed like a bull's. I would wave my red-flag mouth and watch you become blind to everything but me, and that felt *good*.

I confess— I am no great craftsman. I cannot make these fragments more than they are. But let me take Theseus's ship up in my hand; let me brush my fingers over the wave-battered beams and feel those familiar dips before they are sanded down. Three nights: three pieces. That can be enough.

The first night is battered, splintered through. In every way I can picture it, it comes down to the same thing.

You wait outside the bar to catch me at the bottleneck. We are healthily drunk, and our words are meaningless, acrid, spewing into the dark. You reach for your hair and pull as your inhibition gives like rotten wood.

At times like this I wonder: do you hate me?

When you press your shaking hands into my skin, whispering curses against my lips, I know the answer does not matter.

We bruise each other. We tug at fraying strings. We say: *I will meet you at your worst*. You leave your shirt at my apartment, and I use it to wipe my floors clean of the mud you track in.

The second night fractures in the middle.

As you sleep, you curl to the left side, shielding your chest with the pledge of a palm. I watch you rise, and fall, and rise, and rock. *There*: I want to pick out your thoughts from the quiet of your face. The curve of your cheek, the crease of your brow— I coax them into meaning.

Despite what I may surmise, you are not much more than your body. I know *that* well. I have seen a great deal of you, pushed up against my bathroom sink, with one eye always on the mirror.

Something in my form caves as I watch you sleep, dying flowers in a gale. In quiet moments, I cannot help being weak. I have opened myself and become raw where I should have been rough. My fingers twitch out, trying to leave a touch that is soft.

Starting, you roll over slightly, eyelids cracked open. You are not fully awake, but you gather impressions of the room. Of me, bending over you, one hand outstretched.

At times like this I wonder: do you see me?

When you shift back into place, disappearing into yourself again, my hand drops. I feel shame. I have done something awful, or something awful has happened, and I have not been able to stop it.

I think you know what comes after. We gain momentum, and as we hurtle towards an inevitable, we spark and catch fire, burning out in a coffee shop sometime in the morning. The final bruises are exchanged, parting gifts for voyages to opposite ends of the world.

Let me give you my final piece. I have been selfish with this one, but no longer.

Do you remember the last night you cooked dinner in my house, three weeks out from the end? You spilled chicken broth over my counter; you let the water boil into the stove grate while trying to explain the mysteries of the universe to me. You said to *put some actual goddamn music on, none of that electronic crap*, and I told you how pretentious you were and did it anyways. It was that song about the girl named after the drink, and I knew it was right when I saw your eyes light up with prideful pleasure. I sat on my stool and watched you dance around my kitchen, absorbed in yourself.

For a second, I wished my house faced east, not west. I wanted you to turn around and face me. I did not want to wonder anymore; I wanted to stand up and place my hand under your sternum, where your ribs split. We needed to change in that moment. We needed to stop seeking out our faults. We needed to be good to each other.

You looked back, drops of broth falling from your spoon and crashing to the floor. You asked:
what are you thinking?

I cannot see your face in my mind's eye. Too many times, that memory has been passed over. You watch me, I suppose, and it is not enough. I answer: *nothing in particular*. We find our burden again, continuing up our mountain.

Imagine that one day, I learn to disregard the past. When I come looking for you, you are full, and you have not tasted bitter for ages.

I am sweet as well, and still foolish. We have hurt each other. Still, I ask you to imagine us happy.

One question remains: do you listen to me?

Eduardo's Mercedes

The engine revved and the whole structure of the vehicle began to hum good naturedly like a well-tuned guitar.

And then I was back.

My mother sang the notes of a song I no longer remembered the words to, but the simple resonating of the tune flooded my ears like the crashing of the sea on the warm sandy beaches of home. The flimsy screen door slammed shut and my father came out, deep mahogany eyes like the bark of maple trees and holding a newly polished tawny instrument.

I asked him why he polished *Abuelo's* guitar at all when he knew he could never buff out the cigar burn Great Uncle Alberto left or fix the dent when the guitar fell out of the case.

He said, "*Una guitarra* is like an automobile, *hijo*. You must keep her shiny and looking like she came out of the shop *esta mañana*."

