



Friends & Foundation *of the*
Rochester Public Library

April 23, 2026

Sokol High School Literary Awards

FFRPL is the 501(c)(3) charity that **expands the Rochester Public Library's community impact through fundraising, marketing, and programming**. We also manage restricted funds that provide financial and supplemental materials support to libraries in seven counties. ffrpl.org

Since 1958, the Friends & Foundation of the Rochester Public Library (FFRPL) has sponsored a creative writing contest for Monroe County high school students.

Entries from public, private, charter schools and Home Schools are welcomed.

In 1985, **Eli & Mildred Sokol** established an endowment through the **Community Foundation** to cover monetary prizes to the winners and honoraria to the judges.

The Sokols' foresight and generosity ensures that FFRPL will be able to maintain this legacy program in perpetuity.



We are grateful to the Sokol family and The Community Foundation for their support.

Sokol Award Winners posted to SUNY Brockport's Open Access Repository

Thanks to **Mary Jo Orzech**, Scholarly Communications Librarian at the **College of Brockport Drake Memorial Library**, for including the winning Sokol submissions on Brockport's online, open access repository. The complete collection of Sokol winning entries (2015 through the present) can be [viewed and downloaded](#).

2026 Sokol committee and judges

Committee members read all entries and select the finalists.
Judges then determine the winners in each category.

Donna Borgus, FFRPL Executive Director

Susan Chekow Lusignan, FFRPL Director of Marketing and Program Development

Committee Chair, the Honorable Renee Minarik, FFRPL Board Member; Retired Judge of the N.Y.S. Court of Claims

Elijah Bader-Gregory, University of Rochester, Class of 2026; President, Undergraduate Students' Association; great-grandson of Eli and Mildred Sokol

Chad Cunningham, Central Library Circulation & Information Center Supervisor

Hannah Espinoza, Adjunct Faculty, Northeastern Seminary and Roberts Wesleyan University

Katy Hasselwander, Manager of Library Finance for the Rochester Public Library & Monroe County Library System

Jim Kraus, retired Wilson Magnet English teacher; FFRPL Board Member/liaison to the Rochester Public Library Board

Dr. Karen Soanes, Director of Instructional Technology & Innovation, Bloomfield Central School District; FFRPL Board member

Jeffrey Tucker, RPL Board member; Associate Professor of English, University of Rochester

Ichin Zinn, FFRPL Board member; former Director of the Mendon Library; former staff member at Pittsford Community and Brighton Memorial Libraries



Poetry judge
Charles Coté

Psychotherapist, poetry instructor at Writers & Books; author of *Flying for the Window* (Finishing Line Press) and *I Play His Red Guitar* (Tiger Bark Press).



Prose judge
Dr. Tokeya C. Graham
Professor, English/Philosophy Dept., Monroe Community College; Vice-Chair of the African American Affinity Group (3AG); and the recipient of the 2026 James M. McCuller Award for Excellence from Action for A Better Community (ABC).



Performance judge:
Joshua Pettinger
Owner and operator of Wicked Squid Recording Studios, specializing in remote audio recording, mixing, artist development and management.

CONGRATULATIONS to the 2026 Sokol WINNERS!



Winnie Jiang
11th grade
Eastridge
Performance prize;
Prose 1st prize



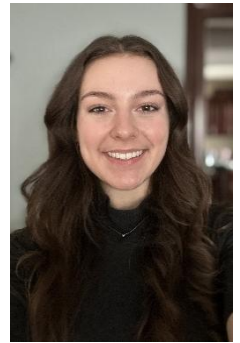
Leixi Chen
12th grade
Pittsford Mendon
Poetry 1st prize



Hailee Grove
12th grade
School of the Arts
Poetry 2nd prize;
Prose 2nd prize



Haley Contino
9th grade
Churchville Chili
Poetry 3rd prize



Brynn McHenry
12th grade
Harley School
Prose 3rd prize

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PERFORMANCE PRIZE – Winnie Jiang

