



Friends & Foundation *of the*
Rochester Public Library



April 27, 2023

37th Annual Sokol High School Literary Awards



Prose: 1st place
Shamil Canbolat
Pittsford Sutherland H.S.



Prose: 2nd place
Myles Able-Kehoe
School of the Arts



Prose: 3rd place
OlaRose Ndubuisi
Our Lady of Mercy H.S.

SOKOL 2023 WINNERS!



Poetry: 1st Place
Nicholas Cutaia
School of the Arts



Poetry: 2nd Place
Lydia McCamant
Pittsford Sutherland H.S.



Poetry: 3rd Place
Elani Spencer
School of the Arts
***AND* Performance winner!**

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.

115 South Avenue ~ Rochester, NY 14604 ~ 585.428.8325 ~ ffrpl.org

CONGRATULATIONS to the 2023 Sokol WINNERS!

PROSE

1st place (\$300): ***Flesh Eating Ants***, Shamil Canbolat, 12th grade, Pittsford Sutherland H.S.
Shamil is a senior at Pittsford Sutherland High School. He loves coaching and participating in Science Olympiad, as well as learning about history and geopolitics. He plans to study engineering in college.

2nd place (\$200): ***The Alaskan Choice***, Myles Able-Kehoe, 10th grade, School of the Arts
Myles is a sophomore at School of the Arts. He enjoys writing and reading. He hopes to pursue creative writing further in the future.

3rd place (\$100): ***The Family Tree***, OlaRose Ndubuisi, 10th grade, Our Lady of Mercy High School

OlaRose is a sophomore at Our Lady of Mercy High School for Young Women. OlaRose enjoys writing poetry and short stories, sketching, and playing piano. OlaRose is a published poet, author and illustrator of six books. Her first book of poetry was published at age 9. She is the founder of Finding Scoliosis Kindly (FiSK), a project dedicated to raising scoliosis awareness globally.

POETRY

1st Place (\$300): ***Surrounded***, Nicholas Cutaia, 10th grade, School of the Arts
Nicholas is a sophomore creative writing major at School of the Arts. Outside of school, he likes playing sports like baseball and hockey and writing fiction.

2nd Place (\$200): ***Returning***, Lydia McCamant, 12th grade, Pittsford Sutherland H.S.
Lydia is a senior at Pittsford Sutherland High School. In her free time, she enjoys digital art and is the Editor in Chief of Sutherland's literary magazine.

3rd Place (\$100): ***For everyone who doesn't know where they come from***, Elani Spencer, 12th grade, School of the Arts
Elani is a senior at the School of the Arts. Besides writing, she enjoys cooking new recipes and traveling. She plans to attend a 4-year creative writing program next year.

PERFORMANCE

one prize given: (\$300): ***Cities***, Elani Spencer, 12th grade, School of the Arts (***See bio, above***)
A special note of congratulations to Elani, winner in two categories this year (and a winner last year). FFRPL is delighted to announce that Elani has agreed to serve as a member of the 2024 Sokol Committee. She will review submissions remotely. Elani is the first student invited to serve in that role. FFRPL looks forward to working with her.

2023 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. Entries from public, private, charter schools and Home Schools are welcome! In 1985, Mr. and Mrs. 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. 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 our 2023 Sokol committee and judges.

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**; Staff Attorney at the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) **Aditi Fruitwala**; and FFRPL Director of Marketing and Program Development **Susan Chekow Lusignan**.

Prose judge (reviewed all Prose 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. Her manuscript, "Mama Said," will be published by West Virginia University Press this Fall.

Poetry judge (reviewed all Poetry 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. Josh handles everything from remote audio recording and mixing to artist development and management.



Prof. Kristen Gentry (left); Charlie Coté (center); Josh Pettinger (right)

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Sokol Winners posted to SUNY Brockport's Open Access Repository

Thanks to our partners at The College at Brockport, the **winning entries for the complete collection** of Sokol award winning entries (**2015 - 2023**) can be [viewed and downloaded](#). (2023 submissions will be posted by mid-May). Since 2015, winning entries have been downloaded collectively **more than 2,000 times**, from **at least 44 countries!**

Flesh Eating Ants

Today is my shift at the laboratory. Yesterday's results were intriguing but inconclusive. 13 dogs, 6 cats, and a full deer that we tranquilized and kidnapped from Lusk Forest and Recreation Center. One may think, "that is not *nearly* enough animals for testing," and I would completely agree. Our line of work is extremely time-consuming and excruciating, but it is necessary for scientific understanding. I take a glance at our most recent results:

Time to Consume (min)	General Consumption Scatterplot	Animal	Ants?	Eaten?
	. .	dog	yes	yes
	dog	yes	yes
	dog	yes	yes
	+635

Images of mountains fill my head. Mountains of paper. Mountains of hard work going to waste. It stains my mind. I slash out the pages with the red pen connected to my ear seconds ago. How are we supposed to know whether flesh eating ants will eat flesh when presented with flesh with data like this? You can never jump to conclusions in science. Everybody knows you need replication in a study. Just because flesh eating ants ate dog flesh and cat flesh and deer flesh and horse flesh and cow flesh when presented with dog flesh or cat flesh or deer flesh or horse flesh or cow flesh does not necessarily mean that they would do it during a second trial. Science is very multifaceted in that sense. Often times there are confounding variables that one needs to assign control groups for. Unfortunately, this probably means we need to funnel additional funding from the Center for Global Cooperation into extorting freshmen senators in D.C. I would do the math in my head for how much money we have to spend on the fire ant control group and the parasitic ant control group and the cockroach control group, but I am currently driving my vehicle through the undeveloped countryside. Perhaps that is why I was thinking of mountains.

Most people do not value replicability and peer review as much as I do. You cannot just use personal experience to make *a priori* conclusions in science. This line of thinking is not only unscientific, but it is also seditious and dangerous. Somebody could end up thinking they are right, and that we are wrong. They love to bring up the time we were caught lying about the termites in the white house, even though we were not lying, and if we were lying then it was for the good of the public. Or the time we were wrong about the death rates from Rhinoceros Pox in Namibistan, even though we were not wrong, and if we did turn out to be wrong then that means we simply did not replicate the study enough. Oh, I am getting

angry just thinking about it. The International Policy Institute was a big help in writing the bill to make spreading termite propaganda an exile-able offence. Not to boast, but I did draft 46 out of the 700 pages. The length makes sure only smart people can read it, just like a good scientific publication. Just as I was calming down, I remembered my mother. I think about how mothers are not very scientific either. They do not give you a reason for why you must make your bed if you are just going to sleep in it again. They say “because I said so” without providing a single source to back up their claims. Oh, I am trembling just thinking about it!

