



Friends & Foundation *of the*  
Rochester Public Library

**April 24, 2025**  
**39th Annual Sokol High School Literary Awards**



**ABOUT FFRPL**

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. We also manage restricted funds that provide supplemental materials support to 62 eligible libraries in Monroe, Ontario, Wayne, Livingston, Orleans and Genesee counties. [ffrpl.org](http://ffrpl.org)

**2025 SOKOL HIGH SCHOOL LITERARY AWARDS**

Since 1958, the Friends & Foundation of the Rochester Public Library (FFRPL) has sponsored a creative writing contest for Monroe County high school students. Entries from public, private, charter schools and Home Schools are welcomed.

In 1985, **Eli & Mildred Sokol** established an endowment through the **Community Foundation**, which makes it possible for FFRPL to award monetary prizes to the winners, and honoraria to the judges. The Sokols' foresight and generosity ensures that FFRPL will be able to maintain this legacy program for young writers in perpetuity.

**Thanks to the Sokol family and The Community Foundation for making this Legacy Program possible.**

## CONGRATULATIONS to the 2025 Sokol WINNERS!



**Poetry 1st prize**

**Miriam Parham**

**12th grade, School of the Arts (SOTA)**

Miriam is a senior Creative Writing major at School of the Arts. Outside of writing poetry, she enjoys journaling, crocheting, and going out to eat with her friends.



**Poetry 2nd prize**

**Thehara Ubayawardena**

**12th grade, Pittsford Mendon High School**

Thehara is a senior from Pittsford-Mendon High School. They are an editor for Scribere Literary Journal and an intern at BreakBread Literacy Project. Besides writing, Thehara loves cats, psychology, and Sherlock Holmes.



**Poetry 3rd prize**

**Frankie Reiss**

**9th grade, School of the Arts (SOTA)**

Frankie is a 9th grade creative writing major at School of the Arts. Outside of school Frankie enjoys playing softball, volleyball, and the drums in a band with her sisters.



**Prose 1st prize**

**Hailee Grove**

**11th grade, School of the Arts (SOTA)**

Hailee is a creative writing major at SOTA. Aside from writing, she enjoys biking and photography. She also enjoys collecting teddy bears, lamps, rocks, and other knick-knacks.



**Prose 2nd prize**

**Kayla Smith**

**10th grade, Spencerport High School**

Kayla attends Spencerport High School. In addition to writing, Kayla enjoys singing, musical theater, and drawing. At school, she is a part of Vocal Jazz and Treble Choir.



**Prose 3rd prize**

**Jasmine Wu**

**9th grade, Pittsford Sutherland High School**

Jasmine loves to write stories, enjoys reading fictional books, and listens to music. She plays piano outside of school, is part of the varsity tennis team, and loves trying out new snacks!

## 2025 Sokol committee and judges

Committee members read all entries and select the finalists.

Judges then determine the winners in each category.

**Donna Borgus**, FFRPL Executive Director

**Susan Chekow Lusignan**, FFRPL Director of Marketing and Program Development

**Committee Chair, the Honorable Renee Minarik**, FFRPL Board Member; Retired Judge of the N.Y.S. Court of Claims

**Elijah Bader-Gregory**, University of Rochester, Class of 2026; President, Undergraduate Students' Association; great-grandson of Eli and Mildred Sokol

**Chad Cunningham**, Central Library Circulation & Information Center Supervisor

**Katy Hasselwander**, Manager of Library Finance for the Rochester Public Library & Monroe County Library System

**Mary Heveron-Smith**, retired English/Journalism teacher

**David Hou**, Attorney with the law firm Bond, Schoeneck & King; prior FFRPL Board Member

**Jim Kraus**, retired Wilson Magnet English teacher; FFRPL Board Member/liaison to the Rochester Public Library Board

**Andrew Iseron**, Senior Project Director/Attorney for Maximus Federal Services

**Dr. Karen Soanes**, Director of Instructional Technology & Innovation, Bloomfield Central School District; FFRPL Board member

**Elani Spencer**, three-time Sokol award-winner from School of the Arts, Hollins University class of 2027, Roanoke's first Youth Poet Laureate

**Jeffrey Tucker**, RPL Board member; Associate Professor of English, University of Rochester

**Ichin Zinn**, FFRPL Board member; former Director of the Mendon Library; former staff member at Pittsford Community and Brighton Memorial Libraries



**Poetry judge:**

**Charles Coté** Psychotherapist, poetry instructor at Writers & Books; author of *Flying for the Window* (Finishing Line Press) and *I Play His Red Guitar* (Tiger Bark Press).