His calloused fingers danced across the strings like the murals of angels in the church I imagined played theirs in Heaven. He closed his eyes and drifted a little to the music.

I closed mine too and let myself fall into the quiet symphonies of strings.

When I opened them, the sun glared in my face and when I shielded it with my hand, he seemed to glow brighter, happy that I was no longer lost in my memories.

I slammed the hood of the 1961 Mercedes-Benz 190SL shut, pulled off my oil stained gloves and wiped the dribbling sweat off my wrinkled brow. As I walked past the 1969 280 SE 3.5 Cabriolet, I dragged my fingers across the glossy surface of the side door and suddenly I was opening it for a young woman wearing neon orange bell bottoms and a form fitting emerald tunic that barely hid her stomach. She flung a tuft of her feathered, crow black hair over her shoulder and flashed a white toothed grin as she flounced towards me.

I sighed.

Angelina Fernández.

When she stepped in front of me, she slyly planted a kiss on my cheek.

I stood there for a minute, having forgotten everything I knew, but then she laughed and slid into the shotgun side and turned up the Beatles' "Here Comes the Sun" in Spanish.

I smiled and listened to the soft strumming of the guitar before flicking on the engine. I pecked a kiss on Angelina's cheek and peeled out of the parking lot, her normally quiet voice whooping in delight as we tore down the road.

"Eduardo?" a soft whisper, barely heard above the breeze asked, feeling far away as if from a dream.

I looked up to see Angelina standing in front of me with a worried expression. Her hair now had streaks of gray and light wrinkles had replaced the laugh lines on her forehead, but one could not say she wasn't still beautiful.

I shook my head and let her take my arm as we strolled back towards the house.

As we walked, I patted the car that had taken my son to the airport after he had told me he wanted to go live in Britain to go to business school.

I brushed my finger across the one that I had fixed myself when I worked in *Rafael's Auto and Repair Co.* in Havana to raise enough money to travel to America with my then wife, Angelina. I smiled a little when I remembered it still had the *ropa vieja* sauce stain on the front seat from one of the times she had visited me on break. I would never wipe it off, even if it wasn't permanently soaked into the camel brown leather.

When we passed the one my father had bought as a going away present before I left for America, I lingered for a minute.

"La vida te llevará a los rincones más lejanos de la tierra, Eduardo," he said in our native tongue and rested his hands on my shoulders.

A single tear slipped out of his eye and my own widened. I had never seen my father cry. My mother stepped up beside him and squeezed his shoulder.

He cleared his throat and continued.

"And life will throw challenges at you, hijo mío," he continued in English. *"But you must overcome them. Life is...una montaña, Eduardo. Your goal is to find your camino, not to reach the top."*

I smiled.

He continued to stubbornly claim to have said it first even after I told him the ice hockey player, Maxime Lagacé, was credited with saying it later.

A tear slipped over my dust stained cheek and I wiped it away.

Angelina seemed to understand and gave me a reassuring smile.

“Maybe we should take a drive, *mi amor?*” she asked and clasped my hand in hers.

I nodded vaguely and turned away from the car to trot back to the opposite end of the driveway.

I opened the door to the Cabriolet and bowed dramatically. Angelina just smiled at me as she slid into the passenger side and turned on the radio.

“Here Comes the Sun” came on and I gently kissed her cheek before backing up the Mercedes and careening down the road.

Angelina glanced at me out of the corner of her eye before raising her hands to the wind and crying out in satisfaction.

I just kept my eyes on the road as I slammed my foot on the accelerator, but as I listened to George Harrison sing of finding happiness, the hint of a smile played at the edges of my lips as we drove into ecstasy.

Glossary (Eduardo's Mercedes)

Abuelo-grandpa/grandfather

Una guitarra-A guitar

hijo (mío)-(my) son

esta mañana-this morning

ropa vieja-a Cuban dish originating from the Canary Islands that "consists of previously boiled and shredded meat, cooked in a sauce with onion, bell peppers, bay leaves, and cumin, among other ingredients" -Yami Cabrera on *chefspencil.com*

La vida te llevará a los rincones más lejanos de la tierra, Eduardo

-Life will take you to the farthest corners of the earth, Eduardo

una montaña-a mountain

camino-path

mi amor-my love

1st place/Poetry: From Tissue Paper Magnolias, Joyce Shi

Dear Joyce,

Congratulations on your Sokol Award!

