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Missouri Youth Write

*Missouri Youth Write* is sponsored by the Missouri Association of Teachers of English (MATE). Prairie Lands Writing Project at Missouri Western State University joined together with MATE and the Missouri Writing Projects Network in June 2008 to form the Missouri Writing Region, a regional affiliate for the national Scholastic Writing Awards Contest, sponsored by The Alliance for Young Artists & Writers (http://www.artandwriting.org/). In 2014, the Greater Kansas City Writing Project assumed Prairie Lands’ duties with regards to the Missouri Writing Region of the Scholastic Writing Awards. The winning students’ writings from the Missouri Writing Region for the 2014 national Scholastic Writing Awards Contest comprise this edition of *Missouri Youth Write*.

Editor: Rebecca Dierking
Web Editor:
Assistant Editor:

This edition is available online at: .
For more information about the Missouri Region for the National Scholastic Contest, see .
There is a dream where
I am standing in my kitchen and
you are shattering dishes,
hurling ceramic at the ground
so close to my feet I can feel the shards
blooming across my skin like
the thorns of desert flowers.
We pick up the biggest pieces
and eat them.
I know it is a dream because
we are still alive after we swallow.
It sounds more like a nightmare,
and it should be, but
we are together.
Even the fractured remains
are tender as we chew.

There is a dream where
we want our own world and so we
cut it out of blue and green
construction paper like a fifth grade
arts and crafts project except that
your silhouette is every piece of land
and my spine is every body of water
lying across you.

Here are the broken plates and bowls
molding themselves back together
in our stomachs, healing soft
and pliant, bending like the
necks of swans.
They forget that they were glass.
Maybe we can forget, too.
Maybe I can kiss you where
it’s sharp and where
your edges run jagged
until you can’t remember
how the pain once felt.

There is a dream where
nothing bleeds, but everything is alive,
where broken things can be
made unbroken simply by
wishing it.
Let me tell you about the earth
and what it looked like
before we got our hands on it.
Let me tell you about the earth
and how it broke apart like
ceramic against the tile floor.

We know what it is to be unmade.
In a dream, we tried to forget.
At the ripe old age of four, I was absolutely certain that I knew everything there was to know about this world. I knew that the path in the woods by Grandma and Grandpa’s house led to Snow White’s cottage. I knew that dogs liked it when I sat on their backs and yelled “Run Horsey! Run!” I knew that the strange man next door with the bushy white beard was Santa Claus. And I knew that my grandpa was a superhero.

Going to spend the day at Grandma and Grandpa’s house as the rest of my family enjoyed a “kid-free, cry-free, complaint-free”—basically just me-free—day was the equivalent of spending the day at DisneyWorld. Days spent at Grandma and Grandpa’s encompassed everything that I loved—adventuring around town, laughing with my superhero, and enjoying a big ole bowl of delectable strawberries blanketed in sugar. Usually when I first arrived, Grandma would have to go “rest her eyes” for a little bit while Grandpa and I took the dogs for a walk. Grandpa would grab the leashes, and I would lace up my own shoes and then his shoes because he thought I should get in the extra practice. (I’m beginning to think that he was just too lazy to bend over.) Our walks varied. Sometimes we’d go fishing at the pond. Sometimes he’d awkwardly introduce me to his friends’ grandchildren and make me play with them. Sometimes we’d take the longer, scenic route and we’d pass by the local pool that he met Grandma at or the gym where he trained to be a professional boxer or the cemetery where his parents were buried. Every walk I went on with Grandpa was different than the one before, and every day spent with him made me love my superhero that much more.

When we arrived home from our strenuous adventure, Grandma would prepare for us her signature snack, strawberries and sugar—something my own mother never let me have. She’d ask us all about our walk as she sliced the strawberries and poured the sugar. “Good Lord Karen are you going to give us a side of strawberries with our sugar?!” Grandpa would say, a sarcastic smirk stretching across his face. Seconds later, when Grandma left the room, he’d pour even more into my bowl. “A little more won’t hurt,” he’d say with a wink. We’d devour the bowl and be off on our next big adventure in minutes. Those days were my favorite days.

It’s crazy how much I’ve learned and grown these past 14 years. I’ve discovered that the woods by Grandma and Grandpa’s house are unfortunately not home to any princesses. I’ve learned that it’s actually borderline animal abuse to ride on dogs and yell at them. My parents successfully convinced me to stop giving the strange man next door copies of my Christmas list. I’ve outgrown most of my immature notions and my nonsensical reasonings, but four-year-old me didn’t get everything wrong. There’s one undeniable fact that cannot be outgrown; my grandpa is a superhero. He doesn’t wear a cape. Disney hasn’t made a movie about him (yet). He can’t lift buses or fly or read minds. He has never rescued someone from a burning building or saved the world. Instead, he picked me up when I fell and scraped my knee, he snuck me an extra spoonful of sugar on my strawberries, and he gave me piggyback rides when my little legs grew too weary. He may not have saved lives, but he has made mine better. He may not have the Batmobile, but he has one heck of a sidekick.
Maggie Bauer
Poetry: Time Doesn't Heal all Wounds
Central High School
Kyla Ward, Teacher

“Time heals all wounds”
Death.
It isn't something we can get out of.
It comes eventually.
But for those who still have to be here on earth, it gets harder every day.
Each year that passes without that person
You question whether or not your memories of them are even true
You start to feel as if they were some sort of character,
Made up. Imaginary.
And they grow more and more distant as you grow older.
Until you see something that reminds you of them.
Coveralls.
Pumpkin pie.
A deer.
Everything...
It
all
hits you.
Like a weight landing
And you miss them
But there's nothing you can do
You have to wait.
And then time just gets annoying.
Time doesn't heal all wounds.
It just opens them, once again.
Hello. I am romanticism. I am Dr. Seuss’ “Cat in the Hat” tucked away in the depths of your baby box. I am the nostalgic feeling of fitting perfectly on your mother’s lap while her delicate fingers point to each word, patiently waiting for you to sound them out. I am the swelling of pride felt as you boastfully advertise your “Magic Tree House” book to your lunch table, making sure to point out that it is a “chapter book... without pictures.” I am the overwhelming sensation of Barnes and Noble: the intoxicating smell of new ink, the lure of the bookshelves’ ability to hide you from the outside world, the instant connection with the fellow spectacle-enshrouded literature enthusiasts clutching their Starbucks beverages. I am your first classic novel; your first encounter with words that have been read by millions of eyes for hundreds of years. I am the instinctual notion to dog-ear the page when Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth first meet, or to underline the iconic lines of “Gatsby believed in the green light” in Fitzgerald’s esteemed novel. I am every coffee and tear stain gracing the pages of every New York Times Best Seller and Nicholas Sparks novel. I am the aching in your wrist from angling the book towards your nightstand lamp. I am every night that turned into morning because of “just one more chapter”. I am the fond memories of all-night study sessions in which your textbook doubled as a pillow. I am cuddling on the couch with “What to Expect When You’re Expecting,” “The Big Book of Baby Names,” and a highlighter, planning the next nine months and eighteen years of your life. I am every hardback, pocket-size, leather-bound, hand-me-down tangible book to find residence in your backpack, car floor, dorm room desk, and nursery room. I have been with you from the beginning and I will never truly leave your nightstand.

The notion of a physical book is, in essence, a sentimental concept. For so many, a tangible novel represents the experience of reading that entranced them from early childhood. Those memories, along with many of the actual books, will follow them to college, then to their own home, then to their children’s bookshelves. The books serve as physical commemorators of portions of their lives; the books, along with the memories, can then be passed on to children or around a book club circle. There is very minimal sentimental value in telling your children that you too “downloaded” a book when you were their age. There are no “heirloom apps”. One cannot bookmark a page with a receipt from your favorite vacation restaurant, or a note written on a post-it your mom put in your lunch box. The entire concept of personality is drained from the experience of reading when a book is confined to a screen.

The gradual phasing out of printed books that has been in progress for much of the Millennium’s generation coincides directly with the immersion of technology into every facet of society. It has infiltrated social interaction, medicine, and has been gradually capturing education for several years. Technology’s successful penetration of the stoic methods of education has caused a significant shift in the rearing of youth. Online chats are becoming more common than in-person discussion, as are Word documents over notebook paper. Gone are the days in which elementary students excite over their new library card, realizing that entire worlds lie in wait within the depths of the county library. It is concerning that young readers may lose the opportunity to fall in love with reading simply because society has chosen convenience over the captivation of a printed book.

However, comfort is found in the fact that those whose loyalty lies with paperbacks seem to be stubborn enough to ensure that printed books never become entirely obsolete. Their resolve to adhere to the traditional notions of reading will, no doubt, save or elongate the life of the printing industry. So, you may read in peace tonight, not in fear that a digitized robot will come hunting down your hardback.

Hello. I am convenience. I am the astonishment of a four year-old as the touch of a finger to a screen brings to life sounds and illustrations of Dora and her explorations. I am the deep breath of a mom, riddled with a hectic schedule, as she flips through her digital issue of People in the waiting room of a ballet class. I am the pure bliss of the ocean waves slowly creeping up to your manicured toes as you bask in the sunlight and glory of a glare-free Grisham novel. I am the redefinition of the size of your carry-on, as the world of Harry Potter is now portable and does not take a forklift to transport. I am the savage spirit of series readers as the final book is
released to be downloaded. I feed your binges, your secret fandoms, your indulgent crushes. I am never sold out or on backorder. I can be with you hiding under the covers with Junie B. Jones because it is past bedtime. I can keep you company on car rides to Florida after all but yourself and the driver have drifted to sleep to the rhythmic hum of the highway. I do not need the aid of a mini book light to beckon you into a world of utopian societies gone wrong. I am threatening to make obsolete the entire realm of bookmarks, book lights, and book covers. I am an industry giant, revolutionizing the world of reading, leaving in my wake the carnage of heavy, oversized hardbacks. I am relatively new to town but am most definitely not going anywhere.

The digital age is here. Its presence is seen in the hands of 2 year-olds who cannot speak but can fully operate an Apple product. It is seen in the eye-rolls of sixteen year-olds as they watch their parents painstakingly type out a four word text. It has made society grow accustomed to words such as “high-speed,” “total access,” and “at your fingertips.” But in the wake of confused grandparents receiving “LOL” in messages that they do not know how to open, it has also radically changed the world of reading. It has opened up literature to entirely new audiences, enticing fifth graders, college students, and stay-at-home moms alike. The draw of convenience has made converts of some of the most tradition-dedicated skeptics. There is no doubt that the ability to simply “click and read” is enticing. With this perspective, reading is not “confined” to a screen, but instead is set free by it. It now knows no bounds—in the dark, in the sun, in the bathtub, in the air; thousands of books can now accompany you to every business trip, soccer game, and family vacation. Although this digital industry is undermining the traditional concepts associated with reading, it is also awakening a new spirit in readers. It allows for authors’ words to be spread even farther and wider; it has aided in the rebirth of classics that would have otherwise died to the emergence of contemporary vampire-romance novels.

Perhaps instead of being the death of reading, digital books are actually its rebirth. The fact that literature has the ability to mold and shift with the growing age of technology is a promising tribute to the stability of the industry, proving that technology can be used for more than avoiding face-to-face contact. The day has arrived in which the online purchases on Amazon far outnumber the foot traffic at Barnes and Noble. It will most likely be within this generation’s college years that textbooks are no longer available for pillows. One can only hope that with this new-age approach to reading, the personal connections associated with falling in love with reading is not lost.
Alison Boehmer  
Critical Essay:  All Hail King Bezos  
Nixa High School  
Lori Joynes, Teacher

It is 1994. A rosy-cheeked, 7-year-old bookworm slams the door of her family’s Ford Taurus and darts across the Barnes & Noble parking lot, ignoring her mother’s pleas to hold her hand. Her eyes double in size as her disgruntled Keds rest bring her to a halt under the neon sign plastered to the warehouse-size retail building. She draws in an exaggerated breath, uses both hands to tighten her Scrunchie, and musters all of her might to swing open the massive doors. Immediately, the crisp smell of black coffee and ink overwhelm her nostrils and she cannot help but to release a grin. Her mother, out of breath and unhappy with her choice to cross the lot unattended, catches up and begins to lecture her, drawing the eyes of surrounding shoppers. The young girl’s ears hear only muffled sounds as her sneakers, as if by their own will, quickly walk her to the corner of the store labeled “Children’s.”

It is 2014. A freckled 7-year-old trudges up his driveway, scuffing his Nike Free Runs against the pavement and kicking the pebbles that lie in his way with excessive force. He jerks the door handle and whips his backpack onto the floor in one, routine motion. Instantly, the smell of his mother’s homemade spaghetti sauce infects his nose and invites him into the kitchen. He practically sprints for the countertop that houses his family’s charging Ipad and multiple e-readers. After unplugging his personal device, he instinctively logs into his account with a few swift touches to the screen. His mind is already checked out of his suburban living room and into the enticing fictional world by the time he reaches the couch; he only faintly hears his mother’s spitting of questions as he adjusts the screen’s brightness and settles into “Chapter 4.”

There is no doubt that the environment of reading has changed: It is more common for pages to be downloaded than turned; books are bought online versus in line, and bestsellers find their stardom based on how many customers click the “BUY” button. This monstrous shift in the industry, no doubt, coincides directly with the shift in society brought on by the internet and the resulting technological uprising. Though a great many of innovative and bold entrepreneurs, such as Steve Jobs and Bill Gates, are accredited with contributing to this upheaval of traditions and surge of technology, Steve Bezos and Amazon have undoubtedly had their part in this revolution. Through Amazon’s discounted prices, innovative features, and e-book revolution, the company has taken both the book selling and publishing industries by storm.

**SETTING THE SCENE: BOOK RETAILERS AND PUBLISHERS PRE-AMAZON**

The Pre-Amazonian era, which will most definitely be found in history books come 2050, was one of much consumer contentment and industry executive unrest, which is typical in a trade that is controlled entirely by marketers chasing after consumers’ recreational dollars. Publishers and retailers alike were, much like today, constantly searching for strategies to catch the attention of customers. Little did they know that a massive shift that would forever shake the book industry was about to be introduced by a small, bald man with an Amazon-sized dream.

**Selling the Future**

Until the entrance of Amazon onto the book-selling scene, consumers were accustomed to waiting in line at their local Barnes & Noble “superstore” to purchase the new Harry Potter novel while grasping their freshly made caffeinated beverage that had been conveniently brewed in-house. Large-scale bookstores were the name of the game, and Barnes & Noble and Borders were essentially the only two players. Independent booksellers were crying “monopoly” to the authorities through legal suits claiming that the two powerhouses had a stronghold on the industry and were exhorting unreasonable discounts from wholesalers. The suits warranted little but a slap on the wrist to the two companies, as the authorities realized that consumers were pleased with the ease and convenience provided by these monstrous bookstores that housed over 175,000 titles (Wasserman 14). American book connoisseurs had become comfortable with the luxuries that these monstrosities enabled; they were satisfied with the icing rows upon rows of books and hot beverages readily available. Consumers were content; Barnes & Noble and Borders were thrilled. The sounds of satisfied readers were loud enough to drown out the cries of independent bookstores, and there was peace within the bookselling kingdom.
Enter: Amazon.

**Publishing Houses Crouch in their Corners**

Picture this: Six monstrous, luxurious houses are residing peacefully on a quiet countryside, happily dictating the quaint residences living in the meek village below them. The occasional uprising from the subordinate houses is easily squelched with a harsh glare from the larger houses; no one dares to protest their superiority, for they have controlled the entire kingdom for generations. Just when the six houses think they have a permanent chokehold on the entire kingdom, an innovative entrepreneur buys a plot of land neighboring their domain. This man, however, sees little value in merely competing with these houses; instead, he decides to revolutionize the entire system that existed within the kingdom for so long. He, seeing beyond the limits of traditional mansion-style housing, builds a hovering, mobile metropolitan utopia, complete with a water park made of liquid chocolate. The six houses, though still powerful in their own respects, quiver in fear of this new neighbor and his unconventional ideas. They, for the first time, feel threatened and small in comparison to the “new kid on the block,” as they certainly do not have a water park made of liquid chocolate.

Though the above illustration is slightly dramatized, it does accurately portray the state of the book publishing industry in the pre-Amazon era. The original “six houses” represent the world’s dominating publishing houses: Hachette Book Group, HarperCollins, Macmillan, Penguin Group, Random House, and Simon & Schuster. Represented through the “subordinate houses” are independent publishers, who have been threatened to be made obsolete since the uprising of the “Big 6.” Obviously, the “new neighbor” is Jeff Bezos and Amazon; the “water park” could be a number of revolutionary features offered through Amazon, such as digital publications, self-publishing, and attractive royalties. As in the story, the “Big 6” greatly fears Bezos, for he continually threatens their way of business and cares little about the status quo that has existed for so long.

A clear and startling manifestation of Amazon’s dominance can be seen through the recent consolidation of Penguin and Random House. The fact that these powerhouses felt that the only way to survive in a world with Amazon was to swallow their pride and join forces exemplifies the iron fist with which Bezos rules (Clee 51). Both the “Big 6” and Amazon’s respective checking accounts further prove the behemoth’s control over the industry: In 2011, Amazon’s revenue of $48 billion was more than the conglomerate total of the world’s largest houses (Wasserman 18). As a result of Amazon’s dominance and variety of “water parks,” the “Big 6” are now viewed as a lesser of two evils by independent book publishers.

**AMAZONIAN DISCOUNTS**

The intense draw to Amazon’s products and a key to the company’s success are due to its unparalleled prices, which enables the company to elbow competition away from bargain-hungry consumers. In traditional publishing, bookstores keep typically 40% of the selling price; distributors receive a 10% cut, leaving about 50% for the publisher. In traditional book sales, the publisher must distribute their profit between printing, marketing, and warehousing. Due to these constraints, publishers have created the “7x rule,” in which a book must be listed at least seven times more than the cost to print in order to be profitable (Alexander 9). Amazon essentially eliminates these extra costs by removing the intermediaries between the author and consumer, enabling the company to keep prices lower than almost any retailer. According to George Alexander in “Print on Demand and the Changing Face of Book Publishing,” “Amazon can discount most books because it pays the same amount of money to get them as physical stores do but has only a fraction of their costs.” Bezos’s tactic from the beginning of his company was to drop book prices as low as possible in order to increase traffic to his website, thus increasing the purchase of Amazon’s variety of other goods. Because of this method and the resulting perception of Amazon, consumers and competing retailers have developed a very strong opinion of the company. Jim Milliot sums up consumers’ perspectives well in his article “Can Anyone Compete with Amazon?” by paraphrasing Peter Hildick-Smith, CEO of the Codex group: “As has been well documented, Amazon is focused on driving prices as low as possible. The perception of Amazon as the cheapest place to buy books and its free shipping offers give the company a tremendous advantage over both online and physical book selling competitors.” This said perception has offered significant contribution to the brand that has become Amazon: Because of these historically low prices, consumers are attracted to the reputation of the company.

Bezos’s pricing strategy, however, has caused much disruption within in the bookselling business, especially as Amazon’s e-books have consistently commanded a large portion of the market. Tim Godfray, the chief executive of the Booksellers Association, in Nicholas Clee’s article “How I learned to stop worrying and love Amazon” explains that booksellers find much difficulty in competing against Amazon, which causes
customers to have reduced book retailer choices (Clee 49). According to Maria Minsker in “Dynamic pricing gains ground,” an approach known as dynamic pricing is being adopted by retailers to compete with Amazon. This strategy, commonly adopted by Amazon’s competition, entails investing in pricing intelligence software that adjusts product prices every 10 minutes to be comparable to Amazon’s (Minsker). The fact that Amazon is pushing retailer to a state of paranoia further proves its dominance in the market.

**NIFTY GADGETS**

Amazon’s intensely low book prices, however, are supported greatly by the innovations integrated into the company’s website and delivery tactics, which has drawn consumers in droves and contributed to its success. Features such as “Search Inside the Book,” which allows customers to look within books without having to buy it, significantly contribute to the high-traffic Amazon’s website has attained (Packer). “1-Click” shopping, a strategy that is patented by Amazon, redefines convenience for the consumer, as customers’ address and credit card information are saved to the website; “there’s just you and the BUY button,” explains Packer. Features such as these contribute to Bezos’s overall attempt to create a shopping experience for consumers that no other retailer could provide. Former Amazon entertainment editor Tim Appelo, as quoted by Packer, explains that “Jeff [Bezos] is trying to create a machine that assumes the shape of public demand.” Shipping, a traditionally standard procedure, has also been touched by Bezos and his wand of innovation. AmazonPrime members receive their items a mere two days after purchase, as well as free shipping. This streamlined process is achieved through the company’s distribution process. Amazon sets up warehouses in areas of low employment and hires workers by the hundreds. The scene within a warehouse is intense and often compared to the factory scene in Charlie Chaplain’s “Modern Times.” “Pickers” within the warehouse are timed by computerized handsets as they speedily walk up to eleven miles per shift through a million-square-foot warehouse; some orders are expected to be collected within thirty-three seconds (Packer). This exhausting process reportedly prompted ambulances to park outside an Amazon warehouse during a heat wave so that ambulances could bus overheated and exhausted workers to emergency rooms (Packer).

However, Bezos is not satisfied with these innovations: The thirteenth wealthiest man in the country has predicted that within five years a drone delivery service will replace “the human factor” within the company’s shipping process. (Packer). Bezos and his seemingly never-ending bag of tricks attracted consumers in 1994 and continue to “wow” audiences over twenty years later.

In the wake of Amazon’s success in the book selling industry, book retailers of lesser size have felt extreme discomfort as the company dwarfs competitors. According to Wasserman in “The Amazon Effect,” two decades ago, 4,000 independent bookstores existed in the United States; only about 1,900 remained as of 2012. The largest retailers, who were partially responsible for the decline in indie bookstores, have themselves not gone unscathed by Amazon’s dominance: “Borders declared bankruptcy in 2011...[Barnes & Noble] is nonetheless desperately trying to figure out ways to pay the mortgage on the considerable real estate occupied by its 1,332 stores across the nation,” Wasserman elaborated. Amazon’s significant hold on the book selling industry is undeniable: The death of Borders proved its dominance and the consistency of consumer traffic on Amazon.com continually confirms it. Whether Bezos intended for Amazon to practically engulf the industry or not, Amazon, through its unprecedented pricing and innovative features, consistently proves that it has no problems with causing waves in the book selling trade.

**E-NNOVATIVE PUBLISHING**

In the mind of the public, Amazon is currently recognized, and possibly idolized, for its territory in the e-book industry, which can be credited for a large portion of the company’s success. To the average consumer, the invention of technologies such as the Kindle introduced them to an entirely new world of convenience. In 2007, as thirty-something moms sipped decaf cappuccinos while reading the latest Nicholas Sparks novel on their handheld screens, little did they know that in office suites in New York City, publishing executives were quickly growing grey over the battleground Amazon had just created out of the industry. And for the first time in the history of the industry, the “Big 6” had a gun pointed at them.

