

2019 Arts Contest

FOR STUDENTS GRADES 9-12

PHOTOGRAPHY • POETRY • VISUAL ARTS • SHORT STORIES



Greetings

Message from the Chief Executive Officer

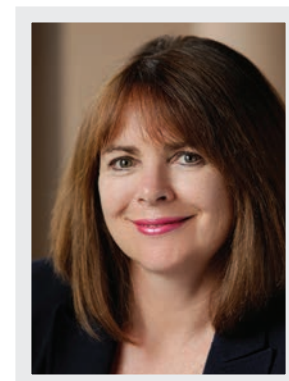
"Art is unquestionably one of the purest and highest elements in human happiness. It trains the mind through the eye, and the eye through the mind. As the sun colours flowers, so does art colour life." – John Lubbock, "The Pleasures of Life"

Most of us know the feeling of being moved by a work of art, whether it is a song, a play, a poem, a story, a painting, or a mural on the side of a building on a busy street. When we are touched, we are moved; we are transported to a new place that can help us identify with one another, spur thinking, and challenge perceptions.

Within this anthology, there's no shortage of opportunities to be moved as we celebrate the profound work of many young artists of Richmond Hill. Year after year, it's an honour for the Library to showcase so many inspiring displays of skill and passion. Congratulations to all the young photographers, poets, visual artists, and writers for creating such engaging pieces of art. We're grateful to have had the opportunity to experience their work.

I'd like to thank our four judges, who generously offered their time and expertise towards performing the difficult task of selecting winners among a wealth of strong entries. Their insight and mentorship is a wonderful resource for the next generation of local artists.

I also want to offer my appreciation to the Library staff whose work makes the Arts Contest and its evening of celebration possible.



- Louise Procter Maio

Our Judges



Andrea End - Visual Art

Andrea is a Visual Artist and long time resident of Richmond Hill.

Currently, Andrea is working on a series of linocut reduction prints. An original multicolored print is made using a single block. Through a series of progressive cuttings, inkings, and printings, the image slowly emerges while the actual block is destroyed. A reduction print can therefore never be reprinted.

Andrea serves on the Board/Executive Council of the Richmond Hill Group of Artists. She sits on the current Cultural Leadership Council, an advisory committee for Richmond Hill's Cultural Plan.

To view Andrea's work, visit The Mill Pond Gallery.

Our Judges cont'd



Marina Cohen - Poetry

Marina is the author of several fantasy and horror books for kids and teens. Her novels have been nominated for awards in both Canada and United States including *Forest of Reading® Silver Birch* and *Red Maple Awards*, the *Manitoba Young Readers Choice Award*, *The Rocky Mountain Book Award*, *The Dorothy Canfield Fisher Children's Book Award*, *The Sunburst Award* and more. Marina loves hot cocoa, old castles, and mysterious doors of all shapes and sizes. She lives in Markham, Ontario where she spends far too much time asking herself "What if...?"



Ken Sparling - Short Stories

Ken's seventh novel, *This Poem is a House*, was published in the spring of 2016 by Coach House Books. He has lived in Richmond Hill for nearly 50 years.



David West - Photography

David has been an avid photographer since the age of seven and during his career as a professional photographer he has won numerous national and international awards for his work. He has also been a qualified photography judge at the provincial and national level. As a past teacher, he continues to be interested in sharing his love of photography with young people

David is an active participant in his community and currently serves as the Ward 4 Councillor for the City of Richmond Hill.

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Photography

1st Place - Mahiur Rahman

The sun that shines beneath the sea



I took this photo while I was visiting Ripley's Aquarium, seeing all that the sea had to offer was breathtaking. My friends and I went to the aquarium to take photos before. I looked online to see what i could find and seeing none to very few photos that look like the one I took, made me proud to be the photographer.

2nd Place - Charlotte Klajman

Frog in Hiding

On my recent trip to Costa Rica I really wanted to capture the diversity and lushness of the country's ecosystem. The photo features a red-eyed tree frog, which is native to Costa Rica, hiding from predators amongst leaves. Although, red-eyed tree frogs are not endangered, their habitat is shrinking at an alarming rate. I want to use this image to promote the cause of saving the world's rainforests.