**Prose judge:**

**Dr. Tokeya C. Graham** Professor, English/Philosophy Dept., Monroe Community College; Vice-Chair of the African American Affinity Group, 3AG.



**Performance judge:**

**Joshua Pettinger** Owner and operator of Wicked Squid Recording Studios, specializing in remote audio recording, mixing, artist development and management.



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

Thanks to **Mary Jo Orzech**, Scholarly Communications Librarian at the **College of Brockport Drake Memorial Library**, for including the winning Sokol submissions on Brockport's online, open access repository. The complete collection of Sokol award winning entries since 2015 can be [\*\*viewed and downloaded.\*\*](#)

## Church Girl Pantoum

What more must our purpose be than to serve man and the Lord?

Hands clasped in the detest of sin—we know—

to ward off sins of womanhood

peace will be found in the forest fires of our minds.

Hands clasped still in the detest of sin—we know

our sisters have become the enemy. In the ocean of pleated skirts

peace is found in the forest fires of our minds

and skirts that reach our fingertips by our knees.

Our sisters have become the enemy. And in the oceans of pleated skirts

wild horses run through our bones,

under skirts reaching fingertips placed at the knees,

braying at the brashness of our obedience.

Wild horses run through our bones

leading us to a salvation of freedom.

Braying at the brashness of our obedience

they know I am something more than these pleats.

Leading us to a salvation of freedom

to ward off apparent sins of womanhood

they know I am something more than these pleats.

What more must our purpose be than to serve man and the Lord?

I am something more.

## Remarks from Charles Coté, Sokol Poetry judge

### Poetry First Place: *Church Girl Pantoum*

This poem's use of the pantoum form is breathtaking, creating a hypnotic, cyclical effect that mirrors the tension between imposed obedience and the quiet, growing defiance of the speaker. The imagery is both delicate and powerful—pleated skirts, clasped hands, and wild horses evoke a sense of repression and rebellion intertwining. The tone is reverent yet questioning, capturing the internal conflict between faith, tradition, and self-liberation. The emotional impact is immense; the reader feels the slow but inevitable awakening of a girl realizing she is more than the roles assigned to her. Culturally, this poem speaks to the experience of many women who navigate religious expectations while yearning for self-definition. The overall style is elegant and precise, making for a deeply moving and triumphant piece.

## Social Norms Pop Quiz

Given a scenario, select the most appropriate response.