The traditional publishing model has been universally adhered to by publishing houses for decades. Before the digitalization boom, authors and their proposed titles were introduced in hardback and sold at a rather high price, because publishers needed to make some money out of the business. If that copy received good reviews and brought in appropriate sales, a paperback copy would then be published. The introduction of digital publishing, led by Amazon, threatened this format and the companies who adhered to it. Customers, who were accustomed to the sticker-shock associated with looking just above the barcode on the back of any
book, obviously rejoiced in harmonious “hoorays” when Amazon promoted its Kindle through selling New York Times bestsellers at $9.99 (Clee 49). Book publishers, not surprisingly, were less than thrilled with Amazon’s grand entrance onto the publishing scene.

Precedence was set by Amazon’s competitive pricing strategy that resulted in readers expecting their e-books to be cheap. In response to this, the “Big 6” teamed up with Apple to combat Amazon’s growing dominance. The conglomerate took a swing at Amazon by adopting the “agency model” pricing strategy, in which publishers negotiated with retailers to set prices. Because Amazon’s extremely low prices on e-books had consumers accustomed to discounted books, the goal of this shifty endeavor was to increase the perceived value of e-books (Clee 49). Authorities in the United States and Europe charged the conglomerate with collusion and ordered five out of six of the publishing houses involved to pay over $160 million to American consumers in compensation for escalated prices. Amazon, however, came out as beneficiary of these squabbles; “Amazon, above the fray, was the victor in these cases… no authority is going to curb competitive aggression. The authorities are unconcerned about what share Amazon takes of the book market, provided book buyers continue to have choices,” explains Clee. Though insiders within the publishing industry are crying foul in response to Amazon’s low prices on e-books, the ultimate determining factor in Amazon’s success is consumers’ response; so long as customers are satisfied with the company’s colossal hold on the industry, authorities will not intervene.

**AMAZON’S REIGN: NOT “THE END” FOR BOOKS?**

The environment of reading has changed. In an industry comprised of traditionalists who professedly smell the innards of books to calm themselves, none would expect that a majority of its profits would come from e-book sales. Twenty years ago, when Jeff Bezos set out to revolutionize a trade that had been relatively unchanged for generations, no one could have predicted the far-reaching affects a little bald man with a dream could have on how an entire nation buys and reads books. Until Amazon, hot shots like Barnes & Noble and Borders were virtually untouchable what with their enticing plush chairs and fresh coffee. Until Amazon, the “Big 6” sat comfortable on their hills, reigning over the industry with little fear of ever being chastised.

Whether Bezos and his massive empire are viewed as benevolent rescuers of an industry in desperate need of an update, or the malevolent force that threatens the realm of reading, there is no doubt that Amazon has forever changed the book trade. Through its unparalleled prices, novel features, and e-book revolution, Amazon has immensely altered the face of book sales and publishing. Though Bezos is feared and resented by many who relish the young girl who was captivated by the kingdom unlocked through a bookstore, perhaps Amazon did something the entire industry was too afraid to do: Modernize what is held between hands so that future eyes can read what is between the covers.
Alison Boehmer

Personal Essay/Memoir: What Kindness Looks Like

Nixa High School

Brittany Parry, Teacher

About two weeks ago, I was walking out of the school building about an hour and a half after the final bell rang. I am sure that I was quite a sight to be seen as I awkwardly half-walked-half-scooted down the hall, attempting to balance my college algebra book, surprisingly heavy ceramic coffee mug, car keys, phone, and lunch box. Also, I believe I had been wearing wedges, which I have decided are not the wisest shoe choice in a school building where staircases are grounds for personal injury lawsuits. I turned the corner in the art hallway, gracefully spilling the remains of my coffee mug on my favorite trench coat, and saw two (unnamed) boys conversing by the door. After feeling sorry for them, for what sorry souls were still at school at this hour (oh right, me), I attempted to make eye contact with one of them, silently pleading for them to open the door. I paused for a moment, almost tripping over the rug in front of the door, hoping that they would take the time out of their obviously über-important conversation to open the door for this obviously exhausted and struggling girl (who, I might add, was most definitely at least two years their senior). But no. They actually moved away from the door. Away from the door. As if my clumsiness could infect them. So, being the dramatic young woman I am, I exaggeratedly “hmph”ed and noisily shoved my back against the door. I then shot them a look of angst. It should be noted that my look of angst is quite intimidating. *I feel obligated to recount that I tripped promptly after the door closed behind me, thus negating all “sass” I attempted to give these two gentlemen.

I am saying all of this to say two things: 1) where has common kindness gone? and 2) those boys should not be expecting a Christmas card from me.

We are taught from an early age that “sharing is caring,” and “please” and “thank you” is required to get the big cookie from the lunch lady. It seems, however, that these simple niceties completely fly out the door when we enter the age of licenses, Starbucks beverages, and finals weeks. Now, please do not misinterpret this and think that I am completely self-righteous and do no wrong, walking around school handing out roses and chocolates to everyone I encounter. Nay, I am only partially self-righteous. In all seriousness, I can get extremely feisty when faced with stress, sleep deprivation, or black coffee shortages. So please know that I am preaching to the choir as I write this piece. I just want to give my fellow high school-ers a little food for thought: What does kindness look like? Do we even know anymore?

We often see radical acts of kindness vividly advertised in the media, like that guy who stood on a street corner with a sign saying “FREE HUGS,” or strangely devoted dogs who valiantly rescue their owners from burning buildings. However, I wonder if the spotlight on compassion has become the driving force behind these acts of kindness. I wonder if selfless, completely unnoticed acts of love with no ulterior motives are as readily available as they were when Roosevelt gave fireside talks and candy bars were 10 cents. It worries me that common courtesy is no longer “common.” I know that I am not alone in saying that I am completely enamored when someone goes to the extreme of pushing the floor-button on an elevator for me. It is unsettling to think that an act so simple has become a grand gesture. So I ask you this: When did politeness become unpopular?

There is no doubt, however, that kindness does still exist. Do not believe that you live in a world entirely void of smiles; there is hope. In fact, I saw a glimmer of this hope just the other day when my brother let me have the last cinnamon roll at breakfast. That, my friends, is true selflessness.

I leave you with this challenge: Do not be like those two boys who let me struggle with the door. However, do not be like me either who gives dirty looks and goes on to write papers about said boys. Be kind. Good, old-fashioned kind. Pay for a stranger’s Starbucks drink. Compliment that girl in your science class on her new hair color, though it has changed hues once a week since the beginning of school. Do the dishes without being asked 348 times. And for goodness sakes, if you ever see a blonde girl with bushy eyebrows and an Audrey Hepburn coffee mug struggling immensely to not fall on her face, open the door for her.
Alison Boehmer
Personal Essay/Memoir: Pennies Back in Penny Loafers
Nixa High School
Brittany Parry, Teacher

Ascots: I have two.
Shrine to Audrey Hepburn in bedroom: I greet a life-size Breakfast at Tiffany’s poster every morning.
Collection of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Austen: Pending but admirable in size.
Louis Armstrong’s “Greatest Hits”: On shuffle.
Pennies in penny loafers: Check.

About two years ago, when my penny loafer collection was still modest, I started putting a penny in each loafer. Tucked visibly in the band crossing my left shoe, is a coin from 1994, the year my parents were married. The penny in my right shoe is from 1997, the year I was born. Though this act seemed juvenile and relatively odd, it has served as an excellent conversation starter, as it perfectly represents where my heart is: In my shoes.

In all seriousness, I adore these shoes but not because they are the perfect amount of practicality and class that match every chino, skirt, and blouse, nor because they make that clinking noise when I walk that makes me feel grown up. I love these shoes because when I wear them I carry a piece of nostalgia with me in my soul... And in my sole.

In addition to the handiness of always having two cents readily available, I feel that these pennies serve a far greater purpose: they embody me far better than any of my test scores, grades, or teacher recommendations ever could. These pennies identify me amongst my tweeting, snap-chatting, yoga pants-wearing peers, with whom I seem to be faintly out of place. I have only recently gotten my first “smart phone” and have proven that I am, in fact, not very smart with it. I am morally opposed to digital books, believing firmly in the power of the printed word. However, my being a slight outlier amid this generation’s breed of “instant message-ers” and “high speed internet browsers” has allowed me a unique perspective, and stems directly from my professed adoration of the “simpler times”.

I admit that I may have a slightly overly romanticized notion as to what the age of “Main Street America” was actually like; I know that not everyone went to sock hops or shared a milkshake on their first date. I understand that high schools did not break into song, as Grease suggests. I realize that there were still bad guys and disease and inappropriate music. But I cannot deny my complete infatuation with the concept of knowing the mailman’s name because my inbox is in my front lawn and not on a home screen. I practically salivate at the thought of women wearing tea-length skirts and red lipstick to the grocery store. Although these admirations seem to be superficial in nature, I assure you that my infatuation is not just skin deep.

My generation is publicly identified as that which has “grown up with technology”; it is in intertwined with every aspect of our lives. And I must say that I do not complain when I have thousands of database sources available to me for a research paper, or when the entire Law & Order: SVU series is available on Netflix. I, however, do get a pit in my stomach when I walk through the mall and see only the noses of shoppers who are enthralled in their phones. I get agitated when entire families mindlessly scroll through their Twitter feeds at the dinner table instead of asking for updates on their children’s lives. I want to know my neighbors. I want my children to grow up with the sounds of Ella and Louis, although they will most likely be playing through a Bose stereo, not a record player.

Ultimately, my pennies are an ode to the minor revolution I want to spark in the minds of my peers. I want us to be pushed to think beyond our screens, to use the ample resources we have been given, but show reverence to the simpler times. I want to put the pennies back in penny loafers.
A six year old girl sits shivering at a kitchen table, her body aching from the stark cold that berated her all through the fitful night. Her mother, whose hair is slipping into her watering eyes, searches for the cereal box she swore still had a serving left. When she concludes the cabinets are empty, she kneels next to her little girl who generates a weak smile. The mother lays her head gently in her shuddering daughter’s lap, letting two soft tears drop.

“Matt, are you awake?”

“It’s still dark outside; wake me back up in an hour, Colin.”

The younger of the two brothers slides from the twin bed in which they both slept and wearily walks through the dark to the door. His small hands find the knob; he can feel his heart flutter with anticipation. Maybe this year. Yes, I know it will be this year. I know he came this year.

His feet find the hallway; his fingers trace the wall, guiding him to the living room that glows slightly from the single string of lights lacing the modest Christmas tree. He quickens his pace, anxious for his eyes to lock onto the space directly below the last level of branches. He slows right before the corner to enter the living room and draws in a deep breath. He closes his eyes, fighting back the tears that come with the memory of being in the same spot 365 days prior. Surely he didn’t forget us again this year. He clenches his tiny fists and turns the corner.

For all too many in Christian county, these scenes are much too real. The holiday season haunts struggling families like a dark cloud shading what should be a brilliant light. In what should be a time of year filled with joy and warm food, too many find nothing but empty plates, empty Christmas tree skirts, and empty bank accounts.

Insert: Least of These.

Serving all of Christian county, Least of These seeks to be the “full-service pantry” for struggling families. This purpose expands greatly during the holiday season as families struggle to find the means to fill plates and stockings. During the months of November and December, the organization reportedly sees over 900 families who need extra help providing for their families. This help, which comes in the form of winter coats, Barbie dolls, and turkey dinners, is lovingly distributed by Susan Kendrick and her team of elves.

Susan Kendrick, who has been director of the organization for 6 ½ years, leads her troop of faithful volunteers through the most hectic time of year with nothing but a servant’s heart: “I volunteered at Least of These for 11 years before becoming director; before that I was an elementary school teacher. I figured out I wasn’t excited about teaching school. My heart is in serving,” Kendrick quoted. And serve she does.

Being the only paid employee of the organization, Kendrick claims she needs a revolving door in her office for the over 80 clients and 30 volunteers who she meets with on a daily basis. Through collaborative efforts lead by Least of These, Kendrick seeks to meet the needs of every struggling family to walk through her door. “I have a ton of resources in my head for specific situations...I am a firm believer that we all have to play nice with each other. I have worked hard to make connections in Emergency Management, nonprofits, and local schools to see what others can offer that we cannot. We all have to work together to get it done,” Kendrick explained.

During the month of December, Least of These is in charge of the Christmas program that seeks to provide every child in need with gifts. However, Kendrick's duties extend far past toy and food drives; “I try to make sure the word gets out; I work with our marketing director very often to make sure people hear that there is a problem. We have people in our community that are hurting,” Kendrick said. The dedicated director has very
personal ties to a majority of her clients, of whom she has seen in her office and been involved with for several years. “I’ve cried and laughed with these families,” Kendrick quotes.

Prior to December and the chaos that ensues, however, Kendrick and her troops were already deep into giving-season. During their Thanksgiving give-away, approximately 125 people helped pack baskets the Thursday before the event. Of the volunteers, ages ranged from three to 80 years old. The event was responsible for distributing Thanksgiving baskets to 789 grateful families. “It was a great time of fellowship for our community,” raved Kendrick.

When asked of the most impacting experience in all of her years of serving the Christian county community, she did not hesitate with her answer: “The most touching was when the mom was sitting there in front of my desk and said, ‘I wouldn’t know what to do without you. Without you I wouldn’t know how to feed my children.’”

Although she is faced with the direst examples of poverty and distress on a daily basis, Kendrick finds no difficulty in keeping a positive outlook on Least of These’s future. “We are looking to purchase, as right now we are renting. We want to have a permanent spot. Since I am a big resource person, I would like to get a building large enough to incorporate some outside offices within the building. It’s looking pretty promising that within the next year we may be moving,” Kendrick hopefully explained. Kendrick also foresees hosting a health clinic in the new building a couple times a week. Least of These is certainly thriving, and has the community’s generosity to thank; “We just received grant money from Nixa Community Foundation to provide milk to our clients,” further described Kendrick.

Support from the community, though always welcome, is especially appreciated during this time of year where the organization sees an influx of clients. When asked how Nixa teenagers can further Least of These's cause, Kendrick’s first response was that of a truly seasoned giver: “You guys are hard to shop for! We don’t know what you want; I have a granddaughter and I have no clue what to get her! So gift cards or donations directed towards our teenage clients would be great,” described Kendrick. She also added that students are welcome to serve on any day Least of These is not open, due to efforts to keep clients’ confidentiality.

There is no doubt that the Christian county community has great need for helping hands and giving hearts, especially during the holiday season. Efforts such as Least of These and Susan Kendrick’s (as well as her troop of elves) prove that when a common cause is chased after, there are no limits as to the good that can be accomplished.
My stamina is fading. My hands are beginning to quiver; my eyes are losing focus. My back is contorted so that I can better see the light, causing an uncomfortable spasm in my vertebrae. I need relief, but that will not come until the lawyers of Bendini, Lambert, and Locke are jailed and fined heavily for their obscene ways. Relief will not be granted until page 527 is read and the worn paperback cover is closed.

As far as I am concerned, I am in a marathon. The race began at about 2 P.M., the starting line being a perfectly comfortable canvas couch that receives excellent natural light. The only breaks have been to put on socks and comply with my parents’ coaxing to join the family for dinner. The race has now reached its 11 P.M. checkpoint where it is necessary, in order to maintain proper bone structure, to stretch the many muscles that I have long forgotten were numb. As I slowly rise from the couch, clutching my lower back like an arthritic elderly man, I am struck with the realization that my living room is not in Memphis, Tennessee. I do not need to check around my house’s dark corners for mob members or FBI agents. John Grisham is not narrating my life, much to my dismay. The sudden strike of reality ignites my hunger that I have been ignoring for several chapters; I grab a handful of cashews and a cup of green tea before cracking my knuckles a final time and returning to my residence on the couch.

Although John Grisham is, in my expert opinion, one of the best contemporary story tellers, I find myself often in these “literary marathons”, no matter the author or genre. Becoming entirely absorbed, losing my own identity, and ignoring reality is, to me, the only way to read. My deep appreciation and love for literature has taught me that reading should be like…how a whale swims; they only come up for air when absolutely necessary.

It is with this approach that I attack each piece of literature that I read; I feel as though there is little point in reading something if you are not willing to let it affect you on a deep level. It is for two main reasons that I feel this way: reading can provoke an other-worldly realm that far surpasses reality; and if an author is willing to type words on a screen for years on end, their words are probably worth reading. Therefore, I find it very difficult to empathize with those who frequently relay their disgust with reading. Reading is, in essence, an academic excuse to shout “Screw reality! I want to be a southern tomboy named Scout for a few hours!” while feverishly opening a crisp paperback. If reading’s critics would truly allow themselves to take on a “whale-like” mentality while exploring literature, oh, how the doors of imagination would come exploding open.

My very first experience with this concept was in the sixth grade when I became enthralled with The Mysterious Benedict Society. Looking back, I cannot decide if I fully appreciated the excellent writing masterminded by Trenton Lee Stewart, or if I enjoyed the feeling of superiority that came with carrying a rather thick book around school. Nevertheless, I adored this series and went through them like a chubby kid goes through Halloween candy. They were relatable, as the characters were all “gifted tweens”; however, its plot was that of abstract adventure, which kept me more than entertained. In fact, I cannot tell of one television show that amused me more than those books. And the same is true today; given the chance to watch a story be performed by trained actors within a screen, or create my own world within my own head, I will go with the latter every time.

However, if the above evidence is not convincing enough to anti-reading individuals, I have found, in my many years of literary adoration, that pure respect for the writer has also enticed me into reading. Unfortunately, my example of this in context reveals an aspect about myself that I do not readily divulge: I am a cliché teenage girl who, occasionally, explores the beautiful, yet scandalous, world that is Sex and the City. Ah, Carrie Bradshaw, how my heart longs for your way with relational advice and collection of couture handbags.

The format of the television show does an excellent job, in my perspective, of exploring the dedication required to be a consistent, successful writer. It is often misunderstood how much personal experience and soul is required to produce an interesting, much less best-selling, piece of writing. The show, sometimes almost too vividly, displays the rigorous struggles associated with being a single, no longer “twenty-something” in New York; it then reads lines from Bradshaw’s supposed critically acclaimed column that relates directly to the plot she experienced earlier in the episode. Through this production method, viewers can easily see how she
truly has experienced each word she writes, allowing her to sew pieces of herself into the writing. The passion, which comes only with experience, that seasoned authors translate into their writing allows for readers to feel a high level of relation to the writer. In turn, a high level of respect for the creative process is grown. It is because I relatively understand and relate to this process that I feel so morally obligated to really read books. If an author is so willing to expose their heart and own experiences on an eternalized page, I should have no reason to not throw myself into their words dedicatedly.

Following an intense reading binge, such as what I experienced with Mr. Grisham's novel, I often find myself in a state of confusion; my reality is still firmly rooted in the realm of the novel though my hands have released the covers. I genuinely miss the characters, and feel unsatisfied by the story’s conclusion. I believe this emotional attachment is caused by one thing: while reading, I do not think of the text as a “story”. I allow myself to become so entirely consumed that I lose consciousness of “real life”, as well as most muscle sensation. Therefore, I believe that if anyone harbors angst towards reading, they simply are not reading correctly. For, in my eyes, the only way to properly read is to take a long breath, harness my “inner whale”, and not surface until the final page has been turned.
A young, freckle-faced girl draws in a yawn as she pulls her covers up to her chin. She rubs her eyes, willing them to stay awake for just a couple minutes longer. Watching in anticipation as her mother slips the dilapidated, hardback book from the bookshelf, the girl’s heart flutters and she releases a grin. Her obviously exhausted mother slides a wooden rocking chair from the corner and lowers herself into the worn seat. She dramatically sighs and locks eyes with her young daughter, whose gleeful anticipation drew her to the very edge of her bed. Upon seeing the innocence and eagerness spilling from her oversized eyes, all feeling of exhaustion and irritation from the day leaves her. She leans forward and gently kisses her daughter’s forehead before sliding her fingers to the bookmarked page and wistfully reading, “Once upon a time…”

Before fairy tales entranced the modern audience of six year-olds clothed in princess pajamas, before they were responsible for an entire portion of the entertainment industry, and before they even began with “once upon a time,” fairy tales were a means of survival. Oral accounts, often spoken around fires with much gusto and animation, gave their audience a sense of hope in the darkness of the Middle Ages. These stories laced through society as fluidly as blood in veins; they were a direct mirror image of the struggles and desires of the time. For centuries, these stories were informally expanded upon and edited to accommodate the current generation. With spoken word as their proverbial pen, fairy tales prospered until industrialization and its widespread hand threatened to choke out all reference to the imaginative past the tales created.[1]

Enter: The Grimm brothers.

Without this pair of passionate scholars, fairy tales may not have survived the wrath of the industrial age. Their dedication to externalizing these lively stories that pulsed through history for so many centuries has allowed the tales to outlive most classic literature, proving how interwoven storytelling is with human culture. Due to the Grimm brothers’ innovation and their contemporaries’ improvisation, fairy tales have proven to be the most adaptable and fluid of all literature. However, had the Grimm brothers not recognized the invaluable worth of these spoken tales and immortalized them into the written word, these stories may have been trapped in the Middle Ages, forever lost, along with the cultural insight and beautiful imagination they entail.

Over two hundred years before dolls with retractable “Rapunzel-hair” were manufactured or Kristen Stewart was casted as Snow White, Hanau, Germany became home to a pair of brothers who would forever change the face of storytelling. Born in 1785 to a wealthy family, Jacob Grimm, the eldest of six siblings, is characterized by historians as scholarly and petite, and interested in the technicalities of the German language.[2] Thirteen months following, Wilhelm, noted for being social and the “collector” of tales, was born.[3] The brothers’ father, Philip Wilhelm, served as a lawyer in Hanau and other surrounding towns. Following their father’s sudden death, the family found themselves relying financially on extended family. This lack of a father figure urged the brothers to grow closer to one another, which had great influence on their future scholarly endeavors. Following high school in Kassel, the brothers intended to follow after their father and pursue law degrees at the University of Marburg. However, passion trumped practicality when the brothers collectively decided to pursue philology.[4] This attraction to the German language was prompted by a variety of literary scholars, including Clemens Brentano, Friedrich Karl von Savigny, and Johann Gottfried Herder. Brentano, an avid poet and novelist of the German Romantic era, lured the Grimm brothers to literature through his lyrical writings and intense imagination.[5] A greater influence was made, however, by Savigny; this scholar and his adamant belief in jurisprudence[6] during the wave of nationalism and civil unification following Napoleon’s demise in Germany coincided directly with the brothers’ growing interest in the field of literature.[7] Savigny proposed that law, like folk writings, should be based upon “antique investigation” and intense analysis; he believed that legislation was interwoven into society and was based upon social customs. The brothers used this concept as a basis for their work in relaying the past through folk writing.[8] Herder, being a philosopher encompassed by the notion of unveiling the future through referencing the past, greatly inspired the Grimm brothers to pursue vocations that eternalized the past so it could be learned from by future generations.[9]
Though these esteemed philosophers and literary scholars had immense impact on the brothers and their endeavors, it should be noted that Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm were very much cut from their own proverbial mold. Their entire thinking was based upon the social and political changes their country was experiencing; however, they saw much value in investigating the distant pasts of nations beyond their borders in places such as Scandinavia, Spain, Ireland, Scotland, and Finland. The unique combination of the Grimm brothers’ personalities and influences, as well as their interest in European literature, allowed for their anthologies of fairy tales to be unparalleled to this day.

