

**2022**

**Richard Benvenuto High School Poetry  
Competition**

**Winning Entries**

**Residential College in the Arts and Humanities**

**Center *for* Poetry**



*established 2007*

**MICHIGAN STATE**  
**U N I V E R S I T Y**

**after rewatching jennifer's body for the third time in the last week**

the shard of glass hidden by the dirt  
next to the sidewalk. you dared me to lick  
it and i was sick for weeks. playing

mafia with cooking knives and naming  
each of the lizards at the pet store. turning  
the gas up on the stovetop. we hide on park trails

and talk to the strangers our moms  
warned us about, in shoplifted push up  
bras and strawberry-flavored lipstick. the ticks

tracing the ground bite my legs as popsicle  
juice drips down your chin like it's bleeding.  
we hit each other with the tire swing

and crack our heads at the top and *oh dear god*  
*i can see some of her brain or maybe it's just*  
*the hair dye?* when you held a lighter

to your tongue but didn't actually burn  
it because the spit would fizzle the flame  
out. the pizza we covered in nutella

and pig's blood. the time we tried to burn  
my house down  
with a box of your dad's matches

and the tampons they gave us during sex  
ed but it only left a bit of ash in my bedroom  
and no tv for a month. banging

our heads into the mirror. moms  
telling us to stop. *honey, you'll break*  
*the glass.* the feathers

from your stuffed dragon strewn

across the floor.        funerals  
and the man who said he loved

your backpack and the glitter  
decorating    your hair and asked  
              *what's your favorite popsicle flavor?*

when we were drowning,  
                              we lit matches

to our shoelaces  
                              and bikini tops, then sprinkled

ash across the water. we stood on the tips  
  of our toes while whispering

our secret into his ear.

First Place (Tie), 2022 Richard Benvenuto Poetry Prize  
Kaydance Rice  
Junior, Interlochen Arts Academy

## Freezerbird

Yesterday, I watched as the sun set over the lake  
It wasn't extraordinary  
It was not a sunset to be painted on canvas  
or wept over or described in songs as similes to falling in love  
I watched as my parents made their way individually  
from the top of the hill, through the trees, and onto the dock  
My mom asked me if I appreciate the way the lake is generational;  
how I have grown up above the same roots of now-wilting trees  
and groaning swingsets my dad did  
I have nothing particularly insightful to say, and maybe I'll regret it later;  
but I don't think she requires an answer

These things are unspoken, like the implication of hot chocolate  
after the first fall of snow  
or a child's silent understanding  
of the fantasy that is the Easter bunny

At dinner, she asked me if I ever have bad days  
I said "No, never in my life"  
This is only partially an attempt at humor,  
and I think honestly of my answer as I watch  
the yellow-orange hues of the sky sink into the water

There is a spectrum to suffering, like anything else  
Even if the day has seemingly been consumed by dread,  
the romanticization of these feelings;  
whether intentional or not, creates pleasure.  
It wasn't a bad day, it was more of a second-verse-of-a-Radiohead-song-kind-of-day  
My dad joined us by then, and he's speaking of the bald eagle

preserved in the freezer of the cottage to our left  
He tells me once I grow up I'll write a short story about tonight,  
but I know I won't wait that long  
I'm already thinking of what I'll say;  
how I'll relate the cold conservation of the bird to the daunting feeling  
of childhood slipping away, or the realization  
that every moment you're alive is another reluctant step  
toward the day you won't be

Maybe it's a symbol of self doubt,  
how it lies unknowingly, inanimate, and alone;  
how it manages to bleed into the minds of three observers of a mediocre sunset  
Possibly it's a metaphor for wasted potential;  
how the beauty and mystique of such a powerful bird can so bluntly be severed  
At the end of the night, it is just a bird in the freezer;  
and much like the sunset, it doesn't owe us anything more.

First Place (Tie), 2022 Richard Benvenuto Poetry Prize  
Kiri Tuck  
Junior, Rockford Public High School

## Voice Theory

When my sister, nine years old, finally learns  
to speak, my own tongue shatters in my mouth.  
When my mother hears the news, I listen to her

weeping over the dishes, each shard rolling  
into the soft water, sinking with the dish soap.  
Her reflection jarred into parts: not split,

but multiples coexisting on top of each other.  
Before her voice broke into the cavities of air,  
my sister bargained with sign language, words

reimagined as a low-hanging moon, a sweet sliver  
of irregular beauty. When she hid under the bed,  
we let her cry. Her future shipwrecked in our spines.

Now, her voice slips under the weight of water, broken  
consonants clogging the pipes. Every limb in her sentence  
twisted, unraveled like bone ripped from a socket, dislodged

from its orbit. Her voice a smudge of mountains  
unrolling along the horizon line, striking against  
the defined sun. The second time my sister spoke,

my mother stopped the car on the side of the highway,  
her legs shaking and ready to crumble like a newly-washed  
wool dress buckling the clothesline. She asked my sister

to repeat herself. Silence. With every syllable draped in  
a heavy coat, I threw my own throat open and echoed  
her words for her. I learned how to respond to every one

of her wobbling syllables, spoken at startling times: racketed  
across the dinner table, sliding in through the mail slot.  
I learned her slouching call of vowels, the shapeshifting

of language a body I grabbed with steel force.  
It was something I had to desire.  
A million mouths to call my own.

