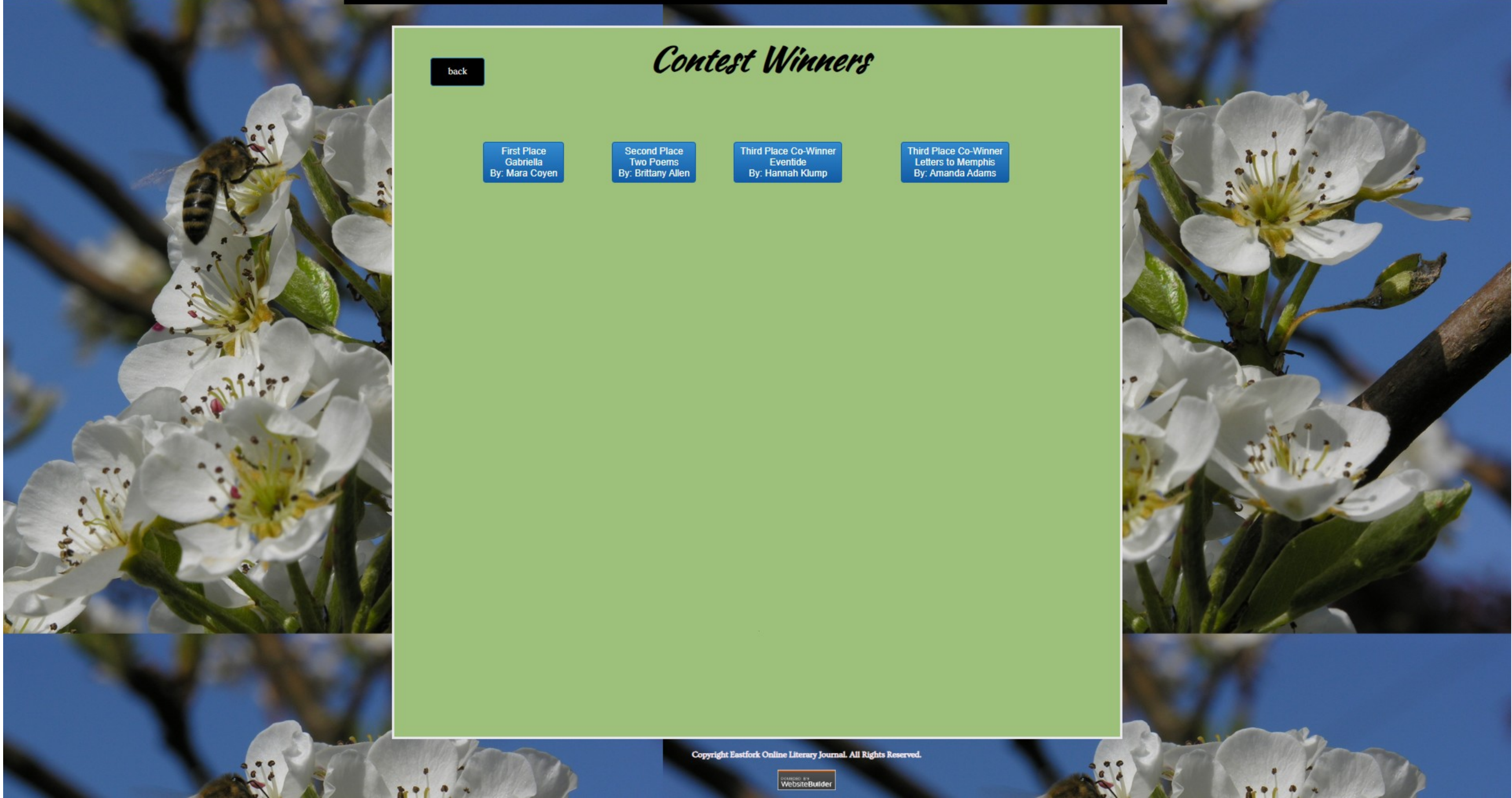




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Contest Winners

[back](#)

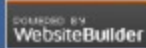
First Place
Gabriella
By: Mara Coyen

Second Place
Two Poems
By: Brittany Allen

Third Place Co-Winner
Eventide
By: Hannah Klump

Third Place Co-Winner
Letters to Memphis
By: Amanda Adams

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Editors](#)