### 1. Dinner

**A) — skip & stay in your room**

*but I know that's rude*

*refusing someone else's*

*time and effort*

*who cares if I*

*feel sick to my stomach*

*I could just—*

**B) — attend but not eat**

*but that'll make everyone*

*feel awkward, won't it?*

*that or fingers clasped*

*over my wrist, declaring anorexia*

*like they know what that means*

*like I don't actually over*

**C) eat**

*then maybe I'll starve*

*or vomit or sleep*

*the rest of the day away*

### 2. Serving oneself

**A) — take small portions**

*and then get called rude again*

**B) — take portions similar to everyone else's**

*I might just throw up without meaning to*

**C) take however much you want**

*in other words, choice A*

*if I'm feeling generous*

### 3. Chewing sounds

**A) — “do you mind?”**

*actually, wait, sorry*

*forget that I said that*

*sometimes I feel so inhuman*

*the sounds and motions of bodily functions*

*are so awfully repulsive to me*

*my hands fly to*

**B) — cover ears**

*but then they’ll call me rude (again), won’t they?*

*what else am I supposed to do if I can’t*

**C) — ask them to be quieter**

*sorry, sorry again*

*that’s rude too, isn’t it?*

*especially since they insist they’re already so quiet*

*sometimes it feels like my ears are megaphones*

*turned inwards while all the world is screaming—*

*but nevermind that, dinnertime is family time*

*time for me to wish that I could*

*make the voices in my head louder*

*than all the noises outside*

*but I should stop complaining, right? instead*

**D) grin and bear**

*because they told me it’s not that bad*

*and not to overexaggerate*

*because they’ve worn my ears*

*and thought my thoughts*

*so they must understand it all*

*what else is there for me to do*

*but simply nod along?*



## **Remarks from Charles Coté, Sokol Poetry judge**

### **Poetry Second Place: *Social Norms Pop Quiz***

This poem's unique structure, styled as a multiple-choice quiz, ingeniously captures the relentless self-questioning of social anxiety and disordered eating. The form itself becomes a metaphor for the impossible choices and contradictions the speaker faces, making the reader feel the suffocating weight of societal expectations. The tone is introspective and deeply personal, yet universally resonant, as it explores themes of belonging, self-perception, and the erasure of personal struggles by those who claim to understand. The emotional impact is profound—there is a raw vulnerability that lingers long after reading. This piece shines as a poignant commentary on the invisible battles fought within seemingly mundane social rituals.

## The American Abecedarian

Absurdity is the only way we know how to live these days.

Before we went and lost our minds it was easy to say he's  
crazy. What to say now with the penalty of  
death looming just over the wall.

Everything I say is calculated but I'm no political leader.

Forget about free-thinking, this is the era of enlightenment.

Good times for love and better times for

hate. You'll have to excuse me,

I have to check my phone.

Just in: the president tweets something new about minorities because  
killing them isn't enough.

Laugh in the face of your foes.

May they suffer in our Red White and Blue shadows.

Now grab your guns and rise,

Off we go to the schools.

Practice the lock down drills and

Quiet the room if you care for your children.

Reach for those automatics with record time.

Stay still, the guns can smell fear now.

Twelve year olds are in the trenches,

"unwavering patriotism" is what they're telling us.

Vacationing in the Bahamas while they tell the boys that

War isn't murder as they send

Xanax in mass amounts.

You'll see the end when

zero survivors are left.

## Remarks from Charles Coté, Sokol Poetry judge

### Poetry Third Place: *The American Abecedarian*

This poem masterfully employs the abecedarian form to create a relentless, urgent rhythm that mirrors the escalating tension of its themes. The imagery is stark and unflinching—every line cuts deeper into the chaos of contemporary America. The tone is biting, sardonic, and deeply unsettling, evoking a feeling of helplessness and rage in the face of systemic violence and political absurdity. The cultural significance of this piece is undeniable; it captures a moment in history with sharp critique, exposing the contradictions of patriotism, violence, and desensitization. The overall style is both lyrical and journalistic, a brilliant fusion of poetry and protest.

## LUMEN

*He was there when the world went dark. The sacred glow of his flame was carried on the breath of twilight. The earth yearned for his warmth as the frost claws away at her skin. His slim, cylindrical body of wax has melted time and time again. Hundreds of layers of thick, oozing wax have stratified into his complex over decades, a capsule of his age. A lake of molten wax now pools around the wick, welcoming the flame with open arms. It is warm, soft, insouciant, greeting the glow. The glow flickers in the twilight, controlled, tame, even kind. In reality, it is harsh and coarse. Through this mask of kindness, Ergo Vanderlumen will always burn. By a single touch, the flesh of the one who harbors curiosity will be burned by the scorching flame...*

Beneath the flames of nourishment and gentle demeanor, he yearns. He yearns, for his flames to fatten as if they were ripe apples in the midst of summertime. To expand, to destroy, to multiply, as his flames consume all before him. The glow will blossom as the sky kisses his forehead, a propellant of his desire. Her eyes will watch, wispy and scant, as they drift across the sky. Someday they will grow plump, and weep down upon his flame. Her tears will not quench his flame, yet they will extinguish it. The sky is both with and against him, granting a breath of oxygen that nourishes, yet tears of rain that douse. He could envelop the world, he has the potential. The potential to destroy, the potential to hate.

*"I could be the most powerful beast that often roamed the vast lands of Earth! She will see me and cower."* He often thought to himself. Yet he also held the potential to nourish, to warm. To provide protection for the sickly animals, chasing away the cold fangs of winter. More candles reside in the house, their aromas new and fresh. They were young, as he once was. The sweet fragrance of flowers, or the apple tree in full bloom which boasts to the tiresome spruce. They do

not have hundreds of layers of stratified wax, and they tease Ergo about how they are new and do not smell of earth and mud as he does. How they are chosen, how they are favored, how they are lovely and joyous. They tease him, mock him, for his crooked wick, his dried layers of wax, his dim flame. The hatred he harbored within his soul only grew. His glow was bright, coarse, and it churned with hatred...