[Link to performance video 'karma is dead'](#)

karma is dead

karma's eyes have been gouged out
for we are blind to the blood
the blood that turns into streams
as innocents suffer
a thousand slashes

karma's ears have been cut off
for we ignore the screams
the screams of grievances
of those who have been oppressed
muffled, static

karma's nose has been stolen
for the stench of metal
and miasma of decomposition
of those who have been wronged
hidden by a sickly sweet
fragrance

karma's mouth has been stitched
for we silently pass
willing for the help
we cannot call out
all censored by us
unable to open

karma's hands have been amputated
for we no longer feel the warmth
the warmth of our company
we stand alone
hating all
fearing all

karma's death was foreseen
for we stuck the blade
deep in its flesh
with our very own hands
for we remain selfish
until karma's ghost
comes knocking
for we tune out the sorrows of others
as bystanders
as cowards
for we see brutality and tyranny
and we exhale
rasping with joy

because it wasn't us

Remarks from Joshua Pettinger, Sokol Performance judge

"*Karma is Dead* evokes feelings of hopelessness and despair through graphic and violent metaphors. Personifying karma as a living, breathing entity which becomes progressively dismembered creates an uncomfortable, visceral response in the audience. The inclusion of make-up, moving text, and dramatized B roll footage underline the weight of the prose in this performance focused submission. What is truly profound about this piece, however, is how it wrestles with the idea of culpability. The piece asks: Who really is to blame for atrocities committed against the oppressed? The oppressed, or rather the oppressors?"

POETRY FIRST PRIZE – Leixi Chen

the girl I was

Did I ever tell you about the girl I was?

A girl hollowed out in the yellow flickering lights outside of a gas station?

Conversations fraught with liberation in the backseat of someone's Chevy

with twisted hands and sly smiles,

pockets devoid of coins

but hope smuggled in the seams of my coat.

Did I ever tell you about the girl I was?

Drowned in gaudy gold bangles handed down

from a distant aunty that

bargained with the corner store for a two-for-one deal.

Smoke lingering on terraces,

staining hair in a brutal wind.

Did I ever tell you about the girl I was?

I crept through forests like an injured bird,

avoiding the hunger of desperation.

I climbed the top of a tree

and saw my future,

with sunken eyes and counterfeit bones.

Did I ever tell you about the girl I was?

Writing on waxy paper in the slants of bathroom light,

the smell of burnt dust hovering in the shadows

Artificial light blooming on my legs,

bruises that dyed my skin into shades of velvety gray.

Did I ever tell you about the girl I was?

Mischief bundled into the feathers of crooked birds,
plucked and burnt for gratitude.

Clenched hands with nails slicing skin,
praising and defying god all at the same time.

Did I ever tell you about the girl I was?

A hurried spit of toothpaste before six a.m. bus rides,
frazzled hair and wrinkled shirts
with last night's pillow still imprinted on my cheek.

Flush from the bitter air
and a clumsy slide down worn-out handrail,
rust clinging to the back of my tights.

Did I ever tell you about the girl I was?

Smudges on the windowpane born out of popcorn
with a side of late night tv static.
Oblivion etched in the skin of a desolate bathroom stall,
a locked window and an empty bottle,
with pills that do not replenish my soul.

Did I ever tell you about the girl I was?

A mistake that could not be tampered with?

Remarks from Charles Coté, Sokol Poetry judge

Dear Leixi,

I am delighted to let you know that your poem, “The Girl I Was,” has been selected as the First Place recipient in Poetry for the 2026 Sokol Awards.

Your poem stood out to me immediately for its clarity of voice and its striking imagery. The opening line — “*Did I ever tell you about the girl I was?*”—is a wonderful entry into the poem. By returning to that question throughout the piece, you create a structure that feels both conversational and searching, as though the speaker is circling a difficult but necessary act of remembering. The repetition carries emotional weight while giving the poem a steady rhythm of revelation.

I was especially taken with the vividness of your images. The girl “*hollowed out in the yellow flickering lights outside of a gas station*” is a powerful scene-setter, grounding the poem in a place that feels transient and exposed. Likewise, the line “*pockets devoid of coins / but hope smuggled in the seams of my coat*” is particularly memorable. In just a few words, you capture scarcity, resilience, and quiet defiance.

The poem also excels in its tactile, lived-in details. The “*gaudy gold bangles handed down from a distant aunty*” and the smoke “*lingering on terraces, staining hair in a brutal wind*” bring texture and history into the poem without overexplaining them. These details deepen the sense that this girl carries both inheritance and circumstance with her.

