

**Black Hawk College
Writers Guild
Flash Fiction Contest winners
Spring 2024**

**1st Place
The Substitute
By Olivia Gratton**

There she was, standing all proud and professional. Her smile was as big as the American flag that hung directly above her head just inside the door. The joyful twinkle in her eyes was blinding me so much that I found myself bowing my head and staring at the floor. The figure in the doorway, the substitute that was so brave enough to take on the task of managing our classroom circus, was none other than my ... MOTHER!!! Yep, my mother, the person who feeds me breakfast knows all of my embarrassing stories and the only person who has ever seen the inside of my underwear drawer...how embarrassing!

I was desperately trying to not let the panic set in. My mind was swirling around like a tilt a whirl ride and my stomach definitely felt like I was on some kind of ride, but my face...I forgot about my face. Was my face showing the utter fear that I was feeling on the inside? Had I managed to divert the feelings and display a cool, chill smile?

As my mom and the principal made their way to the front of the classroom, I could just imagine her walking right up and hugging me, or even planting a huge sloppy mom kiss on my cheek while she ruffled my top hair with her hand; but nothing, nothing at all! She just walked past me like she didn't even know who I was. Her baby..her favorite..the one she cuts the crust off of the sandwiches for. As the principal started to introduce her, I could feel my fight or flight mode kick in and for my sake I remained frozen with fear.

Before I could develop a plan to deal with this tragedy about to unfold before my eyes, the principal began to introduce my mother as the substitute teacher. He called her Mrs. G, said that she was one of the best subs around and could easily handle our class. My mom said hello to the entire class with a huge smile. I loved my mom's smile, it had always brought me comfort and made me feel happy, but not this time. This time I could see how her smile was going to soon melt like when your favorite scoop of ice cream melts down the side of the cone on a really hot day. Before I knew it, our class was beginning to wind up like those jack-n the box toys. You could hear the buzz of little voices gradually increasing louder and louder. The energy was intense and charging up.

Then, I heard it, my mom's voice. It was gentle but firm, just like I've heard before. It sounded like someone who meant business and was definitely not afraid of the craziness about to set in. "I've heard this class is an exceptional class, with very bright students and the ability to do amazing things," my mom said. And that's when it happened, like magic, the room went silent.

My classmates heard her voice and immediately felt like their own mom was standing in front of them. She looked at them as they were her own kids and spoke as though she really cared for them. All of us felt a sudden flood of calmness over the room like a warm, cozy blanket. At that very moment my mother looked over at me and gave me a wink. I smiled with great pride as I thought to myself how lucky I was to be the substitute's kid.

2nd Place
Fingers of Death
By Dori O'Dell

They said it would be "The storm of the century," but being from the Midwest, that never carried any merit. Darla wasn't too worried since they were always under some kind of storm watch. On her way to work, she noticed the strange vehicle at the gas station shaped like some space alien vehicle you would see in a movie and stopped to take a picture. Darla ran the photo through a Google search to find it was a tornado research vehicle called "The Dominator." She instantly thought, what a dumb name, and tried to develop a better one but couldn't.

Darla looked at the sky and saw the darkness in the distance, but it wasn't anything she hadn't seen before. "Bring it on," she said with a smirk, daring the sky to challenge her. Instantly, Darla heard a deep, low roar roll across the sky. She let out a huff as if that was for her. It had been a long year after the breakup of the love of her life. She already felt a little on the dark side; maybe a storm was just what she needed. The roar of the answering thunder left a little chill on her spine as she remembered her mother always saying, "Don't ask for something unless you are ready to receive it."

Working in a skyscraper was the perfect place to watch the storm roll in. Darla stood at the window on the 22nd floor and saw the dark clouds slowly rolling in, admiring their commanding presence. She imagined, or did she see, the two skeleton hands within the dark clouds twisting and turning the chaos inside? Darla saw herself floating in the clouds with her arms stretched out and her head back, her dead soul and the darkness within the circling monster were headed their way. It comforted her, and Darla thought it understood her; she welcomed it. The storm grew closer, and the people in the office started to panic when all the phones buzzed. The warning to take shelter jolted their hands as the tornado notifications came in. Darla stood still, staring out the window, deep into the darkness of the storm's abyss.

"Darla, let's go!" cried Staci, but Darla would not move; she wouldn't take her eyes off the dark mass rotating and calling to her.

