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Next Time

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Next Time

McKenna Rinta

Second Place

Notes from our judge:

This story will strike a chord with anyone who ever wished that they could just leave where they are and explore the world. The setting is ambiguous and therefore can be imagined to be anywhere or anytime. With phrases like "heart and breath and hair on her lips," and "Those stars turned into bright shining windows that got so big she felt she could climb straight out of them," the author has crafted a piece that draws the reader in and helps them experience an escape of their own.

Dirt speckled the back of Aurora's legs, bare heels slamming down on the muddy grass, faster and faster. She hoped she would never be able to stop. It was the end of summer and the sharp tops of the yellowed grass seemed to press little holes into the soles of her feet. This patchy mix of mud and dead grass sloped down to the creek, and she was determined to run straight through it. The sharp sunlight shot spears through her eyes until all she could see around her was gold and white. She kept running. Don't stop when you get there, she whispered to herself between quick breaths. The wind caught her hair, caressing her shoulders and swirling it in front of her eyes. This cool mountain air felt strange mixing with the wet warmth rising from the muddy ground. Goosebumps tickled her neck and arms. There was the creek, right in front of her. A flash of betrayal rushed through her limbs. Eyes wide, she dug her heels into the rocky bank, sending dry stones into the water as her feet skidded out from under her. Her legs slid into the shallow brown-green water as she landed with a thud on the bank. She sat there, heart and breath and hair on her lips, staring past her submerged legs at the path that started on the other side of the water. It led right out of the creek and into the forest, changing from mud to dry dust as it wound its way up into the trees. Next time, she said, pulling herself up out of the creek and turning away from that enticing wooded trail.

She was too exhausted to run back up the hollow. Instead

Rinta: Next Time

she took the long walk, toes digging into the grime, legs aching and spirit sinking. When she reached the grove at the top of the hill, she wandered in. Leaning on a dead, gray tree for support, she brushed and rubbed the dried grass and red hay fever dots from her legs and feet, wishing that she could go up that trail, wishing that the trail turned orange in the fall, wishing that the field would for once dry out by the end of September, wishing that the orchard would give a full harvest all summer long. A hawk flew overhead and she couldn't help wondering if he had ever seen what was on the other side of the hills, if he had seen where the trail led. By the time she reached home the sky was turning dark, bleeding out purples and reds behind dirty brown and black clouds. She hid herself indoors, trying to forget about the world outside and all of its temptations and sorrows, trying to forget about that path she would never walk on. As she lay in bed that night watching the first stars appear out her window, Aurora asked her mother if the stars knew where to go.

"They don't have to worry about where to go. They just are," her mother replied. "Shut out the sky, Aurora. Pull those covers over your little head." Aurora did as she was told. She closed her eyes tight until all of the stars from the night sky shone in the darkness behind her eyes. Those stars turned into bright shining windows that got so big she felt she could climb straight out of them. And she did.