When the world went dark, all the candles that resided in the home came alive. They grew limbs, blinked open their eyes of molten gold. So did Ergo, who one day, never returned to the house. He wandered, drifting from place to place as if he were a ghost. The sky was ashen, darkened with the dreadful clouds. He greeted the spruce, blankly gazed at the hibernating beasts in their dens, and watched the doe scrape the bark of the lone pine. His glow was feeble and dull in the months of winter. But through this, he guided the animals who suffered through the scavenging fangs of winter, who were so bony their ribs were visible. *"Thank you,"* the poor shrew would whisper, his belly now full and his body warm from Ergo's glow. He became loved by the forest creatures, his glow a luminous beacon of hope. And, like the sky would extinguish his flame with her tears, the animals and their gratitude extinguished his hate. *His glow grew tender, endeared. He had learned how to love.*

## Remarks from Dr. Tokeya C. Graham, Sokol Prose Judge

### Prose First Place: *Lumen*

Congratulations on winning the first-place prose award in the 2025 Sokol H.S. Literary Contest. Your essay, “Lumen,” rises to the top of the literary pile with its brilliance.

There is a fiery elegance in how you have structured this piece. It flickers from darkness to light, from destruction to hope, from hate to love. There is a delicate intimacy in the ways that “he” moves through the narrative, and the world. An alchemist who is also being changed. While there is so much power, there is also vulnerability which we see in his yearning “for his flames to fatten...to expand...to destroy...to multiply...” Whether he is flesh and bone or metaphor and symbol, this essay encourages us to think of how our interactions shape the world.

Your writing talent glows with promise, placing you among an elite club of Sokol awardees. Bask in these accolades and allow this recognition to set your future ablaze. You are the light and can craft a future as bright as you desire. Again, I celebrate your accomplishment and wish you all the best.

Write on!

Dr. Tokeya C. Graham

## Low Tides

The Lighthouse Keeper was a tired old man. His whole life he had known nothing but the ocean in front of him. He knew the piercing sting of crushing waves more than he knew the embrace of another. Each day he woke to the smell of salmon and salt, so much so that the scent was entirely blind to him, as was the rest of the picturesque scenery that sat before him. The shore he had known as a lively place of brightness and a still mind had aged along with him. The gray in his hair reflected the gray of the clouds that hung threateningly over the vast expanse. As his wardrobe came to consist of a deep pewter, the ocean had changed its dressing to an akin shade. The Keeper believed they knew each other very well.

From sunset to sunrise, The Keeper never had to worry about what the next day would bring, because he already knew. He would wake from his flat, hard bed, to dress, and went to do the chores, then a break, the rest of the chores, then back to bed. Each morning when he dressed, he slipped on a jacket, heavy in material but not in continents. The spacious pockets were left empty. The man found no reason to carry with him meaningless objects, so he left the clearing of fabric as merely a warm place to tuck his hands into. The consistent schedule that was unknowingly mandated would only shift when the ocean threw a fit. But even then, on days when the water had rage to unleash, The Keeper knew how to handle it.

This morning in particular, The Keeper was expecting a hassle. This past week had been savage waves and substantial rain and today would be no different. The water pinging the sturdy stone was so intense the night previous that The Keeper had a strange sensation bubbling deep in his stomach. For the first time in his long, long life he feared the ocean. He feared the loud whips of salty water and the drops leaking through the meeting corners of brick and mortar. Sleep that

night was far away but eventual, and when it did come, all the disruption outside was nowhere to be found inside of his vivid dream that occurred that night. This dream was not that of the perplexing or odd sorts, but rather it showed imagery of his life in all of its mundane chronicles.

He woke the next morning to dimmed light from a foggy window. This window in particular had become part of his morning routine as well. Each day was started by a long gaze out of the very pane of glass he was watching, but not today. Today there was a mist too thick to peer through, and when he swiped his rough hand across the surface the mist did not buckle beneath him. It simply sat unbothered, as if he never touched it at all.