Photography

3rd Place - Anastasia Blosser

Jezero



Jezero means lake in Slovenian, a fitting title for a photo taken in Lake Bled, Slovenia, a country full of history. The church pictured was built when the citizens were forcefully converted from their Polytheism beliefs to Christianity. The island originally held temple for Živa, the goddess of love, before being replaced with a church devoted to the virgin Mary. Later, in the nineties Slovenia faced the Yugoslav wars, a defining moment in their history. Slovenia had a low number of casualties because the battles were mainly fought in other countries, allowing them to open their borders to refugees fleeing the war. Though we like to see tourist attractions for their beauty, we can't ignore the damage it's witnessed throughout its history.

Honourable Mention - Michelle Cheng

Temple of Mirrors

This photo was taken in front of the Markham Civic Center at night. As the sun went down, I was amazed by the transformation of the scene before me. The eerie symmetry of the columns and the theatrically lit figures, poised like two goddesses, seemed alien. Ethereal worlds can be entered if one chooses to look at their surroundings a little differently, and photography certainly acts as the bridge between the mundane and the fantastical.



Visual Art

1st Place - Michelle Cheng

Scenes from the Night Market



This piece was created based on the sketches and photos I have taken in my region's annual night market event, Night It Up!, celebrating Asian food and culture. I have always felt distant from my East Asian heritage, and aimed to construct a strange, exotic atmosphere using highly saturated colours.

Visual Art

2nd Place - Anna Xing

The Light Haloed the Robust Head of Pluto



I was inspired by a striking image in Clarice Lispector's short story "The Dinner." She writes that "the light haloed the robust head of Pluto which was now moving with curiosity, greedy and attentive." Through a visual response, I wanted to capture Lispector's portrait of this horrific man, powerful in status yet imprisoned by the social expectations accompanying his own wealth and greed. I played on the concept of the halo by seemingly ensnaring him in his own source of light – his pride.

Visual Art

3rd Place - Anette Xia

Comfort Alone



This piece shows a cozy cake shop colored in warm, comforting colors. Small details like chipping paint on the chairs or flower vases scattered around the shop convey a homely atmosphere for the viewer. However, the entire piece lacks people and life, with a cold isolating scene outside. This piece leaves it up to the viewer to interpret whether this is a relaxing and calming piece or an ironic one. Some may find that alone time is the most comfortable place for them, while others may feel like being completely isolated is the farthest from comfort. Nonetheless, this piece shows the role that people play in the viewer's own life, being something different for everyone.

Visual Art

Honourable Mention - Marina Zhang

Monster Kitten



The prompt for this piece was 'magical monster kitten'. I went with an eerie scene of a cute kitten playing with a dead frog, most of the lighting coming from a cauldron behind. Following that area of focus, which would be the kitten's illuminated face, the piece was designed so the viewer would then notice the sharp, monstrous tentacles and its split tail. This was from the Japanese myth of the Bakeneko, which entails a cat getting a split tail from old age, along with the myth that a cat would kill the one who raised it for 7 years, hence its murderous look. Adding the slight, cyan light on the left was also intended to allow the viewer to get a glimpse of the forms on the other side without too much revealed, keeping a mysterious air.

Poetry

1st Place - Aileen Luo

The Box

my companion is a Box
on the outside it's a standard piece of cardboard
to the naked eye it's not particularly noticeable
But Be careful not to slip on the protruding edges
when i look closely the Bottom is murky
it shimmers like a heat haze
faint muffled sounds seem to vibrate from the walls
in the lonely corner
you can see the sole shadow of an ominous figure
a solitary smore standing firmly in the shadows
the Box is a thing of mystery
perhaps it isn't a Box
instead a cylindrical container
maybe an empty void
where you can plummet through
and fall
and fall
and fall
there is always something hiding there
sometimes just a dusty jumble of random objects
guarded By an army of dust Bunnies and tumbleweeds
seeming to gaze at you with a morose expression
you can conjure up glossy prints of your favourite Bands
drooping chocolate cakes with thick mascarpone filling
Battered kettles and painted nightstands
tapestries shimmering with 70 different shades of yellow
dancing palomino horses with tails still swishing
like fantasies straight out of a storyBook
when you reach to touch them, they disappear like smoke
all that's left is the reminder of their stifling embrace
the inhabitants of the Box sit alone
they are listless in the face of adversity
the whorls of mist swirl them into oblivion
The curious creatures seldom stop By
when they do it's only for
a fleeting moment