A manifestation of their innovation is seen through their methods of “scientifically” collecting folktales. Initially, the brothers gathered folk songs and tales for a collaboration between Clemens Brentano and Achim von Arnim. Jacob and Wilhelm used critical essays to examine and explore the difference between folk literature and other writing, which confirmed their belief that “folk poetry was the only true poetry, expressing the eternal joys and sorrows, the hopes and fears of mankind.”[10] From this, the brothers sought to create their own anthology of tales, publishing the collection under the name of Kinder- und Hausmärchen[11], insinuating per the title that both adults and children were meant to enjoy the tales. Their collection contrasted starkly from their romantic mentors’ folk poetry, which was written with much extravagance and fantasy. The brothers took a different approach to their tales; mostly taken from oral sources, Jacob and Wilhelm’s collection sought to accurately convey the “soul, imagination, and beliefs of people through the centuries.”

Their intention was to relay a genuine reproduction of the source’s words. As is evident in their expansive collections of fairy tales, the brothers were keen to include vital details that help to paint an accurate picture of the era in which they were originally told. The culture of Europe in the Middle Ages was one of much unrest and harshness. Historically known as an era of distress and decay, the Middle Ages are characterized as a time of superstition and social oppression.[12] Fairy tales collected by the Grimm brothers reflected this through the graphic deaths of bewitched step-mothers, and the neglect of characters such as Hansel and Gretel.[13] Stereotypical, preindustrial characters are clearly evident in the fairy tales recounted by the Grimm brothers; “long-suffering peasants, quick-witted artisans, privileged yet insecure royalty” are featured in the tales, as explained by Wendy Smith.[14] Jacob and Wilhelm were very conscious of the transparency that existed within the tales, and though they made slight adjustments to accommodate the times, the overall historical accuracy was maintained in their original editions. Wilhelm’s talent in the artistic realm and ability to socialize with sources produced folklore with a readable quality that barely altered the original spoken tales. Jacob’s adherence to literary technicalities ensured that the tales were valuable to the scholastic realm. This unique combination gave the brothers’ folklore much merit among the academic and general community, and resulted in a triumphant of folkloric proportions: The collection reaped widespread distribution far beyond Germany’s borders, their inventive collection methods set precedence for all future folktale gathering, and their examinations of the tales formed the basis for the “science of the folk narrative and even of folklore.”[15] And so ensued an entire revelation in folkloric writing that forever changed the global community’s perspective on the past.

The immense success of the Grimm’s folklore anthologies is supposedly attributed to the brothers’ understanding of the fluidity of the genre. It should be noted that their first publication of fairy tales was not written for the eyes of children; Jacob and Wilhelm viewed the work as purely academic, its intended audience being scholars looking to evaluate historical eras through complex literature. Due to their mysterious and intriguing nature, however, the tales became very popular and the appeal expanded to the general population. Parents found the tales much too dark and churches did not believe them to be “Christian enough.”[16] In response to these disapprovals, the brothers began sanding down the rough edges that resided in each story: Sexual references were edited out and “wicked mothers” changed to “wicked stepmothers.” An interesting, little-known example of this can be found in the original version of Rapunzel, in which a scandalous detail exists, which was edited out of the Grimm’s later editions. According to the initial tales, Rapunzel was visited by the prince in secret one day; the evil witch would have never found out had she not asked why her captive’s dress fit so tightly around the belly. This reference to premarital sex was removed in later editions, much to parents’ delight.[17] Interestingly enough, however, as “cleaner” content was published, the violence against evil villains in the tales actually intensified. Christian symbols were added into illustrations in these later editions, such as a Bible on the bedside table of Little Red Riding Hood’s grandmother. Between 1812 and 1864, the brothers published 17 editions of the fairy tales, which grew more popular with each conservative edit.[18] Though some original details were lost as the tales underwent “sanitation,” it is thought that, had the Grimm
brothers not modernized and mainstreamed the lore, the entire genre of literature may have been entirely lost. The brothers grasped the large role that the tales held in understanding historical cultures; therefore, they put more effort into preserving their existence, instead of the tales’ finer details. Had it not been for the Grimms and their belief in the power of fairy tales, the modern world would not have the portal into ancient culture that is so readily available.

Encouraged by the success of the Kinder- und Hausmarchen anthology, the Grimm brothers continued to explore the intriguing realm of folktales writing. The brothers published Deutsche Sagen, a collection of historical and local German legends, which had little popular appeal but much scholarly appreciation.[19] Jacob and Wilhelm then translated Thomas Crofton Croker’s *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland*, which they preceded with their own introduction on folklore. Simultaneously, the Grimm brothers focused on early literature’s written documents, extracting ancient texts from Germanic and other languages.[20] This study introduced Jacob to the realm of philology[21], prompting him to complete an extensive work on grammar, as published in Deutsche Grammatik[22], which was a comprehensive piece that referred to all of the Germanic languages. For the first time in literature, the historical development of this genre of language was traced; Grimm investigated the laws of sound change in various languages, developing an unprecedented method of scientific etymology[23]. In a concept that was to become known as Grimm’s Law, Jacob analyzed the similarities in genetically related languages and coincidentally inflicted great influence on the study of Germanic, Romance, and Slavic linguistics.[24] Grimm’s profound studies are still in use in contemporary linguistics. In his time, however, his work prompted other publications in France, the Netherlands, Russia, and Slavic countries that have yet to be superseded. The everlasting relevance of Jacob Grimm’s work is purely unprecedented in the realm of linguistics, and proves that the brothers’ academic excellence extended far beyond folklore and fairy tale collection.

Two decades passed as the brothers explored the technicalities of the Germanic language; their quiet residence in Kassel cultivated their studies, both scholarly and artistic. This era came to an end in 1829 when they failed to be given a professional advancement. The brothers then transferred to the University of Göttingen, where they served as librarians and professors. During this period, Jacob Grimm published Deutsche Mythologie[25], which proved to have much influence. In his piece, Grimm traced the Germanic people during the pre-Christian era, highlighting their superstitions which were contradictory to classic mythology and Christianity. Though this publication had many successors throughout Europe, none proved to be as disciplined in their judgments as Jacob had been, as was a common theme with disciples of Grimm products. Following Wilhelm’s publishing of an edition of Freidank’s epigrams[26], the brothers embarked on a bold political movement that would have immense impact on their careers.

In 1837, when Ernest Augustus and his tyrannical reign took the crown in Hanover, the Grimm brothers joined several of their colleagues in protest. In response to Augustus’ repeal of the constitution of 1833, the “Göttingen Seven”[27] explained to the king that they felt they were “bound by oath to the old constitution.” The rebellion did not sit well with Augustus; the protesters were dismissed from their posts at the university, and Jacob was ordered to leave the kingdom of Hanover immediately. This demonstration exemplified the role, the brothers felt, that academics held in civil responsibilities. Though the authority in Göttingen did not appreciate the display, the movement served to be quite beneficial to the Grimm brothers, who promptly received requests for their services from institutions in Hamburg, Marburg, Rostock, Weimar, Belgium, France, the Netherlands, and Switzerland. Jacob and Wilhelm found most appeal in the offer from Frederick William IV, king of Prussia, to serve in Berlin as members of the Royal Academy of Sciences. It was here that they lectured and began intense work on their most ambitious endeavor: the Deutsches Worterbuch[28]. The brothers intended for this piece to serve as a guide for the Germanic written and spoken word, as well as a scholarly reference document. As was the brothers’ nature, this publication deeply analyzed all German words found in literature in the three centuries “from Luther to Goethe.”[29] Each word was defined, given historical variants, etymology, and semantic development; idioms and proverbs were quoted to illustrate words’ use in everyday language. Originally, this piece was intended to serve as a source of income for the brothers following their dismissal from Göttingen; however, it became so robust that it required several generations and over a hundred years to fully complete it. Jacob lived to see the completion of the letter F, while Wilhelm worked through D.[30] Like most of the brothers’ works, the dictionary inspired several publications in other countries, including Britain, France, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Switzerland. Drawing on his philological research, Jacob later completed Geschichte der deutschen Sprache[31], in which he connected the study of early
history with the study of language. Stimulated by this work, research into names and dialects, as well as ways of writing and spelling, were investigated. Due to their undying dedication to academia and the German language, the brothers worked in Prussia’s capital for about twenty years, where they were well respected and financially rewarded for their work. During this time, the brothers wrote several lectures, essays, prefaces, and reviews, which are relied upon to expose the political and social atmosphere of the era. The brothers maintained genuine relationships with colleagues, both at home and abroad, which furthered their merit as literary and linguistic scholars. By the end of their careers, a majority of academies in Europe took pride in counting Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm as members. Jacob expanded upon his technical interests through scientific investigations that took him to France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland, Austria, Italy, Denmark, and Sweden. Wilhelm, however, married Dorothea Wild and fathered four children. After an extensive and successful jointed career, the brothers quietly retreated to their respective studies and family, leaving the world forever changed by their publications and insights.

Whether for their historical merit or creative value, the Grimm brothers have proven to be a consistent and influential aspect of literature in both historical and modern ages. Their works, whether fairy tale anthologies or grammatical reference books, have become intertwined in the study of European history and culture. Because of them, an entire industry was birthed from folklore; contemporary film and television are continuously paying tribute to the mysterious society that existed in the Middle Ages. Because of them, the German language and its place in history is better understood and valued. Because of them, readily used leather-bound books encasing tales of frog princes and dark magic sit on young girls’ nightstands, inviting them to visit alluring worlds every night before “bedtime.” Because of them, an entire world that would have been lost to a modern society, preoccupied with modern advancements and technological breakthroughs, still exists. Albert Einstein said it best when he proclaimed, “If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales. If you want them to be more intelligent, read them more fairy tales.”[32] Had the Grimm brothers failed to understand this sentiment some 200 years ago, an entire realm of insight and imagination would be forever trapped in the Middle Ages.

[4] The study of language in historical texts, including their relations to one another. For instance, the Grimm brothers examined the relation between the English word “apple” and the German word “apfel.”
[6] Concept that legislation is interwoven with society and culture; school of thought that laws originate from social customs.
[8] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.
[21] The study of historical texts and their German Grammar
[22] The research into relationships between languages and development of meaning.
[24] German Mythology
[26] A collection of protesters, including the Grimm brothers and five fellow professors, who rose against Augustus’s repeal of the constitution in 1833.
[27] German Dictionary
[29] ibid.
[30] History of the German Language
He never expected his life to take a turn like this. He never expected to find himself getting paid for quieting someone. For assassinating someone, for murdering them. However, he got a good pay and lived in luxury. He had no complaints now, but back then he would have found his current occupation repulsive, at the least. He silently chuckles at his thoughts as if they were an inside joke only he knew. Someone would find him insane for laughing at such thoughts. To the normal citizens who lived in arrogance and ignorance, none of them cared to open their eyes to the evil that walked next to them, lived with them, slept with them. They only turned a blind eye to it; it was as if it was all they knew. And maybe they did.

The man shook his head; he had been hired to assassinate, not to meditate. He took one more puff of his cigarette before he threw it off the roof of the building. Just as the white cylinder bounced off the concrete below, three black limousines cruised up the street. He took his position and brought his black steel scope up to his eye. Looking through the dusty scope, he watched as the onyx cars parked on the right side of the street; he knew that one of those vehicles held his target. Two of the three limos held guards and hired mercenaries, the limo in the middle held his target. He trained his scope on the doors and waited for them to open. A driver stepped out from the driver’s side and came around the car. The passenger door opened to reveal his target. What stepped out was not what he was expecting: a small girl weaseled out of the vehicle.

The girl had to be at least eight years old and couldn’t weigh more than eighty pounds. Her chocolate colored hair followed the wind; she smiled at the driver as she skipped to the other side of the car. The man found his gun shaking, he frowned before he realized that the gun wasn’t shaking, but he was. He trained the scope on the girl again and put his finger over the trigger. One second was all it would take. He slowly began to press the cold metal. The girl turned around and looked at the sky, her eyes seemed to have found his. They were sky blue and filled with life. He gasped as he reeled back and threw his gun to the other side of the building. This was insane! He couldn’t kill a child!

With a sigh, he sat up and watched as the girl was led into a tall building. He didn’t bother to read the large words plastered over the door; he was finished with this job. He stood up and turned away from the scene below.

Heavy footsteps could be heard from down the hall. Click clack click clack, over and over. His green eyes snapped up to come face to face with a burly man whose head and face had been cleared of hair and left only his piercing blue eyes, “They told me you were back.” The bald man stepped back to eye the mercenary. He had known the boy since he was small; he had practically fathered the child! “Did you do the job so quickly? Or did something go wrong?” The mercenary, Eden, kept his face as blank as paper. “Nothing went wrong, sir.”

“He knows the girl, didn’t he?” Eden had never used his name before… this terrified him deeply. “The matter that the job was not finished is all you need to know, the details of why will be kept to myself.” Eden nodded once and turned to leave, his hand on the knob. “Oh, and one more thing… I’m looking for new employment.” He opened the door, prepared to step out when Hugo spoke. It was unexpected and stunned the mercenary.

“I did not murder a child for the sake of your reputation!” He hissed. “I do not care
whose daughter that was, but I will not cause that type of pain to any man regardless of what they've done. No father deserves to lose his daughter, and I will not be part of it.” Eden slammed the door behind and made his down the hall. Hugo had no words; he only stood gaping at where the man had once been standing. Even as both men had no connection of thought whatsoever, they both had a plan. The smiles that suddenly graced their features were to be feared. For they knew that they were no longer allies, but enemies.

Eden walked as quickly as he could down the street. He knew exactly what to do and where to go. It took him thirty minutes to arrive at his destination, but when he did, he felt a weight lifted off his shoulders. A warm breeze blew past him and his hair covered his eyes for a few seconds, when the wind was over he found himself staring up at the building. His green eyes met bright blue ones, a white smile and a wave was all it took to have him making a beeline for the doors. It took him no more than sixty seconds to find the man he was looking, locate the elevator, and make it to the new location. Eden took a deep breath, inhale, exhale, and knocked. It was light and could be no louder than a whisper, but it was heard. “Come in.” The voice deep and thick with age; not just any age, but an age that can only be received through a harsh life. A life where it was kill or be killed. Eden knew that this man had been through Hell itself.

Eden opened the door and stepped inside, silently closing the oak behind him. “They told me a young man was here for me. You’re quite handsome, what’s your name?”

“Eden, sir.”

“Well, Eden,” the man rolled the name on his tongue, it was an unusual name, but unforgettable and suited to the young man. “What are you here for?” Eden hesitated. Did he really want to do this? Did he want to throw everything he knew to do this? Yes... yes, he did. He took a deep breath.

“I’m here to seek employment.” The older man’s eyes turned into slits as he studied the brunette. The boy gave off a distinct impression before he even spoke, the older man now knew what that was. The boy was young, but his eyes were tinted with that of a wise old man, his posture gave off the impression that he was strong, but did not like to be approached. It was intriguing; this boy would be useful to him in the future.

The older man made eye contact with Eden, “What kind of employment?”

“I wish to protect your daughter, sir.” Eden knew this might set off the old man, but he was prepared. He sat himself down on one of the leather chairs that stood next to him and he began to tell the man his story. The man never stopped him; he only listened and grunted in agreement. Eden hadn’t been sure about this elder man at first, but now... now he was sure this was a good man. As Eden spoke, he finally took it upon himself to look at the other man, instead of shy glances. The man was large, not round or big bellied, but built from muscle and stood tall even as he remained seated. The man had dark blue eyes and dirty blonde hair that was short and cropped. Eden could tell the man was simple and businesslike, but he also knew that he cared a great deal about his daughter. Every father did. Eden’s jaw became sore, for this was the most he had spoken in one period for years. He found himself enjoying the social interaction. When he was finished, he was almost disappointed, but waited for the man to speak his thoughts.

“You’re an honest man...” The man paused, thinking about his next choice of words. “An honest man should be feared among everyone, however, I know you are not to be feared by me. You are not my enemy,” Eden found a large hand stretched across the desk. “Welcome to the business, son.”

After that, almost everything seemed a blur. He caught everything the man had said, and even was told the man’s name. Justin. And his daughter was in his full care. He would be with her 24/7, this didn’t bother Eden in the slightest. He wanted to be with the girl. Eden soon found a strong shake on his shoulder and turned his head. A man dressed in a dark, neatly pressed suit stood behind him. “Follow me.” Eden didn’t need much convincing. He strode right out with the nicely dressed man.

He didn’t hear anything else after that, he just watched ahead. He was led to a dark brown door with the letters K.M. painted on it on black. The suited man had left his side long ago and Eden was left alone. His heart was pounding so madly he thought it might cause an earthquake, but he knew better than to think like. Eden knew, however, that his heart would continue to pound against his rib cage for a while... unless something stopped it. His tan hand wrapped around the cold, golden knob of the door. He slowly twisted and the door swung open without so much as a creak.

“You’re the man from the window!” A young voice screeched, it wasn’t a screech that would make your ears ring, but it was the kind filled with excitement that brought joy to everyone around. Eden grunted as a
small, but strong force rammed into him. He cast his eyes down to find the source and found a bright white smile and young sky blue eyes staring back at him. His breath hitched, and he swore that his heart stopped at the sight. A tiny giggle filled the air around Eden as he found the little girls arms try to tighten around him. She was so petite and looked fragile to the touch, her skin was pale but it only made her shiny chocolate hair glow and her blue eyes sparkle. Finally, Eden found his voice.

“Hello,” The girl laughed as she continued to stare up at him and Eden couldn’t help but smile. Eden hadn’t smiled since he had started training to become the assassin he is, that was many years ago. He had his lessons beat into him and was beaten harder if he so much as smiled after Hugo had picked him up off the streets. He had learned that if you wanted to live you had to fend for yourself, no one would help you. Even though Eden hadn’t said so to himself, he knew that as soon as he saw the girl he would fight for her. He would never let anything hurt her and planned to do so until he died. Whether his death be by the violence he had grown up in or the happiness of living to become old, he would protect her. “My name is Eden.”

“Eden?” The girl questioned, “That sounds like a girl’s name.”

Eden couldn’t help but let out a breathy laugh, his smile only seemed to brighten. “I guess it does, but I think I can pull off the name quite alright for a boy, don’t you think?”

The girl gave him one last quizzical look before smiling again, “Yeah, it’s a nice name.” She finally let go of Eden and stepped back. Her face brightened with another gigantic grin, even the angels in heaven would fall to their knees for this girl. “You’re the person I saw from the roof, and... and from the window!” She squealed excitedly. Eden almost collapsed at being reminded of how he had planned to kill this girl just this morning and was now vowing to protect. It was comical, really.

“That was me,” Eden grunted as he got down on his knees to be level with the child. She kept smiling. “Are you my guardian angel?” She asked. Eden’s heart stopped for the second time that day. No, he wanted to say, I’m the reaper. I’m death. But that was all this morning and he was no longer the man he was a few hours ago. He was going to protect this girl for the rest of his days, and would watch over her in death. He would leave everything he knew if it meant keeping this beautiful girl out of harm’s way.

“Yeah,” he let his mouth stretch into a light smile, “I guess I am.” This made the child incredibly joyful and she jumped up with another squeal. “So, since I’m your guardian angel now, how about you tell me your name?”

The girl with the shiny hair and sparkling eyes frowned at him with something like disapproval. “You’re my guardian angel, you should know my name.”

Eden laughed before answering, “I know, but I fell behind on my job and have carelessly forgot my goddess’s name.” The brunette bowed and peeked up through his bangs. The girl giggled and smiled that wonderful smile. His words seem to have charmed her.

“All right,” She gave him a stern look but there was still a smile, “I’ll tell you, but you have to remember it, because I won’t tell you again.” Eden nodded, “My name is Kasey Marie.”

“Well, Kasey Marie, I am proud to be your guardian angel.” Eden stood up and stretched his hand down to little Kasey, “Let’s say we go to the park and play, little Kasey.” She nodded in enthusiasm and took his hand.

“Let’s play hide and seek!” Kasey smile remained on her face that whole day as she played with Eden. Eden never complained about the girl, never yelled at her, never became bored, and was always willing to do whatever she wanted. Even as the beautiful little girl grew to become a stunning young woman, Eden kept his internal promise to protect her. He never left her side, and she was never in harm’s way. Kasey grew up in peace, and Eden made sure of it. And when Eden lay on his death bed, Kasey was there with him. During his remaining time on earth, Eden told Kasey of his past life before he met her. She never left, even when the most horrible of things were said. Kasey never asked him to stop, she only listened. When the dying man finished, she only smiled at him. Eden whispered to her.

“Why don’t you hate me?”

Kasey finally let her tears fall. “Because you’re my guardian angel.”

Eden was laid to rest that day, but he moved on with a smile. A smile only Little Kasey would see. Kasey went to Eden’s grave every day with a single flower. She would sit down and tell Eden about her day. Every day, as she stood up and said her goodbyes, she would read the tomb stone. His name was never carved on the gray cement, only a passage that Kasey had wrote herself. And it was only for him.

*Here lies a man who once worked with the shadows.*
Here lies a man who kept a promise to a goddess.
Here lies a man who fought till the end of his days.
Here lies a Guardian Angel.
"History's People"
The gleam of blade stained
Red with blood
Pressed against the throat
Of a hero
Long since passed
Name erased from history

The ropes dig in
To flesh now marred
Worn with a thousand struggles
Of an era
Now long forgotten
Time repeats her history

The silent scream
Of tortured souls
Echo throughout a tunnel
Of a prison
Long torn down
With one remaining mystery

Time's prisoner,
It move's with grace
Yet splatters pages bloody
Blood of a people
Long died out
Own foolishness to blame

"Kings and Queens"
Of Kings and Queens and Faerie wings
Of Giant men so fierce
Of Knights with horses and valiant fights
And people dancing through the nights

The fair folk whisper in my ear
The women tell what brave men fear
The couriers croon their songs of deeds
And children leaf from growing seeds

My people ride from near and far
My children reign throughout the stars
My lover speaks of such avowed
And lies with peace of mind endowed

Lycanthropes dance above my head
While green men sleep beneath my bed
With scarring fights and terror sly
My door creaks open to face the sky

Such with recompense we know
But with leering lies is what we sow
And how we line our nests at night
To see to the end and die in the right.

"Entropic Trees"
From little seeds
The children grow

And little sapling
Watch it go

Into a tree
With big, green leaves

Yet all alone
With its roots and seeds

Until a land
From righteous beauty sow

And thwart entropy
And horrors throes

Just leave one light
With splendor bleeds

And rest the night
In new stones breed

To love and nurture
For more undergo

While sip with angels
Lest stir the woe

And so the world
Turns round by creed

Is left by greed
And ends the seed

To start a tree
And renew the earth

With paramours be-
New Entropy
2094, and how far has humanity come.

Valentina backspaced through her comment, leaving only the present date. The time for writing memoirs was when she returned, when she’d be hailed and remembered in the fashion of the first astronauts. Her name would be in history books. That was when she would write her memoirs. Not here in the official mission notes, the team wouldn’t stand for it.