Speaking with simpletons about any current event or scientific issue is exhausting. They really think they can just state an unsubstantiated claim about Rhinoceros Pox or the White House Termite Incident or the Invasion of Omoritus without presenting a peer reviewed study published by a credible journal. Moving to Boston for my undergraduate studies was the best decision I ever made. Leaving behind my parents and their unscientific demands to prepare breakfast, I interned for researchers at the University of Lexington and did *real* work like preparing their breakfast. After I test out a couple many multiple thousand more animals for my postgraduate, I can finally present my findings to Prof. Dr. Johannesburg PhD, M.D. Then we can move on to more important issues, like whether flesh eating piranhas will eat fish flesh when presented with fish flesh. Palpable. My years of studying Prof. Dr. Johannesburg’s (PhD, M.D.) thesis “Dorylus And Flesh: Determining Optimal And Hypothetical Models For Inquiry On The Status And Ethical Considerations With Regards To Animal Rights, Ecosystems, And the Environment On The Status of Flesh-Eating Ants And Their Ability To Eat Flesh When Presented With Flesh” will finally be utilized for – would you look at that; he missed a capital letter in the title. How avant-garde. I should try that next time. I remember we needed a new shipment of ants just now. Perhaps I could get some on the way. I check our budget for this week:

starting stipend: \$3.402.533

EXPENSES:

- > legal fees for animal disappearance – \$789.300
- //lobby to repeal FOIA on Tuesday, protestors know about the 2009 New York State Zoo scandal and are demanding the death threat transcripts
- >2/12/2020 flesh eating ants - \$70.000
- >2/13/2020 flesh eating ants - \$70.000
- >2/15/2020 flesh eating ants - \$70.000
- >2/17/2020 flesh eating ants [BOGO] - \$90.000
- >2/19/2020 flesh eating ants; lim Edit. FIRE ANTZ EXTREME™ - \$150.000
- >1/04/2020 animal shelter - \$456.150
- > lab equipment - \$15.734
- > personal expenses - \$937.828 ¢42 //treasurer comment: need itemized list for personal expenses ASAP!

I thought long. Maybe we should spend less on lab equipment. Well, in any case we can request more funding from the Department of Science again. Preposterous – this imbecile secretary did not capitalize a single letter! How unprofessional. I decide to forget it as my mind wanders. Pondering on how much taxpayer money we could siphon out of various executive departments by staging another national emergency, I suddenly become nostalgic of my time as a civil servant. Through my own hard work, I was assigned a senior position at the Department of Information Direction through a personal connection with the director. This was in 2006. What a productive year. That was when we began the focus groups for the completely spontaneous and unplanned 2007 invasion of Omoritus. I was the one who suggested rewording “war” to “Operation for Local Interests™.” Prof. Dr. Johannesburg’s (PhD, M.D.) colleague at the Humanitarian Initiative Council (or was it the Council for Humanitarian Initiatives?) had the brilliant idea of promoting American values like cookie-cutter housing and debt slavery to the Omiritian population through a network of NGO’s. It is a wonder how they survived so long as a civilization without concepts like public schooling and quinquennial economic recessions. They can complain and protest and riot and beg for humanitarian aid and be put down and protest again, but we have already planned the occupation for the next two presidential administrations, so for now they will have to enjoy the economic prosperity we provide. The good thing about GDP per capita is that it increases as the population decreases, *ceteris paribus* (a negative correlation! I shiver with excitement).

My nostalgic trip came to a halt almost as abruptly as my Subaru Highlander, which had collided with a deer. Like reflex, I had my hand on the door and the thought on my mind that this was the perfect opportunity for a free test subject. I wait for a second, taking in the silence, disturbed only by the hissing of the deflating airbag. Where is my pen? It is not on my ear. I could check later, I thought, and then exited the vehicle. There on the ground lay the stag. Instead of dying, it chose to wail and moan, which irritates me – it being alive makes my job considerably harder. I have about a minute to observe it before its heart stops beating. The antlers are a natural white and seem as if they would be smooth to rub. I would not like to rub its eyes. There are no pupils, but I feel as if it is looking at me. I begin to think that maybe it is angry at me, or defeated, or perhaps ashamed, and I almost feel bad for it. I remember that this is just speculation, and that if I want to prove it is sad, I need to replicate the experiment by running over a large sample size of diverse deer to eliminate bias.

My ear feels wet. I rub it – blood. That is the only thing we have in common right now. We are both bleeding, and we are both mammals. But it would be unscientific to suggest we have anything in common. Deer blood has a higher iron content than human blood. Ah, it is still staring at me! Its limbs are beginning to move less often, and the glistening of its eyes is fading into hide. I turn around and walk back to the car. For some reason, I want the minute to last longer. We need more test subjects to determine

whether flesh eating ants will eat flesh when presented with flesh, so maybe what I feel is an urge to capitalize on this opportunity. This cannot be so, I think, because I also want to leave it there. I turn around again and observe. The fur matches the color of the surrounding fields which have darkened as the sun has just set. It seems as if I rubbed it once, I would want to rub it again. My attention is drawn back to the eyes. All that has changed is that they are closer to being shut, but I feel as if the creature has given up, or maybe it is keeping them open because it is hopeful. This is just speculation. I try not to care for the animal and check the statistics:

Sample Size: 5306 *Odocoileus Virginianus*

Proportion of Sample Eaten by Flesh Eating Ants When Presented with Flesh Eating Ants: 100%

Standard Error: 0.06

Notes: has yet to be replicated with 5306 more specimens

I was almost convinced to leave it there after thinking the data may be conclusive when I realized that all 5306 deer may only have been eaten by flesh eating ants when presented with flesh eating ants due to margin of error. I cannot spread misinformation. The Department would not like that. I reach for the pen on my ear but am instead jolted by the cold of the blood I forgot about. I jerk my hand back and observe it as if it were a sample of ants. Maybe it is because of the increasingly horrifying sounds produced by the deer, or the alien red on my hand, but I do not know what I am looking at. Everything is out of place, and I am late to the laboratory. The deer lets out its last wail. I wipe more blood onto my fingers and cross off the data on the sheet with a messy X. Deer are very heavy, I think, as I lift it by its front limbs and begin dragging the corpse towards my trunk. Maybe we will need an extra test subject. Maybe the data will never be conclusive. I stop to rest after a couple seconds of dragging and drop to the ground panting. That fur did not feel good to touch at all. Once this experiment is over, I hope never to handle deer again. Its eyes are closed now, but I open them manually to take a look; they are still staring at me. Taunting me, forcing me to pity it. Oh, everything is a mess, and nothing is where it is supposed to be. I am so angry!

...

I am driving my vehicle again. Throughout the trip, I catch myself looking at the glancing at the rearview mirror many times, forgetting that it has already died. Just in case, I will take this one to the lab too. Then we can publish our study.

Remarks from Professor Kristen Gentry, Sokol Prose Judge

1st Place Winner: "Flesh-Eating Ants"

"Flesh-Eating Ants" intrigues immediately via the title. The story doesn't offer scenes of mayhem and carnage as one might expect, however, there is still blood and a horrific moment. Horror writer, Tim Waggoner, defines horror as follows: "It is the distortion, the violation of what we think of as the rules of reality—of society, of nature, of humanity, of physics, of time and space—that engenders horror." I wouldn't classify "Flesh-Eating Ants" as horror; it doesn't tip the scale quite that far, but the protagonist and first-person narrator does illustrate an alarming distortion.

He is so consumed with proving fairly obvious conclusions via scientific testing to gain notoriety in the field that he is willing to waste government money and his own time (though he wouldn't see it that way) to do so. His research has led to the slaughter of "13 dogs, 6 cats, and a full deer" to prove that flesh-eating ants will eat the flesh presented to them. In spite of this, he still finds the research to be "inconclusive" and explains, "You can never jump to conclusions in science. Everybody knows you need replication in a study." The narrator's staunch unwillingness to face blatant fact is hilariously ridiculous, and Canbolat turns up the humor of the narrator's efforts by poking fun of the money wasted on these experiments, noting flesh-eating ants purchased at a BOGO (buy one, get one) discount, and introducing critique of genetic engineering via the addition of the protagonist adding "FIRE ANTZ EXTREME™" to the study.