The skeleton fingers were elegantly hypnotizing her; a bright flash blinded her, and the smack of thunder shook her body as the building jolted. She could hear screams and cries but stood still, wanting more of what understood her, wanting more of the darkness inside that resonated with her pain. She could see the rotation starting, the skeleton fingers guiding the turns, and the roars of thunders were deep laughs of darkness. The clouds were alive; the funnel was so large it could cover a football field, circling and engulfing anything in its path. Darla could see things flying off in the distance; it was so close, alarms were sounding, and people were screaming. She put her hands on the window, hoping to feel its strength, and focused only on the dark eyes forming at the top of the storm. Dark weeping blackness stared back at her, pulling her body to the window. One of the skeleton fingers slowly moved and pointed at her, and the bleeding black eyes shifted to her own. She closed her eyes and exhaled when the glass shattered, and she accepted her welcomed fate....

**3rd place
Question
By Vix Dang**

Click.

A soft chuckle.

“...would you marry me?”

Click.

A pause.

Click.

A soft chuckle.

“...would you marry me?”

Click.

Another pause.

Click.

A soft chuckle.

“...would you—”

Click.

Jacob dropped his hand from where it rested on the phone. He was suffocating himself, in a way, having his knees pressed to his chest with his head down, though nothing could compare to the weight of hearing such a question.

A question of marriage.

A question of unity.

A question of promise.

A question that brought an immense sense of joy—a kaleidoscope of fluttering in his gut, a rush of beautiful ceremonies and receptions—but along came the avalanche of doubt and fear— anxiety of a crash and burn of a relationship he once knew, terror of misplaced trust and inevitable infidelity.

Afraid that this relationship would end like his first, if not worse, but he knew it was unlikely.

Dominic was so unsimilar to Glenn, that he didn't know what to expect from him.

The snark—never a shock that it was truly apart of him, nor that it came with the same casual ease as his smirk. It was overwhelmingly annoying upon first instance, and a nuisance the more

time he spent time with him. Though the line between annoyance and adoration thinned and blurred the longer he was exposed to this once supposed irritation.

The silliness—a trait he never thought to associate with him—from the juvenile to borderline stupid jokes—the endless messages of random memes sent throughout the day—the barely comprehensible middle of the night words made of slurred words and spammed letters—the clearly exaggerated tales that were only meant to bring fond eye rolls—still always brought a smile to his lips.

The nights—carried in extravagant restaurants, enough to make him swoon—with simple home made meals, enough to capture his heart. The many nights spent with each other, hand in hand, executing whatever plans were set would always be cherished and kept. Memorable as they were, they would never live up to their first real date.

The midnights—entangled with each other—a desperate need to fulfill their lust—holding onto a future in hush whispers and quiet promises. Grasping a reality that could be, but finding the idea slipped away when morning came.

The words—honest and true as they were, could never amount to his actions.

The actions—would always be more than enough. He had no words left to describe how every single thing his beloved did was done with a purpose. How a small touch could mean an apology or a simple "I love you." How he made an effort for his affection to be known, through arriving on time, or making his favorite meals, or setting aside time to be with him, or having most of their nights and mornings ending and starting together. Nothing he could say could amount to his actions, as they were simply enough.

Click.

He didn't think he could live through the same betrayal and heartbreak and scars, his previous relationship had left him with.

A soft chuckle.

Even so, he would take every risk and bargain, if it ensured for the rest of his life that he would wake up each and every morning and go to sleep each and every night to the same face and smile—being the first and last thing he saw.

Yet he knew he wouldn't need to bargain or trade anything for this life.

"...would you marry me?"

Yes—because he adored him and trusted him and truly wanted the future they spoke of in those simple hush whispers in the cover of night.

Click.

Most Climactic award winner
My Cryptic Mind
By Reice McCormick

I always thought that I was being followed anywhere I went, but no matter how fast I ran away from the heightened sense of danger, I could never shake the feeling that someone was always one step behind me.

Just like I have always thought that I was alone in the house, but then I heard a creaking floorboard, and my heart stopped.

I always reasoned with myself that old houses like mine are just made to make noises like those. The silence stinging my ears like a poison.

Sometimes this followed me into my dark dreams with nothing but the unilluminated traces in my mind.

I always took a deep breath and stepped into the shadows, where the unknown lurked.

The last remnants of light fade away, leaving me alone in the shadow-filled room.

The darkness seems to close in around me, threatening to swallow me whole.

The darkness was calling to me, and I was starting to realize that it was not as innocent as it appeared.

I was in a desperate search for answers, why I felt this way all the time, but the truth was more sinister than I could have ever imagined.

A voice that surrounded me whispers secrets that I may not be ready to hear.

The whispers in the dark were getting louder, and I was starting to fear that I was losing my grip on reality once again.