“Ready, Valentina?” crackled a voice over the speakers of the bulky survival suit’s helmet. Ja’Quan himself had designed it to be prepared for any condition she might encounter in the vast mystery of the future, and that was why he sounded so nervous.

She could see him from where she was standing, alone in the middle of a glass-walled chamber with a hulking, square machine at the back. His melancholy brown eyes were dark and unreadable, his frizzy black hair already beginning to gray at the temples. “Now remember,” he added, “we won’t be able to contact you in the future, and you won’t be able to contact us. The risk of forming a paradox is just too high. Take good notes and we’ll analyze them when you get back.”

Her hand formed a clumsy thumbs-up and she dismissed the journal from the screen in front of her face. She had it set to recording, as planned. It would take accurate observations without her sentimentality clogging the report. No one liked clogged reports.

“Chrononaut Valentina Munoz, please step forward into the machine,” came Scottyn’s voice over the intercom wired throughout the lab complex. No one was there to hear it besides those in the room outside – they were all clustered up next to the glass, waiting with bated breath for the results of humanity’s first expedition forward into time. Scottyn, a young intern and something of a prodigy, fought to keep the excitement out of her voice. Valentina smiled. Let the girl lose her composure, just this once.

She stepped into the clunky, box-like machine, covered with wires that looked haphazard and plating that looked halfhearted. Neither was true. This machine was currently the single most powerful mechanism on the planet.

“A arrival date: 20 June 2194. Are you ready, chrononaut?”


“Then the countdown will begin. T minus 20. 19.”

The funny thing about forward time travel was that it got easier to calculate the further you went. Valentina could explain the math, but it would take far longer than 20 seconds.

Less, now. Breathe, Munoz.

“16. 15. 14. 13.”

She was starting to worry. Of course. It was normal, for her, to overthink. What if the tachyon agitators were out of alignment? What if one digit, one sign, one calculation, was off, and no one had caught it? What if, what if?

We don’t know. We don’t know anything. We think we know so much. Breathe in, breathe out.

“10. 9. 8. 7.”

She was starting to regret volunteering for this. What if she died? What if Earth was destroyed when she got there? Or what if the world had gone hostile? What if her suit mechanisms broke, what if she lost the radio connection to the machine that would bring her back? No one would ever know what became of her.

Breathe in. It is too late now. Breathe. Out.

“3. 2. 1. Zero. Launch.”

2794.

Valentina blinked.

There hadn’t been a flash of light or a burst of sound. Nothing to herald her arrival. And why would there be? From her point of view, it was reality that was changing. She stayed the same.
It was very green here, she observed. Had she landed in a park? Or some high-tech arboretum, most likely. Nowhere else would the plant life look this vibrant and be this tall. She couldn't even identify most of the plants she could see from her limited viewscreen. Had they torn down her lab and built something in its place? It had been a possibility, she knew.


Valentina's brow furrowed. 50 degrees? That was hardly greenhouse temperature; in fact in her time it was almost Arctic. The computers set into the suit were telling her the conditions were safe to remove her helmet, but a glowing red alert popped into her vision before she could pull it off and have a better look around.


Valentina froze, a cold shock running through her body. Someone, in some single obscure calculation, had mistaken someone else's badly written 1 for a 7. And no one else had noticed. It was a miracle she wasn't dead right now, that the date was the only thing it had affected. To her knowledge.

If her arrival date had been off, it was almost certain that her emergency return mechanism was off as well. She couldn't risk jumping home now; who knew what could go wrong? The people of 2794 were bound to be better versed in time travel than those of her time, right? They could help to correct the error and send her back.

Taking a deep breath, Valentina grabbed the two handles on the sides of her helmet and pulled.

The air smelled sweet, and was somehow easier to breathe than what she was used to. The sky was clear and blue above her, in a way that was really only seen in movies and children's drawings anymore. Trees more than 70 feet tall surrounded her, some deciduous, some evergreen, all surreally straight and healthy-looking. Too much so to be plastic.

A deer – a deer, a real deer, like the kind that was once common but now hovered on the verge of extinction – emerged from the trees without hesitation and snuffled at the ground before Valentina. She stared.

Still no sign of any humans, and there was no way a deer would be allowed in an arboretum. This was starting to get creepy. Valentina checked her recording devices, to make sure they were all working, and began to walk. She had to find civilization eventually.

Behind her, trees swayed agitatedly in nonexistent wind. Far below them, in a pitch much too deep for humans to hear, the ground rumbled as if woken from a long, long sleep.

2236.

The 2020s was the best decade for music. Or at least, that's what the plants thought. Mahnoor didn't care for it much – the multilayered chants in half-dead languages overlaid with vaguely synthesized melodies of the 2230s were much more her style. Call her a vapid member of the teen pop culture mainstream, but dreamy theorizations about the nature of the universe swirled into song just held her attention more than vintage crooning about some romantic interest.

The plants liked the tunes, though, she thought. Their gauges and monitors always were higher where they should be high and lower where they should be low when she had some 2020s pop blasting over the greenhouse's massive speakers. Sometimes, she swore she could see their leaves sway in time with the music. It was strange, and beautiful, and knowing her father's plants not entirely surprising.

Mahnoor hung her oximask – covered with twisting henna designs, as was the fashion of the moment – on its special hook by the entrance to the greenhouse and allowed the door to scan her identity through the infochip in her brain. Taking the mask off was honestly the weirdest part of coming in here to chill with the plants. She didn't think she'd ever seen anyone without a mask except in pictures or in the oxygenically sealed dining room. They'd been a fact of life for more than a century, after Earth's air had stopped catering to human lungs.

Rococo Industries – Mahnoor's father's company – grew genetically engineered plants to harvest oxygen for all of Calcutta and over half of the Indian subcontinent. It was a booming business. Mahnoor walked among the gray-green trees and drooping plants, all as healthy as she'd ever seen them, all connected to a state of the art oxitheter that pumped away the valuable air they produced. Faint, bouncy music filtered into the room from above, and she instructed the computer through her chip to put on her 600-song “Happy Plant” playlist.
And turn up the volume, why not. Mahnoor swayed her hips to the beat, dancing lithely among the greens and browns and yellows.

She knew this tune; it was one of her favorites of the plant songs. Mahnoor stepped lightly off the path as she danced, letting her feet sink into the cool, damp soil. Were the plants swaying, or was that her?

It was the plants, Mahnoor noted with delighted surprise. Every single plant was dancing to the exact same rhythm. She wondered if her father knew this, and what he could do with the knowledge. She should tell him right away... once this song was over.

Mahnoor swayed, and smiled, and the plants swayed with her, and then a root poked up out of the ground and crept under her foot, and Mahnoor fell. And the plants did not stop, even as vines crept around her arms and legs and thick tree limbs reached down and grew up and wrapped around her chest, uncomfortably tight, faster than any plant should grow. The song faded to a close, and the plants still swayed, and it was like a war dance.

2794.

Valentina had been walking for almost an hour and the scenery hadn’t changed. Still unnaturally healthy plants, bizarrely friendly animals, no sign of humans. She wasn’t picking up any wireless or radio signals, but Earth could have progressed past those centuries ago. Back in her time, other top scientists had nearly succeeded in creating a prototype of a thought-to-internet connection – seven centuries after that, who knew how far technology had advanced?

This much open space was making her uneasy, though. With Earth’s population at over 9 billion, it was almost unheard of not to be surrounded by people as far as the eye could see. It was so... quiet, she wasn’t used to it. The cold wind whipped her hair around her face, and she wished for an elastic to pull it back. What had she been thinking, jumping into the future without her hair safely up?

The woods were thinning, she thought. Finally. Once she got over this hill, she’d be able to have a proper look around. Ja’Quan had really come through – his suit protected her against the frigid temperatures while not overheating or being too cumbersome to move in. Not even breathing hard, she pushed her way through the foliage and rounded the hill.

And then she saw the city.

The still, silent, abandoned, green city.

It felt like all of her internal organs had balled themselves into a fist and settled at the base of her spine. Something was wrong. Something was horribly wrong.

She scrambled down the hill as fast as was safe, hoping desperately to find human life. She’d even settle for some form of explanation – in fact, she’d be overjoyed with explanation. She needed to know why, what had caused this – her recording devices were all still online, she noted detachedly, and was pleased with herself for noticing. At this point, recording was the most important thing.

As she approached the city it became apparent that this hadn’t been a planned evacuation. Futuristic pods she guessed were cars lined the streets and sidewalks; doors were hanging open or even torn off their hinges. People had tried to leave, and in a hurry. Valentina had yet to see any corpses – did that mean they had escaped whatever they had fled from so frantically? She passed a tangle of shiny metal plating and twisted car innards – remnants of a wreck never cleaned up – and tried not to shudder.

Everywhere there were plants. Bushes and ferns grew out of the ruptured pavement. Timid creepers slunk around the crevices of derelict cars. Valentina’s boots made shuffling noises as she walked through the spongy carpet of sprouts and plant matter. Even the skyscrapers had succumbed to crawling ivy and frighteningly tall trees. But – this didn’t look like a result of the natural erosion and decomposition process. The trees looked almost as if they had punched straight through the buildings. Like they were saying they belonged there, and that humanity didn’t.

Valentina shivered. This wasn’t natural. It couldn’t be.

2236.

Fear gave Mahnoor’s limbs strength as she kicked and thrashed desperately against the branches. But the hold on her only tightened, as matter-of-fact and impersonal as a Venus flytrap closing on its prey. She tried to scream for help, but creepers grew over her face and filled her mouth with bitter-tasting leaves.
The sound of 2020s pop bounced cheerfully between the rustling and roaring of trees and ferns surging out of their plots to freedom. Plants didn’t have emotions, people said, of course not; that was silly. But Mahnoor somehow had always been able to tell that her father’s plants felt things – not like humans, no, but they felt in their own way. And now, they were excited. Triumphant.

Mahnoor felt a thick but smooth root – branches didn’t have that texture – wrap around her foot and pull. The branches released her and she fell, only to be caught by the network of roots that anchored the whole garden to the ground. Now they were squirming like snakes, tangling her in their embrace and knocking dirt from the surface down onto her face and body. She shrieked once, but to her horror, the roots climbed into her mouth instead of just covering it. They filled every space and probed tentatively into her throat. Mahnoor gagged, the reflex bringing tears to her eyes, and tried to bite through. The roots didn’t give.

She let a sob loose and found she couldn’t draw breath. The plants had grown too thick over her nose and were crawling steadily toward her eyes. Through her darkening field of vision she watched the plants – her plants – begin to force through the concrete walls and inch-thick skylights. Her family was out there… she had to… warn…

Mahnoor’s eyes closed. She was the first casualty of very, very many.

2794.

But where were the bodies?

The question plagued Valentina like an itch she couldn’t scratch. They had to be somewhere. Not underground, no one to bury them. Had they been blown to pieces? Incinerated? Vaporized? But there was no evidence of such destruction on the surrounding buildings, no damage at all except for that done by the plants growing over time.

The plants...

Valentina blinked and frowned. The plants hadn’t had anything to do with it, surely. It was against all known natural law for a plant to behave so quickly and aggressively as to cause this mass, long-ago panic.

Valentina needed to go home. She needed something that wasn’t the silent, stupidly incautious animals or the blasted plants to be alive. She wanted to go home.

There had to be some people left alive. Humanity’s tale couldn’t have just ended. Valentina could barely wrap her head around the concept. Humanity came, it saw, it conquered, until it had conquered everything there was. It didn’t just lay down and die.

A putrid smell floated through the air to Valentina’s nose, and she looked up. Rotting flesh. Following the odor led her around the street corner to the corpse of a gopher – just hours old, or so it appeared. That couldn’t be right, though, because the body was already overgrown with creepers, and a twenty-inch maple sapling protruded from its ribcage. It took weeks for plants to cover something this heavily. She wondered what had preserved the body so perfectly.

Valentina sniffed again. But it wasn’t preserved.

Brow furrowed, she knelt down and gently prodded at the gopher’s chest cavity.

Tiny white tendrils swarmed onto her finger, encasing it in a web of almost gossamer-thin fibers in a matter of seconds. Valentina jerked her hand away, ripping through the strings. A few ends still clung to her glove, and she held them up to her face. They looked like… roots. The roots of a sapling.

Valentina rocked back and rested on her heels, taking deep, shuddering breaths. Pieces of the infernal puzzle were slotting into place. What she had seen defied natural law, but it had happened, which meant natural law was now void and unreliable. The plants she had encountered here were nothing like the plants in her own time – they had evolved to be fast-growing and vicious, and they had singlehandedly wiped out the human race. Maybe it was the nuclear waste humans constantly dumped into the ground, maybe it was some freak mutation. Whatever it was meant that nature was now, if not intelligent, aggressive, and it had taken its planet back. And the bodies… Valentina swallowed. She didn’t put it past these things to drag people underground and grow over and through their remains. Plants grew best with fertilizer.

She had to go back. It would probably malfunction, yes, she could die, yes, but she had to try. Anything was better than being stranded here alone and in danger.

So focused was Valentina on priming her equipment for her return jump that she didn’t hear the rumbling sounds from above. On what had once been called the thirty-fourth floor of the skyscraper that towered above her, the weight of a massive oak suddenly became too much for a certain segment of wall to bear. It fractured
and crumbled off the side of the building, falling to the ground and crushing Valentina instantly. Nature had waged its war against humankind and won, and it would let no one take the spoils of the planet from it again.
The tree bends with the wind, its roots grasping a tighter hold in the earth with every passing moment. It first grew from a seed not too many springs ago, and has only seen the girl once before. She comes running over with her friend, their waist-length black hair tied in ponytails with bright pink ribbons. Sitting underneath the tree’s branches, they share funny stories and the bread they’ve taken from their parents’ picnic. But after a time, an argument chokes the laughter like an insidious vine, and the friend leaves. It doesn’t take long though for the girl to replace her frown with a smile. She starts climbing, up and up and up, for though the tree is not yet reaching to the sky, the girl is young. At the top she rests on the warm branches, giggles bubbling out of her even as she struggles to balance herself. She sweeps in the sight of the tall trees, flower fields, and rugged mountains in the distance. An hour or two pass by, and only then does she climb down hurriedly at the sound of her father’s call.

Father Time rolls the years along, and new rings form inside the tree trunk to mark its life years. Tall and strong it stands in its youth, yielding slightly to the wind’s breath. The girl is back on one of her usual visits, tucking tendrils of her hair back into the scarf, the hijab, which tightly encircles her face and covers her head. She has changed: her hips flare in a body with curves. A journal is in her lap, and she writes in it from her perch on one of the tree’s lower branches. Above her, the leaves are the deepest, richest green they will be in a whole year. A July breeze rustles past, heavy with moisture, and beads of sweat form on the girl’s forehead. She frowns as she stares down at the wedding invitation tucked into the journal. Pushing it aside, she starts writing faster, and lets her dreams bloom across the white pages.

Years fall away, one by one, like the leaves that nature’s hand plucks off the tree. The rings within have almost doubled now and its branches hang down slightly. Several years have gone by since the girl first came with a ring of her own on her finger. She appears over the side of the hill today with him before her, and a child, in a pale pink frock, in tow. They have come with two other families to sit beneath the tree. A woman now, she lifts her face up to the branches as she did so many seasons. But this time, her face and body are covered in a black burqa, and all that can be seen is the glint of two eyes behind a mesh screen. They flutter nervously, keeping the man and child in sight always, and completely missing the reds, oranges, and yellows of the distant trees. She speaks with the other women, the shadow of relaxed meetings without husbands lining their words. Only then does she smile brightly behind the screen net, and the little girl peers through the holes.

Father Time turns the pages of his book too fast, and the tree is dying early, its insides being destroyed by an insect which lives inside and will never be seen. Drooping towards the frozen ground, the icy tree seems to yearn to return to the soil where it began life. The woman does not come anymore now. Her eyes wear a double screen, one of the burqa, and one of the frost-covered window she looks out of. She has come only once, alone, since that picnic on the hill. Standing a few feet from the leafless tree, she had gazed up at it. But something was missing from her eyes, something which the little girl had so much of and this grown woman has none. The tree had sighed with her, and she’d wondered if it would live to see next spring’s sunshine. She left then, leaving only a remnant of herself, a dirty white scrap of ribbon fastened to a branch and reaching desperately in the wind to fly someplace else.
Orunima Chakraborti

Poetry: Roses of Night; Cheiranthus; Ocean’s Child
Blue Valley North High School
Michele Buche, Teacher

Roses of Night
To know of roses, softly white,
and long-flowing script
of letters and breaths.
Know my beginning to end, just
by holding a hand and
silvery kisses on
rooftops.

Give me a rose and let it fall
through chasms of dreams
until morning.

Of remembrance and silver pearls
scattered in a fan of black
hair, promises on my wrist,
behind my ear, where you
kiss them into place.

See love dancing on
the precipice of your rainbow,
Prisms of my light
shining through.

Break of dawn in two,
each of our hearts, in golden
remnants.

Give me a rose and
Let it fall.

Cheiranthus
A true wallflower,
seeing from afar
and yet within.

Dancing passionately,
on sleek black-lined notes.
Craving music, for
through harmonies and
crescendos resonate
my ache.

Wondering why
lifetimes stand between
You and I,
born of one year.
Desire to feel, to just
brush fiery crimson edges
off your spirit
onto my fingertips.
Burn myself in your flame,
like all others
gathered round.

Hiding, a wallflower can
whisper alone of its
beauty. Strong, unashamed –
until it wanes beside
the rose in morning.

Must I paint over myself
In shades of you?
Waiting for a moment
when you dip your walls
in my hue of
rich, vibrant color.

**Ocean's Child**
The ocean laps gently at the warm sand,
washes over my feet.
I look for the thousandth time to the east,
the empty horizon.

Closing my eyes, I imagine.
If I reach into the deep blue waters,
my hands will emerge
clutching swathes of dreamy blue material,
as soft as a wind's whisper
and as blue as my baby girl's eyes,
his eyes too.

It will drape itself over my hands
and wait for the touch of my needle.
And I will transform the blue depths
into the most beautiful dress he has ever seen,
the most beautiful creation of fabric and love,
sliding smoothly onto my body
and cooling my feverish skin.

Then, looking towards the east
and the lush green land upon which the sky rests,
the horizon pink as a rose petal,
I will see the crest of his ship once more,
and the wait of a decade,
of a lifetime,
will be over.
And I will appear to him as the ocean's child
wrapped in her arms,
welcoming him home at last.
The university was in a small town in Minnesota – the closest town with over 50,000 people was three hours away. The institution was very exclusive, as only students deemed to be near-perfect were admitted. It frequently rained in autumn here, and when it did not, the sky was still overcast. The university’s student body was moderately sized, although the expansive campus made the school seem somber, cold, and quiet. I rarely saw anyone I knew personally, and the students who did not know me were quite rude. Teachers and students alike busily rushed from place to place, greeting each other with curt nods and stiff waves. The dull, intimidating, gray-colored buildings of the college were spaced far apart; all buildings were erected around four extensive stretches of grass and cement sidewalks. Towering trees lined the walkways, looming, arching over the pedestrians below.

As an endowed professor of psychology at the university, I was revered by my students and my fellow faculty. Having taught for only ten years, I was regarded as a relatively young professor, but I hear others say that my papers are exceptional and the journals they are published in are prestigious. They said I was the “perfect” teacher, someone both knowledgeable yet relatable to students. Around my colleagues and students, I tried to maintain a professional image, always nodding in reply to their stiff waves. It was as if we were on a foreign planet where the customary greeting was a tense, awkward arm gesture.

In my morning class, there was an especially bright young man named Robert. Never before had I taught a student as astute and hardworking as him. An active writer for the school newspaper, he also played a prominent role in the school’s community. I absolutely adored him, as his keenness and bright enthusiasm for study complemented his amiable personality. After class that day, Robert stayed behind to ask if he could meet with me this evening to advise her on a paper. We agreed to meet in a classroom in the psychology building that night.

During my lunch break, I walked alone across campus to the old, dingy cafeteria. As I sat down with my meal, I noticed a young man with a brown sweater whose resemblance to my late brother, David, was uncanny. As a child, David was always cheerful, optimistic, busy, and incredibly bright. Only four years younger than me, David was always my playmate. In his third year of college however, he became depressed. He stopped attending classes, and spent many hours a day at a local bar instead. In the months leading up to his death, I could barely recognize him as the brother I grew up with. How could that be? Could college really change him that much? At last, he could not handle the stress of life at college and took his own life. I locked myself in my house for the two months following his death. I reflected on the world and life during these months of solidarity, and the more I contemplated about these things, the more bitter and vengeful I became. What caused David to kill himself? Who killed my dear brother? His school. But all other colleges were equally guilty as his. I resolved that institutions of higher learning were the fatal, cancerous tumors in the world – ever spreading and unstoppable. I saw how the high expectations imposed on students could overwhelm them. How could high expectations change students? Due to the extreme competitiveness of such places, people became cold and unfriendly; they viewed each other as enemies. Nevertheless, David’s death only motivated me to work harder, so I swiftly rose the ranks of academia – the community that killed my brother.

That evening, as I waited in the classroom for Robert, I thought again about David and observed my surroundings. The classroom was only partially lit, as I sat in the front with my feet up on the solid, stainless-steel desk. The floor was carpeted with generic, blue carpet tiles which were rough to the touch. The small, cream-colored, identical desks were neatly arranged in ten rows and six columns. The bright, white, fluorescent lights of the classroom created a clean, cold mood – like that of an operating room. The tidy pencils and pens on the teacher’s desk reminded me of the sanitized scalpels, needles, and forceps on the table of a surgeon. It was here, in the classroom, that students were rigorously tested after all. It was the classroom that established the high expectations of students and the competitive, alienating atmosphere of the school. The classroom was the core of the college – it was because of my achievements in the classroom that I gained my respect and my position, but it was also because of the classroom that David was dead.
Upon Robert’s arrival, I stood up to greet him. After meeting Robert for the first time, one would inevitably recognize his potential as a great scholar as well as his cordial qualities. He was rarely blunt or harsh with his words and always wore a pleasant smile. As we sat down and discussed his research paper, it began to rain. Rain continued to pour at a steady rate, creating a strangely peaceful mood. The white noise often helped me concentrate on my work, as it blocked out all other sounds and distractions. From the four large, metal framed windows of my classroom, I could look out across the symmetric school campus and watch as the few remaining pedestrians rushed to the buildings to take shelter from the weather.

Robert detailed his concerns to me and I tried my best to offer solutions. I stood up and paced back and forth across my room as I debated what to do. All of a sudden, through the window in the door of the classroom, I saw the man from lunch with the red sweater who resembled David walk past. All of a sudden, memories of David rushed back. I closed my eyes and flinched, as if I had just been punched. Thinking about David made me wonder what was really best for Robert, my best student. Should I stay here and help him with his paper? Would that be doing the right thing? Wouldn’t that just be raising standards for my students and thus be contributing to the competitiveness of the school? Yes, that would! On the other hand, I could also liberate him from the oppression and evils of college… save him from suffering the same heartbreaking fate as David. I opened my eyes.

I walked to a window and gazed outside at the steady downpour. It was so dark outside that I could not see any other buildings and the quadrangle was completely devoid of people. The gloomy weather reminded me of the night I learned of my brother’s death. I recalled that the weather forecast predicted that the rain would not stop until the next morning. With this weather, it would be incredibly hard for anyone to see something happen outside. The steady drumming of rain would drown out any screams.