While the narrator's extreme dedication to science, presented in a strong narrative voice, is funny, it is also disturbing, and it doesn't take long for readers to understand that his behavior is no laughing matter. He uses scientific study to bend truth and refuse to admit when he's wrong, declaring, "...if we did turn out to be wrong then that means we simply didn't replicate the study enough." This refusal to actually see the world, feel feelings conjured by that witnessing, and recognize what fellow humans and the creatures who inhabit this planet are feeling and experiencing without an extensive study to help him reach a conclusion has left him dangerously desensitized and compassionless. "Flesh-Eating Ants" is the haunting story of a monster in the making.

The Alaskan Choice

The windswept forest was stunningly still. The dawn was breaking over the pine forests of Seward, Alaska. It had long since grown to winter near the town and icebergs floated across the still dark water like ghostly ships. People were stirring in the village; dogs were barking and the day was starting in the small town. Anna sat on the roof of her house, coffee in her hand watching this magnificent scene unfold. She had lived here all her life, but the stunning beauty of the Alaskan wild still made her breath catch. She finished her coffee with a few big gulps and climbed down the ladder propped against the side of their two-story house. She looked at her house with a dissatisfied frown, the house had become dilapidated since their father had stopped caring, started drinking. She touched the house "I know how you feel" she said.

She went onto the porch, careful to avoid the rotting weak spots in the wood floor. She pushed open the heavy door and looked in disgust at her father lying in the easy chair in the living room surrounded by beer cans, sleeping off the hangover. Her mother was in the kitchen making repulsive cakes of oil and flour. They could only afford the terrible food because their father had lost his job due to his drinking last July and had been "looking" to no avail. Frankly, Annie hated her father. The smart, energetic, loving man of her youth was gone, and Annie was 17 now, she saw no trace of her father in this drunken shell of a man. She had gotten so used to hunger by now that she no longer noticed her stomach crying out. She had dropped out of high school the previous year. She had good grades up until 9th grade when her father really started drinking and had never stopped. She knew she had no future ahead of her, Like many Alaskan children she was doomed to stay there and repeat the mistakes of her parents. As the story goes with so many children of drunken parents, she had dropped out to work as a cashier at the town Kmart. Since then her life had become a bitter monotony in this cold swept death trap.

Her melancholy deliberations were interrupted by the clattering of cans that signaled her father was awake. Anna brightened as she saw her sister run down the stairs from her room. Everyday Anna's

10 year old sister Cathy ran down the stairs, always expecting her father to be happy, caring, sober. But it was always the same and today was no different. Cathy's face fell and then assumed the normal, tough position both children had taken in the last few years. Anna pulled Cathy into their routine hug that was both comforting and happy. Anna always felt better after she had seen her younger sister. Their mother walked into the room and looked judgmentally at their father standing near his chair.

“Breakfast” she said in a flat tone.

They sat down and none of them spoke, her father wasn't one for small talk, or mornings, or children anymore. Anna wolfed down the dry fry cake, eager to get out of the oppressive house. As she left, she saw her father's snowmobile and remembered he was going hunting in the woods south of town. Her father only had to do this a couple times a year, Anna just hoped her father could stay sober for long enough. She remembered as a child being taken out on her fathers snowmobile to his hunting hut far south of the town in the forest. It was a long trek, 2-3 hours at least. By the time they got here she had been almost frozen despite her thick winter coat and pants. She crawled into the camouflage hut after her father. He pulled his gun in after them and propped it up on the bottom of the small shooting window. There they waited, her father in steady concentration and her in nervous fidgeting. Finally, a large shape seemed to emerge from the forest, and she gasped under her breath. The majestic beast was chewing a sapling sticking out from the snow, he was at least 7 feet tall at the head and his massive rack rose another two. His white chest rippled in the slight wind and his brown pelt was shiny from the reflection of the snow. Then, there was a massive boom and the resplendent animal was crashing down into the red-splashed snow. She cried out and ran towards the elk where she stood over his body, crying. Her father came over and wrapped her in his arms. She threw him off and climbed onto the snowmobile and refused to look at him. He had never taken her hunting again.

She finished her breakfast and grabbed her phone, coat and keys to the truck as she ran out the door. The clock read 7:30 and her job started at 8. She threw her truck into gear and fishtailed down her driveway on the slick winter ice. She finally got it stabilized and drove down the secluded woodland road

towards Seward. As she drove the trees disappeared and were replaced by houses and neon signs. She pulled up to the K-Mart parking lot and looked at the sea of cars in the parking lot. Even though it was the only grocery store in town, Kmart only had 25 cars in its parking lot at a time, today there were 300, easy. She felt a great wave of uneasiness wash over her. She parked the truck in one of the few available spots and hurried inside, careful to keep her footing on the thick ice. Anna waded through the customers at checkout and made her way back to the warehouse. She saw her manager shouting orders to the men driving the forklift as she made her way over to him.

“What the hell is going on” Anna said, yelling slightly over the noise of the warehouse

“Big storm’s coming in!” he yelled, “supposed to white out the whole town, people are buying up all the canned food for miles. Today is our day!” he patted her on the back and walked away to order his employees around in his booming voice. Anna loved storms, the howling wind was like a monster at the door and Anna felt safe and warm inside her home when she knew that out there she would surely be frozen. Through these warm thoughts of home she had an unpleasant thought, her father was out there with no way of knowing about the storm. And then, an even more unpleasant thought: was that a good thing?

She worked at the register for 7 more hours, watching the panicked people, anger and resentment etched into their faces. She broke up a fight between two women fighting over the last large pack of toilet paper. It was funny, she thought, how whenever there was a big storm in town people abandoned the thought of community to get things for themselves and their families. Again, she thought of her father and an unwanted pang of fear for his life struck her heart. Her shift was over and she stood gazing out of the large storefront window. She stood between an unending sea of white and the bright industrial lights of the supermarket. Taking off her Kmart vest and donning her heavy winter jacket she opened the door and braced against the snow. She walked over to the truck and began to drive home. She saw a crash along the side in the ditch surrounded by police cars and again thought of her father. The neon signs and buildings were again replaced by looming trees, the forest began to look like a mighty wall in the gathering

dusk. She pulled into the driveway and went inside the house. Anna's mother had just started the night shift at the national park. She was a park ranger and had to work odd hours to accommodate Anna's hours. Anna hated that her mother had such strenuous hours but there was nothing she could do. Cathy ran down the stairs and wrapped Anna in the largest hug her small arms could handle.

"What's wrong?" Cathy said, instantly seeing the troubled look on Anna's face.

"Where's dad?" Anna said.

"He hasn't come home yet, but I'm sure he will soon."

"When dad left this morning was he, you know...?" Anna trailed off but Cathy understood.

She nodded and looked down. "I told him he shouldn't go out into the woods drunk but he just ignored me and kept drinking."

Anna stumbled backwards and sat heavily on the drooping living room couch. She put her head in her hands and stared through her fingers at the worn rug on the floor. Her father had left the house drunk, and gone to the hunting spot he had been going to for years with no trouble, but then, the blizzard hit. Anna had no idea whether her father was alive or dead but she knew that without her he would surely be the latter. Her father had been an unending burden for the past years and had offered no help or love to Cathy or Anna. Even though she knew she shouldn't, whether it was a childish attachment or an unmet need for his love, deep down Anna loved her father as much as she had before he started drinking. However, her father had stopped her from going to college but she didn't want the same fate for Cathy, her sister was the smartest person she had ever met. Anna knew without their father Anna and her mother could work enough to send Cathy to college. Cathy, ten years old but wise beyond her years, knew everything Anna did, and more. She sat next to Anna on the couch.

Anna was desperate for some kind of answer, some defining thing that would help her decide. She paced about. Why did this have to be her burden? Why couldn't it have been left to her mother? Anna knew what her mother would choose, she had never given up hope that her husband would quit drinking

and Anna knew this would be no exception. Suddenly she wanted her father more than anything else, wanted him to hold her in his arms and comfort her. She felt she was being torn in two.

