Grand Prize 2026
Level 3
"The Eye"
by Ethan Xie

The eyes looked too real, too like a real person. The golden color perfectly reflected the sunlight creating a warmth in the eyes. I could feel the pupils growing bigger and smaller. I could feel a spirit dwelling inside the foundation of the statue. The statue was alive. It had to be. I couldn't prove it, but I knew it was alive somehow.

One year ago, I quit painting. It was useless. I couldn't find any jobs and my art was ignored. I was desperate. It had been two years since I had last sold one of my paintings. I had put half of my savings into this one piece of art, but it wasn't perfect enough. There was always this one detail of the eyes that made the man in my painting look strange. I had tried to fix the mistake. Initially, I layered more paint over that one spot, but as time progressed, the stacks of thick paint were visible. I started removing layer by layer, slowly disfiguring my own creation. I scraped each layer, meticulously removing every one of my failures, until I was left with the blank white spot on my canvas. From there, I kept painting and painting trying to perfect the eye. Every time I messed up, I piled the layers of paint until they bulged . Then, I would ply the paint out. My actions became more aggressive. There was nothing I cared about other than fixing the eyes. Striving for perfection became my battle. After six months, my canvas was destroyed. Each time I removed the protruding section of paint, I would rip a bit of the canvas. Slowly, the fabric broke apart and a rift formed in my painting. I sat, kneeling on the ground, staring at the hole in the canvas. A hole made by my tireless dedication. A hole not only in the painting, but in my heart.

As if a switch flicked on in my body, I threw the painting across the wall. My eyes bulged. I am done for. There was no way I could survive. I had spent days without eating, weeks without sleeping, months without going outside. All for what?

My head slammed onto the floor. I could feel it heating up after my thick skull came crashing onto the rough floorboards. My hands flew to the ground, digging and digging into the old dusty wood until a scratch was visible. Then, they went for my head. Each finger, seemingly like a nail, pressed deep into my scalp until drops of blood streamed down my head. Chunks of my hair drifted across the room like a bunch of skydivers trying to escape a broken down airplane.

I stopped. My head twisted to the left like a hinge. The eye was staring at me. The one with the hole. It's gone though, I pondered. I could feel the emptiness of it. A presence filled the missing eye. It was alive. It had to be. I had never felt true fear. Was this fear at all? I wondered. It felt like something else though, but I wanted it gone.

Right before I blinked, I bolted to the painting, reaching for the missing eye. When I felt the emptiness of the air, the presence of it faded away. I gasped for air. Slowly, the restlessness exited my body. I stared forward, waiting for something to happen.

I stepped backwards, trying to get away from the feeling, but it wasn't disappearing. The statue pulled me closer. The inanimate eyes stared at me, slowly pulling me closer and closer with its huge, metallic arms. My legs dragged my body forward to the statue. My arms brushed past other bystanders. My head locked upwards towards the head. Yet I had no control over my body. Just as I got near the statue, I was yanked violently by the guards. They brutally shoved me to the floor and my chin cracked along the dry concrete. My eyes still stared at the eye of the statue. The guards pulled my arms together and bound my wrists to my back. Then, they lifted my body up and began dragging my body into a police car. The eye still stared back. I felt the chains pulling me to the statue tightened. I wanted to go back. My wrists flew at one of the guards, causing one of them to fall.

Using this opportunity, I sprinted to the statue. Am I… smiling? I questioned myself when I felt the muscles on my face form into a crescent shape. I could feel it too in my brain. The eye was there and it was pulling me forward. The eye that led me into the months of despair. The eye that was the mistake of a creation. The eye that was the only other thing in the world I wanted. I wanted to fix the eye.