I threw open the window, and thrust my head outside, feeling the hard rain splatter against my hair, neck, nose, and cheeks. The moderate gusts of wind whipped drops of cold rain at my face. I pulled back from the rain, and called Robert over. I told him to stick his head out through the large, open window with me to observe the queerness of the weather. I noted that although the rain was loud and forced people to remain inside, the rain saved the plants from drought and destruction. Suddenly, I thought – I can be the rain. I can be the saving rain, delivering these students to their salvation, one at a time.

Moving quickly, I firmly gripped Robert with one hand and rested the other against his back. I smiled gently at him. As my most treasured student, Robert certainly did not deserve to undergo David’s pain! I was going to save her. I lightly pushed him through the wide, open window and watched full of excitement as he slowly fell to the concrete sidewalk below. There was the sound of his body colliding against the ground, then only the steady drumming of rain. He had landed headfirst on the concrete below and now laid there motionless. I watched his body for a while, feeling a sublime sensation of righteousness and redemption. I was euphoric. The longer I looked at him, the wider my smile grew. I stepped back, shut the window, and collapsed in my chair with a sigh of accomplishment.

The next morning, a faculty meeting was called. The chancellor said that a body was found last night. I grinned widely. They discussed Robert’s death in a serious, somber mood as if it was an unfortunate thing. But they were wrong. He was saved! I saved him! I chuckled at their ignorance.
Out of the corner of my eye, I see a flash going the wrong way. A person dashing the wrong way up! The crowd is thronging, pounding down the steps and this person going up, toward the fire.

Now I’m only five stories from the safe ground and getting closer. All I wanted to do was get out of this burning building but now I have a mad obligatory urge to save this crazed somebody. Don’t turn back. You can’t help him. He probably forgot something. But I just can’t. Something, perhaps a conscience I have never felt before, pulls me toward the deranged stranger.

So I turn around at the next landing and sprint upward after the person, who is now flights above me. I push off to get momentum so I’m not trampled by the thronging crowd.

Going upstream is hard. My face is smacked by scared humans rushing to safety five times in fifteen seconds. The blaring fire alarms echo through the cement staircase, but I only hear ringing. My purpose is clear as I take the sprinkler-wet steps two at a time toward the stranger heading toward certain death.

Finally, I catch up and see a shoe pounding upward. I sprint harder. Three steps at a time... I’m so close... I grab the person’s hood and pull. He wheels around, but I can’t read his face.

“You have to leave this place. Can’t you hear the fire alarm?!”

The crowd is still rushing around us and I can’t be heard, so I motion to go down the stairs. The stranger rolls his eyes, then turns around and begins to sprint up the stairs again.

I dart after him. This poor guy. He must be so confused, and somebody needs to save him. But why do I have to save him?!

Still, the mad, obligatory urge pushes me forward and I know my newfound conscience will not permit me to exit the burning building until he does too. You have to save him because you are a good person.

Wait, I’m a good person?

This is no time for those sorts of questions, I scold myself.

So I lunge and grab his pant leg this time and don’t let it go. I pull him down to my level and shout in his ear.

“This building is burning!! We have to get out! GO DOWN!!!!” I point down the flight of stairs.

He has a funny look on his face. Almost humored, almost laughing. It is not that of a deranged human, but that of human that seems to think he knows more than me. He rolls his eyes again and shouts back.

“You go! I forgot... something!”

But I don’t let him go. I grab him again, and begin pulling him down the steps. His eyes flash with terminal annoyance, that which is sure to become rage soon. And it does. This stranger whose life I am trying to save reaches out and shoves my shoulders, hard. I tumble down the stairs and, and...

I blink. Why the hell am I sleeping in a staircase?

Then it all comes back. Everything. My first thought is logical. I have to get out of this place. I don’t know how long I was out, but the fire could cause the place to collapse at any moment. But then, I realize a few things.

Number one: There is absolutely nobody here. I don’t hear a sound. If this building were burning, there would be firemen. There would be someone, something here other than an empty building.

Number two: The fire alarms aren’t blaring anymore. If the building were burning, the fire alarm would be on. Or there would be a crackling, burning noise, or shouting, or something. The staircase I lay in is dead quiet. Almost peaceful.

And number three (this realization irks me most): That man I was pursuing did not seem crazy. He seemed to be the most assured and purposeful human in the world as he walked upward, toward the supposed fire. He knew exactly what he was doing going up those stairs. I realize that I must have been the stupid, uninformed one. My head is still pounding as I sit up. My mind starts running at a breakneck speed and rage boils in my middle when I remember how he shoved me.
Before, I followed the man out of pity. Even the good of my heart. But now, I will pursue him to find what in the damned world was important enough to shove an innocent and well-meaning person down cement stairs, in a supposedly burning building.

Consumed by anger, I try to stand, but my skull throbs. I lower back down and sit still, gathering myself. When I feel the pressure in my head ease, I get up, gently this time. I begin to climb the stairs. The climb is dizzying even though I am going slowly. I stop every few seconds, gripping the rail. I accidentally look down and realize how high up I am. The dizziness floods back as I gaze down at the real ground, 200 feet down. The spiraling staircase comes to a stop on a cement ground floor, still pooled with water from the sprinklers. Mercy. It is so far down. So far...

My knuckles are white from gripping the railing. I pull myself up, up, up. Something just pulls me to the top. The man must be there and I must find him. I don’t let myself look down again.

Finally, mercifully, I reach a landing and realize there are no stairs above it. I turn to the only door. It is labeled:

“89th floor
Scenic lookout.
Unsafe for untrained personnel.
Danger, restricted access.”

I square myself in front of it.

I open the door with mustered strength and step onto the restricted 89th floor.
I see the man. He sees me. He is holding a bomb.
Anna DeSalvo

Short Story: Hacked
Platte City Middle School
Kelly Miller, Teacher

Picture this for me, if you will. You’re sitting in biology, and there’s a dude sleeping at his desk in front of you. Well that dude is me. Dawson Kage. I’m an ordinary teenager, just like you, kinda. But, there’s something... a little off about me, I guess you could say. I’m a hacker, a good one too. I can hack into anything. Once when I was twelve, I hacked into the government secret service files and found out some interesting information, without a trace of evidence to pin on me, or so I thought. Now, I want you to think for a moment. If I could do that when I was twelve, I’m fifteen now. Imagine what I’m capable of now. That’s why the Government hates me, and I dug myself into a deep hole. And to put that cherry on top of the sundae, I dragged my best friends Abby and Gary into it without even trying to. Aren’t I just great?

When I hacked into those secret service files, I found some plans for something called “The Blackout War.” Really? Another war? Can’t we do without yet another one this century? Anyway, I guess they noticed that I left a file open or some other stupid mistake I made because I was 12, so they raised suspicion on countries we have beef with and that started a whole giant argument over allies, so as of right now, it’s every man for themselves on the brink of war.

I obviously couldn’t tell anyone, but I did. Last year, I told Abby and Gary, unknowingly putting their lives in danger along with mine.

“So...” Gary said, “How did you find all this stuff exactly?”
“I hacked into the government server and downloaded the files,” I said.
“What the hell is wrong with you Dawson?” yelled Abby.
“I got curious Abby, calm down.”
“You could get in serious trouble for this Dawson!” yelled Abby once more. This time smacking me upside the head.
“OW!”
“Let’s hope you don’t, for our sake and yours,” Gary said with a slight tremor in his voice. Changing his expression a little, he said,
“Well, what did you find out dude?” he said, curiosity oozing from his words.
“Something called The Blackout War bro, it’s pretty bad.”
“Woah. With what countries?”
“I don’t know man. Some group.”

Sunday morning I woke up and looked out my window. It was 9:14 A.M. There was a sleek, black Rolls Royce in our driveway. I threw my clothes on and walked downstairs, and I heard my mother laughing. She was talking to some man. He was in a black suit and sunglasses. He looked very professional. She was giggling like some little school girl. Suddenly she looked at me as I was walking down the stairs.

“Dawson, honey, come over here and talk to Detective Ray. He said he would like to speak with you.”
“Ermm, ok Mom.”

I reluctantly made my way over to the table in the kitchen, where they were engaged in conversation.

“Pleased to meet you Mr. Kage. I have some interesting questions to ask you about. Mrs. Kage, do you mind letting me have a quick word with Dawson? It will only take a moment of his time.” said Detective Ray.
“That is quite ok sir,” she said, stepping out of the room.

“What’s all this about?” I said once she left.
“It has to do with computers, I understand you know a great deal about the topic.” He said with a smirk on his face, he said it so confidently, like I knew exactly what he was talking about.
“I know a few things, why?” I said, trying not to lose my nerve.
“Well, it has come to our attention that someone from this IP address has logged on to one of our top secret government folders and accessed highly top secret information about government plans.” He said, the strain in his voice unmistakable.

I laughed nervously.
“I'm sorry Detective, but I have no clue as to what you're talking about,” I said, I could feel my face turning red with anxiousness.

“Oh, but Mr. Kage, I have a feeling that you know very well about what I am speaking about.” That smug smile of his made me want to pop him in the mouth. I already loathed this man.

“I'm sorry sir, but I don't. Now if you don't mind, I'm going to go back upstairs now.”

“Don't try anything sneaky Kage,” he said. “Deleting those files won't do any good. Our computer specialists have already found the files located in your computer. Why, don't you think we have a few tricks too, Mr. Kage?”

“Look all you want, sir, but there's nothing there so you're just wasting your time.”

“You're a very sneaky boy Mr. Kage, but not sneaky enough. Don't try anything stupid now, because as of right now, we have placed a bug in your computer, documenting and sending us everything you now do on your computer and if you try to damage or take this out, we will get a signal and you will immediately be hunted down and charged for the infiltration of top secret government files. So, it is in your best interest that you keep all of this information to yourself, Mr. Kage.” The tone in his voice was a little intimidating, which I'm sure was the point.

“Ok, I'm gonna go upstairs now.”

“It was a pleasure to make your acquaintance Mr. Kage. Possibly when you get older you could seek employment as a government 'data collector', since you are almost as good as our own at your age. Almost.”

“Thanks. Goodbye now.”

I walked upstairs. Dammit! I'm so stupid! I thought. Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! How could I forget to close the file? Stupid!

At least I had thought of this predicament before and put it all on my flashdrive. I guess I'm not completely stupid after all. I immediately called Abby and Gary and told them to come over ASAP. Within about 20 minutes they were both at my house. As soon as we got into the basement where no one could hear us, I told them about Detective Ray and that he found out about the files and the bug.

“I told you dummy!” Abby shouted. Even when she's as red as a tomato and screaming at me she's still the cutest girl I know, easily.

“Calm down Abbs,” Gary said. “Does he know you told us, bro?”

“He told me to keep my mouth shut, so I don't think so. Just don't go around shouting it so loud China can hear you. You better keep your mouth shut too guys.” I said sternly, my mouth pressed into a line and my brow furrowed in frustration.

“Dawson,” Abby said, her voice soft and soothing. “Does your mom know about any of this?”

Damn. I hadn't thought about that. “I don't think so...”

“Well what did she think the Ray dude was here for?” Gary said.

“You remember Jason?”

“Druggie Jason?” Abby said.

“Yes. She thinks that he tried to sell me something and ‘My information about him could be valuable to the investigation’s solving.’” I said, sounding clearly annoyed.

“You're in some deep doo-doo, my friend.” Gary said, sounding as sarcastic as ever.

“I'm very aware of this friggin’ idiot,” I said.

“Dawson, do you want us to go? A lot has happened to you today and if you need some time to think, we totally get it.” Abby is so considerate. I honestly wouldn’t care if Gary left at the moment, but I never want Abby to leave.

“If you guys want to,” I said, “Abby, could you stay for a second though? I kinda want to talk to you.”

“Sure Dawson.” She said, her mood taking an obvious spike in the up direction. She made me smile.

“I see how it is, text me when you two are done with your little make-out party later. Deuces!” Gary said, the annoyance obvious in his tone, the smirk on his face suggestive.

“Shut up Gary! You're irrelevant. Good Bye.” Abby said that with a giggle and so much joy. God, I love her.

“So... What is it you want to talk about Dawson?”

“Well, nothing really. I just wanted Gary out for a little.”

She laughed at that. I love her laugh. It's one of those contagious laughs that make you want to laugh too once you hear it.
“So there’s nothing on your mind? About anything?”
“Well, what’s up with the Blackout thing?”
“It was pretty vague in the plans, considering it was three years ago. All I know is that it escalated when they assumed that it was one of our rival countries like Germany or something when I hacked into it. Since they know it’s me and they bugged my computer, I have no way of hacking into the server again. I have the 2012 plans on a flashdrive though, if you want to look them over.”
“Sure. I am kind of curious now, since it was such a big deal that a detective had to come and they bugged your computer.”
“I just wish that there was some way that I could get back onto the server.” She looked at me.
“What are you thinking Abbs?” Her expression, so devious.
“Maybe you can,” she said.
“How?”
“Your cell phone.”
“It’s gonna be a little more difficult than a computer, but I think I can manage.”
“Didn’t you say you hacked the school server and changed your grade when you failed Mr. Peterson’s class?”
“Yeah.”
“Shouldn’t it be like, the same thing?”
“Little bit different, considering it’s the government and all, but same concept yes.”
“Well it’s worth a shot I guess. I think you can do it. It could be pretty epic if you succeed.”
“Then I guess there’s nothing stopping me is there?” I said with a smirk on my face, probably blushing, considering that the cutest girl ever is sitting by me and telling me that something I regularly do is "epic". I could feel my face getting hot.
“I guess not. Guess what else there’s nothing stopping you from.”
“What?”
“This.” She leaned over and kissed me. I just sat there paralyzed for a moment, until I remembered that this was real life and that this was happening. I moved my arm around her and she wrapped her arms around my neck. We sat there for almost five minutes. I savored every second of it, it was unbelievable. Abby Carter kissed me. The girl next door, my best friend since I was four, the prettiest girl in school, wrapped in my arms kissing me. She pulled back a little.
“What time is it Daw?”
“11:47. Why? What’s up?”
“I told my mom I’d be back before noon. I’d better go.”
“Do you think you could come back later tonight? I assume you’d want to be here when I hack onto the server, since it was your idea,” I said with a playful smile on my face.
“Of course silly goose! I’ll be back around four o’clock, OK?”
I smiled.
“OK.”
She came over, kissed me on the cheek, then said,
“See ya later cutie!” Then walked up the stairs and out of the house, turning back once to flash me a smile. I was ecstatic. As soon as I was sure she was out of the house, I ran upstairs and to my room. I still couldn’t believe it. I flopped on my bed and let out a deep sigh of relief. I’ve loved Abby for the past two years almost, and now, I know she finally likes me back. I thought I was forever friend-zoned, but I stay uncorrected.

It was about 3:02 when the doorbell rang. Hoping it was Abby, I ran out of my room and flung the door open. It was Detective Ray. My heart sank a little in disappointment.
“Hello Mr. Kage. We meet again. Although, I’m unhappy to tell you that it is on unpleasant terms.”
“What do you mean sir?”
“Why, you remember that bug we placed in your computer server don’t you?”
My stomach felt like it was falling to the ground. The sudden realization hit me as to why this man is back here. I had to play dumb.
"Yeah, why?" I said with hesitation.
"Well Mr. Kage, the bug had a microphone built into it and we can listen to any part of the house. One of your conversations with a Miss Abbegail Carter interested us very much."

"What conversation and why were you listening?"

"I wouldn't plan on using that cell phone to access our files Mr. Kage. You see, anything you do on this IP address will be documented, reported, and sent to our database where we have specialists reviewing and tracing every little move you make on this WiFi network."

"But that doesn't mean I can't do it on a different WiFi network!"

"OK Detective. This is the last you'll hear from me for a while. I promise that I won't hack onto the server. You have nothing to worry about from me."

"Well I would hope so. If that's all, then I shall be on my way. You and your mother have a pleasant evening Mr. Kage. Good Day."

"Bye Detective."

I ran to my room, grabbed my jacket and headed for the door.

"Bye mom, I'm going to Abby's for a few. I'll be back for dinner."

"OK Dawson, I love you."

"Love you too, mom!" I shouted as I ran out the door.

I walked to Abby's house, knocked on the door and waited. A few moments later, Abby opened the door with a smile on her face. It was good to know that she was pleased to see me.

"Hey Dawson, I was just about to head over, what's up?"

"Forget going to my house. The whole place is bugged. The only way I can get on is if I get on a different server and delete my cookies and history before logging back onto mine. Do you think we could do it over here instead? It's practically the only way, unless you want to go to Gary's."

"Let's just stay over here Daw. Come on in, let's go to my room."

I walked in and she shut the door behind me. We made our way to her room, greeting her mother on the way, and she shut her door behind us.

"Do you need to use my phone or can you use yours?"

"I'd better use mine, in case I do get caught. I wouldn't want you to get blamed for something you had nothing to do with."

"Well since it was my idea, and you're like, my boyfriend now, aren't I already involved?" she said with a smile stretching from ear to ear. I leaned over and kissed her.

"Well when you put it that way, I guess you kinda are."

"OK then, now let's get down to business. Is there anything I need to do?"

"Just sit there and look pretty," I said with a smirk.

"Easy."

She was looking over my shoulder as I logged on. Once I successfully logged on and opened the folder up one last time, I read the first line and Abby gasped. I couldn't believe it.

First air strike to take place on July 17, 2015 in Berlin, Germany. That's tomorrow.
Arjun Devraj

Personal Essay/Memoir: A New Building

Marquette Senior High School

Amy Doyle, Teacher

I am not your typical male singer: brash, defiant, supposedly charming. In fact, I am quite the opposite, a “nerd” who’s better left to the dim-lit laboratory than the radiant stage. But I’m still a singer, an architect who builds a mellifluous song from an intricate foundation of aesthetically arranged pitches. Nonetheless, my type of architecture is vastly different—not byzantine nor gothic, not rock nor country. I create buildings built from swaram and gamakam, notes and graceful pitches. I create buildings built from music, Indian classical music. Most Americans have never heard of Carnatic music, an esoteric art form here in the United States. In South India, however, it is a vibrant way of life, a way to communicate, to understand, to empathize. My relationship with Carnatic music has always been a sine curve, my x and its y in a dynamic struggle with ups and downs and bumps all along the way. But I need this sine curve on my graph; I need this building in my city. This building, like all others, has a story, and it was this story, this culture, this identity that I almost lost forever, burning away in the darkness.

I am eight years old. I watch as my younger brother sits down on the soft carpet rug to begin his first vocal lesson. But I am not in the limelight today. I am merely a spectator, watching enviously as my brother transforms his voice from a jumbled mess of strident, hastily stacked bricks into a resilient and harmonious structure. I continue to attend my brother’s weekly lessons, not because I am required to, but because I have this urge, this spark in my gut that subconsciously carries me there. I try to stay as far away from these crazy Indian practices, as if keeping away from the “dark” side will make me anymore American, but I fail. Eventually my brother’s guru, or teacher, notices my unsolicited, yet earnest attention. She asks me to sing, just a few basic notes—a simple scale, and I willingly oblige. She congratulates me. She says I have a wonderful voice. She asks me to learn. My guru.

I am ten years old. My teacher recognizes that I have an affinity for this style of music, a voice with a slightly nasal and metallic touch; still, to call me an amateur would be an overstatement. But I decide that practice is extraneous while only talent is required. I walk into class with a strut, full of confidence and self-adulation. I sit on the same rug, and I try to match my wavering, unrefined voice to match the perfect, static pitch. I open my mouth and begin to sing, but only sound emerges, not music. My teacher asks, “How much did you practice this week?” I reply with—first, silence—then the word once. My teacher tells me her story from when she was a young child, growing up in a small town in South India. She tells me how she used to wake up first, silence—then the word once. My teacher tells me her story from when she was a young child, growing up in a small town in South India. She tells me how she used to practice for weeks on end to prepare for a performance, to make it not only technically perfect but to make it more than sound: to make music—taking a simple pitch and adding a profound touch, an emotion, a memory. She tells me how she envisions her song springing to life, taking form: rustic passion, ephemeral joy, eternal sorrow. I am ashamed.

I am twelve years old. My teacher recognizes that I have an affinity for this style of music, a voice with a slightly nasal and metallic touch; still, to call me an amateur would be an overstatement. But I decide that practice is extraneous while only talent is required. I walk into class with a strut, full of confidence and self-adulation. I sit on the same rug, and I try to match my wavering, unrefined voice to match the perfect, static pitch. I open my mouth and begin to sing, but only sound emerges, not music. My teacher asks, “How much did you practice this week?” I reply with—first, silence—then the word once. My teacher tells me her story from when she was a young child, growing up in a small town in South India. She tells me how she used to wake up first, silence—then the word once. My teacher tells me her story from when she was a young child, growing up in a small town in South India. She tells me how she used to practice for weeks on end to prepare for a performance, to make it not only technically perfect but to make it more than sound: to make music—taking a simple pitch and adding a profound touch, an emotion, a memory. She tells me how she envisions her song springing to life, taking form: rustic passion, ephemeral joy, eternal sorrow. I am ashamed.

I am fourteen years old. I shout. I scream. I don’t want to do this anymore. I’m in high school now. I have a busy schedule. There’s no time. So many excuses. But finally, I say it. I want to be American. I haven’t practiced
for a month. I haven’t seen my teacher for two months: debate tournaments, robotics championships, final exams. My teacher asks me what happened, where that passion went. Did it fly away like a bird, vanishing into an intangible horizon? I say I don’t know. Later, my mom introduces me to her friends, with their greasy hair and ravenous beady eyes. They croak and tell me to continue, for college at least: Harvard, Yale, Princeton. I nod my head. I’m just a puppet here, no truth or emotion. My passion for this architecture—hidden in an abyss, shrouded in the somber nighttime sky. I can see it: a magnificent building, with flying buttresses and gleaming arches, with terracotta bricks and grandiose pillars, burning away in the darkness. Flame and shadow.

I am fifteen years old. Sweat pours down my face as I attempt to sing. The atmosphere is a thick syrup, sucking the air out of my mouth and drenching me in its foul stench. I can hear the cars honking outside, their overused rubber tires screeching over the rocky unpaved roads. But I still sing, for them, my grandparents. When I finish the song, they clap. As long as I decide to practice every day, they decide to listen every day. As long as I decide to smile every day, they decide to smile every day. They take me in their tiny, cramped car to see concerts, to watch musicians magically transform into architects live on stage, a feat far more awe-inspiring than any ludicrous “pulling a rabbit out of a hat” trick. They show me YouTube videos of famous performances even though they can hardly find the “Start” button on an outdated computer (more like a white box) from the 90s. With their kind words and motivation, their long, outstretched arms pulling me back down to this world, my grandparents restore an outdated blueprint: a blueprint for a new building, perhaps a better building. So I watch. I listen. I practice.