Having nowhere else to turn, Anna stopped pacing and looked to her sister for guidance. She looked at Cathy in desperation. "Dad is out there, alone." she said "if we do nothing he'll die, but I'm afraid if we save him--" Anna was shouting now and when she looked down Anna saw that her sister had burst into tears. Why had she thought that Cathy could handle these massive decisions any better than she could?

"You have to go get daddy" Cathy said between sobs "I know you hate him. If you don't get him I'll never talk to you again!"

"I-I don't--"

"If you don't get him then I will!" Cathy said "you're stupid and scared"

Anna walked over to Cathy and hugged her. "I'll get him. I'll get him" she said and kissed Cathy on the head. This isn't just about me, Anna thought. Cathy needs him, in all his drunken glory.

The harsh wind whistling in her ears Anna braced herself against the blizzard and slowly made her way to the garage. She could only see a few feet and her tracks in the snow were instantly erased. If I'm not careful we'll both die tonight, Anna thought. She struggled to pull the snowmobile out of the garage, sliding on the ice and being buffeted by the wind. She climbs on and starts the engine. As she pulls out of the driveway Anna sees her sister in her bedroom window waving goodbye to Anna with tears in her eyes. Anna prayed with all her heart she would see her sister again. Anna hadn't looked at a map before she left but she knew where to go. She knew the path to her fathers hunting spot by heart. Her headlights were like a ship cutting through the oppressive ice of night. All around her everything was black. The pine trees became a thick wall along the narrow forest path. She saw familiar landmarks she hadn't seen in years and a wave of nostalgia washed over her with each passing hut and boulder. After 2 hours the shack finally came into view. In the dark it looked even more sad and dilapidated than in the day. And to Anna the small clearing it was in that had always seemed so bright and wild seemed like a place of death. She

climbed off the snowmobile and walked toward the shack. The snow swirled around her like a mighty serpent coiling around her and threatening to crush the life from her body. She found the door and pulled it open full of trepidation.

Her father was alive, huddled in the corner looking at Anna covered in every blanket and jacket in the shack. She walked over to him, grabbed his hands and pulled him to his feet.

“I-I’m so sorry” he said through chattering teeth “I-I should have been there for you.”

Anna tried to answer but her words were lost to the wind. She helped her father up onto the snowmobile and she sped away towards home. Many times Anna felt her fathers hands slipping from around her waist and she had to stop and shake him awake, fearful that next time he fell asleep he wouldn't wake up. Finally they made it home. Cathy was still standing at the window looking out into the night and her eyes lit up when Anna drove doggedly into the driveway. Anna pulled her father off of the snowmobile and he started mumbling deliriously. The door banged open and Cathy and her mother ran out and helped Anna carry their father into the house. Anna studied her mothers face and saw relief and anger. They laid Anna’s father down on the sagging couch and Cathy smothered her father, who was beginning to come to in the heat of the home in hugs and kisses

“I'm so glad your ok daddy” Cathy said

“What-what happened?” her father said. And then, as he remembered he started to cry.

“I should have treated you girls better, I'm so sorry.” he said between quiet sobs.

“It's alright,” Anna said “your with family now”

Anna stares out the window and watches the fields of wheat and corn pass rapidly by. She is full of fear and excitement. The car finally stops in front of the small high school in Afton NY, she gets out with a look of disbelief on her face. Her father gets out and wraps his arm around her. There's no smell of liquor on his breath and there hasn't been for at least a year. After the blizzard they moved out of the death trap that was that little town and flew to warmer skies. Her father had followed her mother into a

job as a police officer in Afton. Anna was finally able to quit working and finish high school. She hugs her dad tighter than she ever has before and breaks away, her heart full to bursting. She walks inside and her father stands leaning against the car, watching his daughter leave, and her life begin.

Remarks from Professor Kristen Gentry, Sokol Prose Judge

2nd Place Winner: "The Alaskan Choice"

"The Alaskan Choice" opens with setting description that plants readers firmly in the "windswept...stunningly still...pine forest of Seward, Alaska" and the "dilapidated" home of the protagonist, seventeen-year-old, Anna that signals the story's main conflict. The house has fallen into poor condition because her father "stopped caring, started drinking." Anna "[hates] her father." In spite of good grades, she dropped out of school to help her mother support the family since her father is unemployed. Anna feels "doomed to stay [in Seward] and repeat the mistakes of her parents," living "a bitter monotony in [the] cold swept death trap."

When a major snowstorm hits after her father has set on one of his bi-annual hunting trips, Anna's internal conflict with her father becomes a life or death external conflict as she decides whether she should brave the storm to save her father. Her decision is fraught with concerns for her own safety, but a heartbreaking concern is whether she feels that father is even worth saving. Would she just be saving him to continue a life of alcoholism, eventually depriving her ten-year-old sister, Cathy, of the opportunity of education? "Anna knew without her father [she] and her mother could work enough to send Cathy to college." Anna is so desperate for advice that she consults Cathy. This decision highlights the daughters' characterization illustrated in dialogue earlier in the story. Both daughters have grown an awareness beyond their young years because of their father's alcoholism. When Anna asks Cathy, "When dad left this morning, was he, you know...?" Cathy can fill in the dots; she knows exactly what Anna means. Though Cathy has matured enough to recognize her father's drunkenness and make efforts to keep him safe, Anna realizes that Cathy is too young to make a decision that she must make on her own.

"The Alaskan Choice" is rich in emotional and physical tension that keeps readers perched on the edge of their seats as the snow swirls and time ticks.

The Family Tree

Introduction

In Nigeria, there is a little but magical village where the most hard-working people reside.

This village is not known by a single name.

The sun's peculiar effect on the land is its only claim to fame.

At noon, the sun reaches its highest point in the sky,

And the earth finds itself too weak and fragile to regulate the sun's power.

All afternoon, the sun scorches the earth, making the ground too hot to walk across.

At this time, the people of this village close their doors, shut their windows,

Shield their eyes from the blinding sun, and sleep.

Sleep is a difficult thing to achieve due to the heat,

But what else can be done when the land cannot be enjoyed and walked upon?

At night, everywhere cools down and the earth somehow recovers from its burns.

During the night, the sun's unbearable heat is faint and unnoticeable,

While the moon's comforting glow is overwhelming.

It is at this time that only the tiniest and most innocent of things — children —

Can harness the little power left of the sun, while reflecting the righteous rays of the moon.

It takes inner strength to wield both lights at once.

And as long as the children continue to sleep during the afternoon,

Rather than soaking in the heat, they will forever boast both the moon and sun.

Nighttime is when it is safe for children to play.

Playing doesn't drain their energy.

In fact, it excites and rejuvenates them.

It puts smiles on their faces that will sustain them and keep them joyful all morning,

Despite the tediousness of their work.

The best time to do one's work is early in the morning when the ground is calm,

Hearts are full, and peace can be found.

The Power of the Sun - Sun

The irritating crow of the rooster tells me that morning has arrived. It is time to work.

As I put on my blue sandals, I examine my feet.

“Why are your feet crispy?” my little brother asks with a disgusted look on his face.

“In time, yours will be like mine,” I say.

His feet are soft for he has not yet felt the pain of work.

Even us children have ashy, rough feet thanks to the sun’s impatience.

We do our chores in the morning, but weak sparks of heat still course through the ground,

Burn our shoes, and shock our weary feet.

I suppose it is the sun’s way of warning us that it is coming.

I wonder how hot the land feels in the afternoon.

As the tree-picker of the family,

I have to pluck all the fruits on our property and wash them for our family.