Poetry

2nd Place - Jane Wen a study in a.m.

sheep number 1...

a pale square in the shadows:
(is it the night upon your bedroom
or your bedroom upon the night?)
i search for the secrets that hide
behind the stars' sealed lips
or in the popcorn plaster ceiling.
outside, the moon is nothing more
than another cup of warm milk –

sheep number 63...

my limbs are contradictions:
(how can you rebel with the
tiredness settled in your bones?)
the adrenaline of sleep would wish
to escape blanketed comfort and
dance a waltz with the streetlamps.
what a pleasant dream it would be,
a dream fickle as the morning tide –

sheep number 296 ...

thoughts tip-toe across my mind:
(why is it that you always wait
for the worst to come crawling?)
a cluttered emptiness, an itch that
can't be scratched. wait for the
crash from that loose-lipped silence;
soft cotton, soft lashes, soft sepia,
would you please just fall apart –

sheep number –

Poetry

3rd Place - Nazanin Soghrat

Dementia

in the bad poems i wrote about my grandpa
he could still dream. his name was etched out in
more than just flowers and he still told me stories:

how he had spent his childhood swimming by the caspian sea,
skin rusting underneath the middle-eastern sun,
the pastel blue of the sea and sky rocking him to sleep.

blue-numb, blue-numb, blue-numb, everything blue as he drifted away.
how he had spent so many afternoons skinning fish: baring teeth, deboning quills,
spilling gut and tallow over his feet like crumbling yellow-shingles.

in the summer of '09 something changed.
the stories wilted in grandpa's mind.
a slow decay. details disappearing.

names began to escape his mouth like rain.
language became the enemy. words lost their meaning.
john, jane, june — everything blended together like warm water in a bathtub.
his body shrunk.

that summer grandpa began mistaking me for my sister.
he started wandering the streets at night calling out for the sea,
thinking he lived in a country in the other half of the hemisphere.

grandpa called & called & still couldn't find himself.
he stared at his reflection in the mirror and only saw a gamble of bones,
a web of muscles taped and glued.

last night i met him in the hospital with a bouquet of flowers.
nothing i could possibly do.

Poetry

Honourable Mention - Amber Wu

Frozen in Time

I walked through a small town
On a cold and snowy day

A silver-haired man
Sitting in the laundromat

With his hands inside
A charcoal-coloured beanie
Resting on his knees
Quietly swallowed
By the black winter jacket
And the warm flowery breeze

He stared at the machine
As the grey-scaled contents
Traveling the world counter-clockwise
Time after time
But the only sound I could hear
Was his memories rewind

The colourful bubble gums
Vibrantly glaring under
The white florescent light
Unwittingly, disturbed
The lonesome Christmas night

Short Stories

1st Place - Arian Safavi

Subway

The subway screeched as the brakes were slammed to a stop. He put his book down so that he could grip the armrest by his seat. The doors opened. A wave exited, a wave entered. The doors shut again. He gripped the armrest once more as the subway gathered speed.

When the subway's speed steadied, he let go of the armrest and made to pick up a book. He had just made himself comfortable, when a woman sat across from him and started to cry.

He was transfixed, his mouth gaping slightly. He stared as the young woman sobbed gently into her sleeve. She was very beautiful and refined; she had high, rosy cheeks, and bright shiny hair. She raised her head then, and through sunken eyes, glanced around. Their eyes met.

Quickly he averted his eyes down to his hands, and his cheeks turned a bright red. She began to sob again. He began to twiddle his thumbs, as he looked around the car. He must surely have looked at every molecule in the compartment besides the woman herself. Tears continued to stream down her delicate face.

He leaned forwards and looked far to the left, then to the right. Every single seat was occupied. He looked again at the woman, tears wasting away, subsiding into her shawl. As he stared, his head turned a little lopsided. He scratched his head.