Your final image is especially haunting: “*I crept through forests like an injured bird, / avoiding the hunger of desperation.*” The simile is both delicate and fierce, and it leaves the reader with a powerful sense of survival — fragile, watchful, and hard-earned.

For its evocative imagery, its confident use of repetition, and its moving portrait of memory and resilience, your poem stood out clearly among this year’s submissions. It stayed with me long after I finished reading it, which is always the mark of a poem that has truly done its work.

Thank you for sharing this piece. It was a privilege to read it, and I am very pleased to award it First Place in Poetry for the Sokol Awards.

With warm congratulations,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Charles Coté', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Charles Coté
Poetry Judge

POETRY SECOND PRIZE – Hailee Grove

Hymn of Steel

They feel the subway, the beast beneath the stone,
an electric fever crawling up their spines. The
leviathan's tremor drills into their skulls, rattling
the marrow of their claws, their hymn of steel. The
ground has soured, once of crumbly root and
winding river. Now, it tastes of rust and battery acid and
the bitter iron-blood of the city, bleeding into mother
earth, mingled with the rot of bread and tinged with
the poison of oils, their sacrament of rust. Breath
is no longer a blessing here. It is weight, it is
smoke crawling down the throat, coating the chest in
tar and oil, it is iron weight pressing into every gasp. Once
keepers of soft tunnel, their claws now scrape against the
grainless, cold concrete. Each step rings back like a
broken guitar string, a reminder of this alien realm. They
sift through cracks, fissures, and hollows, scavenging for
every crumb left behind by gods above, molded crust and
wilted leaves from the gutter, smelling of sun they will
never feel—they long for soft earth. The wriggle of
maggots infesting bits of food reminds them of damp
tunnels teeming with plump, pink worms. Cling
together they must in shadowed chambers, huddled,
bodies trembling with each growl dragged by every
train, bringing wind of ozone and rust that chills
calloused flesh beneath fur, right to the bone. They
remember the fertile dark that once cradled them, but
they know the earth that waits beneath, patient and
enduring. The moles will listen to the hymn of steel,
the leviathan humming above, and the roar of churning
engines, quietly remembering the tunnels of gentle sleep,
of rich soil that once cradled them, a life they once knew.

Remarks from Charles Coté, Sokol Poetry judge

Dear Hailee,

I am very pleased to inform you that your poem, “Hymn of Steel,” has been selected as the Second Place recipient in Poetry for the 2026 Sokol Awards.

Your poem distinguished itself through the power of its atmosphere and the intensity of its imaginative vision. From the opening lines — “They feel the subway, the beast beneath the stone, / an electric fever crawling up their spines”— I was immediately drawn into the world you create. The subway rendered as a subterranean leviathan is a striking conceit, and throughout the poem you sustain this metaphor with impressive consistency and force.

What impressed me most is the way you inhabit the sensory world of the moles with such conviction. The poem is rich with tactile and visceral detail: the ground that “tastes of rust and battery acid,” the air that becomes “weight... smoke crawling down the throat,” and the harsh echo of claws scraping against concrete “like a broken guitar string.” These moments give the poem a powerful physical presence and allow the reader to experience the environment as the creatures themselves might.

I was also moved by the poem’s underlying tension between memory and survival. The repeated longing for “soft earth” and the recollection of “damp tunnels teeming with plump, pink worms” provide a poignant contrast to the harsh mechanical world above them. The moles’ persistence creates a quiet emotional core within the poem’s industrial landscape.

The closing movement is particularly effective. The image of the moles listening to the “hymn of steel” while remembering “the tunnels of gentle sleep, / of rich soil that once cradled them” brings the poem full circle, blending the mechanical music of the city with the creatures’ deep memory of another life. It is a haunting and thoughtful conclusion.

For its vivid imagery, sustained metaphor, and its exploration of displacement and endurance beneath the machinery of the modern world, “Hymn of Steel” stood out among this year’s submissions. It is a richly imagined poem that lingers in the reader’s mind.

Thank you for sharing your work. I am honored to recognize your poem with Second Place in Poetry for the Sokol Awards, and I look forward to reading more of your writing in the future.