Second Place, 2022 Richard Benvenuto Poetry Prize  
Emily Pickering  
Junior, Interlochen Arts Academy

## Poem in Lieu of Funeral

I help my Bubby move out of the rent-controlled Manhattan  
apartment she's lived in for decades. She only kept it for so long

through tax fraud. It's four and a half bedrooms. It's forty  
and a half years. In romance languages, age is not

something you do. I am not fifteen years old. I have  
fifteen years. I'm the only one in the family who can't speak

Spanish. Who doesn't know how my aunt  
killed herself. Who can't map confidence to Grand

Central without asking for help in the first place. I build  
the building a floor thirteen. I believe that we don't need superstition

anymore. We are Chinese takeout Jews. It's a new  
denomination. There's still gold in the hat boxes,

but we don't think we'll ever need to use it. My father says  
that me and my Bubby are the same kind of messy

eaters—duck sauce goes everywhere. He hands me a  
thick stack of napkins and says he's trying

to save me from myself. He jaywalks across four lane streets  
because he grew up here. Pedestrians don't have the right

of way, he does. I follow him as he does not look back.  
This might be trust, but I won't pretend that I know it is

for certain. I won't pretend that I'll ever know the geography  
of my father's New York. The way his father beat him

into the bones of the building. The doorman sees nothing  
but he is always there. I want to know how old my aunt was

when she killed herself because my Bubby keeps buying  
me clothes for nine year old girls—that is, girls who have

nine years—and if I'm ever going to ask her to stop  
I need to do it accordingly. My father takes me to the Times Square

M&M store like it's a treat even as I'm too old to eat



unconsciously. I wish I was still capable of the mania I had  
when I had eleven years and, hopped up on espresso  
M&Ms, I stared in the mirror and defined luck to myself  
for two hours and thirty three minutes. And those moments  
were lost in my grasp. That's unaccounted for in my collection  
of time. When I fell asleep, I dreamt about the funeral  
of some dead relative and how I hosted the Shiva. Like we grieve  
in tradition. Like we hesitate at all. I pushed the furniture to the sides  
of my own Manhattan apartment because we needed the space  
for black dresses and dumplings. Nobody was crying. A street cat  
slipped through my hands. I didn't know the identity of the dead  
at the time, but I do now. I question what happened  
when she died. I know she had those years. Seventeen  
or twenty one or thirty three. My bubby still sleeps  
in her daughter's bedroom and every time I visit she points at the pink  
quilt and says, *This used to be your aunt's*. And so the childishness  
of her suicide is frozen in time. She says, *Nunca me hagas*  
*una herida como aquella*. I don't understand. Those years went  
somewhere. In the bones of that house or born into  
the consequential life of me. They were there, in her  
possession. They cannot be entirely gone.

Third Place, 2022 Richard Benvenuto Poetry Prize  
Sophie Bernik  
Junior, Interlochen Arts Academy

## epistolary entomology

You told me that I would move on and so I  
moved on to doors slammed in my face  
and walked away as to prove that I was moved  
into a new line new subject blinking dots  
move like caterpillars or more like  
centipedes and remembering your horrified  
face as a blue admiral swooped to grace  
your head and you swatted it which  
how was I supposed to respond to that  
by anything other than by becoming  
a mayfly and being less prehistoric than  
dragonflies but prevalent enough it  
was common to get squished  
by your shoe—and I still imagine  
that thunder smells like insect blood  
and you hate my perfume but if I  
wrote everything you've said to  
me I'd be devastated by how the words  
taste like crunched up cricket eyes.

Honorable Mention, 2022 Richard Benvenuto Poetry Prize  
Summer Erickson  
Sophomore, Interlochen Arts Academy

## Mother Moon

she is a force,  
but not the kind to be reckoned with.  
her aura alone pushes and pulls  
and reaches out across galaxies  
to lay a kiss along the foreheads  
of the weeping.

she is warm and caring,  
tender and steadfast  
in her love for others.  
she is the first to come  
and the last to go  
when i lie alone in my room.

Mother Moon collects all the light she can find  
and casts it back through foggy windows  
as she checks on her children,  
keeping the promise of her gentle glow,  
laying it lightly on our beds.

she is far away.  
i cannot hold her,  
but she holds me even so

when i bring her my sorrows in handfuls,  
she dries them on her nightgown,  
hums quiet songs of tranquility,  
and rocks me softly to sleep.

Honorable Mention, 2022 Richard Benvenuto Poetry Prize  
Lexie Frontjes  
Senior, Saginaw Arts and Sciences Academy

## Another Elegy

My father

was killed when I was seven, remnants of his past pieced together

narratives told by siblings and grandparents

he was a chain smoker for twenty years, always a cigar

in his left glass of rum in his right

at forty-three, he gave up tobacco

too tired of the taste he muttered

familiar sticks of

Marlboros replaced by Tootsie pops

too stubborn to admit that he stopped because

mother was diagnosed with lung cancer

When he

pulled the trigger, he didn't question if his target was

a saint a husband a father of three

Every minute broke down to

a drip of sweat

Every second broke down to

a blink

& between blinks, his stomach blossomed like

oil rig drilling waste lands.

My father's fingers laid delicately across his chest as if he believed

bits of skin could soften a shot

My mother's

jagged lungs, a hushed echo chamber

soundwaves bouncing          collapsing upon themselves

an abandoned widow searching for a home, he was an ocean

she didn't      know how      to swim

we wonder how her fragile chassis didn't

split                  snap                  sink

she prayed & welp & cried, he was at the

wrong place    wrong time    just another death

her devotion drove her to move

one foot          in front of          the other

Some days

I wonder how I could keep my father's narrative alive

a man who      preached forgiveness          and justice

I'm hurt by how much I yearn to

hurt every      part of          my body

How can I lecture of love, when they

placed a bullet      through his          chest

Honorable Mention, 2022 Richard Benvenuto Poetry Prize

Ray Zhang

Senior, Troy High School