Suddenly, he jumped, and rummaged his inside coat pocket for something. He drew out a deep red handkerchief. He fidgeted forward in his seat, and the woman took no notice, as she was still crying quietly. He tapped her twice on the shoulder, and she looked up at him. He showed her the handkerchief with a warm smile on his face, and nodded reassuringly. She did not move for a bit, looking between the handkerchief, and the man's face across from her. He had a rugged look, with his facial hair and his suede jacket. Slowly, very slowly, she reached out her hand, and took the handkerchief. She smiled an affectionate smile back as she wiped her tears on the handkerchief. She handed it back to him before sitting back in her chair. Her smile again faded into a dark frown.

cont'd

Short Stories

He was still watching her, and began to drum his fingers on the armrest. She sniffled again. He tapped her shoulder again, and she looked up at him. He watched for a moment, took a deep breath, then puffed his cheeks like a chipmunk and crossed his eyes. Her eyes narrowed as she stopped sniffing, and she cocked her head. She stifled a laugh with her hand. He released the air from his cheeks and smiled back. He put his hands forward, palms facing up, eyebrows raised with his rugged smile still intact. She laughed again, and put her hands in his. They looked into one another's eyes for a while.

The screech of the subway came again and they both jumped back into their seats, holding on tight, eye contact broken. It stopped and the doors opened; another wave in, another wave out. Some seats emptied. The doors closed again and the subway started. The woman wiped her tears again with her sleeve. The man eyed the seat next to her: it was unoccupied now.

He clenched his fists. His heart began to pound into his throat as he drummed the armrest again. Then, he took a deep breath.

He stood, and sat beside the crying woman. He put his arm around her, and she laid her head on his shoulder, crying quietly.

Short Stories

2nd Place - Ali Farhadi

The Forever Genesis

He'd missed his stop.

The rain's drunken waltz on the roof and a crying engine, a troubled mind's great lullaby to daydream nightmares. He was no exception. Too busy planning too many things, sometimes he forgot he had to get home first.

The rusty little thing was wounded by the ages. The walls discoloured, more brown than gray at that point, wounded with graffiti of many generations with familiar and alien scripts alike. As if anyone cared they were ever there. Fluorescent lamps, or the few still alive, playfully flickered to their rhythmic light show, too faintly spectral to bother any of the fellow passengers' sleep. There were seven in total; three nearly identical children in physique and fashion both, given they were apes, and an old, bearded, brawny fellow with hair as pale as fear to his right. To his left... oh.

Naked. Very much naked.

An unshaved brunette of a man on whose shoulder lay the head of an equally pasty-white fair-haired woman snored, neither covered with more than a single leaf where it counted.

No. Eight.

Standing in front of him was a boy, looking no older than ten, yawning. "Finally awake? I was beginning to think I've gotten too old to get it right anymore."

"Hey there, kiddo," he replied half-heartedly. He was never good with children, never planned to be.

"I'll go with Doug, thank you. That's what my friends would call me if they remembered."

"I'm—"

"Adum, yes. I know it's a bit weird. Sorry, never quite gotten the hang of this naming thing."

"Yes... How—what?"

cont'd

Short Stories

"Not very observant, eh? I guess I had to tone that down to fit the rest."

Adum stood up to avoid further confrontation. Then he saw it out the window: What he could've sworn was a streetlamp a second ago was now a... galaxy?

Space. He was definitely floating in far space inside a rickety bus talking to what appeared to be the prepubescent source of creation.

"Now let's have a chat," exclaimed the boy, sporting a mischievous smile, "father to son."

And he showed him. Adum always thought he was an ordinary man destined to no more than anyone else, certainly not to meet Him. He was right. He was painfully ordinary. Everywhere he looked were civilizations, species identical to himself and vastly different, planes congruent with his logic and those Doug didn't even bother commenting on. Worlds far more advanced and those far lesser evolved. Those at constant war with sticks and those in which every member of the species had the power to cause total extinction.

"Why?" he would ask if he only remembered how to speak.

"Because I felt lonely, really," Doug replied anyway, chuckling. "This used to be the only route around, y'know, back when I still used mud for everything, before this state of general disrepair made it impossible to keep a straight wrist."

"Not anymore."

"Once I drop you guys off, wherever or... whenever that may be, there's nothing stopping you from building your own busses. It's really not that hard."

"But this bus is special. I've been in a couple of these before, y'know. None of them can quite... well, what's the word?"