With warm congratulations,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Charles Coté', with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Charles Coté
Poetry Judge

POETRY THIRD PRIZE – Haley Contino

The puppeteers mascread

The skyline bleeds in neon hues, A circus
built on broken truths.
We clap for liars, kiss the blade, And call the
rust a masquerade.
The rats all chant in perfect time, Their
hymns of ash, their songs of grime.
The piper plays a hollow tune, As children
chew on silver spoons.
You swear theres reason in the spin, A god,
a law, a lie within.
But chaos winks and snaps the thread,
Leaves logic choking on its head.
The bankers vault, the beggars hands, Both
turn to dust in times demands.
The scales you worship, cold and bright, Are
just the darks favorite sleight.
So dance, dear fool, but mind the strings,
The puppet knows what silence brings.
The only order left to keep
Is what the shadows laugh in sleep.

Remarks from Charles Coté, Sokol Poetry judge

Dear Haley,

I am pleased to let you know that your poem, “The Puppeteers Mascread,” has been selected as the Third Place recipient in Poetry for the 2026 Sokol Awards.

What first struck me about your poem is the confidence of its voice and the clarity of its vision. From the opening lines — “The skyline bleeds in neon hues, / A circus built on broken truths”— you establish a vivid and unsettling landscape, one where spectacle and deception intertwine. The poem sustains this atmosphere throughout, presenting a world in which performance, illusion, and manipulation shape the social order.

Your use of rhyme and meter is particularly effective. The couplets move with a strong, almost incantatory rhythm that reinforces the poem’s satirical edge. Lines such as “We clap for liars, kiss the blade, / And call the rust a masquerade” and “But chaos winks and snaps the thread, / Leaves logic choking on its head” are both musically satisfying and intellectually sharp, capturing the poem’s critique with memorable precision.

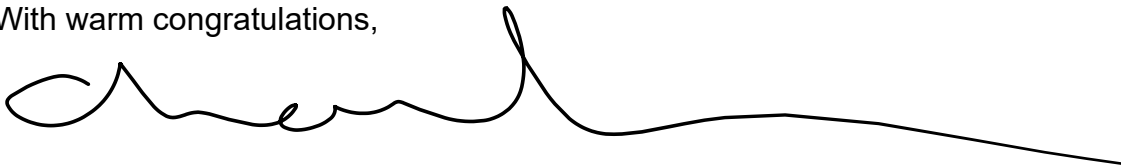
I was also drawn to the poem’s rich symbolic language. The recurring imagery of puppets, pipes, rats, and masquerades evokes a theatrical world where agency is uncertain and appearances conceal deeper forces at work. The line “So dance, dear fool, but mind the strings” crystallizes this idea beautifully, reminding the reader that participation in such a world often comes with unseen constraints.

The closing lines provide a fittingly dark and resonant conclusion: “The puppet knows what silence brings. / The only order left to keep / Is what the shadows laugh in sleep.” These final images leave the reader with a sense of lingering unease, suggesting that beneath the surface of spectacle lies a deeper and more ambiguous order.

For its strong command of form, its vivid imagery, and its thoughtful exploration of illusion, power, and complicity, “The Puppeteers Mascread” stood out among this year’s submissions. It is a sharp and memorable poem, and I am very pleased to recognize it with Third Place in Poetry for the Sokol Awards.

Thank you for sharing your work. It was a pleasure to read, and I look forward to encountering more of your writing in the future.

With warm congratulations,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Charles Coté', with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Charles Coté
Poetry Judge

PROSE FIRST PRIZE – Winnie Jiang

Seashells in the Trash

It summons the tranquility of waves, with the ebb and flow of pure blue; the beauty of paradise, with curiosity towards the catalpas and content with the currents; and the memories of childhood, with the simple scent of seaweed and the sound of sand slipping through the soles. In *feng shui*, seashells represent a comfortable home.

Fortuitously, I do not believe in *feng shui*, because the only seashells in our house are those found in the trash. Although they will meet their unfortunate demise, these seashells embody salient celebrations and milestones, ranging from birthday parties to family feasts to grand Chinese New Year functions. But throughout the years, seashells have shown up less and less.

I grew up in an ethnic enclave. The vendors were speckled alongside the roads like pebbles on a beach, while a sea of pedestrians flowed by, the loud chatter of dialects soaring, and my family riding the wave. Like a batch of sand on the coastline, we blended right in. Even if we were extracted, the scenery would still be complete. I am eternally grateful for my hometown. It provided me with a protective shell, allowing me to learn and appreciate my culture without the angry cry of seagulls—viciously judging.