[Issue 23-
Spring
2022](#)

[Previous
Issues](#)

[Join Our
Team](#)

[back](#)

Gabriella

By: Mara Coyen

I stood on the pier engulfed in a large throng of people, inching towards the forbidding, run-down warehouse. Though rain was drumming down upon us, the crowd wasn't deterred; it grew larger as time stretched on. Newsboys danced around the edges, offering copies of the day's New York Journal. Why would any of us want it, though? No one in this crowd wanted to hear the news; they all knew yesterday's events far too well. I glanced at the people around me and couldn't see their faces, but I could hear their muted voices. A woman moaned in Italian into her husband's shoulder while another man muttered a Yiddish prayer. Raw grief echoed in their voices. These people were just like me. New to the country; they probably had come through Ellis Island around the same time I did. Scraping to get by. Trapped by circumstance. Deprived of fam—no, that was the difference. I wasn't deprived of family. Gabriella just hadn't made it back to our tenement yet. But then, I asked myself as I approached the building, my heart beating quickly, why was I here?

...

The room, I noticed immediately, was large and spacious, but had the dusty, stilled air of a place that has been purposefully built, but then forgotten. Fittingly enough, as it was a place for the forgotten girls. It was ill-lit by out-of-date oil lamps that bestowed a feeble, flickering light. The rain clattered against the eaves, jolting the muted scene within. The dark clouds crowding the high window panes cast a grayish tinge over the dark, sodden mass of people streaming into the room. I got caught in the jumble and stumbled, but then the crowd quelled suddenly, as though some mysterious force was squeezing it into a line. I could finally see through the heads and stared in horror at my view.

Down the middle of the hall were curious-looking aisles, created as though in great haste. Though the aisles had seemed to merely be made of boxes at first, on closer examination, bodies began taking shape in my wavering vision. Heads began to poke out of the cheap coffins. Most of the bodies were those of women, young women, whose pale faces were covered with blood-stiffened hair. Blood had congealed on some of the crushed features of girls who had landed head-first upon the sidewalks. Others had obviously broken limbs that the simple coffins couldn't accommodate; arms and legs stuck out at awkward angles. Where a normal person would have had flesh, these bodies had bone, and where bone would have been, there was merely twisted flesh. A couple of the corpses—I swallowed convulsively as bile rose in my throat—were completely charred, totally unrecognizable. The worst, however, were the ones that were only partially burnt; though they were recognizable, the sickening smell from their patchy, blackened flesh punctuated the stale odor of the dust, a twisted combination reeking of death. She is not here. She is not here. She is not in one of these boxes, I begged at each body I passed. The silent corpses held command of the room; every eye was fixed on the grisly reminders of the previous day's events.

The taciturn mob swarmed past the aisles. It was a motley group, ranging from the poorest of poor to—my muscles tensed with rage—a fat-clad woman who had a false aura of sympathetic understanding as she peered down her nose at the spectacle. Rosaries were clutched in the hands of many as the searchers moved from coffin to coffin, bending over the silent girls, peering intently, straining to find family resemblance. Occasionally, a sorrowful wail would pierce the thick air and reverberate around every corner of the cavernous room as a ragged mother would fall to her knees beside a coffin, sobbing with both relief and anguish.

...

Officials fluttered around the hall, murmuring in little voices to the grieving families. A body would be marked, the lid would be closed, an occasional packet of belongings would be given to the distraught mother. Whenever a body was identified, the rest of the mob grew restive. The air would begin to stir as hope clashed with confusion; confusion, with desperation; desperation, with fear; fear, with anger, and energy would envelop everyone in a chaos of feeling. The coffin would be carried out of the room, and the air would settle again. The clashing emotions would dissolve into quiet desperation, and each individual would carry on, strained by the exigencies of their search.

