

2025 Elie Wiesel Competition
Special Commendation Senior Essay
Olivia Reid, 12th Grade
Norfolk Academy, David Kidd

Laying out your Soul

Beginning with cave paintings over 10,000 years ago, art has been used to tell stories and communicate a personal narrative that might feel inexplicable through any other medium. Everything in art, from the colors to the composition of the piece, conveys a different meaning or holds a deep truth for each viewer. It becomes an intimate record of the soul, sharing important moments and details that are often difficult to reveal through conversation or are even hidden from artists themselves. Similarly, personal diaries and stories carry the raw emotions of people, unfiltered and uncensored. They share their lives through their words or their craft. Without concern for what people see, people create art or write personal stories to make others listen and see an important truth or experience. These forms of expression are people's true selves laid bare to allow others to understand their life, their thoughts, their emotions.

Art for me has always been an escape from reality. The only way I truly feel that I can be myself. When I paint or I draw, I feel myself begin to loosen up with each stroke of the paintbrush or pencil. Every figure I choose to draw, the colors I choose to paint with, the pose that I want to use. Every detail in the painting is a carefully crafted expression of my soul because I want others to look at my art and understand something about me that I cannot express through words. Instead of turning to a diary to record my thoughts, I use my creativity to capture whatever's in my head. The images arise to my mind and I just chase after that fleeting form, trying to grasp what I feel. I do not create art for other people to interpret or for people to merely see a pretty picture, but to illustrate my experiences and my emotions through this medium. When I struggle with the weight of life and the constant push and pull of obligations, I turn to my art as solace. I lay down my most honest emotions onto the canvas to make the viewer feel and understand that emotion.

A personal story, *I Have Lived a Thousand Years*, that I read when I was twelve opened my eyes to the power of self expression through different art forms and literature. A heartbreaking story about a 13 year old girl, Elli Friedmanm, surviving through Auschwitz and her struggle to keep herself and her mother alive through the labor camps. I still remember crying while reading this book. I was only a year younger than Elli when reading the accounts of her time in Auschwitz. Her writing moved me so deeply that I still remember sharp details of her record six years later, like when Elli first arrived at Auschwitz she saw another girl bleeding out on her period, and she had thought that girl had been shot. Especially as a young girl myself at the time, Elli's story of the Holocaust through the eyes of a 13 year old girl made the brutalities and horrors feel even more saddening. It was after reading her story that I fully understood what the Holocaust was beyond just the facts and details that I learned in history class.

I Have Lived a Thousand Years evoked a deep sense of sadness and pain for this girl. Her story made me see through the eyes of someone not that much different than myself and it entirely changed how I perceived the Holocaust and other injustices throughout history. Her emotions and her connection to her mother felt so close to my heart. This powerful force that art and personal stories like Elli's hold make people see not just the artist or the writer in a new light but also see themselves in a new light. These pieces grasp the very emotions that connect us all as humans—grief, love, pain, and happiness—just as Edgar Degas said, "Art is not what you see, but what you make others see." In a world that seems extremely divided and cold, continuing to share art and honest diaries can bring more light to important truths and experiences that should not be ignored. Utilizing these mediums to speak out against events

like the Holocaust can inspire greater change. Art and personal stories are vital to create, to read or to see because of their ability to evoke these raw emotions and experiences, making others comprehend the world with greater sympathy and kindness and bringing forth positive action.