When I later moved to an average suburb, nostalgia for the big city riddled me. The pebbles were replaced with mountainous rocks, the sea had become a great lake, and my family was washed onto the shore. I craved the connections I had created in my cultural community. Rather than sharing my favorite Chinese cuisines with my classmates, I stumbled through unfamiliar American traditions. *People actually care about sports? We wear shoes inside the house? And what even is a meatloaf?*

Meanwhile, my favorite dishes—tofu oyster soup, garlic steamed abalone, spicy stir-fry clam, amongst others—gradually disappeared from our dining table. Naturally, the shells disappeared from our trash can too. Not by choice, but because the only Asian market was two towns away and looked like it had been on a diet, empty and petite.

In times of isolation, we must choose between assimilation and loud proclamation. Swimming against the current, I chose the latter. I reconnected with my roots through exploration of Chinese media and with my very own Great Awakening, I allowed my heritage to shine through. There was the familiar sharing of favorites with friends, this time with television instead. We might leave the ocean momentarily, but like seashells in a tidal wave, the ocean will consume us again—eventually.

At home, I use an exotic version of Chinglish, blending the aggressive tones of my Fuzhou dialect with the short, sweet syllables of Mandarin, and the elongated vowels of English. While I used to feel awkward and illiterate, syncretism has gradually become the new identity that I embody.

My cooking ventures are a prime example of this fusion. Over the summer, with a pinch of online research and a hefty dash of improvisation, I was crafting concoctions in the kitchen. Squids were my victims. Cut into perfect little rings, the squids sizzled in the pan while the oil frothed with joy. As the aroma from the pan swayed and flowed into my face, panic settled in. I had forgotten to create the sauce and now, the squid was going to overcook!

Rummaging through the cupboards and fridges, I pulled out every sauce imaginable; bottles shaped like vases, gourds, and bears lined the counter. Feeling daring, I put a hefty amount of ketchup into the pan. If you have ever had the mishap of crossing paths with an American, you know we love our ketchup; it goes on everything! But I never would have imagined blending an Asian delicacy like squid with heavy American flavors like ketchup. Much less would I have imagined that this stroke of genius, some soy sauce, and a handful of peppers would create the perfect flavor. Oddly, it awakened a memory in deep slumber, a memory of childhood. Or rather... the memory of the Asian snack aisle!

From squids with ketchup, noodles with peanut butter, and salad with miso soup base, the combination of flavors always takes me by surprise, no matter how revolting the ingredients might have sounded. Cooking represents not the limit of the fusion of my cultures, but simply the very beginning. Seashells might show up less and less, but they are never forgotten.

Before I was enlightened by the possibility of fusion, I hated the term Asian-American. Asian *hyphen* American. Asian *minus* American. Not full, not whole, but stuck between two worlds. Humiliation overtakes me at the notion that I was most fluent in my native language at the ripe age of four. When you have to use circumlocution for the languages you use daily, you start to question the validity of your identity.

But over the years, I have grown to accept the label Asian-American. I refuse to be an invasive species in every country. Rather, I believe seashells should drift in the ocean, free from borders. The waves might be turbulent and formidable where the Pacific meets the Atlantic, but bivalves thrive in intertidal zones.

I am an ABC—not American, not Chinese, but an American-born Chinese. I am me—not broken, not incomplete, and not someone who would accept a different identity.

If one listens to a seashell, they will hear the ocean. Which ocean would I hear? Which home would I envision? Perhaps it does not matter. After all, *feng shui* is less about the objects and more about the placement. And the best part about placement is that it is up to the mind. Entropic balance is preferred.

Even the trash can is acceptable.

Remarks from Dr. Tokeya C. Graham, Sokol Prose Judge

Congratulations on winning the first-place prose award in the 2026 Sokol H.S. Literary Contest. Your essay, "Seashells in the Trash," is a strong offering that showcases your clear gift for storytelling and narrative craft.

The deceptive simplicity of an ordinary seashell serves as a metaphorical connective thread between memory, identity, culture, and home. How can a person define themselves without succumbing to others' voices? You explore this question and more with beautiful language that feels poetic at times. And your final declaration: "I am me—not broken, not incomplete..." is a powerful display of radical self-acceptance.

