



# 19th Annual RRAS Nature Writing Contest

*Results for 2024: Winners & Honorable Mentions for  
Junior (Grade 4) and Senior (Grades 6-9) Divisions*

Entries of essays and poems were significantly down, at just 25 submissions. RRAS awarded four cash prizes (totaling \$75) plus three Honorable Mentions to the following students who explored the topic, “What Nature Means to Me.”



***First Place,  
Junior Division  
Penn Kerhoulas  
Grade 4,  
Garfield  
Elementary***

### ***“What Nature Means to Me”***

I close my eyes and feel the wind flowing over my face. It blows my hair into my eyes. I brush the silky brown hair away, and feel soft crumbs of redwood bark on my face. I look down, the forest floor is spread out far below me like an ocean of thin spindly needles. The needles fill the grooves and cracks of the forest floor as they float down upon the drafty air. The forest is like a swirling lake spread out below me.

As I look closer I can see two young deer lounging in the shade of a lofty redwood, their eyes are soft and dark. I shift my head carefully and see their mother, poking her head out from behind a curving trunk, her eyes are soft as well. I take a deep breath and then exhale.

I stare into a hill of reddish clay and see wild ginger climbing up onto the trees surrounding it. The plants are green and the delicate white pink blossoms seem to spill from the leafy heart of the plant. Tall redwoods stretch up tall around me as I pull in my breath yet again. I feel the warmth of the wind on my bare legs, I feel it in my hair and drifting all about me.

I bend my knees inward and push off against dry crumbling bark of the redwood; as I soar out into

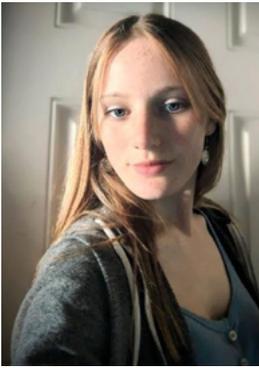
the blazing blue and white sky I see everything. I see the ocean in the distance, and the birds’ nests perched high in the upper branches, I feel the sun beating onto my back, I feel the red harness around my waist. The harness is the only thing keeping my body suspended above the ground far below me, and yet I feel no fear. I am in my happy place. I feel my body rapidly regaining weight as the harness and I swiftly fall back against the familiar tree. I know I am safe, nothing can hurt me. Times like these, when I am tall in the redwood canopy, help me appreciate what nature means to me.



***Honorable  
Mention,  
Junior Division  
Renley Noro  
Grade 4, Coastal  
Grove Charter***

***Honorable Mention, Junior Division  
Avery Dolan  
Hendrix Malicdem-Hayes  
Grade 4, Coastal Grove Charter***

***Unfortunately, the entries for these  
three students, which were submitted as  
handwritten text surrounded by drawings,  
were lost when being taken down from  
display after Godwit Days, so we are unable  
to reproduce them here. We apologize to the  
students and their teacher for the mishap.***



***First Place,  
Senior Division  
Thea McKnight  
Grade 7, Coastal  
Grove Charter***

***“These Lonely Roads”***

“Remember last time when we saw the baby jellyfish?” my sister asks, an excited, carefree gleam in her ocean blue eyes. I wonder what people see when they look into my eyes. Do they see sadness, or joy? The maturity of age, or a little girl’s naïve dreams? I admit to a deep aching sort of envy over that carefree, happy glint in her eyes. When you’re young, it’s easy to be happy over the little things, a trip to the beach or forest, getting a new top, hearing your old favorite song again. That ability to find the purest joy in the smallest things is a superpower. The older you get, the more you look at the bigger picture, become cynical, and waste those precious, tiny, happy moments on worrying about something that happened weeks, months, years ago.

“Of course I remember,” I say. And I do. Once, when we went to the beach, there were tiny baby jellyfish rolling around at the edge of the water, washing up and then washing back out to sea. My family took to calling them “Eyeballs” because that’s what they looked like. See-through spheres with miniscule and unidentifiable organs at the center. Eyeballs.

Our old black car speeds along the road, and my family continues their conversation. Heedless to what’s being said, I stare out the window.