I am still fifteen years old. I just returned from my month-long trip to India. It’s my first lesson in forever, so I’m somewhat intimidated. I enter my teacher’s house, my feet shaking from trepidation, but my face, a perpetual mask that hides my fear under a blanket of false hope: malignant serenity. My teacher asks me to sing an old song; she says I can choose this time. I pick my grandfather’s favorite, for I have no preferences right now. After I finish, my teacher is astonished. She says she can no longer teach me. At first, I’m scared. My voice is hoarse, as if I was searching for subtle silence in a vociferous cavern. What did I do wrong? Did I squeak like a mouse, skittering away from my abstract, nonexistent mouse hole, claws scraping against the cold tile floor? Later, I find out: that mouse hole didn’t exist—but neither did the mouse, frightened of everything, always wanting to conform. Now my teacher asks me if I received training from a maestro in India. I reply curtly, “No.” Then, she tells me I am beyond her training and that I must find a teacher in India, and so I do. During the school year, I wake up at 5:30 in the morning, fatigued, droopy-eyed, and a tad bit overworked, in order to take phone lessons from my new teacher, a profound and knowledgeable singer. I see beyond the coffee shops with their overpriced organic drinks and the tall skyscrapers with their not-so-modern glass windows. I learn what it is to be American, to have a background, a history, a cultural identity. I see the ruined building being rebuilt, gradually restored to magnificence. New bricks, new building.
Anthony Dudley

Short Story: The Runner
Braymer High School
Terrance Sanders, Teacher

I wait silently, not daring to move, not even breathe. I crouch behind a door, curling myself into the smallest shape possible, hoping I would not be found. The old wooden floors moan in protest as the creature stalks even closer towards me. I wait. I could smell the horrid stench of the creature getting closer ever second. The creature could not see me but somehow senses my presence. I wait 1 minute. 5 minutes. 20 minutes. My body becomes so overwhelmed. The lack of oxygen my body needs overpowers the need to hide forcing me to gasps for air the smell that entered my body was so horrible my nose began tingle, causing me to sneeze. I try to hold it in but I couldn’t the smell was to horrible. In a split second I could hear the rumbling of the gears coming towards me. I stand up to run but as soon as I looked up it was there. Nothing moved except for the gears on it back rumbling at full speed making a screeching that hurt so bad my ears started to bleed. I move my head slightly to the right to see if there was anything that I could defend myself with. Nothing. I do the same to the left side. Nothing. My hands feel the wall behind me I don’t dare take my eyes of the beast that stands in front of me. My right hand feels something long and thick. A stick, it’s not much but at this point I would be willing to use anything to separate me and the monster. I pull the stick in front of me and the beast leaps towards me but only to meet the far end of my stick hitting it directly in the face. The beast falls on its side its mechanical arms are on the direct spot where I hit it. I realize this was my chance to run and that’s exactly what I do... run. Run until I couldn’t feel my legs but still don’t stop there keep running until one of two things happens it catches up and get a hold of me or there was no more room to keep run. I sprint straight ahead. I get to a turn and take it in hopes of confusing the beast. I don’t look back because I know by doing that it will only slow me down. I come upon a few more turns all in a different direction as the last. I have no idea of where I’m going but I’m going there. I come upon a huge wall that must go miles in every direction. I turn my body to the right but as I do a wall burst out of the ground blocking my path. I turn around take five steps then the same thing happens to me a wall appears. My last option is back. Back where I came from. Back to where the creature is. Just as I think about running back the creature rounds the corner sliding on the concrete floor but quickly gaining back its balance. I’ve made my decision. I dart directly at the creature. Right before I get an arm’s length away the last wall pops out of the concrete floor. The top hits my lower jaw sending me flying into the middle of the square that was just created. “Well, well, well, look what we have here a group of misfits.” The random voice booms on the walls echoing every word being said. Before I could reply a face appeared on the wall in front of me. So shocked to see another face I was speechless. “There are forty of you all running away from the same thing. All forty of you will be brought together as soon as I’m done speaking all of different abilities. Twenty boys and twenty girls. Each of you has a partner of different sex you must figure out who you go with on your own. All of you have a tattoo on your back showing you a hint on your partner. Once you all find your partners you will be one step closer to finding your path to freedom. So for now let the fun begin.”

The man disappears. The walls fall. I immediately look back to where I was being chased by the creature. It’s gone too. All that stood in the spot was another boy who looks to be about 17. A little muscular but he wouldn’t be considered ripped. No one moves. All forty of us equally spaced apart. I scan my surroundings to see if I could recognize any faces but none of them seemed to ring a bell, and by the looks of it no one else does either. I make the first move quickly followed by others. I walk over to the girl on my right. We greet one another quickly. I look up to see all of the unfamiliar faces. I think to myself only 38 more to go.

To be continued...
Harper Dziedzic  
*Short Story: Our Girl, Our Boy*  
*Academie Lafayette*  
*Jessica McDowell, Teacher*

Her feet were always dirty; her dad refused to clean the floors. So she would wash her dirt covered toes in the sink and wear socks, eventually throwing them out because their broken down washer couldn’t get the stains out of the heels.  
Her eyes were always drooping, since she could hear the radio on the back porch from her bedroom at night, cigarette smoke wafting and enshrouding her like a thick blanket.  
Her lips were dry and cracked, so she’d rub lotion on them so they might seal back up again. She didn’t want to ask for chapstick in fear of that look in her father’s eyes when he saw her skin peeling.  
She’d flip through the only 6 channels at night, staring blankly at the static on the battered television. Looking at the bare fireplace and pulling the big blanket around her thin frame.

His room was always messy. He tried desperately to organize the stacks of books on his desk and floor but it kept returning to what he assumed was its true form, its natural state.  
His eyes were always fixed on the ceiling at night, listening to the cars and buses and trucks rattle by, their endless pounding trying to fill the heaving space in his chest.  
His phone vibrated silently with texts from some girl, always some girl, but he ignored them so he could listen to his only form of comfort, twisted earphones from four Christmases back. Tears ran down his full cheeks, but he never felt like he was actually crying.  
He’d get up in the middle of the night and turn on the radio, read a book, write a letter, do extra credit homework [though he didn’t need it].... do whatever he could to not return to his horrible dreams.

At school, they were both robbed of energy. People would laugh at her, and she’d crumble, but they would start the day alert and awake. His friends would steal his energy too, through side glances and worried faces, pats on the back and sympathy.

She had no friends.  
He had too many.

They both felt lost. Too many stories and lies intertwined with the truth sat on their chests like an anvil, voices ringing like broken church bells to the beat of horse hooves and battle cries. Guillotine party favors. Long showers and mist from concealed seaside towns couldn’t help but they tried, their chubby baby hands reaching for the sky but instead having to shield their equally pudgy cheeks from raindrops that slid down their faces.

Their backs hurt, from breathing, from living on this wretched earth and singing songs only other souls could hear, lanterns burning on a rained out Fourth of July. But to them, sensitivity meant so much more than having dyed hair, it meant feeling light brighter, it meant feeling sadness deeper, it meant hearing sounds louder, hearing their own voices inside their heads louder than what anybody could understand clearly.  
She was the image of divinity and innocence, but he was the picture of understanding and intelligence. So she wilted and he melted to the sound of radios and the rumble of buses, to the smell of cigarette smoke and the feeling of headphones resting on the side of your head like earmuffs.

Hand-me-down problems were practically thrown on their shoulders, boulders of hassle and unnecessary kindness. A world founded on their tears teetered on the edge of expulsion from existence. And they cursed it, holding that damned lithosphere on both ends, but never the idea of overthrowing it into a faraway abyss entering their heads. Whiny incessant anarchy and teenage rebellion simply weren’t an option if they were to survive, which they were. Which they needed to.

And then it happened.
The principal’s voice crackled over the P.A. system around lunchtime, and her head lowered slightly. His head shot straight up.

A student had driven off a cliff and perished tragically, her body barely recognizable. A birthmark on her arm had confirmed her identity, leaving her parents, schoolmates and hometown in tears.

No one knew if it was an accident or suicide, if it was a joy-ride gone wrong or completely intentional. It still shook them both to the core.

Last summer, the soon-to-be car crash victim stood at the counter of the only convenience store in town. It was a small town, she had come to stay with her ancient grandparents for a couple of days. Just the weekend.

The only thing Elizabeth was genuinely excited about was the small lake where her grandpa used to take her down to when she was little. They owned a single rowboat, and not much else.

The first night she was there, she rowed the tiny boat out to the center of the lake and watched the stars. Her parents hadn’t known, her grandparents hadn’t either.

She sat there until early in the morning, just watching. Occasionally a shooting star would pass, but she wouldn’t wish on it. She wasn’t a particularly superstitious person.

When she finally decided to go back, she saw a boy. Our boy. Our sleepless-nights, bad dream boy. He was standing on the dock, waving slowly and regarding her intently. She rowed back curiously.

Elizabeth docked the boat and held out her hand, and the boy shook it. His dark hair was slightly messy and unkempt. She thought he was very attractive.

“Did you get dragged along to see your family too?” she said. He shook his head and smiled.

“Nah, my aunt lives up here and she needed help with her business. I guess it was voluntary.” He said it with confidence, like he knew it sounded nerdy and was proud.

“What does she do?” she said. He just looked up to the stars and shook his head.

“She owns an antique shop. Nothing much. It’s quaint.”

Nobody at her school said “quaint.” This was a very interesting find.

“Where do you go to school?” she asked.

“Central.”

“Central, like in Washington?” This was almost too good.

“Yeah…” He grinned. “You too?”

“Actually, I do. Go Bulldogs, right?” She laughed awkwardly.

They both stood there for a moment, looking at each other.

“I should head back,” she said quietly.

“Okay. I just came to sit on the dock, I couldn’t really sleep.”

Without looking back at her, he went and took off his shoes and sat near the water. She turned slowly, willing herself not to smile.

The next night, Elizabeth rowed out again. She had wished (yes, wished) all day that he would come back. And he did.

So they both sat in the rowboat, talking about life and school and problems. At one point in the night, he sat up out of nowhere.

“Hey, I think some local kids are having a party tonight. It’s supposed to be epic, my cousin went last year. He said it was amazing.”

She sat up too. “Sounds good to me,” Elizabeth said.

So they rode in his rusty pickup truck, which he had kept immaculately clean on the inside. She was sort of impressed.

When they finally arrived, she felt the bass of the music from inside the house in the soles of her feet, in her chest. It was slightly unnerving, but that’s what parties usually were like for her.

Inside was like a scene from a cliché teenage movie. People were making out on the couch, there were girls passed out on the stairs, and the floor was barely visible. Coke cans and chip bags lined the floors, there were red solo cups galore. They made their way into the kitchen and tried to find an open spot amidst the wildly drunk teenagers.

“So…” Elizabeth said. He laughed and hopped up on the counter. She followed.

“Pretty crazy, right?” he yelled.

“Yeah, it is!” she screamed back.

He started telling some story about one of his friends from school, but she didn’t really pay attention to it.
Suddenly people from the living room stumbled into the filthy kitchen, crowding them even more. Blue lights leaked in from the windows next to the couch, and a siren rang in the background.

“Shit!” Elizabeth muttered, jumping down from the counter.

While everyone else bolted outside and scattered back to their cars or trucks, they ran upstairs. She grabbed his hand and led the way, laughing and tripping the whole way up.

At the top of the stairs was a small closet, and the boy stuffed himself inside. She giggled and sat on his knees, closing the door quickly. It was like an extreme game of twister, and it was insanely crowded, but that was the fun part. She grabbed his hand and wrapped it around her waist. It felt pretty soft, for a guy.

They waited like that, even after the cops had left. When the flirtatious, silly, playful vibe had died down from both of them, Elizabeth had found a more comfortable position to sit in where his mouth was right next to her ear. They didn’t talk for a very long time.

Elizabeth checked the time on her phone, squinting from the brightness. It read 3:48. She cursed under her breath and stood up quickly.

“I should get back. It’s pretty late. Or early, depending on how you look at it...” She trailed off, hoping he would say something. He just sat there for a few seconds.

“Okay. I should probably go too. Do you want me to drop you off at the lake? I can do somewhere else, I just don’t know where you’re staying.” he said.

“The lake is good.”

They got back in his truck, but for some reason he looked sullen. Sulky. He turned on the radio and turned it to some crappy pop song, but she could tell he wasn’t listening to it.

When he pulled up to the lake, he drove as close as he could to the dock and let her out. The moon was shining on the water, illuminating his face. Elizabeth kicked the ground under her awkwardly and looked at her feet.

“Well, I’ll see you. How much longer are you staying here?” he asked.

“Actually I’m leaving tomorrow.” She waited for his response.

He stood there for a couple of seconds, choosing his words.

“Oh. Next year then? Hopefully we’re in the same homeroom.”

“Yeah. Hopefully.” She laughed, but he didn’t meet her eyes.

He hopped back into his truck and waved at her slowly. Like when they first saw each other at the lake. Slightly creepy, but also oddly charming.

He pulled out and got back on the road, leaving her in a cloud of dust.

Walking back, she processed the entire night. The boat, the party, the closet, the awkward goodbye.

She realized she never got his name.

The next year, she was dead. Plain and simple, she was gone.

Since her body was so mangled, she had to be cremated. Her once beautiful body was now confined in an urn, with yellow flowers painted on the side.

As our boy tried to wrap his mind around this fact; our female counterpart was sobbing. People in the hallways passed her without a glance.

Before her mom had died, our girl was really happy. She and Elizabeth were best friends; their parents had been friends since high-school. At least, that’s what Elizabeth’s dad told her. Elizabeth and her friend were even born in the same week, in August. Elizabeth was the older one.

They played Barbies together, and when their mommies watched movies, they giggled and covered each other’s eyes when two people were kissing. Elizabeth thought it was gross.

When Elizabeth and her friend had gotten older, they stole her mom’s makeup. Elizabeth thought they looked great, but her mom just laughed and washed their faces off. Elizabeth’s friend was still happy then.

At the funeral, her dad cried and kissed the coffin. Elizabeth’s friend just sat in her seat quietly, she didn’t even cry until later when Elizabeth called her on her mom’s phone that she had taken out of her purse. She told her to let it all out. So she did, until her phone died around four in the morning.

Elizabeth’s friend was different after that.

At sleepovers with other girls, while Elizabeth was playing charades or making popcorn or painting her nails, her friend was sitting and staring into space and listening to weird music. Nobody liked her music.

One night, when they were fourteen and at a sleepover, Elizabeth’s friend pulled some black hair dye out of her bag. Everyone oohed and aahed, like it was something rare and precious, but intimidating. She
disappeared in the bathroom for a ½ hour, and when she came out her bouncy blonde waves had turned an inky black. Elizabeth didn’t approve.

At the weekly sleepovers, Elizabeth’s friend slowly became less and less interested. She would zone out. The other girls felt uncomfortable, so they made Elizabeth tell her friend that she needed to either talk or just stay at home.

That night, Elizabeth pulled her into a corner to try to talk to her quietly.

“I think we need to talk.” said Elizabeth. Her friend stared at the ground and furrowed her brows.

“What? Is it about my hair?”

“No, even though I don’t like it. What’s going on lately? You’re quiet, you eat barely anything, you wear gigantic boots that aren’t even your size and you don’t even tell me who you like.” Elizabeth took a breath and crossed her arms.

“I…. I don’t like your other friends. I’m never hungry anymore, and I like these boots. And I don’t have a crush on anyone! I keep telling you that.” she leaned against the wall and crossed her arms like Elizabeth had, brushing her hair out of her eyes.

“What about sleepovers at your house? I haven’t seen your house in like two years.” Elizabeth studied her friend’s face. She was wide-eyed and looked panicked.

“My dad doesn’t want any friends over. You know how he’s been since mom—”

“Yes! Since your mom died! I know. I’ve known for five years now. I know how terrible it must be to wake up every day, with your dad, but you need to understand that you aren’t the only one with problems. Did you even stop caring about yourself to ask me about my life? My mom has come home intoxicated every night for months. Sometimes she thinks I’m your mom and confides in me about all her problems. Mostly it’s money, but sometimes it’s suicide!!! Suicide!!! I just sit there and listen because if I don’t she’ll start wailing. Do you know what that’s like?” Elizabeth was red in the face, tears streamed down her face. “I know you have problems. So does everyone and—” her friend cut her off, grabbing her bag and storming out. The screen door slammed behind her.

The other girls came up and patted Elizabeth on the back, rubbed her shoulder and hugged her. She felt out of place, a square peg in a round hole. So she closed the bathroom door quietly and stared at her mascara-streaked face in the mirror. She made sure the door was locked and slid down against it, grabbing a towel to muffle the sobs. She let it all out.

That was three years ago, and the girls haven’t spoken since.

Our girl sat in the back pew at her old friend’s funeral, trying not to cry. Meanwhile, our boy sat in the second row, as close as he could get without interfering with the family.

They talked about Elizabeth’s life, about how she would steal her mother’s makeup and look at stars, how she was a straight A student and how she would ride on her bike for hours.

After the memorial, everyone met at Elizabeth’s house for the reception. Our girl considered leaving until she saw a boy (our boy) by the refreshments table. She walked right up and said hi, which was very unusual for her.

“Hi…” the boy said back. He stared at her.

“Did you know Elizabeth?” he asked.

“Yeah, I did. Our parents were friends,” she said. “My name’s Caroline.” She extended her hand.

“Eli.” he said, shaking it.

“How did you know Elizabeth?” Caroline asked.

“We only met once. I still thought it was necessary to come, though.”

They sat down at a table nearby and talked for the rest of the night, about life and school and problems, but mostly Elizabeth. Eli recounted the lake, Caroline told him about the fight.

After a while, they were both speechless. Not from shock or fear but reflection, and they didn’t say much the rest of the time they were there.

Caroline came to the conclusion that Elizabeth had loved her more than she had imagined. She ripped a piece of paper out of her notebook and wrote a heart-felt goodbye, talking about the nights wondering if Elizabeth even remembered her. She talked about her plans to dye her hair back to its original blonde, she talked about how much everyone would miss her.

She let it all out.
Eli thought for a long time. He thought about how he distanced himself before he got too close, he thought about the closet. When everyone one was leaving, he found a picture of Elizabeth on the mantle and waved slowly again, saying his final goodbye.

Elizabeth’s ashes were spread at her grandparents’ lake, where she could stare at the stars and think about the boy, or her childhood friend or her mother. Most of all, she thought about her life as a whole. How she taught, how she loved, how she changed and how she lived.

She thought about cigarette smoke and dirty feet, headphones and stacks of books. She thought about how she never really let go of either divinity or knowledge.

She thought about Eli and Caroline.
My brain snaps awake, adrenaline coursing through the tense muscles of my body. In a cold sweat, my eyes focus on the darkest area of the chilly room, immediately disproving the shadows are animate. Nothing. My desk is hiding the majority of the area, as though it’s a secret that lies behind the cherry wood. The humming digital clock on the floor attracts my attention. Seven thirty-seven. As I rub the sleep from my eyes, I roll onto the extra mattress on the floor. I'm instantly reminded that my dogs have claimed this as their own, the residual fur acting as a bookmark, holding their favorite place. Legs numb, I get up. It feels as though I was actually running as my nerves finally boot up again, sending throbbing soreness all throughout my lower limbs. My brain desperately tries to erase all memory of its most recent nightmare.

For the past month, every night, my mind has been plagued with gruesome depictions of my own death, and other horrible things of the like. Every night. Every time I close my eyes. All of them are terribly morbid. The most recent nightmare is no different. Yesterday, roughly noon, I had been climbing the rocks at the quarry. Last night, I'd been scrambling through, over, under those very same rocks, and dashing through identical trees to get away from the huge black beast chasing me. The thundering paws flatten everything, including me. Before I woke up, I got the pleasure of feeling each of my bones break, each of my organs either punctured or made into pudding. Everything was in slow motion, and I got to experience every detail as if it were actually happening. The night before, the horrific phantasm in my mind was arguably worse than the one in which I was reduced to a bloody pulp under a huge black mass.

I woke up on an operation table, blinded by the lights overhead. My ears picked up the sounds of men’s palaver, and the shine of a metal instrument. I squinted my eyes to observe everything in greater detail. One thing that never leaves me is my near-sightedness. The men (all five of them) were in dirty, blood-spattered blue scrubs and gloves. The masks on their faces were brown from old blood and dirt. I saw the one nearest me pull out the metal I caught a glimpse earlier. It’s a dull, rusty scalpel. As it neared the pale skin of my stomach, I felt the cold fear sweep through me. Suddenly, my skin split open, instantly turning red. I screamed, and two men pulled the incision apart so the other two could fit their grubby, crusty gloves into my abdomen. Then, in the midst of all the red, I discerned pink. Smooth pink. The pain and abrupt blood loss knocked me out.

NOT in the mood to go back to sleep, despite the fact that a Rummy game kept me up into the wee hours of the morning. I make sure my phone is plugged into the radio, carelessly placed on the floor. The only thing I made sure of when I threw the black electronic down was the speaker pointing upwards, ensuring I can hear whatever song comes on. Since it is still early, I’m sparing everyone’s sleep being interrupted by the screaming of Mitch Lucker, leaving the music off for now.

Paintbrushes, paint, six paper plates, stepladder, a cup of water, and a mug of Earl Grey; my supplies for this morning. One color at a time, I order the paint according to the rainbow on two plates, the other four already designated for mixing colors.

I set up the stool, laying my girly, floral patterned comforter on the floor below my work area. After checking the clock again, I deem it late enough to turn on the music. The rest of my family listens to the crap Taylor Swift spews. I just can’t stand it. The radio blasting screaming lyrics, wailing guitars, insane drum solos and deep bass notes holding everything together works as a very effective insect repellent.

Dipping the thin detailing brush into the thick black paint, I meticulously trace over the pencil sketches I’d made a few days prior. The outline of a wolf from my nightmares forms, painstakingly slowly as I add every detail. A scar on the left ear, over the right eye, across its muzzle. Long cuts littered the thick black pelt, nearly invisible as I add more black paint, creating the illusion of lengthy pelage. Bit by bit, the monster appears on my wall, watching my every movement.

I leave my room only twice today; once to stock up on tea and cola, and again to fetch my dinner to eat in the safety of my room. The rest of my day is spent painting and using Sharpies to scrawl random lyrics on my wall as I hear them on my radio in seven different colors.
Nine thirty p.m. is my turn-in time. Changing into clothes that aren’t splattered with varying colors of dry paint, I flop into my bed, slapping the light switch on the way down. The room is plunged into instant darkness. My brain had already shut down by the time my head hits the pillow.

I wake up the next morning, well rested but anxious. The dream last night... It was an actual dream, not a beastly nightmare. Instead of the usual monsters or spooks, this dream was full of pink and purple. Flying rabbits, walking on clouds, avian people assuring me that I was safe. I was treading lightly, ready to take off at any minute with the first sign of danger.

Today, my parents want to take the whole family to see a movie. I don’t want to leave the house right now, so I come up with a bull excuse to stay home. Once everyone leaves, I turn on the sixth episode of Supernatural.

As I watch Dean's doppelgänger tear out his nails, rip the skin off his back, I think back to the unusually cheery dream I’d had. How it WASN’T morbid. I drift back to sleep, another dream full of blue and lavender and bright greeting me with open arms.