Your writing is mature, introspective, and full of cultural awareness, which underscores your first-place win. You now join an accomplished group of Sokol award recipients. This recognition is fitting for someone with your writing gift. Again, I celebrate your accomplishment and wish you all the best.

Write on!

Dr. Tokeya C. Graham, Prose Judge

Where the Lion Sleeps

The calm of the night had cooled the gardens into something nearly tolerable, a rare breath of tranquility the city of Babylon took after the heavy heat of the day. The pale moon of Sin, God of Moon, hung quietly in the sky, cloaking the verdant treetops in a veil of silver. Water weaved through the channels, a hushed trickle that seemed to never end as it streamed from terrace to terrace. The leaves above Amat-Seri shifted from the breeze so gentle that it dared not disturb the lamps strung along the terrace pathways. Beyond the gardens, there were few sounds as the city of Babylon slept, from the occasional bark of a dog to the chatter of the low babbling of the river. In the gardens suspended above the city in layered tiers, the world felt separate from the city.

Amat-Seri sat upon a stone ledge that jutted outward from one of the many upper terraces, creating a sort of balcony that oversaw the gardens below and the city itself from a distance. Her tablet rested across her knees, its surface covered in neat notes and annotations she had taken throughout the day. She had spent the day moving through the gardens with a sense of polite detachment, silently scoffing at priests reciting prayers that appeared useless and at overseers boasting about irrigation systems they barely understood from a time long before them. Now, alone, she could finally think.

The gardens, she had concluded, were not a marvel. The great Hanging Gardens of Babylon may have been a symbol of power and wealth a few centuries ago, but now, they were a drain on labour and resources that could be used more efficiently. She had seen men collapse in fields and women ration grain, and now, backs were tirelessly bending so the powerful could watch and admire the gardens. The irrigation system which forced water against gravity may have been ahead of its time a century ago, but now, it demands constant maintenance. Greenery was never meant to grow in the hot, arid landscape of Babylon. For this reason, Amat-Seri has been sent to quietly audit the gardens. She would report back to the royal court, who would determine the fate of the gardens. Then, the gardens could be restructured as farmland—terraces flattened, trees removed, irrigation restructured—it would provide enough barley to feed the growing populations. And yet, as Amat-Seri's gaze drifted across the terraces, she felt an unease she could not attribute to her fatigue. It was the sense of being observed, though no one walked through the terraces.

Her attention almost unwillingly turned to the statue of the lion across from her. It lay in a sleeping position at the edge of the balcony, lounging, its head rested on its forepaws. Its limestone surface had been worn out by two centuries of wind and water. She had seen it earlier that day, cataloging it to be a decorative element, perhaps an illusion to Ishtar. Every Babylonian knew that the lion was the sacred animal of Ishtar. Hundreds of murals and depictions of Ishtar's lions could be seen across the city, particularly at the Ishtar Gate. However, Amat-Seri has never seen a depiction of a sleeping lion. She was certain that merely a minute ago, the lion's head had been resting differently against its paws. Her eyes were glued to the limestone statue.

Out of nowhere, its tail flicked. It would have scattered dust throughout the air had it not been dusted by the garden's caretakers.

Amat-Seri instantly tensed, grasping her tablet tightly. She kept her eye on the creature still, and after a minute or so, it let out a lazy yawn and shifted its forepaws once more. She was the first to speak.

"You are," she declared, "a hallucination."

The lion opened one amber eye, then closed it once more. He hadn't bothered to move. "Oh, undoubtedly. Everything inconvenient always is..." The lion yawned. "You should write that down, it will comfort you later."

"I'm serious."

"So am I," the lion replied. "This is what seriousness looks like after being awake for a millennia."

"You're a statue made of limestone. Limestone is one of the most vulnerable materials... It would have degraded by now. And it sure doesn't speak!"

"And humans do not listen," the lion spoke, his head now lifted from his paws. "Yet here we are, carrying out our ever-useful responsibilities." He laid his head down once more.

Amat-Seri could nearly taste the lion's sarcasm rising in the back of her throat. She swallowed it down, as she had swallowed worse in the council chamber. "If you are real," she said at last, "then you are no god."