Birds sit on telephone wires; other cars drive past. A man in a silver Avalanche glares at the road, as if daring it to make him late. Good luck, I think, silently laughing. Cows graze in green fields and horses race the wind in their perfectly manicured enclosures. Those fields used to be forests, I think. Those enclosures used to be marshes. Before we slashed and burned the forests, filled in the marshes, and plowed the flattened earth into perfection.

More drivers flash past in the opposite lane. It’s almost as if everyone is in their own world. Someone frantically talks on the phone. Someone else sings along with the radio. And in so many ways, we all are in our own worlds. The days’ worth of our own troubles and our own worries weigh down our shoul-

ders. No one has time for anyone else’s worries or troubles. Did you forget your phone? Bring the keys! Pack an extra pair of shoes! The thoughts of what we could’ve done, what we’re a second away from doing, and what’s in the future crowd for space. Me! I matter more! Each one screams, until it’s just too much.

So many writers have dreamed up dystopian worlds where everyone lives in front of a screen and never sees anyone face-to-face. Everyone lives in their own chosen world, built on memories and comforting words and idealistic futures. But maybe that future’s already here, so subtle that we barely notice it. It’s here in the way that texting is a completely different language than the one we speak, made up of abbreviations and symbols and misspelled, mixed-up words that have taken on new meanings. It’s here in the way that so many people who consider themselves best friends have never met in real life. It’s here in the way that it’s so easy to forget all about the little moments, the tiny details that hold up reality. Forgetting that being happy is very, very different from being ecstatic.

I tune back into the conversation inside the car, and talk, laugh, and crack jokes like normal. But slowly, a realization settles over me, like rain falling to the ground. Such a long fall, what a sudden end. The realization that, although the road is teeming with cars, it might as well be deserted, and we might as well be alone.

\* \* \* \* \*

We go to the beach, have our fun. Before we leave, I swear to the sand between my toes and the sun drying my hair and the cool brush of the wind and the salt air that I won’t be swept off my feet into my own little world and forget all about this other world of wonder right at my fingertips. I’ll never abandon it, because the whispering redwoods, the sound of the birds, the gravity of the moon, the cold of the storms, the scent of rain on pavement, the distant stars, and the warmth before a cruel spring rain mean everything to me. I’ve always loved nature, and I always will: even though I couldn’t imagine a world without technology, I couldn’t imagine a world without nature, either. I just wouldn’t exist.

After hours of fun, I pile into the car with my family, saltwater crisping my sister’s blond hair, sand and wind having done their fair share of damage to me.

We make our way along the twisting and turning journey home, and as I glance out the window at the other drivers and passengers, each in their own multiverse, I don’t forget my promise. I’ll never lose myself to these lonely roads.



***Second Place,  
Senior Division  
Trillium Pitts  
Grade 8,  
Alder Grove Charter***

***“Current”***

The gravel slid under my bare feet, piercing through the soft skin of my soles and leaving sharp red indentations in the calluses on my heels. I winced and stared at the ground, watching for burrs and thorns.

I didn't see the osprey soaring amongst the shards of sunlight scattered across the sky, the tips of its wing feathers spread out like stretching fingers. I didn't see the wind whistling through the willow leaves, or the sun glinting off a bit of broken glass buried in the sand. My eyes latched onto the ground, and my heart latched to the bars of the steel cage in my chest. I could feel the feeble fluttering of wings deep within my heart, but I pushed them down and locked a chain around their pleas.

The sun blistered the back of my neck. Spring scents accosted my nose, and I sneezed.

It wasn't that I didn't love nature, or that I was unobservant. I just was too weighed down in my own worries to notice the miniscule miracles that shone and flew and glittered all around me, begging for my attention. *Look! Life isn't so bad. Fly, run, jump, laugh, be happy!*

I pushed away the prying voices and kept walking, my head bowed. Pinpricks of pain shot through my feet with every step.

My gaze was so resolutely fixed on the ground that I was startled when I glanced up and saw the glittering sapphire band winding through the trees ahead of me. Finally, a small smile darted across my lips. I broke into a run, dodging the trunks of the willow trees and the knotted stones rising in clumps of shadow from the loamy ground. Mud squelched between my toes, and the wind pushed me on, blowing my loose hair into my face and obscuring my vision. I almost laughed, but the heavy cage around my heart smothered the sound. My happiness was stillborn.