I don’t like my job very much,

But Father says that he used to pick fruits off the trees when he was a little boy.

Climbing up trees and falling, reaching for fruits and missing,

Carrying heavy baskets and dropping them,

Racing against limited time and failing shaped him into the man he is today,

Worthy of being the head of a respectable family.

It is the idea of following in his footsteps that keeps me going.

The cashew tree is the closest to our house, so I collect those easily and quickly.

I am carrying a heavy basket of cashews to the house,

When I see the sun peaking over the hills that protect our village.

Soon it will rise above our walls and reign over the land all afternoon.

We will have to succumb in fear and do what we don’t do nearly as well as working — sleeping.

I hate sleeping. I can hardly sleep with the lights on.

It’s nearly impossible to sleep with the brightest star in the sky on!

While my sister and I play during the cool night, my parents sleep soundly,

Knowing that the moon shines down on them.

I find the moon almost as boring as the rain. It's so dull and plain!

Who needs a satellite that waxes and wanes,

When a sun that lights up the whole world is right above you?

One day, I will step out of the house and stare bravely at the sun.

Everyone will see that there's no reason to run.

I place my basket of cashews on the porch, then hurry towards a distant tree to pick guava,

Before the land becomes as hot as lava.

Merely jumping won't help me reach the branches of the tree.

The tree is short, but I'm even shorter. Perhaps my sister should be the tree-picker instead.

She is taller than me, but, according to my father, I will be greater.

I jump once again, but my arm doesn't stretch far enough to reach the green fruit.

I look up towards the sun. It reminds me of the guava, but only it's yellow.

Though the sun has not yet reached its highest potential, it feels so far away.

I feel so small.

On my own two feet, I'll never reach the guava nor the sun until I grow up,

Become taller, and more like my father.

When you admire the sun long enough, you realize that it is not a ball of light.

It's like a spherical fruit of fire. A vessel of fiery might, stealing sight.

For this reason, my mother says that the sun is the opposite of love,

While the Son is the greatest example of love so true.

I try not to confuse the two.

My father is so big and strong that I like to believe he created the sun,

But my sister always tells me to stop encouraging such a silly notion.

Even higher than the sun is God, who put everything in motion.

She says that we should look past the sun and into the heavens in awe at the true Son,

For gazing directly at the star with desire could lead to consequences so dire.

I try to look past the sun and at the moving clouds, but I end up squinting.

I close my eyes to soak in the darkness, then open them.

My focus is entirely on tree-picking now.

I climb up the tree and nestle myself in a ridge of bark, so I do not fall.

I wrap my fingers around the guava ready to tug.

The fruit's warmth burns my bare and brown hand, for it has harnessed the sun's power.

My fingers recoil and cower,

But I must obtain the guava before the day turns rotten and the fruit of my labor spoils.

Enduring the heat, I tug on the fruit until it detaches from the Family Tree and gives itself to me.

The guava exudes warmth, but has it preserved such power, such warmth within?

Or is the power of the sun merely a mask for the cold ones to hide their sin behind?

It is the truth that I must find!

My teeth bite through the outer skin and sink into the soft core.

The heat dances on my tongue in bursts of warm water.

The water trickles down my throat and is sprinkled across the dry soil of my chest,

In which the guava seed resides.

I feel a sapling of warmth growing into a sturdy tree.

Its blooming flowers and leaves branch into the innermost chambers of my aching heart.

The tree's roots dig down and settle in my stomach.

The guava tastes delicious and the realization that dawns upon me is even sweeter.

Despite how pointless tree-picking feels currently,

The future of our family rests within me.

Positive that the fruits of this tree are fit for our family,

I pluck the rest of the guava and put it in a basket.

I take one last glance at the spherical fruit of fire.

I aspire to acquire its power someday, and I know that I will.

I carry the guava back home, slowly walking down my road to greatness before the sun reigns and morning fades away.

The Power of the Daughter - Water

My alarm clock isn't the crowing of the rooster, the crying of my baby brother,
The shouting of my twin brother, the gentle prodding of my father,
Nor is it the smell of yam being boiled by my mother.

I am my own alarm clock.

I wake myself up hours before the rest of my family to fetch water.

My mother can't boil much, my family can't bathe, and the crops can't be watered without it.

My mother has been working too hard lately and has other jobs of her own,

So I must make her load easier by making breakfast today too.

I tie my black braids up, put on my brown sandals, and prepare myself for the journey ahead. The well is far away and I'm not the only one seeking water.

Water-carriers from all over the village will flock to the well, trying to provide for their families.

Carrying two jugs, I leave the house in a hurry to beat the sun.

I walk for 20 minutes before I realize that I took a wrong turn earlier.

The unfamiliar path before me is split by a daunting, beautiful river.

Instead of turning around, I am drawn to the body of water.

The sight of the winding ribbon makes my heart swell and my soul soar.

The river blocks my path, yet I feel as if it has simultaneously made it so clear.

Oh, how I wish I were a fish!

I would no longer be limited to admiring the river's surface, so obscure.

I could either swim with the flow or dare to go against it,

Rather than go down a single path to the well.

I would stay cool and refreshed,

Rather than oppressed by the heat.

No matter how far my fins propel me forward,

I would still feel secure in the river's encompassing nature.

I could not only truly say that I am a child of God,

But also that I live within one of His most fascinating creations.

Maybe being the water-carrier made me more appreciative of all appearances of water.

Or perhaps water is just naturally majestic.

I would sit by the river and cool myself down, but the current is quite fast today.

One can easily fall in and be carried away.

Besides, though it looks lovely,

The water is teeming with algae, creatures, and unclean things.

It is not safe to drink.

So, I cautiously step on the stones littered across the river until I get to the other side.

I pray that this new route is a shortcut to the well.

The sun fiercely shines down on me.

I yearn to return to the river,

But I cannot allow my selfish wants distract me from my family's collective needs.

Beads of sweat roll down my face.

If I stay out here any longer, my beautiful brown skin will dry up, losing its elegance and grace.

I set one jug down and try to raise the other to shield me from the light,

But my arms are drained of their usual might.

My feet hurt so much that I can no longer stride.

I slowly proceed, dragging my jugs through the gravel and sand.

I struggle to keep my disoriented mind focused and my eyes open wide.

To a foreigner, I bet I looked like a malfunctioning, leaking machine,

About to break down, and in need of repair.

A foreigner wouldn't know that this strenuous journey is a daily routine for us, water-carriers.

A foreigner wouldn't realize that the joy on my brother's faces

And the satisfaction of my parents, regardless of whether their reactions lack gratitude or not, Give me the medicine I need to go on the journey again.

I wearily raise my head and squint at the sun in disgust.

It is selfishly extracting the water, the life out of me.

No matter the obstacle that obstructs my way,

I am expected to do my job until my dying day.

Father thinks that traveling alone in the dark is not safe,
But I still wish I could complete my job at night.
I would be guided by the soft moonlight.
I admire the moon's tranquil, yet firm expression of its power. It has inner strength,
Which I find more priceless than the sun's flamboyant display of its outer strength.

I look past the egoistic sun and concentrate on the clouds as I move along.
Just as the clouds are serene, surreal, and peaceful,
So is the Kingdom of Heaven, I imagine.
I consider the clouds to be superior to the sun because rain,
Which cools the earth, falls from them.
The rain is one of the few things strong enough to combat the impact of the sun.
For this reason, the rainy season is a blessing.
Unfortunately, it lasts for a shorter amount of time in our village,
Than it does in the rest of Nigeria.