"Instantaneously travel through all potential space and time forever with only rust to show for it?"

"That. The ones I know have trouble with tight alleyways."

"Good point."

"Yeah."

cont'd

Short Stories

"Cosmic corrosion was solved years ago. I don't think there's a single other model out there that rusts anymore."

"I... don't understand."

"You people were pretty close to building one yourself, actually, thanks to that German guy from your past century. Such a shame."

Hitler?"

"Uh... him too, I guess."

"How close?"

"Something around two millennia off. About time."

"I sense a but here..."

"Oh, don't mind that guy."

"No—you said 'shame.'"

In an exhale, everything was black once more. No. Darker. No galaxies or stars to be seen, no life and no death, but less. The jovial child suddenly went grim. "You guys are my only miscalculation. You won't make it," for a second, he looked as old as he sounded. "No one has ever made it but it's always their choice. Most everyone surpassed me long ago, and every time, in every timeline I begin anew, they just disappear. They're smarter than me, with greater conviction and wisdom, but they always choose to die. When they reach my level, they just kind of... give up. Something in their nature is inherently self-destructive, even far after they defeat death itself. It's like a choice they always make whether they have a choice or not and somewhere, deep inside me, I'm noticing traces of the same thoughts.

"But you guys won't have a choice. You'll just burn to a crisp in 50 years because your star is sick. That's why I'm trying to restart one last time, try to change your fundamentals, to fix you. No. Try to change you so you can fix me. Adum, I don't want to be alone. I'm afraid to die." He cried human tears then, mourned as a child who wasn't in control. He wept for what felt like hours, millennia.

cont'd

Short Stories

"I don't wanna die," Adum echoed, selfish, in sympathy, considering, denying. "I... I think I want to start again."

Doug grinned the widest grin he'd ever seen. Adum noticed he was missing a canine. "That's the spirit, kiddo! I'll drop you off somewhere nice. 'Earth,' they call it. The second one I ever made."

"I think I'd just like to go back to the stop I missed, thank you."

"What? Did you hear anything I said? There won't be a stop anymore! You have decades at most before your star throws up and cooks all of you!"

"I know."

"On Earth, you have a chance. You'll evolve and you'll survive until nothing can kill you. You'll rule the universe."

"I know."

"You'll become God, Adum. You'll become God! Don't you all want that?"

"Maybe at one point I did. Now, I'm not so sure. No offence, but... you look pretty miserable to me."

"You'll die, you know. Way before your body does. She's gonna say yes, and that's gonna be your peak. The only one of your children that'll survive the crash is gonna be your lost-cause son. Then you're gonna get fired off your job because the coworker your wife cheats on you with wins the court case for workplace harassment. Then the nerve damage your mom left for you is gonna start kicking in and soon you won't be able to keep driving that garbage truck. She's gonna take back your son then. You won't even be at her side when the chemo kills him, because you'll be stuck stiff on your wheelchair. When the flare comes, when your world is just about to end, you won't even flinch. You won't even notice because all you'll be thinking of," Doug barked, on the verge of a scream, "will be how it's all your fault."

Adum didn't flinch. He didn't blink. He just stared at the helplessly frustrated child for a slice of forever.

cont'd

Short Stories

"It's okay," he finally responded, with a tone more sure than he'd ever been.

"What did you say?"

"I said it's okay."

Doug laughed then. A hearty laugh. In that moment, he was just like a child again; small, free, and giggly without a care in the world. Small, free, crying for his mom because it didn't make sense. Nothing made sense. Small, more free than anyone else in the universe, and it still wasn't fair. It seemed like hours, millennia had gone by before he stopped. The darkness faded, but there were no stars. There were trees and houses and towers and people. He spoke then, barely a whisper, afraid the sound would shatter Adum. No. Afraid to break himself: "You said that last time. And the times before that," he pointed at the sleeping passengers. "It's what all you people say, every time."

The streets were back, wheels again on uneven asphalt.

"Then..."

The worries were back, but he didn't notice.

"Then what, kiddo?!"

But no more hail, just a big fat gas giant gleaming, mocking. No. smiling in empathy because it understood.