The river stretched vast and green-blue before me, so close that the roaring of the torrential current

pounded in my ears. I watched as the eddies and currents knotted and wound together and twisted apart into a thronging mass of wave-slicked pebbles and grass and sand and water--so much water, moving faster than anything I'd ever seen.

The river had swollen since I'd seen it last. Its waters had risen to pummel the rugged rocks lining the shore. It spat foam into the mist-thickened air, its voice great and powerful and deep. The song of the river reverberated deep in my heart. Within me, a lock slowly clicked open.

The bars of a cage creaked.

A bird ruffled its wings, its beady eyes bright with hope.

I smiled. The laugh that had been weighted down for so long sprang free of its anchor and burst into the sun-drenched morning. I realized that all the worries and troubles that had been strapped to my hands and feet like great iron weights were worth nothing to this great beast of a river, who rushed past today and into tomorrow without a care, its current washing everything away.

I stepped into the shallows of the river, which were riddled with eddies and ripples and sand tangled with stone. The cold surprised me, and I shouted out, not caring who heard me. The cage inside me splintered, bit by bit. The bird's wings stretched. A song burbled up out of its throat.

I waded deeper, feeling goosebumps prickle along my submerged skin. I could feel the current tugging at me now, winding around my legs and trying to pull me off balance.

I wanted to become a part of that river, flowing fast and free through the world. I could feel the current winding into my heart, roaring like a beast relishing its freedom.

I drew my hands through the water and lifted them up to the sky, feeling droplets of river water dripping down my arms and onto my shoulders, my face, my hair. *I am part of the river*, I thought. *We all are.*

I laughed, trying to remember what I had been worrying about while I walked to the river with my gaze locked to the ground. But it seemed that the river had washed it away, along with the cage trapping my heart and the chains binding my song.

Inside my chest, the roaring of the river pulsed, flowing through my body like a wild current. I smiled into the sun and the wind and the water spray, a smile meant just for the river inside me.



***Third Place,  
Senior Division  
Isabella Green  
Grade 9,  
Academy of the  
Redwoods***

***“Nature’s Song”***

I remember when I first heard it, I was with my dad, hiking for the first time and we had taken a break on a small spot on the path. I was sitting when suddenly I heard it, the sound of the gurgling river began to meld with the many chirps of birds and frogs til I heard it: Nature’s song.

Nature’s song is one you don’t know the creator of. There are all these theories of who wrote this beautiful song of the wind whistling through the trees and the melancholy chirping of birds, but you never really know who created this beautiful melody that plays before you.

Nature is a song that has a unique sound for each ecosystem. The forest almost has a voice of its own, all the different areas, from the dunes to by the cliffside have their own beautiful sound. The sound of the ocean is roaring but often attempts to find peace. The peal of the forest is one of whistling its calming and an almost freeing sound. The tune of the marsh is quiet but filled with many, many voices of the wildlife, from the seemingly carefully crafted empathetic warbling of the Purple Finch to the almost booming chirping of tree frogs that signal the sign of spring.

Nature to me is a song that tells you its meanings. Of course it’s mysterious in its own ways, but if you listen closely it will tell you exactly what you need to know. Like how close we are to the winter, and you know it’s getting close to spring when swallows return from the south. Nature is a song that is alive, with every chirp, hop, and warble, it plays the melody of a new day. Every note nature sings while alive is beautifully melodious.

Nature is an often forgotten song; with every dropping of litter into the sea, with every summer that seems to get hotter, and with every forest that seems barren, nature cries for help. For their song to be heard and assisted, but it is often ignored. Nature is a song that is persevering. Even while it is in pain it will still sing in overwhelming chorus.

Nature’s song is not only a cry for help but a call for action. Nature is a song that I see many finally begin to hear. It’s been playing our whole lives but many lived unaware of its existence, myself included. But society has begun to hear its cries, and they are assisting. Finally, what nature means to me is a song that is an inspiration, a driving force that sings of help and is hopefully going to receive it. And if you have never heard it before, I encourage you to go out into nature, wherever you may live. To go out and just listen. Maybe you’ll hear it too.