I muster up the strength to balance the two jugs atop my head.
I am now able to pick up the pace.
As I reach the midpoint of my race, I try to ponder my job.
I value the honor of being a water-carrier.
I believe it has taught me perseverance, discipline, and how to be selfless,
But I know that I can use these gifts for something more.

I don't want to stay in the village and continue to gather water.
My desire is to gather knowledge beyond my narrow horizons,
And gain experience away from home.
Only one child from this village was given the chance to let go of their work and freely roam.
In boarding school, they cultivated their mind, instead of crops.
They picked their future, rather than fruits.
But they never returned to their village, their family, their roots.
Due to their negligence and absence, their family depleted,
Legacy receded, and reputation reduced.

I will not let my curiosity leave what my parents have planted uncared for.
I will stay rooted in my family and grounded in my faith, while being as mobile as the water.
I want to flow from one stage of life to another,
Acquiring knowledge and growing like a flower by the riverbank in summer.

I dream of reading about how ancient history affects our current activities.
I dream of obtaining the insight and courage to imagine future possibilities.
I dream of learning about worldwide realities,
and delighting in my continent's magical mythologies.
I believe that one day, my family's legacy will be in a book of Nigerian mythology, not history,
To make people believe that there is already magic and excitement in their current situation,
If only they are willing to see it.

I need to take my own advice because, on days like today, I find myself discontent.
My brother tells me to stop complaining. He says that my job is much easier than his.
If he stops obsessing over the sun and tries to even consider why we need water,
Perhaps he'll understand how difficult my job is.
My brother isn't the only one who adores the sun, despite its merciless nature.
The sun is the defining feature of this land,
Which causes people to forget about the significance of water.
My brother being the favorite child is considered more important than me,
Which causes people to forget about the significance of the daughter.
Indeed, my father, along with everyone in the village, thinks that the tree-pickers — the sons — Are
more important than the water-carriers — the daughters.

"It is easier said than done, but it must be done," is my father's way of comforting me.
My mother doesn't care if things get done or not.
She cares about how and why I do it, or choose not to do it.
Instead of being despondent and refusing to do my job,
I choose to fetch and carry water for my family,
And I try to do it with a smile on my face.

I lose sight of the path, so I stop walking and put my two empty jugs down.
Mother always tells me not to worry if I lose my way.
“Sometimes you must lose who you think you are to find who you truly are,” she says.
Hopefully her wise advice applies to finding a literal path, not a personal one.
I close my eyes, take a deep breath,
And let my instincts guide me west.
My thoughts, however, swerve in different directions and I think about the sun with objection.

Those boys, those ambitious tree-pickers,
Hope to climb a fruit tree so high that they’ll be able to pluck the sun right out of the sky.
But I don’t want to cradle the sun. I want to be a carrier of living water.
Jesus, the true Son, is the source of such revitalizing water.
I would let streams of living water flow from Jesus, through me,
And pour onto those in need in a tangible way –
A kind act or a compliment that will brighten their day.
Mother always says that no matter how big our problems may seem,
We should try to make another suffering person beam,
By giving our time and energy in charity.

Water reminds me of my mother. I believe that she already is a carrier of living water,
For her mere love rejuvenates my heart when I feel discouraged.
My mother is the nurturer and caretaker of the family.
I would like to be like her one day – a true caretaker of my family, but also of the whole world.

It is frightening to see the sun rising higher.
I need to return home, or else I will burn and wither away.
No amount of rainfall could save me.
At the same time, I don’t want to go back to a disappointed house.
My jugs would be filled with tears, not well water.
Yet, that still wouldn’t be enough for my father.
That still wouldn’t prove my love for this family.

I am startled to suddenly feel a light tapping on my shoulder,
Distracting me from my worries.
I spin around to see a pale, barefooted man.
He is dressed in dirty, ragged clothes.
He says that he is a stranger to this land,
And apologizes for tainting its beauty with his lowly presence.
Although he looks unkempt, there is a palpable but invisible radiance about him.
With a hoarse and weak voice, he politely asks for water.
“I have traveled for so long without rest. I only need a sip,” he says.
I sorrowfully tell him that his efforts are in vain,
For my jugs are empty and the well must be far away.
He urges me to follow him, as if he knows where he is going.
He leads me to the well and I gape in awe.
It was so close this whole time, yet my discouragement made it seem miles away.
I am shocked to see that it is deserted.
Leaping for joy, the man exclaims,
“What a lucky day! It seems as if this time and place was predestined for us!”
I run to the well before the man’s cracked lips rust.
I tie the handles of one jug to a rope and lower it into the dark void that is the village’s well.
I pull the jug, now filled with water, out.
I tell him to cup his hands and take some water, but he refuses.
It is as if he feels unworthy to drink it, despite how parched his throat is.
He takes a small, gilded chalice out of his tattered pocket.
I pour water into his cup until it overflows, and then he takes a sip.
He smiles, thanks me, and says, “Dear Father, I ask you to multiply any blessings that are coming this
girl’s way, for she is a true carrier of living water! I feel alive again!”

I’m glad that I helped the foreigner.
After helping someone, many expect a treasure trove of prizes and praise.
I don’t seek anything in return for serving others.
I simply think everyone deserves to be happy.
Seeing the joy and gratitude of the man I helped,

And knowing that he is better off than before I met them, is enough.
I lower my jug into the well again to fill it to the brim. I fill up the second jug as well.
I smile as I pull it up,
For the man is still praising the Lord and singing about how much he is blessed.
I would bid him goodbye and my best,
But when I turn around, I see that he left without his much needed rest.

The increasing heat of the sun lets me know that it is time to go.
Though I am now carrying the weight of water upon my head,
I offer up this trial to Jesus, whose burden is light and yoke is easy.
Doing this always makes it easier to come home than it is to leave it.
One day, the people of this village will see how valuable the water is and learn to love it.
I just have to believe it.

The Power of the Mother - Soil and Roots

I saunter across the soil, planting seeds destined to be crops of prosperity.
Though I am a human of flesh and bone, I think that my spirit is fused with the soil.
I care for my children with tender love and affection.
The soil nurtures the seeds buried in her embrace with the same sincerity.
Although the fathers are the heads of their household,
The mothers of this village are thought of as the foundation of the house,
The beginning of everything.
I don't discredit my dear husband, of course.
His love and authority harden the ties that bind us, so they can never be severed.
He keeps this family united forever.
However, I, by the grace of God, brought this family together.
I am the soil that gives my children the nutrients they need to grow,
But I am also the roots that keep them grounded.
No matter how far they go, they can always return to their roots.
They can always return to their earthly mother.

When the day comes that I am absent from their lives, but ever present in their thoughts,
They have their divine Mother to turn to.
She anticipates their needs far better than can.
They just need to ask for her help.

I love my children dearly with all my heart,
But to say that they are loved by others equally would be a lie.
The tree-pickers are elevated and promised to inherit the greatness of their fathers,
While the water-carriers are destined to carry on the unappreciated,
But valuable work of their mothers.

I wear a brown and blue head wrap as I work in the fields,
To show God how appreciative I am of my relationship with my daughter,
And that I recognize the fruits that our cooperation yields.
The soil and the water must harmonize for crops to grow and flowers to sprout.

I always tell my daughter not to limit her scope like her brother does.
Fruits are sustenance only for our bodies.
The sun can be enjoyed only during our temporary time on earth.
But there is something spiritual and lasting about water. It has a greater worth.