The Keeper slipped out of the covers and into his shoes, but for once, felt too lazy to dress in his orderly gray attire. Creeping down the old wooden stairs he took in the abnormal silence. Despite their age, the steps did not creak beneath his feet. It must have been the storm, he assumed, it must have knocked them back into place. He tramped along the known pattern of walls and tables, all cold in hue as the pallet reflected from the windows surrounding. At the door that divided him from his well-known companion waiting outside, he felt apprehensive. The unease from the night before lingered. A feeling so rare to come was hard to shake smoothly. He watched his tottering hand turn the door handle, but did not feel the cold burn of the frosted brass. With a chattering spine, he let his hulking steps lead him out the door.

The water was still. More still than he had ever seen it before. The familiar, dull pewter hue was now a vivid glaucous. Any trace of the upheaval was gone. The sand sat with a light yellow, stunningly warm from the sun. Shells laid at the bend in which the ocean and shore met, as if strategically placed there by the wit of the waves.

The Keeper walked lightly towards his familiar, hoping to not leave footprints behind in the case of disturbing the solitude the world currently held. He wanted to speak but couldn't find the



words to say. He wanted to reach out, but there was nothing to hold onto.

They stared at each other for a while, long enough for The Keeper to feel a sweat building up on his skin. As he looked up to find the basis, his hand flew up indistinctly with him, saving his retina. The harsh yellows and oranges of the fully exposed sun rained down on his dull, deep skin; skin that hasn't touched raw sunlight in years on end. Unlike every other day of his life, there wasn't a pull to the ocean that was drawing him in, it was the sun. Despite the vigorous light, he found that the sun had no burn to him. He wanted this warmth to envelop him. He wanted to fill his heart full of pleasant sensation, but the reality he had known for so long looked up at him with a blank and unmoving expression.

A coruscating shell caught his eye as the rays reflected off the glossy surface. He observed the colored conch shell with intensity. Waves of nostalgia rose upon him as he ran his calloused fingers along the cracks and ridges. Delicately holding the shell, as if afraid to break it, The Keeper raised it to his ear and listened in a familiar pattern. In his past, when the ocean was a new and uncharted place, he would pick up shells as such and listen to the waves crashing within them, for it was told that they carried the sounds of the ocean along with them. It was true, he found. Today however, there was nothing. He listened and listened. If he focused hard enough, he could pretend to hear the breaking of the waves and the screeching of seagulls. But in reality, no comforting sounds were presented.

The Keeper plunged his hands into the water before him, grasping at the feeling of anything hard and smooth, yet each new shell he dug up had the same effect as the last. He brought each up to his ear, less and less careful as the numbers increased and waited for a sign that the ocean was still with him. He was met with silence each and every time, and each and every time he stored the shells away in the waiting pockets of his pewter jacket. Maybe next time he tries, they

would present to him the tune of his life. Just maybe if he surrounded himself with the creations of his creator he could be enveloped and taken away forever in the only thing that has ever brought him comfort and solace. Same as the last, shells weighed down his pockets and his dropped shoulders weighed down his body. Sunken to his knees and reduced to a pleading mess, he cried. He shed the first tears in a century. The man sobbed for the lost wind and in mourning of his once beloved equal. He sobbed and sobbed and sobbed yet when he reached up, grabbing at his face to get a full inhale, he found his face dry. And when he reached down to his feet that he had stood within water, they too were desiccated. And finally, when he searched deep inside his soul, he knew that all the water was missing; that he no longer knew the ocean.

The Keeper trailed back to his bed, his mind so empty that the journey there was forgotten, and by the time he reached the comfortless mattress, he collapsed into it. He gave his weight away and let his body sink into the impressionable wood base. A deep sleep crept upon him, willing him to rest. He did not tussle with slumber, rather he let it come to him, and take him into a warm steady embrace. The Keepers last thought before being taken from his consciousness was the sound of waves crashing, and tides of a deep pewter, for in the morning, he would not wake up.

**Remarks from Dr. Tokeya C. Graham, Sokol Prose Judge**

**Prose Second Place: *Low Tides***

Congratulations for winning the second-place prose award in the 2025 Sokol H.S. Literary Contest. Your essay, “Low Tides,” offers solid writing with vivid description.

The protagonist in this narrative is “a tired old man” who is more like the ocean than anyone or anything. This poignant ebb and flow of action and emotion creates an expected disruption in the familiar. Surprisingly, the Keeper’s life is changed in the stillness, as much as by the torrential currents. This collision of sun and wind, of tide and calm, creates shared moments of self-awareness for both readers and the protagonist.