Your poem floats in memory with precise imagery that works both as lamp and mirror, illuminating and reflecting an imagined world that I can inhabit. I'm intrigued by the dramatic address to a mysterious other, the one who tells the speaker to stop imagining other's lives. To my way of thinking, the speaker's sympathetic identification *is* the task of every poet and storyteller. The repetition of various blooms is pleasing to read. I appreciate your sophistication with language and syntax. It welcomes me into the speaker's imagined and lived experience in a way that carves those stories on my heart.

I wish you the very best with all your future writing.

Sincerely,
Charlie Côté

2nd place/Poetry: 11 Reasons Why This Is Our Home, Elani Spencer

Dear Elani,

Congratulations on your Sokol Award!

This is a poem of witness. It testifies and implicates. It has a cinematic quality that sets us down in the middle of so much action. It speaks out with authentic grit and visceral imagery from a particular place under unbearable pressure, speaks out about what it means to be alive and survive against all odds, so vividly so that the reader lives there too with all that threat and degradation. The repeated assertion of the present moment, the here and here and here, affirms the power of poetry to bring it all home and we feel it.

I wish you the very best in your future writing.

Sincerely,
Charlie Côté

3rd place/Poetry: She Plays with Golden Fire, Aries Champion

Dear Aries,

Congratulations on your Sokol Award!

There's a formal elegance to your poem, a sestina for heaven's sake! You handle such a difficult artistic challenge with grace and style. Nothing feels forced. The poem creates a dreamlike effect that is delightful, and you shape it towards such a compelling and ironic transformation. Your phoenix descends into the ashes, and oh, how that rings true. Your poem dazzles us with fire and brings us, inevitably, to a world of ash, and while we lament that incineration, our shimmering bag of lies laid bare, we find a way to sift through the remnants and try again.

I wish you the very best in your future writing.

Sincerely,
Charlie Côté

“Woven Stories” is a simply lovely story. The language used to describe the scarves that the first-person narrator’s grandmother knits for those she loves, those whose secrets she knows, wraps readers in a world just as mesmerizing, beautiful, and comforting as the scarves that protect the owners. The beauty of the scarves lies in the stories woven into the garments. The narrator explains, *“These scarves, when worn, tell the wearer fantastic adventures of love, of loss, of friendship, and of life. The scarves, made with the softest wool, wrap the wearer in warmth with the stories that creep silently into their ears and crawl into their memories.”*

These stories include secrets that are *“like spiderwebs. Sticky and icky to touch.”* The grandmother explains that you *“have to reach out and pluck—not grab, not pull, not extract, not jerk, not yank, not tug, not twist, and certainly never snatch”* these delicate memories to make the scarf. While the secrets may be dark and painful, their presence in the scarf creates the mix of rich colors that make the garment so exquisite. The scarves symbolize the beauty in our trauma. They illustrate the idea that wearing our scars like a prized possession can help us reveal ourselves to others and gain connection as a result. Deeper connection is gained in the story as the narrator tells of people donning others’ scarves and experiencing that person’s secrets *“[making] a nest in [their] heart.”*

This connection, of course, begins with the grandmother, the knitter who can only make a scarf once she becomes aware of the future owner’s secrets. This intimate knowledge baffles the narrator apprenticing under their grandmother. They do not know how her grandmother knows but want to learn and declare that they are willing to wait.

The narrator—and readers—understand that gaining this knowledge is going to take time, patience, an attentive eye, and keen, listening ears. Seeing someone down to their core takes the willingness to dig beneath the surface, acknowledge their pain, and create the connection and reassurance that allows that person to shine the beauty of the strength and wisdom they have earned from that pain out into the world to others. “Woven Stories” shares this thematic message about empathy and compassion in a time when the world most urgently needs it.