I teach my son about the dark side of the sun, so he does not get attached.
The sun steals sight,
But there is still a beautiful aspect of it that rings true:
It provides warmth and light.
When thinking about the sun from this perspective,
It could be counted as an example of love and perhaps the Holy Spirit working in our lives.
Unfortunately, warmth and light is not enough for my son.
He wants to harness the star's power,
And won't stop dreaming until the deed is done.
I walk barefoot around the compound, so I can truly feel the earth.
Instead of focusing on how hot the ground is,
I feel comforted by its warmth and close my eyes to savor the sun's bright rays.

They shine on my skin, making it gleam with enhanced brilliance.

There is one patch of soil on the compound, protected by the shade of an iroko tree,

That neither dries up nor gets too moist.

Nothing will be planted there.

One day, I will sink my hand into the soil to imprint and preserve my family's legacy forever.

After sowing and watering some seeds,

I reap the crops that are ready to be harvested and place them in my basket.

I hope that my children sow their own seeds of love in this land.

The seeds will sprout and grow into two tall trees of generosity.

By then, they will understand the importance of giving the fruit of their labor

To those who need a helping hand.

Even a simple cherry of charity will be appreciated,

For quality is greater than quantity.

As the sun rises higher and higher, my toes squirm.

The ground is getting too hot to ignore.

I quietly sing a song to myself to unburden my heart,

Continuing to do my part.

I am not afraid of the sun, but that doesn't mean I disregard its strength.

I just don't let it intimidate me into hastening my pace and failing to do my task with grace.

I am feeling lightheaded, but I cannot quit now.

I still have a few parts of the garden to plow.

I will not accept defeat.

In my head, I repeat, "Let it be done to me according to your will."

However, I know that God will not let me die on this hill,

Because there are still things that he needs me to fulfill.

After watering, planting, and harvesting, I depart from my beloved soil,

And return home after a strenuous day of sweat and toil.

My determination is the one piece of me that the sun can never spoil.

The Power of the Father - Tree

The fathers of this village are the leaders, the heads of their respective households.

My son likes to think that I am the sun that lights up this little village,

But I try my very best to emulate the true Son.

He is the divine shepherd and the whole world is His flock.

I am lucky that as an earthly goat herder, I am tasked only with caring for my family

And tending to the small flock of animals that we own.

Sometimes, it is so difficult to follow in the footsteps of Jesus – divinity and perfection itself –

That you need to start off with something more tangible.

As a child idolizes and imitates their parents,

I strive to echo the reliability yet humble expendability of a tree.

Like a tree, I am strong, sturdy, tall,

And was created to shepherd and shelter creatures, big and small.

My authority and influence branches out and affect all.

A tree is useless without creatures to shade, feed, give oxygen to, and provide wood for.

Likewise, I, a father, am useless without a family to care for.

A tree is useless without purpose, and so are we.

If you don't live for a purpose, you won't yield any fruit.

If you don't search with purpose, you won't find the truth.

The truth is that even though the sun beams and gleams,

It isn't as wondrous as it seems.

There is one aspect of the tree that separates it from me.

A tree is a product of sunlight, water, and good soil,

While my children are a product of my influence.

My son equates the sun's power with mine, but I was raised to be brighter than the sun.
I am supposed to be a pillar of eye-opening light and guidance for my people.
My son thinks that by harnessing the sun, he'll be like me.
If I continue to fuel those thoughts,
Then I will be leading my unsuspecting child into the darkness,
Rather than towards the light that he craves.

I admire the tree's leaves because it shields my family from excessive light.
The light filters through the spaces between the tree's branches,
So they get enough light to see, but enough shade to hide what they don't need to see.
I don't want my children to get used to having an abundance and wanting more,
Nor do I want them to be exposed too early to the corrupt side of life.
It all starts with not being content with the sweet glow of the moon,
And wanting to foolishly bask in the sunlight, while others are reasonably hiding.

Since the boy hates the leaves and adores the sunlight,
He'll grow up to want too much sun and become greedy.
He is exposed to the cruel side of life,
The aspect of the sun that scorches you,
The feature of its power that changes you.

I admit that as the head of the house,
I get more credit than I deserve.
I wish the whole world could see how much I appreciate my wife,
For without her, we could never tolerate this land that generates daily pain and strife.
While my wife is the backbone of this family,
Our children are the beating heart.
Although I favor my son more and pray that he will be a great heir,
To deny that my daughter is more reliable is unfair.
I want my son to succeed, but see that my daughter is already succeeding.
I do not know where her road is leading,

But I recognize that her mind contemplates beyond what I can imagine,
And her heart desires more than I can offer.

I am inspired by her determination, and try to give her as much freedom as I can,
So she will not suffer.

I only hope that my daughter grows to resemble her mother,
So that they can easily harmonize and heal what is bound to be broken.
My daughter must extinguish the greedy fires that will ensnare her brother,
So he can be replanted and reoriented with love by his mother.
If my heir doesn't change his ways and dares to embrace the sun,
As the father of this family, I will feel solely responsible for any damage that is done.

Taking the goats to the market to be sheared,
Is only one of the duties that I do for my tribe, which I hold dear.
After feeding and milking the goats,
I am ready to return home to sleep.

When I count my goats, I see that one is missing.
It isn't the biggest or best of the tribe, but it is mine and I cannot leave it behind.
Driven by the ominous sun, I seek my lost goat.
It is nearly noon. I am used to the sun's preliminary tricks,
So the heat only tingles my bare feet a bit.
Even a great goat herd like me has a limit.
If I don't find the animal soon, we will both face a fiery doom in a few minutes.
I finally spot it trying to climb up a tree,
But its weak hind leg doesn't allow it to be so nimble and free.
The earth heats up like a stove ready to fry goat meat for stew.
The goat's bleating sounds like a child's cry,
As it hops and scampers around the burning ground.
I scoop it up with one strong arm and cradle it, keeping it from harm.
When we return to the tribe, I briskly guide them all home.
I hope that one day the sun's flaming fury will cease and grant us peace,
So that our lovely village will be safe to roam.

Remarks from Professor Kristen Gentry, Sokol Prose Judge

3rd Place Winner: “The Family Tree”

The mix of poetry and narrative in “The Family Tree” is reminiscent of Jacqueline Woodson’s *Brown Girl Dreaming* and Elizabeth Acevedo’s *The Poet X*. Both of these National Book Award-winning books feature young, female protagonists coming-of-age who are searching for their place in the world amidst settings that often feel unbearable to endure and impossible to change.

“The Family Tree” is set in Nigeria and features a daughter who must set out in the early morning hours to gather water for her family before the heat of the sun “fiercely shines down” to dry up “beautiful brown skin.” Even in the early hours, “weak sparks of heat still course through the ground, / Burn [her] shoes, and shock [her] weary feet.” The oppressive setting is presented with vivid, sensory detail. The daughter recognizes the significance of her contribution as a water carrier. She explains that without the water that she gathers, “My mother can’t boil much, my family can’t bathe, and crops can’t be watered...” While she knows the worth of her daily chore, she also knows the sobering reality that her brother, the tree-picker, is the favored child, deemed “more important.” She dreams of leaving the village to “gather knowledge beyond [her] narrow horizons” and share the fate of the one child who left the village to “pick their future, rather than fruits.”

Ndubuisi shares the desires of the water-carrier in first-person point of view, as she does the other members of the family tree, populating the story with a chorus of voices and perspectives about duty and responsibility within a family. Though the daughter wants to leave the village and study, she decides, “I will not let my curiosity leave what my parents have planted uncared for. / I will stay rooted in my family and grounded in my faith, while being as mobile as the water.” Meanwhile, her brother, the tree-picker, is obsessed with the sun, imagines it is the source of his father’s power, and dreams of touching it for himself. His obsession is a source of conflict that has the potential to morally corrupt and throw the entire family unit off balance. The father states, “My son thinks that by harnessing the sun he’ll be like me. / If I continue to fuel those thoughts, / Then I will be leading my unsuspecting child into the darkness / Rather than toward the light that he craves.”