In this season, accept all of the honors coming your way. Continue to use your words to share stories of the human experience. Congratulations again, and I wish you all the best.

Write on!

Dr. Tokeya C. Graham

## Mr. Patched Bear

In a place deep amongst the shelves of a young child, was a world where teddy bears roamed. Years ago, the bears had gathered to form a community. One where they could learn and talk and play and work. A replica of the human world surrounding them, where new bears would be added by a toddler from time to time. It was always peaceful, within the bookshelves. The playgrounds had a cheerful hum and the air was cozy. Dust layered over the hills of abandoned Legos like snow. The streets were lined with fairy lights, and each day the cubs would be let out of school to play. They would pass a small wooden hut on their way home and laugh at the size of it. The house was owned by Mr. Patched Bear, an old citizen made out of stitches and buttons and sections of floral pillowcases. The adults would utter remarks like *scary. Don't talk to him. Weird.* And the young cubs would ask, *is Mr. Patched Bear really a bear? If he isn't a bear, then why is he called that?* Mr. Patched Bear led a lonely life where all the bears would avoid him whenever they could. Every night the old bear would come out to the park benches and read the daily newspaper. One evening, the young bears were getting ready to leave the swings when one of them spotted Mr. Patched Bear perched upon a wooden seat.

“Why don't you go on and snatch Old Patched Bear's paper there? I dare ya,” she said. The teddy bear wore a smug expression. She pushed her friend, who reluctantly agreed, towards the elderly bear. Before he reached Mr. Patched Bear, the friend removed his glasses and shoved them swiftly into his pocket.

“Hey Mr. Patched Bear! I didn't know you could read with that button as your eye,” the friend teased. He brushed some dirt off the bench and took a seat next to Mr. Patched Bear. The old bear set his newspaper down and faced the cub.

“I can see perfectly normal,” Mr. Patched Bear said with fluency, “better than you I'd assume.”

“No, sir. I have the eyes of a hawk,” he sat a bit straighter, a bit taller with his chest high. Mr. Patched Bear eyed the young bear's spectacles jutting out from his coat. He chuckled to himself as he reached for them. The cub's eyes darted to the newspaper, then to his snickering friends, as Mr. Patched Bear rested the glasses onto the bridge of his nose. Mr. Patched Bear followed his eyes to

the folded-up paper, and he handed it to his acquaintance. The young bear took the magazine and flipped through its pages. One was filled with delectable tarts and another with burgers and fries. All of a sudden, the young bear grew hungry, and his stomach began grumbling. Mr. Patched Bear recognized the sound and smiled once again.

“I was just about to head home to bake those tarts. You and your friends are welcome to come along now,” he said. The bear nodded and ran to his friends.

“Mr. Patched Bear has offered to bake me tarts! He said you guys can join too,” the cub explained, and scuttled back to the old bear, who had already stood up.

One friend chimed in, “oh, yes, and let’s all leave him before he notices.” A nasty smirk grew upon her face. The group started walking towards the two bears ahead of them, staying a good distance behind.

As Mr. Patched Bear walked towards the small wooden hut, the young bear realized that he was walking with a cane. It reminded him of someone.

“Mr. Patched Bear, you have the same cane as my grandpa! And my friend's grandpa, and—and everyone else who has a cane,” his eyebrows came together, “why do you have the same one?”

“Well, we all got them from the same shop,” Mr. Patched Bear replied.

“Oh, I didn’t know you went to the same shop as everyone else. I thought you were... never mind.”

“Different? I am, but still, all bears go to the same stores.”

“Yeah, everyone knows that. I just thought you weren’t a bear. Or at least a typical one,” the young cub felt a pang of guilt as he watched Mr. Patched Bear’s face sadden. But before he could take it back, the fabric near Mr. Patched Bear’s heart ripped a little, and a ball of cotton stuck out. He gasped but Mr. Patched Bear waved it off.

“I can sew it back together when I get home,” the old bear said. The cub couldn’t tell if Mr. Patched Bear was smiling or not. The two finally arrived at a small wooden cabin. They turned around, but the young bear’s friends were not there anymore.

“I guess they decided to go home. Come on in then,” Mr. Patched Bear said. Little did he know, they were all hidden behind his rosemary bushes. The two bears settled down in the kitchen

and got started on the desserts.