My head eyes spinning in the darkness until I see a flash of light.

What appeared to be a mirror, Hope fills my once unrealistic thoughts.

I walk to it.

I watch in horror as my reflection in the mirror transforms into something unrecognizable.

Myself.

The sensation of what was in my control felt heavy.

I tried to destroy the mirror because what I saw made me grow sicker and sicker.

I destroy the source of the sickness, but I know that it has left a permanent mark on my soul once again.

Yet again I was confronted by a dark force, testing my resolve as I was forced to take a risk to protect what I loved.

Myself.

I wake up from the darkness and my eyes are met with bright reassuring lights.

My eyes focus on the ceiling fan that barely moves in circles.

I get ready to leave my house, making sure I have everything I may need to protect myself from someone that will never truly be there.

The creak of a floorboard catches my attention once more.

My heart drops and my pores fill with sweat.

I lock my eyes on my feet as I do not want to face what may be there.

Best Dialogue award winner
Don't Whistle At Night
By Grace DeVrieze

The Woods never scared me, it was often where I found solitude and peace. Somewhere I could escape and recharge, a place where I could sit and just be. I found no issue being out here after sundown, it's nothing short of normal for me. Tonight was not for pleasure though, there's a big storm coming tomorrow and our pregnant barn cat's missing. Her place also seems to be deep in the overgrown woods on our property. "Juniper!"... "Come here kitty!!"... "Phwwwwwhhht" ... "PHWWWHHTT!!"... "well.. Alright then kitty, I'll be back home waiting for you I guess." With no luck and sad attempts at whistles, I turn back around and head up the path towards the house.

"Where are you coming back from so late, young lady?" Granny met me in front of the house. She must've been waiting out there on the porch with a newspaper in hand and flashlight in the other.

"Oh, nowhere. I was just walking through the woods, I thought I heard Juniper out there when I was feeding the chickens." I couldn't help but feel as if I was in trouble like I had to justify where I had been, but it's not like I was lying. I did think I heard our old barn cat Juniper hollering. It's pretty typical for her to run away whenever she's ready to have a new litter of kittens and she was due around anytime now.

She flips the newspaper to the front and examines it almost to read off its summary.

"There's this local folklore of a deity or some kind of creature terrorizing the farming community. Feeding off livestock, causing a hole in some pockets around here. Right here people are even saying it's mimicking calls and even voices and the natives around here say whistling and calling at night attract it to you. And Sally down the road caught a video of a stranger walking along Fischer Grove and when she watched the video back, the person had goat legs!" Hearing this from Granny though didn't strike me as odd, She's pretty easy to convince of anything.

"That's crazy, that's just a scary story to tell at campfires. Well, I better head off to bed now. Love you, Gran-

"Wait a moment. Not so fast. I want you to stay out of those woods from now on. Until this is bunked as lore. I don't feel too comfortable with you out there."

"Okay." Some people have their vices of drinking, smoking, and fighting. Not me, I just like getting lost and if that's so bad then sue me.

The next morning started abruptly with the storm panels slamming against the siding of the house and wind running rampant through our little shack of a house.

I run out to the living room to be met with all the doors open. The front door swung up from the wind, and the sliding glass doors on the side of the dining room table flung open, the screen door crooked off the hinges. Windows open, creating a high-pitched whistle and curtains blowing fiercely in all directions.

“SKRREeeEECHhh-” that agonizing sound of nails on a chalkboard we all love. I wince and turn my head to find Granny standing still outside of the glass doors, fingernails running down the glass, deadpan face not even turned towards me. Not a single part of her moving besides her clothes and hair swaying from the wind.

“Granny! What’re y-” She picks up her hands and runs them down the window again
“SKREEEEEEeeCChhh-”

“Stop it, Granny!” I close my eyes in pain and suddenly the noises stop. No whistling, No wind, No scratching nails, no Granny.

I feel the hairs on the back of my neck stand up, my body warning me something is not okay. Slowly turning to scan the living room, the glass doors with faint blood marks streaking down from where Granny’s nails would’ve been, the front door open but no longer moving, curtains still. The storm stopped, but something much worse was coming.

Cold hands grabbed me from behind and lurched me backward, knocking all the air out of me. Dragging me to the back door, I can't fight. This is much too strong. Cackling engulfed me “AHAHAHAHAHAHA.” and then a sharp whistle, “PHWWWT.”

Most Creative Concept award winner

Endless Serenity

By Justine Boelens

The woods are my therapy. It was brimming with life and filled me with hopeful happiness. It was quite the sight, too. Trees towered high above, light filtering down in between the leaves. I could walk through here forever, enjoying the endless beauty. I trod on through on an invisible path with no destination in mind. I caught the sound of water and moved closer to where it was coming from.