“The Family Tree” is a beautiful portrait of a family drawn in moving, poetic language that presents essential lessons about balance, pride, sacrifice, and love.

Surrounded

For David Wagoner

Frozen still. People and stores tower around you,
Reaching into the sky like massive redwood trees.

You are as alone as one can be while surrounded by people.
Isolated in the commercial forest.

The sounds of normal conversations
Reverberate through your head,
Like a flock of birds launching into panicked flight.

People know where you are.
They see you as they pass,
But they do not stop for you,
Continuing their march like worker ants.

Like a boulder, you wait patiently,
Petrified at the thought of getting lost further.
The trees you ran around,
Going in circles as you followed your nose,
Chasing the smells of fresh food,
Got you right back where you started,
Surrounded by strangers,
Even deeper in the woods.

You don't know where you are.
You know that, eventually,
A passerby will someday aid you
Decipher the map you have in your hands.
They will guide you
Out of the forest and back home.

You know that someday,
You will be found.



Charles E. Coté, LCSW-R

2480 Browncroft Blvd, Suite 219A, Rochester, NY 14625

Nicholas Cutaia
First Place, Sokol Poetry Award

April 27, 2023

Dear Nicholas,

I am thrilled to extend my warmest congratulations to you on your incredible achievement of winning the first prize in the 2023 Sokol Award for poetry with your exceptional work, "Surrounded." This is a tremendous accomplishment that truly reflects your outstanding talent and dedication to the art of poetry.

Your poem is a beautiful and poignant reflection on the feeling of isolation that one can experience even when surrounded by a bustling city full of people. The imagery you use to describe the towering buildings and the bustling crowds is striking and powerful, evoking a sense of awe and even fear. Your use of metaphor, comparing the people to worker ants and yourself to a boulder, adds a layer of complexity and depth to the poem, making it truly unforgettable.

As a reader, I found myself completely drawn in by your words, feeling a deep sense of empathy for the speaker of the poem and their struggle to find their way out of the commercial forest. Your skillful use of language and imagery brought the scene to life, making it feel vivid and real.

Once again, congratulations on this remarkable achievement. Your work is truly deserving of this prestigious honor, and I have no doubt that it will continue to inspire and captivate readers for years to come.

Sincerely,

Charles Coté, Poetry Judge

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Returning

Do you ever walk across bridges?
Worn wood and moss and lichen,
Ragged corners and rusty nails and rotting logs,
Bushes creeping on each side,
Their branches so overgrown that the bridge almost
Disappears.

The sun comes down in spots,
Like freckles on the wood.
Do you remember
Do you remember when they came and put those planks down?
Did they know what the bridge would become?

I wonder sometimes
If you are exiled.
I've decided instead that you're
Returning.

I'll cross with you.
But you can't come back.
No, you can't come back.



Charles E. Coté, LCSW-R

2480 Browncroft Blvd, Suite 219A, Rochester, NY 14625

Lydia McCamant
Second Place, Sokol Poetry Award

April 27, 2023

Dear Lydia,

I am thrilled to congratulate you on winning second prize in the 2023 Sokol Award for poetry for your captivating poem, "Returning." Your words took the readers on a beautiful journey, and your talent for painting pictures with words is truly remarkable.

I was highly impressed by your unique style and ability to create a vivid image of the worn bridge and the surrounding scenery. The way you compared the bridge's condition to the emotions of a person was quite moving and thought-provoking.

Your poem's powerful message about returning and the complexity of human emotions deeply resonated with the judges, and we are honored to recognize your work as an outstanding piece of art.

We are delighted to have you as a part of the Sokol Award community, and we hope this recognition will inspire you to continue to share your beautiful words with the world. We look forward to seeing more of your work in the future.

Once again, congratulations on this fantastic achievement! It is well-deserved, and we wish you all the best for your future endeavors.

Sincerely,

Charles Coté, Poetry Judge

For everyone who doesn't know where they come from

For everyone who doesn't know where they come from

For those who can only trace their history back here

For those whose family only knows war and bondage,
and fire hoses and tree tops

For those who only know suffering,
and peace is as foreign as English

being force-fed to them at the end of a knife

For those whose tether has snapped

For whom no point on the map draws them near

For those who don't know their great-grandparents' names

For those whose sense of being was lost somewhere
between the Gold Coast and Jamestown harbor

For those whose body mourns
for broken backs and blistered feet

For those who long for distant shores
they've never seen

I see you.

I, too, daydream about returning
to the place my ancestors once roamed,
of looking out at the horizon,
and realizing
this is home.

For those who feel a song crescendoing
deep in their chests,
their veins like guitar strings
ready to be plucked
For those who have bongos
hidden in the dips of their hips
For those who have mountains
weaved into their hair, rivers
cascading down their backs
For those who have sunlight
underneath their fingernails
For those who have storybooks
unfolding in their eyes
For those who hear the gentle whispers
that tickle the back of the neck
For those who know how to make a home
within their own flesh



Charles E. Coté, LCSW-R

2480 Browncroft Blvd, Suite 219A, Rochester, NY 14625

Elani Spencer
Third Place, Sokol Poetry Award

April 27, 2023

Dear Elani,

It is with great pleasure that I congratulate you on winning the third prize in the 2023 Sokol Award for poetry. Your poem, "For everyone who doesn't know where they come from", was a truly remarkable piece of work that captured the essence of the struggles and challenges faced by so many individuals today.

Your words spoke directly to the hearts of those who have faced displacement, loss of identity, and the struggle to find a sense of belonging in a world that can often be cruel and unforgiving. Your ability to weave together such powerful imagery and emotions in your poetry is truly a gift, and it is clear that your talent is deserving of recognition.

I was particularly struck by the lines "For those who feel a song crescendoing deep in their chests, their veins like guitar strings ready to be plucked / For those who have bongos hidden in the dips of their hips / For those who have mountains weaved into their hair, rivers cascading down their backs". These lines not only highlight the beauty and richness of diversity, but also the strength and resilience of those who carry their history and heritage with them.

Your poetry is a testament to the power of words to inspire, to heal, and to bring people together. I have no doubt that you will continue to make a positive impact with your writing, and I wish you all the best in your future endeavors.

Once again, congratulations on your well-deserved recognition.

Sincerely,

Charles Coté, Poetry Judge

Phone: (585) 406-7264

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Cities



“Cities” is a ghazal poem highlighting the struggles and journeys of immigrants seeking shelter in the United States. Many of these immigrants are housed in major cities like Houston, New York City, and LA. However, they aren’t always welcomed with open arms. This poem is a call for kindness, compassion and open-mindedness. As a U.S citizen, I’m lucky to not have dealt with war, dictatorship, religious persecution, and overall destruction of humanity. Of course, these are not the only reasons people come to the U.S, some simply want to seek better opportunities. But my heart goes out to those who have no choice but to leave the only home they’ve ever known. And live in a foreign country where they may not speak the language or understand the customs. They may not seem very special to us, but to many, cities are safe havens, and we must do everything we can to protect them.

Remarks from Josh Pettinger, Sokol Performance Judge:

In Elani Spencer's performance of "Cities" she delivers more than a simple recitation of a beautiful poem. Her voice wields the aspirations, struggles, and triumphs of people who have been drawn to the promise of cities since the birth pangs of civilization.

Elani's deep seated conviction, passion, and clear familiarity with the subject is what ultimately makes this a standout performance and certainly worthy of high honors.