"Maybe..." Adum said, before stepping off, "maybe you should listen."

cb

He woke from his own snore, shivering, shoulder sore, and a head brimming with so much fog he could prod it around with his tongue. He usually didn't fall asleep in public transportation.

"Rise and shine, kiddo," spoke the thin air of public transportation. "Time to get you to work, Adam."

Short Stories

3rd Place - Florence Guo

You Remember

This is not a love letter.

We met when you were nineteen and I was seventeen, both of us young but neither naive.

A war raged on around us, seen in the tinted lenses of dimmed phone screens and the dark circles under our parents' eyes, heard through the worried whispers of the adults we almost were and their silent cries in the night when they thought we couldn't hear them. We felt the war in the too gentle hush of leaves blowing past our skin and silent streets as the world emptied around us.

But you remember this.

You remember how we were, both of us, alone and friendless in the world and how we were inseparable from the day we met.

You brought me coffee with a hint of peppermint though it was only fall; you tucked flowers into my hair, and though I despised flowers, I never hated them, tucking them in the pages of our book until they were dried and pressed: old, though we were young.

You remember how you used to tangle your fingers up in my hair, how you used to wrap your arms around my waist; you swore I smelled like daffodils though I had never been near one, and I? I remember the smell of the aftershave you always used, the cologne I bought you for your birthday, and though you swore you never used it, I remember seeing the half empty bottle on your desk and smiling.

We used to run up and down the streets, you carrying my backpack full of textbooks and math homework; we used to laugh and smile and dance under a falling sun as though the world around us didn't exist.

For all we knew, it wouldn't for much longer.

cont'd

Short Stories

You remember how we used to pretend that the intangible war around us was only locked inside television screens and other people's heads. It was a dream of those wishing for war, really, and oh, how we ignored the world as this one dream—nightmare, more so—bled into reality but all of our other hopes and fantasies were left unrealized, ink bleeding against the pages of our story.

We used to hold hands, gripping onto each other as winter came and the cold began to cut into our skin, seeping into our bones like icy cold fear as planes whistled overhead and the television reported of only death.

Then: New Year's. You remember that night, just the two of us with a little too much alcohol between us and the sheer need for company in the world that forsook us a long time ago. And you remember our panic as we stared at those two lines.

You remember the blizzards that year, the two of us huddled underneath blankets in our abandoned town, how the winds howled and raged, snow whipping into windows and walls like a wild thing that had been caged too long: the two of us fearful, but never scared.

The war spilled out onto the streets, painting the pristine white snow a crimson red as the screams filled the air.

You remember my grief as I came home to find snow mingling with the ashes of what remained; you remember how you held me as I cried, shaking with the knowledge that our child would never meet their grandparents, would never know of the world that had been taken from them.

Our child would never know of the world that had been taken from all of us.

Daffodils bloomed in the fields outside of your house, yellow and green amid months of red and white and grey and black and you remember seeing the first true smile I smiled in months as you tucked the flower behind my ear and said that I still smelled of daffodils.

cont'd

Short Stories

You remember the two of us, watching as the last of the snow melted along with the memories of last winter, draining into the ground where it would be buried forever with the rest of the dead; you remember the two of us, lying down and watching the clouds drift by. The two of us watched as wormwood grew in the flooded riverbanks, clear, but on sunny days, copper still filled the air and I would bury my face into your shirt, still smelling of the cologne I bought you.

You remember as we sent our silent prayers with the dead, that wherever they were, they weren't alone.

We danced in the sunlight, your hands on my waist and mine on your shoulders, rocking along to the tune of a song only we could hear, a song woven from our past future and present; you remember how you smiled at me and how I smiled back, the two of us glowing.

In that moment we were invincible—drunk on our hope and our youth.

The days grew longer, and the nights grew warm enough that we could lie outside and watch the falling stars streak by. You remember your wish for a better world for us and our child; you remember my wish for you to stay, always. You remember us: my head against your chest, you embracing both me and our child—you remember our hope.

You wove a crown of flowers for me, pink and yellow and purple and blue, and you crowned me the queen of your heart.

You remember our happily ever after as our daughter was born on the day we met, a beautiful and bright baby girl; you remember cradling her in your arms as I smiled.

You remember the three of us, happily ever after.