My mind was fraying as I jerked down the line, staring into the dead faces that held no answers. Was this a friend of Gabriella's? Was this blackened skeleton a boss? Did these lost souls know the truth? Could they help me find my sister? The fellow behind me prodded my back and I realized I had hunched over, clutching my head. The line was starting to pool into a mob again, anxious to keep moving. I forced myself to my feet and took a few steps, then promptly collapsed again, because there she was. Her face was smashed; she must have jumped. Her hair and shirtwaist were singed, but she had avoided the flames. Was that better, or worse? Had she escaped the agony of burning only to feel the terrifying thrill of the fall? Did she pause before falling, or was she pushed by the desperate people trying to evade the flames? Did she have comfort in those precious final seconds? Did she hope a fireman's net would catch her? I battled with the answers as the officials closed the coffin and gave me the packet containing the wages that would be used for her burial. The coffin was lifted into the air and the officials began nudging past the searchers; I numbly followed. At the end of the hall I looked back. The mob was beginning to settle again. The faces were now distinguishable, and I saw on each of them despair that must have been mirrored on my own. I, too, was deprived, of my sister and my hope. As another mother sank next to a coffin, I turned away from the scene and went back out into the rain.

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[Home](#)[About Us](#)[Contact Us](#)[Submit](#)[Meet the
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Spring
2022](#)[Previous
Issues](#)[Join Our
Team](#)[back](#)

Two Poems

By: Brittany Allen

If Weakness Were a Waitress

If Weakness were a waitress,
One tear would slowly creep
It's way out of her colorless eye
And drag down her bony cheek
Leaving a stain on her unclean skin
And she'd look in her grimy, cracked mirror
And see her brittle, lifeless, straw-colored hair
Fall out in small clumps
As she slowly ran her brush through it.

If Weakness were a waitress,
She would be sliding one of her few, stained socks
Over her aching, over-worked feet
And skinny ankles
Before heading to work
Just to try to earn enough money
To put at least a little food on the table
For her four-year-old daughter,
Sick with cystic fibrosis.

If Weakness were a waitress,
She would work through her lunch break
Just for the extra hours
And instead she'd snack on biscuit crumbs
Left on people's plates.
And on the bus ride home,
She would silently weep when she looked at her nails
Once pretty and always manicured
Now cracked, chipped and as dry as the desert
From hard labor and warm dishwater

If Weakness were a waitress,
Her hand would shake from exhaustion
As she unlocked the door she had to keep locked
Because of the neighborhood she lived in.
She would draw herself a bath
To try and relax
Before her mom brought her daughter home.

If Weakness were a waitress,
She'd silently cry as she laid her daughter in bed
And slowly make her way to her own
Where she'd reach under her pillow
And pull out a solid gold watch her grandpa gave her.
She'd hold it while she slept-
And dream of being Strong.

Because She's Brooklyn

Because her electric blue eyes sparkle when she laughs
And she growls when she's mad
And giggles when you squeeze her stomach
And cries when you tell her her hair's turning brown.

Because she loves the Land Before Time movies
And memorizes every word.
And wears tutus every chance she gets
And stick people are the only things she can draw.

Because instead of saying of course she says, "course of."
And thinks nobody and anybody is the same
And responds to questions with a shrug and, "sure."
And her favorite excuse is, "he did it second!"

Because she's brilliant.

Because she's beautiful.

Because she's my little sister.

Because she's my best friend.

Because she's Brooklyn.

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[Issue 23-
Spring
2022](#)

[Previous
Issues](#)

[Join Our
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[back](#)

Eventide

By: Hannah Klump

there's something strange about
the way you move.
is it those limbs, stretching,
branching outward as evening spawns?
vermicelli white, spilt milk and jaundiced flesh,
it crawls over tiny bones
that snap like toothpicks when pressure and stress
break the state of being.

is it those eyes, reaching,
spinning in all directions as different paths cross?
apathetic azure, ultra-grey and glassy,
they play cruel, silent games, their black pupils
swimming in a sea of severity.
from their eyes grow salt blossoms
when heartbreak and terror strike and sullenly
warp the state of mind.

is it that mind, spawning,
plotting danger, avoiding hopelessness as life moves on?
beautifully connected, an enigmatic maze
of puzzles and paradoxes, fiction and nonfiction,
torn between malevolent ambiguity and withering hope,
it desperately searches in its own creation with one wish
that keeps the stars in an imaginary sky in an imaginary world
and secretly distorts the mirror of sight.

or is it that heart, beating,
pulsating softly, a melody of cryptic songs,
buried in a shadow world of its own making?