Kristen J. Gentry
Associate Professor of English
Director of Creative Writing
SUNY Geneseo

2nd place/Prose: Psyche, Ana Paku

The heartbroken first-person narrator in “Psyche” feels stuck, lamenting to their former partner over their lost relationship. They relive its demise in a memory loop, questioning the truth of their recollection warped by frequent journeys over the same, worn terrain of fights and making up. The narrator’s reflection is rich with stunning figurative language that allows readers to glimpse a sense of the allure that draws them back to this ultimately doomed toxic relationship with a narcissistic partner. They recall the *“pretty things”* their partner would say sitting in a cafe, *“preaching in the morning while the light sucked shadows from [their] skin.”* The narrator remembers watching their partner sleep, *“[curled] to the left side, shielding [their] chest with the pledge of a palm.”* Even the partner’s anger sparks attraction as the narrator expresses their desire for them to *“rage.”*

“I wished you would color brilliantly, your teeth flashing, your eyes burning bottomless. When you got angry, your vision narrowed like a bull’s. I would wave my red-flag mouth and watch you become blind to everything but me, and that felt good.”

They compare themselves to *“dying flowers in a gale”* as they recall being weakened by witnessing their partner in the silent vulnerability of sleep. They confess, *“I have opened myself and become raw where I should have been rough.”* The narrator’s questions to the ex throughout the story seem to illustrate not only their wrestling with memory and whether their recollection of the flaws that led to the relationship’s end are true accounts, but the questions also seem to be propositions and indications of their hope that the broken pieces of their relationship can be replaced to create a new, healthy, lasting relationship.

This possibility, like the question of The Ship of Theseus referenced in the narrator’s initial pondering about memory, offers no definitive answer. And in that absence of absolutes, the narrator continues to imagine a different, *“happy”* future and asks the ex to imagine along with them. However, in this future, the narrator describes themselves as *“still foolish,”* and this speculative future is followed by the narrator’s question, *“...do you listen to me?”* This suggests that what the narrator wants to forget cannot be forgotten, what they want to begin anew still holds traces of what had been *“rotting.”* The story is a beautifully written account of love, loss, regret, and the potentially fatiguing, damaging power of relentless hope.

Kristen J. Gentry
Associate Professor of English
Director of Creative Writing
SUNY Geneseo

3rd place/Prose: Eduardo's Mercedes, Audrey Cleveland

Eduardo, the first-person narrator in "Eduardo's Mercedes," is taken back in time on a journey of memories with loved ones triggered by work on his collection of vintage cars. The first stop in Eduardo's memory is a moment with his grandfather. Figurative language is used to link the present to the past as Cleveland writes, *"The engine revved and the whole structure of the vehicle began to hum good naturedly like a well-tuned guitar."*

In Eduardo's memory, his grandfather holds a *"newly polished tawny instrument"* and explains, *"Una guitarra is like an automobile, hijo. You must keep her shiny and looking like she came out of the shop esta manana."*

This connection between past and present continues via concrete imagery. Eduardo's fingers *"[dragging] across the glossy surface of the side door"* of a 1969 280 SE 3.5 Cabriolet leads to a memory of opening the door for his wife, Angelina. Physical description of Angelina, who *"[flings] a tuft of her feathered, crow black hair over her shoulder,"* and the reference to the Beatles' "Here Comes the Sun," which the two listen to as they ride, help solidify the time period. When this flashback is interrupted by a *"soft whisper"* and readers see Angelina through Eduardo's eyes with her hair streaked gray and *"light wrinkles"* on her face, we now understand that he and Angelina are decades away from those young lovers in 1969. This is solidified in Eduardo's memory of his son, now living in Britain attending business school.

Eduardo is saddened by the passage of time, the distance between him and the loved ones in his cherished memories, but Angelina, who unlike Eduardo's grandfather, father, and son, is still near. She urges him to take a ride in the Mercedes, and as they do Eduardo realizes that there are still miles of road left untraveled.

"Eduardo's Mercedes" uses skillful crafting to remind readers of the gift of the present moment.

Kristen J. Gentry
Associate Professor of English
Director of Creative Writing
SUNY Geneseo