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The dreams last for three days. Three days of butterflies that don’t trick me by morphing into noxious gasses, or horses that trample me. Nothing monstrous; it's terrifying. I constantly look to the black beast I painted days earlier on my wall, willing the violence to reinstate itself, take its rightful place as the ruler of my dreams.

On the fourth night, the nightmares finally return. I feel a sense of comfort and familiarity envelope me as I run. The burning of my lungs, the pounding of my feet on the hard ground of the forest, and the large pack of wendigos chasing me is welcomed. Embraced.

I'd gladly take a month of dying and waking up on repeat over pixies, unicorns, and clouds.

I fear light more than I fear night.
For the past several months, Vishna began taking a few extra minutes out of her day to rest on her daily trips for water. She enjoyed the sensation of her sun-scorched skin incessantly baking under the blazing inferno of an Indian sun. The daily pain brought a sense of constancy that she craved. Yet, it was really the dirt beneath the well that kept Vishna returning. She liked to trace the footprints left behind with her fingers, imagining the faces of the women she knew had come here. When the wind came, Vishna couldn’t help but cry as she watched the imprints of those women become as insignificant as the particles that bore their essence. Every day before returning home, Vishna made the habit of retrieving a small handful of the dirt and hiding it within the depths of her robes. Despite her gesture’s impracticality, Vishna felt leaving the dirt alone did an injustice to the vanishing women of old.

The journey back to her village seemed to grow longer with each passing day, extending deeper and deeper into the hours of night. Whenever her husband asked, she told him that she had tried to hurry, but the baby was hindering her speed. Truthfully though, she always dreaded returning. Vishna never considered her husband’s house her home.

“You are lucky to find a man willing to marry you with your dowry,” her mother had told her. “Be appreciative of this match, Vishna. You were born a girl; you have no right to be picky…. Please try to understand that we cannot afford to marry you off, he is your only choice,” her dad responded in turn.

She married Ajith that next month. While Vishna could never claim happiness at any point in her relationship with him, the exact moment she no longer felt safe came at around midnight a week after their wedding vows.

“You know what women are good for?” Ajith burst through the front door, screaming nearly incoherently as he swayed with unbalance. Vishna shivered with anxiety.

“They’re good for making men, that’s what. Without a son, without a dowry, wives are useless.”

The ocean within Vishna’s stomach rose, whirling in agonizing stress. As Ajith crept closer towards her, she felt ever more uneasy. He grabbed her wrist and continued, “You are a poor, pathetic woman. If you can’t give me money, you can give me a son.” Every morning following, Vishna hid behind the house, incapable of containing the contents of her stomach. Her fingernails engraved the dirt as she lay there, tormented by the mass in her stomach. Here, pain was the only mark preserved within the earth.

It was after that day Vishna began waiting by the water, watching the footprints in the dirt. It was the day she learned of her pregnancy that she began collecting the soil. To Vishna, it was more than just worthless filth; it contained the souls of women lost to time. The footprints were those of women, strong and determined, who made their way to Vishna’s resting place every morning to collect the day’s water. Some were made by women, content with the mundaneness of a daily route for the fluid of life. Most, however, radiated sadness. Their broken spirits illuminated through centimeters of ephemeral dirt. Vishna wished she could bury her sorrows within fossilized indentations. She wanted to encapsulate herself within a single mark in the sand.

“You must get the sex determination test done, Vishna. We all want to know the gender.” At Ajith’s house, Vishna never found solace. The words hunted her, biting voraciously like a pack of dogs. From all sides she was assaulted, by his mother, his father, and Ajith himself. Their persistence wore on her. She felt as though she were crumbling and would, at any moment, transcend herself, aided by the breeze. Boy or girl? Her unborn child was a genetic coin toss. Only the gods could determine which side turned up. Yet, the pressure grew heavier upon her shoulders with each passing day. Vishna found no asylum, a refugee forever confined within the borders of a hostile nation-state.

Her hours by the well continued to extend. As she began her ritualistic excavation, Vishna began to realize that the footprints she loved steadily dwindled with each new day. She never liked to dwell on the missing, but the heartbreak of knowing they would never take another breath or walk another step was an incurable injury. Wondering how much life these prints had seen, and how much they had lost brought a wave of grief that penetrated the depths of Vishna’s heart. How many more would succumb to the wind?
On the trip back home, she was not purposefully slow. The earth grabbed at her ankles, pulling Vishna to her knees. She clawed at the gravel, desperate for escape. Radiating pain from her stomach kept her groveling at the mercy of the elements. Vishna screamed, begging for help from her imaginary protectors. Before passing out, she noticed a large shoe in front of her, and the footprints of a man.

She woke up in the hospital, the jeering faces of her husband and his family choking her peripherals. “It’s a girl.” The doctor’s words poisoned the atmosphere. Vishna could feel herself suffocating under the noxious words. She was brought back to the house in hysterics. Her heart palpitated in a rhythmic hymn of fear.

“Just try again, Ajith. Eventually she has to bear a son.”

Vishna rolled away, hoping the scene around her would vanish in the gale. “Only a man’s boots are welcome in this household.” This time the words were directed at Vishna. Ajith leaned over her, his dark eyes seeping hatred. He began caressing her cheeks, and, in typical cruel irony, wrapped his other hand around her neck. “Understand that a man such as I will never have a daughter. Do what you have to, but don’t ever let me see you back here with a child.”

He released her, but continued to scowl at a distance. Gasping for air, Vishna wished for everything to disappear. She wanted to be alone, to never face another man, to sit by the well and wash her pain away.

At the well, Vishna could be safe, protected in the embrace of the elements. Even more than that though, she could protect others. While the passage of time took its inevitable toll upon the soil, Vishna could preserve the essence of women left behind in the dirt. She felt a part of something, as the dirt from the soles of two-dimensional shoes shifted through her fingers. She felt loved. The feeling glowed like a ball of shining light, illuminating the darkness within her heart. An intangible energy, the lifeblood of the cosmos flowed through her body, into her heart and into the earth. Vishna wanted to consume the feeling, feel it drip down her throat and coat her stomach: because, outside of this haven, neither Vishna nor her baby would ever live in love. Outside of herself and beyond the dense layers of dirt, laid nothing but disgrace. Vishna knew what her husband required, knew that she was ultimately a delinquent in a world of men. Gently, she wrapped her dirt-covered fingers around her abdomen. As she bent her head down to peer at her bulging stomach, she whispered, “I love you.”

Ajith put on a docile façade throughout Vishna’s pregnancy. Still, the contents of his thoughts were easily visible. With eyes as the windows to the soul, Vishna could detect nothing but emptiness. His mouth curved in a perpetual sneer. He never wanted to spell out his intentions with the child, should Vishna choose not to terminate. However, Ajith’s unspoken aims hung heavy in the air.

It was only after Amala’s birth that the pressures began once again. The threats came first, followed by the physical abuse Vishna had feared for months. She felt tormented, trapped, and terrified. There was nobody she could tell, she knew what would happen if she did. Failed marriages were the woman’s fault, a disgrace to herself and her family. Better to keep a terrible relationship, than to be single. She gripped the sides of the bed, biting back the tears.

Vishna brought her daughter to the well, after a night at the hands of her husband. She examined the bruises along her thighs. His were the marks that truly lasted forever. The scars had roots throughout her bloodstream. The contusions along her skin, unlike the footprints, would remain implanted forever.

Vishna held her child close to her heart, and closed her eyes as the sun began to set. Never before had she waited for so long before returning to Ajith. With the sun in retreat, a chill permeated the air. Her icy breath was carried by zephyrs into a swirling abyss. Vishna and Amala shivered together under the twilight. The world was hostile, a place in which nothing beautiful held permanence. Vishna herself could never leave her own footprints, she merely collected them. Even those who could leave their mark continued to disappear. Within this world, only Vishna found them worth saving.

By this time, the wind had dissolved every footprint left behind. The sun slumbered beneath the horizon. Vishna could hear Ajith calling her name. She grimaced, and closed her eyes. His voice signaled their moment of earthly absolution.

Despite the growing terror of encountering her husband, despite the wind, Vishna could not bear to leave. She held her child closer, feeling the swirling winds around her. Once again, the air beset onslaught against the earth, uplifting the gravel and adorning Vishna and her daughter with hairpins of dirt. The dust flowed through their bodies, encapsulating them in the deconstructed footprints that Vishna could never bear to tell goodbye. Now, she would never have to. For in this world, a daughter could never leave her footprints in the dirt. She
could submit to the wind, and join the thousands of particles lost to the inevitability of time. The earth grew still, and the wind blustered on in all eternity.
Maiya Foster

Poetry: Quit Hatin'
Lincoln College Preparatory
Mako Miller, Teacher

We spend our days constantly contemplating
The should’ves could’ves and I need to’s of our past and future
Rather than
Living sporadically in the moment that is happening as I speak
Because in a world that’s
Moving so rapidly
It was only a couple hundred years ago that we were discovering gravity
When the apple fell from the tree

But now that I'm mentioning apples and trees
Let's talk about these little boys and girls who think that they're Adam and Eve
Rushing to hit life's highest peak
Before they've even gone to college

But who cares about attaining adequate knowledge when instead
I could twerk
But now, that's the only way she knows how to work
Since first her daddy told her that's all she's worth

Jumpin man to man
Sweetie they're all just like your dad
That only makes it worse
But what do you expect when women without male role models have to look to the media to define their worth

Beginning when she was little
Wanting to be every Disney princess
Damsel in distress
Waiting for a man to save her
Until she realized that the real Prince Charming
Only wanted under her dress

And she's the one who got labeled "hot mess"
Simply because she was too scared to say...
She wasn't ready
And then they started going steady
All smiles in the hallway
But behind the curtain was no wizard, no land of Oz
Only empty prayers and suicidal thoughts of a once hopeful girl
Now a woman too soon beginning to rot.

She used to confidently say,
"My body is my temple"
And now her body's all she's got
Craving attention in any way and instead of offering a hand,
Even other girls call her a thot
Because...
"We teach girls that they cannot be sexual beings in the way that boys are"
   We've got girls believing this too
   We've even got females against feminism
      In all due respect,
      Are you stupid?

   How could you follow an idea so erroneous and convoluted
   Mind so diluted
   Competing with each other for the attention of a man who's only in it for the booty
      Do you ever stop and ask yourself,
      "Why do I do this?"

      No, but you believe you must
Because who gives a shit when you were never taught the difference between love and lust
   Even Judy Blume told us that
      "We must, we must increase our bust?"
   For these boys in which we load our trust
      Only to have them shoot it back at us

   Bullets replaced with words driven by a complex of superiority
      But as far as I can see,
   Keeping men at the top of this hierarchy
      Has done NOTHING
      To benefit me

      So what's it gonna be?
   Hatred towards each other
      Or a long-deserved
      Equality
Not every event that impacts a life has to be a major one. Seemingly minor events, or ones that may even be considered insignificant or meaningless to others, can affect a person in a surprising sort of way. Its impact may last for a short time, or the rest of your life, depending on what exactly it is. I’ve been faced with this sort of writing project many times before, and few things about my life could be considered interesting, but I believe what I’ve chosen to write about is something that’s immensely important to me, even for such a small and recent thing. Among everything else in my life, recent or not, the thing that has impacted me in an unsuspected and subtle way was a movie.

In August of 2014, many people are well aware about how the world lost a brilliant actor and comedian. Robin Williams’s death is what happened to influence my decision to watch this movie. Dead Poets Society was a movie I had never even heard about until after he died, and my mother happened to tell me about it. One night we followed through on the impulse to watch this movie. Needless to say, since it was important enough for me to base an entire personal narrative around, I was not disappointed.

The choice of a favorite movie often seems to reflect on the person and their interests, and I guess this isn’t entirely a lie for me. The entire plot of this story is based on an extremely conservative prep school and the way Keating, a new English teacher, changes the way the students look at the learning process. Then he even changes their perspective on life itself. Many of these boys in his class were pressured by their parents or society into becoming something they didn’t truly want to be, and student Neil Perry is a prime example of this. This movie can be as depressing at some parts as it can be motivating and inspiring, as it deals with topics such as depression, suicide, but I won’t spoil anything beyond that. There is power behind words, and more often than not, they are even what we stay alive for.

One of the main characters in Dead Poets Society is a young man named Todd Anderson, and if it weren’t for him, I may not have loved this movie as immensely as I did. Maybe it’s because I saw so much of myself in him. Not only does Todd wish to be a writer someday, but he also appeared to have major issues with insecurity and social anxiety, which I have as well. This becomes blatantly obvious even in the beginning of the story when he is forced to read a poem of his in front of the class. In comparison, such an act has been nearly impossible for me. He was more of an observer than one who participates, and I can also relate to this. Often he also feared that his life had no meaning, and to be brutally honest, I often find myself fearing that too, that I am doomed to a boring and equally empty existence.

For the past year or so, I’ve been diagnosed with social anxiety (as well as symptoms of depression), and I’ve gone through medication and two therapists so far because of it. There’s nothing easy about it, at times it can be a lonely and painful black hole sucking out thoughts and emotions, leaving little behind, but at other times life goes on as normal. Words have become a powerful thing. They are weapons, they can be used to defend, entertain, or destroy. As a writer and through these minor difficulties in life, I’ve learned just how powerful they can be. Representation is another vastly important and powerful thing. Dead Poets Society proved this to me when I experienced watching it for the first time, through both the portrayal of Todd Anderson and Neil Perry, as well as the beautiful quotes and themes used in the storytelling.

Carpe Diem is a well-known Latin Aphorism defined by a multitude of dictionaries as “seize the day”, or “give little thought to the future”. How does this tie into the movie? It’s simple. Not only is it used by Mr. Keating in the beginning of the movie to inspire his class, but it’s a valuable lesson to learn outside of the movie. If there’s one lesson worth remembering at the end of the film, it’s to live in the moment and make your life extraordinary. If you wait, by the time you realize no two words could hold a truer and more meaningful definition, then it’d be far too late to make something of the potential everyone holds within themselves. At one point Mr. Keating asks the boys what their verse in the powerful play that is life will be, what they would contribute when all was said and done in their lifetimes, when they are “fertilizing daffodils” like the previous alumni the class was shown photos of in the beginning.

Overall it was a beautiful thing to have watched, and it’s important enough for me to write about. I certainly don’t regret taking the time to watch it with my mom. Rarely do movies or books actually manage to
get a strong emotional reaction out of me, besides possibly happiness or a vague sense of sadness afterward, or longing for continuation, but Dead Poets Society is something that did more than just that. The messages it has to teach are ones I also won't allow myself to forget. Whether it was the story itself or my personal connection and emotional attachment to a major character in it, the movie has left behind a lasting impact that I doubt that I'll forget any time soon. I don't know what my “verse” will be yet, there’s still so much out there for me to experience despite emotional/mental setbacks, but I refuse to live a life without meaning, and I believe that’s how everyone should look at life.
It’s eight thirty and I have forbidden myself to go to bed until I write, because someone once told me that a true writer shouldn’t be able to fall asleep without writing that day. This is advice I hold close to my heart, even though the person who gave me it wasn’t a writer at all, but a young black security guard who had studied architecture in college. I saw him a few times, but talked to him only that once. I never learned his name.

School had long since closed for the day, and it was one of those wintry nights where darkness falls before five and the world seems to snugle away while snow glows outside. I sat huddled over a model of a staircase I was building for architecture class, spare parts heaped like a pile of kindling at the corner of my desk. I was alone, gluing strips of white cardboard together and pinching them together for a slow count of thirty as the glue dried. The door opened silently, and I didn’t know he had entered until he spoke.

“Whatcha building?”
I glanced at him over my shoulder. “I’m building a staircase model.”
He looked at the lightweight contraption in my hands, stiff and sharply angled. “Looks pretty crisp,” he said.

He asked me about architecture class; we discussed the travails of drawing a perspective grid. He made his way around the room as we talked, leaning on his toes to admire drawings hanging on the walls. Minutes later, we found ourselves talking about jobs—he told me about his architecture degree, how he was working in security until he could find a better job, and I told him that I wanted to be a writer.

The very first thing I learned about writing, from a videotaped lecture, was that writing is about not inspiration or ideas or luck, but skill: skill that is earned from work and practice. Writing, the instructor explained, is like chopping wood. I obsessed over that phrase. I typed it up and printed it out and taped it to the door of my workspace. (It was only later that I’d learn from a friend what that phrase meant in slang—although I suppose it works that way, too.)

This is exactly like architecture: success is wholly dependent on work ethic. “It don’t even matter how smart you are,” the security guard said. All that mattered was how much time you put into it, how long you stayed up building models, losing sleep, toiling.

As we talked more, me finishing with my model, him showing me, on a pristine white Mac, photos of all his architecture projects, and finally the two of us heading outside into the slick, snowy night, we kept coming back to jobs. I was worried that writing wasn’t a stable career. “Nothing’s stable these days,” he said, “except maybe the medical field.” It was almost like I was trying to talk my way out of my dream.

Finally we stood in an empty parking lot, pools of water reflecting white lamplight. “Some people can’t sleep without exercising,” he said. “If you can’t sleep without writing, maybe that’s what you were meant to do.” And I felt guilty, because I had not written in days, perhaps weeks, high school being the excuse. But I did want to be a writer. Perhaps I wasn’t meant for it, but I did know, above all else, that that was what I wanted to do.

I realized that we were in the wrong parking lot. I told him that my ride was waiting elsewhere, and together we walked back.

It is almost ten. I have drafted barely over a page, which is enough to warrant sleep. It may not be the best thing ever, but if this goes nowhere, I will at least have become a better writer in the process.

I feel a warm, tender sorrow at the memory of the security guard. I wonder where he is now, if he has become an architect. I wonder what sorts of things he is building.
The New United States Congress Bill was signed last week, marking the beginning of a yearlong experiment into the functionality and effectiveness of Congress. The experimental Congress features all-new members, all of which are below the age of ten. Under the guidelines of the experiment, the new Congress will have all the powers the old one had, and the average approval rating among the population, as well as the efficiency of Congress, will be recorded. Researchers are hoping the experiment will shed light on what problems are afflicting our Congress today, so changes can be implemented and the United States as a whole can be improved.

According to President Obama, “We believe this test will help us improve how Congress functions, and make our government better.” In a study conducted by the University of Nebraska in early 2013, researchers found that the average American approval of Congress has been steadily decreasing. They also discovered that the number of new bills and laws signed by Congress has been changing. Since 2008, Congress has gone from signing an entire binder of new laws daily to sending out a bent paper clip and half a banana twice a week.

Dr. Markus Daniels, a scientist from University of Nebraska says, “We got several researchers together to try and think of ways to fix Congress to improve approval ratings. One guy suggested, ‘Hey, let’s try putting kids in charge of the free world.’ We all just decided it was a pretty good idea, and it wasn’t until days later I remembered he said it as an April Fools Prank. It was too late to change things, so we just went with it.”

“We’re going to start with deciding what juice box flavor is the best,” House Majority Leader Timmy Mattson said in an interview last Monday, addressing what issues Congress would face in a meeting this coming Friday, “Then we’ll move on to determining whose dad is the coolest, and could beat the rest of Congress’s dads in a fight. We’ll also start to work with the CDC to stop the cooties epidemic facing girls around the nation.”

Many members of the President’s Cabinet doubt the effectiveness of this experiment. Vice President Joe Biden says, “I’m not certain what President Obama was thinking when he signed this bill. I trusted my 8-year-old with watching over my house for two hours a few months ago. When I got back, I found he had burned the house to the ground. I also discovered he had salted the earth, cursing the land from ever supporting life again. It was the second worst thing to happen to me that day. I really don’t think trusting these kids with making important decisions that will impact the future of our country is a good idea.” Secretary of State John Kerry also mentioned that he doubted the experiment would be successful, and that it wouldn’t help make Congress more efficient.

Despite the negative predictions of the future, most officials in Washington believe this is the best way to improve our great nation. As Congressman Mattson puts it, “We’re going to make America better. We’re going to ban time-outs and broccoli. We’re going to change things.”
Tom Fits always knew his story would be written someday. He is the ideal human being: he is strong, mentally stable, emotionally capable, and spiritually faithful. In fact, he knows he is written about and loves being in his own story, showing the audience his perspective through his eyes. Because his perspective is always wonderful. The audience dreams about wonderful things—and because the audience wants it, Tom Fits lives it. Today, he wakes up, staring out his window on the second floor of his luxurious-but-not-conceited story house, the sunrise greeting him with streaks of purples, oranges, and pinks. But he knows it is not the most beautiful thing in the world. And he tells her so every day.

He hops into his car, music blaring out of the radio. His wheels glide over the asphalt of the driveway and onto the street, sailing a cool 5 miles over the speed limit. He pulls up next to her house, rushing out of the car and to the door. She steps out, the secondary-yet-smart character, smiling her always-beautiful smile even though she woke up a mere 5 minutes ago. He takes her bags, staring only at the beauty of her face and knowing it will never add up to the beauty inside of her, and walks her to the car. He knows she is strong, but he still holds her hand like it is made of porcelain. He throws the bags in the trunk and starts the car once more.

"How was your day yesterday?" She asks him, her big eyes wide and thoughtful as she stares at him. He knows she is infatuated—because that is how she is written.

"Good. Coach ran us extra hard yesterday so I didn't get to finish that painting for the scholarship." He shot her a winning smile. "But that's okay. I'll be able to finish it by tonight."

"Of course you will. You never realize how capable you are, Tom Fits, but you can do anything. Remember that. And also remember that in 10 years, it won't matter what you succeeded at or failed or forgot, but what you learned." Her expression was shining.

She always knew the right thing to say.

They arrive at the school, a huge, gleaming tower with kids of all different shapes and sizes. And they all love him. Because he is the hero. And they all love her, because she is with the hero.

He walks in, her in tow, smiling and waving as the student body greets him with encouraging words and cheery salutations. She sticks close, holding his hand with that same lovely delicacy.

"Tom Fits! Nice play last Saturday, man!" "Oh Tom! The sculpture you made caused tears!"

"Fits! Astonishing paper on the motifs of fictional stories. Simply astounding."

Before they arrive at their homeroom, he drops ten dollars into the donation jar. Today, he saves an abandoned litter of Labradors.

"I'll see you later, okay?" she says with a smile, kissing him lightly on the cheek in front of their homeroom.

"Okay," he nods in happiness, watching her go. He has everything—varsity sports, scholarly artwork, close friends, and the most beautiful girlfriend in the world. He hurries to his first class, feeling elated as he acknowledges the wonderful gifts he's been given. He always does—it's part of his character.

His first class is anatomy—he loves anatomy, because he wants to help people when he's older with the medical knowledge he learns. He aims to cure strains of cancer. Next is history—he loves history nearly as much because when he applies it to the world today, he understands the balance between the individual’s rights and those of the greater good. He believes peace is achievable, and he's been told if anyone is able to accomplish it, he can. Before lunch, he stops in math. It used to be his worst subject, before his character developed. Now he can translate the numbers into his purpose, because numbers are the same in every language. He uses the numbers to bring people together.

He leaves for the cafeteria, and sees something that makes his blood sing. The villain.

He watches in horror as the bigger boy tries to push the smaller one into the locker. The others cower in fear behind him, staring up at the bully with wide eyes and open mouths. He tips his chin up, knowing he will not win with violence and pain.