Walking through was easy enough. There was no struggle of overgrown plants catching on my feet. There weren't even bugs to irritate my skin or disturb me here. I could do as I pleased, go anywhere I wanted, and explore new sights. It didn't take long for the river to come into view. A small waterfall stirred it along and made a rushing sound fill my ears, which I welcomed amongst the prolonged silence from before.

Further down the stream the water calmed and cleared up enough to see rocks glistening at the bottom. Perhaps taking a closer look would reveal something nice to collect. Whenever I came across a scene with water, it was difficult for me to get close. I preferred the uninterrupted woods, the sight of something pleasantly brimming with life but not reminding me of what I lacked. I could never stay at the stream long enough to find any collectibles I knew were lurking.

I continued back into the heart of the woods, the leaves dancing about as if a breeze had passed through. I lowered my gaze to the ground, hoping to find a flower or stone I might have missed earlier. A bright yellow flower greeted my sights. I couldn't help but grin at the broad petals and the light that seemed to reflect off them. Just as I went to collect the enchanting flower, everything went black.

The sudden awareness of reality made my heart sink. I slid the virtual reality helmet off and sat up, causing my bones to crack in their protest of my dormancy. I guess the power went off. Everything was still dingy, a thick layer of dust and sand the prominent sight. With a sigh I got up and looked through the only window, only a couple of inches wide. The thick pane of glass showed nothing but a muted and dark beige. Another sandstorm must have damaged the solar panels and I would have no choice but to use the backup power.

With just a flip of a lever, the lights came back on. Checking the water supply was a little disappointing, but I took a large gulp of water to soothe my persisting thirst. It's all so desolate, the only sounds are of my own making or the gentle hum of power. This place sickens me to my core and suffocates me. I can only hold on for so long here. My rescue and return to other people, to life, seems so far away. I can't help but scurry back to my bed and lie back down. Air only being able to enter my lungs with the relief of putting the helmet back on, entering beautiful sights and sounds once again. The woods are my sanity.

Most Emotional award winner
The Day I Met God
By Taylor Folsom

18 year old female, car crash she was unresponsive in the field, cause of crash is unknown, only one victim. I just lost a pulse, I need a crash cart in here! Everybody CLEAR, still no pulse CLEAR again! I watch silently as they worked on my lifeless body. I had no idea what happened. I was just driving and started to feel fuzzy until everything went black.

“Hey Ellie Ellie”

I heard a voice calling me, I hadn't even looked up. I was too focused on the doctors working on my body. I turned around to see a beautiful garden that can only be described as otherworldly. I fear if I describe it any other way I may destroy it. I look at myself and see I am no longer in my bloody t-shirt and jeans but am now clothed in a flowing, white dress that feels like the softest thing to ever touch my skin. I can feel the wet ground under my feet and begin to explore the garden looking for the booming voice calling me. I haven't run since ACL surgery, but when I looked at my knee there was no scar. I almost screamed. I used to run Cross Country and Track and Field in high school, but one slip while playing volleyball with my friends ruined it all. I began to run. As I was running I noticed that not only did my knee not hurt, my lungs weren't tired either. I always had asthma since I was a kid and needed to take my inhaler before any kind of running. I kept running without any real direction until I saw this warm glowing light and something in me said that was where I needed to be. I stopped, and before me stood a man in a white robe, he was glowing so brightly I couldn't see his face but knew he was smiling. The glow was so bright I had to look down. When I looked I saw two circular holes in the man's feet. It finally clicked that I was in front of Jesus. The same booming voice spoke again “Not yet Ellie, I have plans for you”

I woke up in a hospital bed with my mom holding my hand. I had 7 broken bones: A femur, shattered hip, wrist, nose, and 3 ribs. I had a long road ahead of me. They said the reason for the crash was a seizure and since the crash I had been diagnosed with a rare form of epilepsy. I would most likely be in a wheelchair a very long time if not forever as well as I new incurable condition. A bum leg and asthma was now the least of my worries. My doctors were unsure if I would ever walk again or have full brain function. It was a lot to take in, but my mom was taking it a lot harder than me. In the coming weeks after many surgeries my mom looked at me and said “It's ok to be sad, your old life is gone You haven't even cried” I looked at her as the first tear fell down my cheek “I am sad, but I am going to help someone. I won't be sad forever” How do you know that?” she whispered as she leaned over the railing of my bed, I smiled as more tears came and sniffled “God told me”.