"Heavens no! I would never take a position so poorly managed..." The lion was shocked, though not in the way the diplomat expected.

"Then what are you?" She demanded. She wanted answers. "Because whatever task you believe you're performing, you are fulfilling it rather poorly."

The lion indolently stretched, its spine arching in a manner that defied the laws of matter, being made of limestone. When it settled once more, its eyes were on her enough to suggest it was paying attention. "Poorly?" it echoed. "My dear woman, I have done this job for longer than your city has grown into an empire. If my performance displeases you, it is not because of my failure. It is because of your misunderstanding." The lion briefly paused, then turned its gaze towards her tablet in repugnance. His gaze lingered on the tablet for a moment longer. "You clutch that slab of clay as if it might protect you," he said in irritation. "Columns of plain numbers, lists of repairs, estimations of cost... It comforts you, does it not? Everything must be precisely calculated, hm?" It lifted its head, amber eyes fixed on her with a sudden, sharp glare. "They do not."

Amat-Seri was surprised by the lion's intense tone, but stood her ground. "They determine whether the city starves," she replied coldly. "Whether the labourers are paid enough to feed their families. Whether water reaches the fields that thousands of stomachs need more than a stupid ornamental fig tree." She gazed at the terraces below, their lushness

nearly glowing in the pale moonlight. “The gardens consume resources Babylon can no longer afford. An attractive symbol of wealth and power does not excuse its inefficiency.”

“Purpose can be measured and assessed,” Amat-Seri replied, heat creeping into her tone. “If the gardens lose funding, it will be because labour has been mismanaged and funds misallocated.” She gestured toward the terraces below, where the water continued its steady course.

“Ah,” it murmured, “you appear to not understand.” Its forepaws shifted, claws grating against the stone. “To you, the gardens are just an ornamental decoration for Babylon to flaunt its wealth. That is how you mortals view it; you see a fig tree growing where it shouldn’t grow. You believe them wasteful because no one has explained their purpose to you in a manner you respect...”

“Then explain it,” she hissed coldly. “No riddles. If this place has a purpose beyond display, I would very much like to see the evidence.”

The lion went silent for a moment, tail swaying lazily. “You are an auditor, not a believer. Evidence that I can provide will not satisfy you.” A wry smile formed on his limestone lips. “Though,” he paused, “you are closer than most...”

A chill crept along her spine. How did he know she was a non-believer? She had learned long ago that disbelief was not something someone announced in Babylon. She had spent years building a face that revealed nothing — not faith, not doubt. And yet, a single statue was able to glance through her mind as if her skull were made of glass.

“You speak as though you know me.”

The lion could sense her fear, widening his smile just a fraction. “I do,” he spoke calmly. “Amat-Seri of the western quarter, daughter of the scribe who learned too much. You read quickly when irritated. You see the worshipping of statues and the belittling of the Mushkenu and scoff. And you have not bowed once in these gardens, to the nukiri who manage these gardens.” The lion blinked. “I find that quite interesting.”

Her breath caught in her throat. “How do you know my name?”

“Oh, do not be dramatic,” the lion replied. “You have been walking through mine all day. If it eases your distress, know that I only speak your name out of convenience. Titles are exhausting, I prefer to not use mine...”

Amat-Seri abruptly stood, the clay tablet slipping from her knees and clattering against the stone. Her voice was steady, but her heart pounded. “If you are neither god nor illusion,” she said, “then you are irrelevant. I was sent here to assess costs, not debate philosophy with talking limestone.”

The lion chuckled a small rumble that rose in his throat. “Irrelevant,” it repeated. “Yes. That is what I am to you now, but you might think otherwise soon enough.” He rested his head once more, a wry smile on his dusty lips. “Do as you must, Amat-Seri. Write what you will, count as you can. Just remember—there are more to these gardens than numbers and facts.”

Amat-Seri stood still for a moment, watching the lion settle back into stillness. It gradually became the form she had seen earlier that day, the slumbering statue of the lion. With no pestering voice in her ear, the gardens now murmured around her, the water flowing through channels, the rustle of leaves of the fig tree, the shifting moonlight. Somewhere below, a monkey leapt through the date palms and an owl hooted. She did not like how small the gardens suddenly made her feel.