But you don't remember this.

cont'd

Short Stories

You don't remember how you left when you were twenty one and I was nineteen, neither of us young, not anymore, not after the war we lived through.

I tried to pretend that it was just a nightmare, bleeding into reality like red ink on the pages of our story, bleeding through like red blood from the bullet wound against your heart.

I couldn't look at daffodils for a month, but tore up the wormwood growing on your grave to plant some so that you would never be alone.

I took a look at the empty bottle of cologne on your desk and broke down, sobbing and screaming like a lost child, raging against the world for taking you away.

You don't remember how our daughter said her first words and they were dada, for you, the father she would never know.

You don't remember how our daughter flourished, how she forged a new beginning and new world in this war torn earth, how she laughed and cried and lived, how she reminded me of you every time she smiled. It never stopped hurting.

It never stops hurting.

And though you may not remember, you know that I will always love you.

Short Stories

Honourable Mention - Irvette Radke

Dance Against the Lights

There would be no celebrating tonight.

Camila stood at the bus stop in silence as flakes of snow settled around her. She watched as the day turned to dusk, trying not to peer at her mother who hovered by the signage. Even without looking, she could tell the older woman's lips were pursed, her hard gaze too transfixed on the faint twinkling lights of the far city across to notice her daughter's consternation.

Camila looked down, tightening her grip around the quarters of her ballet shoes. They had been a pretty peach colour once. Elegant and sophisticated with its fine leather bindings and cascading satin ribbons. "These will make you appear weightless. Like a sylph," she had been told. And they did. When she danced with it, lithe and spritely despite her bruised toes, she felt she could do anything. Now, the light-weight shoes looked overworn. Riddled with loose threads and dark scuff marks along its canvas.

Her mother had never watched her dance before, but somehow she had run out of excuses. No phrases such as *'I will be home late'* or *'I still have work to finish'* that she had often used in the past. The week prior, when her mother realized she had to come, the reluctance on her face had been impossible to ignore, but it had only made Camila practice more rigorously. She had desperately wanted to win, wanted to feel the roar of victory around her, that euphoria that spread like wildfire from one's chest to every part of their body, triumphant atop every dancer, claimed by the eyes and cheers of admiration by many – especially her mother's.

But in the end, she had not even placed.

"Just change at home. We might miss the bus," her mother said after her loss. So Camila had slung her winter jacket over her sapphire tutu dress and quickly slipped her swollen feet into her more comfortable winter boots. She had swallowed the confusion and anger down her throat before it could rear its ugly head and make things worse, trailing after her mother as they trudged towards the bus stop. They had not exchanged another word, she would be foolish to expect otherwise.

Now, the stillness between them sat like a third presence. Camila sniffed. Because of the cold, or because of her humiliation and disappointment she did not know. She felt out of place. Maybe it was because she was wearing a tutu by the bus stop in the middle of winter. Maybe it was because she was standing next to a mother who would not acknowledge her efforts.

cont'd

Short Stories

From afar, their awaited bus approached the preceding block's stoplight, waiting for the light to turn green. Camila reached for her duffel bag, preparing herself to board when a hand suddenly reached out and wrapped around her own.

"Camila," her mother spoke in the heavily accented English familiar to her. "By the way, I thought you did very well."

And then she smiled at her.

She had not seen that smile in a long time.

It reminded Camila that her mother had been beautiful once. Back home, where she had been successful, admired and respected by many. Now she was worn out, tired and pale. Their move to this new country they now called home had weathered her once vibrant skin, her eyes now empty and shuttered after working from paycheck to paycheck at a job she was overqualified for, for men who put only half the amount of time she did.

Her once-beautiful mother, who had learned to rush in order to catch the bus everyday or she would be stuck waiting in the cold.

Her mother, whose hard earned money was spent on ballet classes for a daughter who would not acknowledge her efforts.

At Camila's lack of response, her mother let go and again, Camila looked to the dull colour of her ballet shoes.

The orange and white lights of the bus closed in. Its beacons glared almost like a spotlight coming to rest on her whilst onstage, signalling her turn to perform, to begin and *dance*.

The bus pulled over by the sidewalk and the silence that had encompassed them came to an end as the doors opened to the cacophony of shuffling feet and the boisterous, lively laughter of its passengers within.



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