“Mr. Patched Bear,” the cub said after the pastries were inside the oven, “how come you’re the same as all the other bears in this town, but everyone’s scared of you? You’re so kind, no one has ever offered to bake me tarts.”

Mr. Patched Bear put one arm around the little bear’s shoulder and led him to a framed painting that was caked in dirt. He grabbed a handkerchief from the coffee table next to him and wiped off the grime. The cub saw that the painting in front of him wasn’t a painting at all. It was a mirror. He could see himself in it and Mr. Patched Bear who was more than double my size even though he was kneeling.

“I look so different from you,” Mr. Patched Bear replied, showing off his colorful patches of fur and many stitch patterns.

“Why, Mr. Patched Bear, why do you look like that?”

The elder bear shrugged his shoulder, “It was so long ago, I was the little girl’s favorite toy. She would carry me around everywhere— and drop me everywhere too— and then her dog would chew me up. But she would always give me to her grandma to mend back together. And when she grew too old for me, I was stored away on this very shelf with all your grandmas and grandpas, and the rest is history.”

The two bears stood there in silence for a while. Outside, the little cub’s group of friends gathered beside the small window of Mr. Patched Bear’s home. His oven beeped and they saw the hungry little cub bolt to the oven. Mr. Patched Bear retrieved the tray of treats, and the air filled with warmth and sweetness. After letting them cool, the two bears took one each and tried them. The tarts were toasty and sugary, like the ones grandmas would make on a Christmas night. The little cubs outside scurried home at the sounds of their parents’ calls. After finishing all the treats that Mr. Patched Bear and the cub made, they made their way back to the young bear’s home. Before the cub opened the door to his house, he turned around to Mr. Patched Bear and hugged him goodbye. The old bear was taken aback but wrapped his own arms around the little bear after a few moments. When they separated, the cub realized that the tear above Mr. Patched Bear’s heart was nowhere to be seen. Inside the house, the little cub crawled atop his sofa and watched Mr. Patched Bear walk back to his small cabin through his window.

The next evening, Mr. Patched Bear strolled to his daily reading spot. But instead of an empty bench, he found a box sitting on its surface. The bear took a seat, carefully opened the lid, and saw a note that read:

*For Mr. Patched Bear*

- *Cub, and friends*

Below the note were a dozen mini tarts, like the ones he had made with his little friend the previous night. Mr. Patched Bear looked up at the playground and saw the young bear and his friends piled onto the merry-go-round. The little cub turned around and saw Mr. Patched Bear with his gift. He waved and the two exchanged smiles. After those two days, Mr. Patched Bear would always bring the cub and his friends to his home and teach them how to bake different sweets. And the following days, the cubs would prepare the same thing for him to eat while reading his newspaper. Some of the town still thought of Mr. Patched Bear as a strange outcast, but the kids from the park slowly became his family and the group of bears lived happily ever after...



The old lady closed the book in her lap and smiled at her granddaughter, who was tucked cozily into her blankets. The little girl looked up at her grandmother and asked, “so was Mr. Patched Bear really a bear?”

“Yes, darling, he was always a bear.”

And with that, the grandmother rose from her rocking chair, kissed the toddler goodnight, and turned off the lights. She closed the door behind her, and the little girl hugged her own patched teddy bear.

“I’ll never let anyone think you aren’t a teddy bear,” she whispered to her stuffed toy. And they slowly drifted to sleep together.

## Remarks from Dr. Tokeya C. Graham, Sokol Prose Judge

### Prose Third Place: *Mr. Patched Bear*

Congratulations on winning the third-place prose award in the 2025 Sokol H.S. Literary Contest. Your essay, “Mr. Patched Bear,” showcases your well-developed writing talent.

There is a fairytale-like quality to your characterization of Mr. Patched Bear. His mysterious charm is delightful yet tinged with melancholy. His presence hints at something that it seems we all desire – to belong. The symbolism of his “heart [ripping] a little” made me long for a bear I never had. What stands out is how Mr. Patched Bear forms a bond with the little cub, showing that even when it seems we have outgrown our usefulness, we can find new ways of being in community with others.

This essay offers a reflective take on the need for connection, especially between generations. There is much to be learned when old and young share their lives, and you have done a wonderful job highlighting this, which is noteworthy. I hope you celebrate yourself and enjoy this moment of recognition. Wishing you all the best.

Write on!

Dr. Tokeya C. Graham