Amat-Seri retrieved her tablet and clutched it to her chest. It somehow seemed heavier than before, as if the numbers engraved on its surface could no longer explain her surroundings. Whatever she had seen, or thought she had seen, did not sway her mind. The gardens were costly, a drain on Babylonian finances and labor. No spirit of stone could change that. And yet, as she left the gardens, a single unwelcome thought nestled its way into her confidence like a fracture in stone.

There may have been more to the gardens than she thought. The gardens breathed behind her, as if waiting for her to choose. The first light of dawn touched the terraces, and with it came the thought that she would soon have to decide.

Remarks from Dr. Tokeya C. Graham, Sokol Prose Judge

Congratulations on winning the second-place prose award in the 2026 Sokol H.S. Literary Contest. Your essay, "Where the Lion Sleeps," offers strong writing coupled with vivid and engaging description.

This essay is an exercise in world-building in the gardens of Babylon with lush imagery and historical flair. The lion offers the protagonist food for thought in a way that is applicable to every reader who may pass over beauty for utility. Your writing moves between logic and enchantment, giving the audience a tool for personal reflection. One is discouraged from dismissing something as "wasteful" simply because "no one has explained [its] purpose to you in a manner you respect."

Continue to highlight stories that help us grow in our humanity. Your pen is a powerful tool and this award affirms that. Congratulations again, and I wish you all the best.

Write on!

Dr. Tokeya C. Graham, Prose Judge

The Forearm's Dance

When a classical pianist performs, the audience does not dance. They sit, quietly listening to the piece. But a few feet away, the musician does quite the opposite. Up on stage, without a doubt, their body moves to the music. The most dramatic display of this is the swaying of their torso and snappy arm movements that become a reflex to the staccato notes. At the top, their face scrunches and smoothes with mouth open or closed to create a focused, passionate, or pleasant demeanor. Lower, there's the tapping of a foot, a way to keep tempo but also add to the head, arm, and midsection motion, bringing the whole body into the flow. You could suppress these by straightening your spine and planting your feet, but the body finds a way to express. There is unstoppable activity in the area of the forearm near the elbow. If you look at that section while the pianist is playing, each tendon—connected to an individual finger—moves. They twitch right on time to the music, since the movement of the tendon is needed to control the finger and hit the key. This creates a motion similar to the crashing of waves on the arm due to the flexing and relaxation of tendons and muscles under the skin. Moving back and forth, they jerk to each and every note. Musicians play the music and the music, in turn, plays them. From beginners practicing scales to masters playing Scriabin etudes, the ribs twist, the foot taps, and the tendons rise and fall. It is a perfectly timed dance.

But what happens when physical expression of the performance has been taken away? The listener must step in. When separated from the live musician, in order to feel the same intensity of sound, you need motion, some bodily extension of the instrument. Because you are not watching Rihanna sing live in concert, you are drawn to lip syncing and pumping your fists while riding in the car. Because you are not witnessing a guitar player plucking the strings, you play your own made from the air. Because you are not sitting in front of a full orchestra performing a Mahler symphony, you turn up the volume on your headphones, close your eyes, and roll your head back and forth to the legato melodies. You may simply put a song on and hear it, but without movement, it has no soul, no body, no channel to flow through.

We are helpless against music's demand for our motion. Rightfully so, as it is needed for our connection with the notes. So, the next time you have the chance to watch a piano, cello, saxophone, or any instrument player perform, I urge you to take a second and notice their shoulders swing, their facial expressions change, and their tendons dance. Notice the life a musician brings to the piece, and the life a piece brings to the musician.

Remarks from Dr. Tokeya C. Graham, Sokol Prose Judge

Congratulations on winning the third-place prose award in the 2026 Sokol H.S. Literary Contest. Your essay, "The Forearm's Dance," showcases your ability to take something familiar and guide readers on a fresh, immersive journey.

One of the most compelling elements of your writing is how you make the reader pause and feel the physicality of music. Through your words, our bodies become both instrument and conductor. Going forward, we will "notice the life a musician brings to the piece, and the life a piece brings to the musician." In each moment, we commune with rhythm, performance, and music, creating a personally choreographed dance.

Your writing reminds us that brevity can still carry great power. This award is an opportunity to celebrate what you have crafted. Congratulations again, and I wish you all the best.

Write on!

Dr. Tokeya C. Graham, Prose Judge