Tom Fits walks over, his hands shaking with anxiety. But he is ready. Whatever happens, he is ready.

"Hey." His words are confident, steady. He tips his chin up. “Leave him alone.”
The bully looks at him blankly for a moment before sneering and dropping the boy, who scrambles to the side in a pit of fear. Tom Fits does not flinch as the bully stomps up to him, his eyes sparking with power and abuse. He uses fear to control people.

It was up to Tom Fits to stop his reign of terror.

“Stop,” Tom Fits says, and even as he looks up at the bigger boy, he sees the bully shrink.

Mentally he wishes his girl was here—he always knew what to say.

The bully seems to recover and shakes his head, raising meaty hands. “Tom Fits. We finally meet. I have been waiting for you—this school is only big enough for one of us, and I ain’t leaving.”

Tom Fits smiles inwardly. He knows Nolef—he is just an ordinary villain. He roams the pages of the book, sulking and hiding in the margins, until now—when he snapped and revealed his true nature. Tom Fits saw it coming. His name backwards was Felon for crying out loud!

There was one major difference between Tom Fits and Nolef: Tom Fits triumphed over the trials of life, but Nolef was swallowed by them.

That’s why Tom Fits was the hero. And Nolef was the villain.

But Tom Fits could see straight through Nolef. He knew what it was like to be the bully—he started off as one.

“Nolef.” He starts, his voice gentle. “Is Nolef right? I see you walking around the school, taking out your anger and frustration on other kids. It’s because you were hurt as a kid, isn’t it?”

Nolef looks at him, suddenly taken aback. His eyes become more human—sad, pained, and vulnerable. Tom Fits knows he has not let anyone see the true side of him for a long time. He knows Nolef did not mean to be the villain, but he had to. Otherwise, Tom Fits wouldn’t play the hero. But he was the best kind of hero—he saved everyone, even the villains.

“Nolef,” Tom Fits smiles at the bully, helping the smaller, beaten boy to his feet. “This is Laser.”

Laser gives him a funny look, sniffing softly. “Like the Lupe Fiasco album?”

The small boy nods, looking down still in slight fear, but holds a certain defiance about him now.

Silently, Nolef does something unexpected, but something Tom Fits knew he would (because he’s the hero).

He hugs the boy he was just bullying.

Laser looks shocked for a moment before tentatively hugging the boy back.

Tom Fits hears whispers and hopeful laughter behind him, and leaves to go to the cafeteria with a bounce in his step. Another thing about being a hero—he could make more heroes out of ordinary people.

At lunch, Tom Fits passes his coach.

His coach, his admired mentor.

His coach, who recruited him freshman year, when he was still the bully, the smoker, the drinker, the partier, the failure.

His coach, who whipped him into shape with harsh words and worthy lessons.

His coach, the only man who showed him sympathy.

His coach, who he would die for.

Tom Fits feels a lurch of emotion. Without his coach, he never would’ve found his sense of self-purpose, determination, and passion that he carries with him now. Simply, his coach was a key character in Tom Fits’ development as the hero. Now he sets goals and reaches them.

At the cafeteria, he smiles and laughs with his friends, giving out high fives and words of wisdom from his own 18 years of living. They are tertiary characters, there to give him depth and the audience perspective about how flawed yet heroic he is. But he cares and loves them all the same.

Tom Fits knows invincibility isn’t real—he is the hero, and he is vulnerable. But his vulnerability almost makes him invincible—because you can’t kill the hero of the story, can you?

He feels invincible. Everything about his life is incredible, and he wants to live this way for the rest of the time he breathes.

But that will not happen.

Suddenly, armed men—dressed in black, with ski masks, tattoos, unshaven beards, and wild eyes burst through the cafeteria, shooting bullets at the ceiling at 100 miles an hour. The voices mesh behind Tom Fits. This is his climax. These are stereotypical bad guys—but they are his bad guys. They are the greatest challenge
he has ever faced. All of his training has geared him for this moment. Everyone’s hearts are jumping from fear—except for Tom Fits’.  
  His rockets with excitement.  
  This is the climax. The top of the story arch.  
  This is Tom Fits’ moment.  
  He is the hero of the story.  
  He knows, deep down, these people are all the same. He wants to show them that everyone is desperate. Everyone has been bullied. He wants to make the peace. He wants to be the hero again.  
  He looks at his girl, who has tears in her beautiful, big eyes. He kisses her. "I love you." he tells her firmly, and she nods, knowing those are the most truthful words he has ever said. Knowing he may not survive this attack.  
  He stands.  
  "Get down!" The leader—he wears a red ski mask—is yelling at him, and cocks his weapon. The metal is sleek and gruesome, like a rabid dog.  
  Tom Fits’ tips his chin up, swallowing his fear. “No.” he whispers. He was taking a stand. “I will not stand in the face of your evil. Of your oppression. You will not control us, because we will stand together. We will all be the heroes.” He gives his speech, people’s voices slowly but steadily beginning to rise in volume. The man’s gun begins to drop as he is overwhelmed by the crowd. Tom Fits quiets the crowd and begins speaking again, reaching out his hand. "You don't have to live like this. You can drop the gun. You can be with us. We can fight for peace together." His eyes are shining, a smile spread on his face.  
  He could see it in his mind’s eye. The man lowering his gun, putting it on the ground, turning himself in.  
  Tom Fits would be the hero once again.  
  Instead, the man begins laughing. Tom Fits is so startled he raised his eyebrows to the ceiling.  
  I try not to look at him.  
  "Bullshit," Red Ski Mask says, aiming the gun directly at Tom Fits’ stomach. For the first time, real fear leaps on him, tugging at his gut, covering his expression.  
  Suddenly, another man comes rushing downstairs, a small, handheld gun in his hand. The security guard. His is round and sweating, looking more like he should be in the crowd of the cowering students. But he is taking his own stand. “Hey!” He yells aggressively, “drop the gun!”  
  Tom Fits can feel their attention—even his friends, his girl, turn toward the guard. He can hear the whispers of their thoughts.  
  My hero.  
  "Hey!” he shouts, and the scene around him freezes. I come out of my hiding place.  
  "What the heck?” He asks me, wrapping his arms over his chest. Even in this pose, he still looks like the hero—because that’s how I wrote him. I shrug, slightly sheepish. "I'm sorry, dude. You needed saving."  
  "Did you forget who I am?” He asks, honestly puzzled. Even the endless intelligence I gave him cannot help him now. I know because I did not write him with the ability to find the solution. “I’m the main character. We had an agreement. What gives?”  
  He’s trying to be reasonable. I know he never saw it coming. I know I pulled the rug out from under him and threw him under the bus. But... "I'm sorry. It's not what the audience wants."  
  The audience wants idealistic! Perfection! You know... fantasy! Things that can never be had." He smiles his winning smile at me, and I am not immune. I wrote him for the audience—and he is doing his job perfectly. But I must try to make him understand.  
  This is for the good of the story.  
  I press my lips together, trying to lay it down for him as gently as possible. He shouldn't be frustrated when he dies. "Nobody has it all. And the audience doesn't want perfection. They want... reality. Sadness. Emotions twisting. Motif, you will always be classic. But you're at the end of the story or at the beginning of the story. You begin ruined and get better or you are better and get ruined and get better. Nobody wants your perfection. They want the suffering, the pain, the growing. The realism. You understand?"  
  He doesn't respond for a while. I made him smart; he is sure to understand.  
  He looks up at me, biting his lip. "Please give me another chance," he murmurs, believing with his whole heart that he can change the men attacking him. "I want to be the hero of this story. I want to save them. I want to save the world. Let me do what you wrote me to do."
I bite my lip, shaking my head. He throws his arms in the air in exasperation. "I'm the hero of the story! I don't need to be saved!"
"I'm sorry," I murmur, my voice cracking. "I can't. The problem about being a hero of the story, Motif, is that your destiny is written in ink."

With sadness, I tear the last page from the notebook and show him. The words glimpse past his eyes and translate into the scene in front of him, like he is looking into the future. Which, he is. I shouldn't do this, but he won't be alive to change anything.

Red Ski Mask shoots the officer before he shoots Tom. The officer is on the ground, dead. Blood streams from the other kids' heads as the group releases fire on the cafeteria. Choking sounds echo through the space, but then it is eerily silent. His girl's eyes are still wide, but glassed over now. Blood streams onto her perfectly red lips, turning them even more beautifully red. Even in death, she is beautiful. Motif thinks this; I can hear his thoughts.

I wrote them. I wrote HIM.

His bottom lip is wobbling. "But... this isn't what I know. People CHANGE--"
"I didn't write them to change, Motif. Because it isn't reality. And the audience wants reality now. There will always be bad in this world, Motif."
"But I--"
"That's why happier tomorrows are written with broken characters. To give hope. But you already have hope; and now brokenness is here for you.

He is quiet for a long time. "You're... recycling me?" his bottom lip is quivering. His voice is shaking. I don't trust myself to reply. "Will they remember me as the hero?"
I nod, tears hitting the words and smearing the ink on the page. "Yes, Motif, they will."
I don't tell him that they will forget about him because he is another archetype. He is just another perfect hero. Hero, sure--but one without impact.
"Some hero," he says bitterly. "I can't even save myself."
Madelyne Hartleroad

Poetry: Art
Platte County High School
Angela Perkins, Teacher

Paint
He possessed the deepest of blues
Colors that made my memories swim
As if I was drowning in swirling waves
Or the ocean he longed to recreate

Hues
He mixed the strongest of greens
Brushstrokes of pine needles
Of forests long forgotten, torn down
Trees that are nothing but traces in the breeze

Strokes
He manipulated delicate pinks
Creamy, warm, shiny underbellies
Of the seashells collecting dust atop my mantle
The life he wishes could breathe through paint

Shades
His hands fell away, revealing the shadows
Left on the lone walker, deserted within his art
The darkness envelops him, but here it is day
The stranger he gifts with a small dark smile

Palette
He swirled rhubarb reds and colors of velvet
His wooden companion a reflection
Of every color ever gracing his moods
He wishes that we could feel the rainbow's bane

Canvas
He transforms a blank slate
Into tears, into anger, into hope
When I watch his magic swirl, dancing along the nothing
That's when I see his smile tugging at his lips

Art
He falls back, the darkest of nights
The bright and vivid oranges
Clinging to his clothes like little children
And he stands there, smiling at the colors
Painting a life where nothing once stood
An elegy is a sigh
we made with lips. A whisper
called jazz when jazz was
between lips like cigarettes.
And jazz when jazz was smooth.
Eyelids chase after sleep.

An elegy plays after death
hushes the body, leaves
the eyelids ajar. The last glimpse
is reflected in the irises.
The door sighs wide. Open

a body on the metal slab.
It is the new bed
to press into, a canvas

for impression.
The stiffened feet point through
a white sheet to the exit.

Once the exit was just a neon sign
with four red letters.
Henry Heidger
Poetry: Why Do Buddhist Monks Wear Orange?
De Smet Jesuit High School
Robert Hutchison, Teacher

Why is the sky blue?
The question of youth is why
do people die? It was a question
of uncertain results
until biology class explained
everything. Herded us to believe
in lines, single file from room
to room like sheep. In my textbook
I saw a photograph. In France
the children cross their arms
in the monastic style.
Folded across the next page: why
do Buddhist monks wear orange robes?
We figured the figure showed
orange is in abundance
in northeast Thailand. A textbook
example: they had orange. We had blue
popsicle stains around our lips
and kissed the thought
of monks in meditation.

Then I saw the lush, green ink
and realized they had more colors than
my father’s palette of oils.
Now chemical dyes
are used and sometimes give
that vivid orange color
that one sees in Bangkok.
But why do clouds move faster
when they’re eggplant gray
and filled with a jar of rain?
Is it because the sky’s fertile
rows of soil are sown
by airplanes zipping up the seams?
Or is it because I asked why,

and the sky was too nervous to answer?
She zipped up her cleavage,

turned her cheek away from me.
She cried a saffron sunset

over the jungles of Thailand,
and turned the soil orange.

Beautiful monks grew
like tiger lilies.
Mack Hoagland  
**Poetry: A House so Small**  
John Burroughs School  
Shannon Koropchak

A House so Small  
A house so small, insignificant,  
It was odd,  
How two people lived,  
A father and a son.

The Father kept them out,  
Of conflict.  
They did not ask for more than they had,  
They did not need more than they had.

And Father aged,  
And Son grew,  
One day son would bury father,  
And the world would not stop to notice.

A house so small, insignificant,  
It was odd,  
Why the national spirit wrapped  
It's dreadful grasp around the boy.

And Europe's war swept him,  
And all the young blood,  
To a land so close - yet so contrary –  
From what he called home.

The boy was reading from The Book,  
For he had watched Lucifer at play.  
Then he twitched, and fell - eyes open –  
As the air around him burst.

In a house so small, insignificant,  
It is odd,  
To see a father bury his son,  
As the world does not stop to notice.
Claire sat quietly on her bed, tracing a picture of her mother with her finger. Her heart ached, her throat swelled and her eyes felt heavy with tears and sleepless nights. She wore a black gown with her mother’s crown resting atop her head. She had always wanted the crown’s power, but never like this.

Her mother had passed away last night in her sleep from disease. It had slowly dwindled her magic until she simply didn’t have enough left to sustain her. She had passed away holding Claire’s hand. Her last words were "You’ll make a wonderful queen." She had smiled. Then she had released the last of her breath. Her eyes dulled and her hands became cold.

Claire had been in a state of internal chaos since then. She didn't know what to do anymore. Her father had died several years back when she was only 12. Now there was no one else in the royal family besides her. She was the only one who could accept the throne. Claire felt her stomach knot up. She was afraid. Deeply afraid. She fought to swallow and tried her best to stand tall when her guards came in.

"Your majesty, it is time for your mother’s funeral." One said, apologetically.

When Claire entered the main hall, she prepared herself for all the "pity" and "grievances" that everyone would give her. "Oooh, it’s a shame!" They would say. "Your mother was such a fair woman. Oh, I hope to see you smiling again soon!"

Claire scowled despite herself. She knew exactly what they hoped for. They hoped for her hand in marriage.

She walked through the endless torrent of people, finally reaching the throne room. It was a vast space with intricately woven silk rugs crafted by the Nymphs of the Wood as a gift for her grandfather. He had befriended them and his kingdom had fought on their side in the Battle of the Wood, against the infamous Morac tribe. They had wanted to use the rare, magical golden trees as the ultimate inexhaustible fuel source.

She felt tears in her eyes as she thought now about how she would have to make decisions like that as the only royal heir to the throne left. She wished with every fiber of her being that her mother was still alive. But her mother was gone. There wasn’t anybody to help her now; she was alone.

Completely alone.

The memorial was long and tedious, recalling every event in the queen’s life. "She was a great spell caster and we all felt protected with her on our throne." The spokesperson said in the same fake voice he used for every funeral. "We will miss her greatly." He paused, looking around, making eye contact with as many as he could before he continued. "Let us have a moment of silence as we cast her spirit up to the shining stars."

Everyone held their hands up to the night sky. They closed their eyes, and for a long moment nothing was heard besides the occasional whisper of the wind. It was as if even the constantly flowing river had stopped for an instant.

It was a peaceful moment. A moment Claire was oblivious to. She was too far down in the murky waters of denial. The throne was calling. Fear clenched harder than ever before. The throne’s beautiful song echoed through the castle as its previous keeper’s life force was set free. It wanted another person to sit on its glowing white crystals and rule. But not before it tested any claimant to the throne.

This was the cycle of the throne. It had started long ago when the dwarves had found the enchanted crystals deep in the center of the world and they had brought them to the surface, where they had instantaneously formed into the shape of a throne. Its power had been too great for any of the dwarves to control, so in fear they had brought it to the village of Desperan and left it there. When the first people saw it, they were suddenly controlled by a greater force and sped towards the throne. They all sat on the throne and instantly turned to dust.

When the head of the village heard, he came to the throne and truly sensed its power. It seemed to blend within him in a magnificent way. This was the first time the throne had ever sung.
He calmly sat on the throne, and his eyes closed. His eyes stayed closed for hours, and all any of the townspeople could do was watch around fires until finally they opened. The king gasped and caught his breath as his people asked what had happened. He appeared to be somewhat sad.

"A test." Was all he would say.

Claire snapped out of her train of thought. Now it was her turn to take the test. If she failed, the whole balance of the kingdom would fall. With the kingdom gone, balance would be lost and chaos would break loose.

Everyone else finally heard the song and solemnly turned to face Claire. The people closest to her extended their arms onto her and let some of their magic flow into her. The people behind those did the same to them and those people transferred their magic through themselves to Claire. The people behind did the same until there was no one else behind the last people.

As they each released their magic, they all glowed a different color depending on where their magic sprouted from; nature, water, fire, stars, and many other things. They all glowed in unison, creating a beautiful web of harmonized magic coming together as a blessing for the one who was about to need it most.

Claire knew what to do now. She held up both of her hands and released some of her own magic, a magic exclusive to the royal heir: the magic of light. The magic of pure good and balance. It traced through every person connected to her, symbolizing that everyone was connected within her kingdom.

The magic soon faded and everyone gave Claire reassuring looks as she walked up the steps to the throne. With her kingdom below her, she stopped in front of the throne. Everything was dependent on her now. She took a deep breath, releasing any negativity as her magic filled her chest and spread throughout her being. She knew what she had to do.

Claire sat on the throne, and the throne's and her own magic intertwined. The throne shone a fluorescent green. Not the green of envy, or of the emeralds they used as money, but the green of life. In the heart of the throne, where Claire sat, it was an intense white that was as bright as a beacon and lit the entire throne room in a blinding light.

Claire clenched her eyes shut and felt herself leave her body and fall through the surface of the throne as her soul—her purest state. No problems plagued her now; her soul was free. She fell into the true heart of the throne and everything stopped shining.

It was time for the test.

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Apparently the test didn't come with a map and directions: Claire had been stuck in a seemingly endless labyrinth with walls made of the same material of the throne. They glowed a variety of different shades of orange and yellow, like fire lighting the maze. She hadn't given up though. The thought that her mother had done this before her was enough to fuel her determination.

Claire's determined gait eventually gave way to a wandering stroll. Her magic wasn't working and she had lost track of time. She was completely lost. As Claire was turning a corner, she could have sworn that she saw a figure in the path, shining with a golden light. Claire squinted to make out any details, but the silhouette vanished before she could see anything. Claire rubbed her eyes, shaking her head.

'This place is getting to me' she thought. The silhouette continued to appear more and more frequently. It seemed almost like it was trying to guide her. Claire followed it until she found herself in a circular space, with two different portals on opposite sides. The golden silhouette vanished before she could see anything. Claire rubbed her eyes, shaking her head.

"Greetings." It said, smiling.

It had long, flowing hair, similar to her own, and wore a long, beautiful dress. It had rather large wings alike in appearance to a swan.

Claire could only just stand, gawking. She hated herself for it, but couldn't help it.

The guardian smiled. "I have been expecting you." It said, landing in the middle of the room, its' large wings folding behind it.

"...and I am afraid that now is where the true test begins, now that you have found your way here." She pointed to each of the portals, and Claire had a feeling she would have to choose one.
They each held such great power, it suddenly struck Claire just how much the throne held. This was probably the first of many secrets she would learn. That is, if she passed.
The guardian read her thoughts. "Yes, you will have to choose. And it will be difficult." She warned.
"Through this portal," she pointed to the left one- it was green, swirling with energy. It was where the silhouette had gone.
"-you will find your mother and father. You will live as a family, like you've always wanted." The guardian said. Claire's hope skyrocketed despite the fact that she knew better. There was always a catch.
"On the right." the guardian pointed to the other portal. It was blue and still, like the surface of a pond.
"Is your kingdom, and your body." She finished, solemnly.
Claire's heart sank. Tears flowed freely down her cheeks.
"Th- that's cruel!" She cried. She could be a family, but at the cost of balance. Of everyone else's happiness. She couldn't do that... could she?
Claire walked to the green portal. She saw her mother through the other side, and her father, holding each other and watching her. She held her hand out, as if to touch her mother, but then stopped.
"I'm sorry, mom and dad. The world needs me now. I'll see you when my time comes." She said. Then she turned around, closed her eyes, and ran through the other portal before she could change her mind.
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Claire opened her eyes as her soul filled her again. She caught her breath and looked around. Her kingdom was surrounding her. One person began clapping, then all at once her whole kingdom cheered. She had passed the test. She smiled. She would meet her parents again when the time came. For now, though, it was her time to rule, to keep balance.
And she was sure she would be sitting on the throne for a long time.
Some people swore the house was haunted, others swore it was the people inside it that were cursed. Most people thought both things to be true. As for Mary, she wasn’t sure what to believe in.

As the door closed behind her, and even though she didn’t find it frightening she realized why the mansion was the talk of the town. Looking down, the black tiles were so clean they offered her reflection back to her. Parallel to the expensively tall ceilings, a white staircase seemed to rise up forever, and at the same time it went down eternally, swallowed into the basement. She had known the building was imposing because of the many times she had driven past it, but she had never completely understood the massive dimensions of the house until that moment.

The room to Mary’s right was also white, for the house lacked all color. A piano was set in the middle of it. Tall statues of women stood in each corner of the room, all made with the same kind of white stone. They were missing both arms, as if these had been torn away, their shoulders ending in sharp definite cuts, and their bodies covered in porcelain robes. Mary, interested, stepped closer to one of them. Despite the lack of facial features, the sculptures seemed realistic in a more powerful way, looking at Mary with empty eyes.

"Mom doesn’t like it when people do that,” Mary heard a voice behind her say. She lowered her hand immediately and turned around only to face a six year old girl with skin as pale as that of the statues, and black hair pulled back so neatly that every single strand of it was tamed by the ponytail. The girl’s green eyes stared into Mary’s so coldly that the babysitter felt forced to look away.

Still trying to pull courage together, Mary stepped forward. "Hi, I’m Mary,” she said with the friendliest voice she could manage to use. "You?"

"Katelyn," the girl answered, slightly lifting her chin. With judgmental eyes, she examined the teenager in front of her.

"Do you go by Kate? Katie?"

Katelyn’s facial expression remained emotionless. "No, just Katelyn."

The babysitter took a step towards the piano, and almost stroked it, but thought better of it and let her hand fall back down to her side. "Do you play?"

"No. Mother used to.” The volume of Katelyn’s voice slowly decreased, and by the end of her words it was nothing but a whisper.

Mary searched for something else to say. "What do you want to do? Do you want to watch TV? Do you want to play a game?"

"I'm not allowed to watch TV, and I don't have any games to entertain you."

Mary stood tense, as the all the ideas she came up with were burned to irrelevance by the tiny girl in front of her. "That's okay. We can make a game up! Have you ever played princess with your friends?"

"I told you. I don't play games."

"Well... there is always a first time. I can make something up really quick. You can be a princess today!” She tried to sound excited, trying her best not to let her anxiety show through. Mary walked away past the staircase even though she had no idea where she was going or what she would find. She didn’t look back, just hoped Katelyn was following. She finally found a living room and without asking, Mary started to move tables, switch couches out of place and took blankets out of closets to arrange a fort.

Katelyn blindly fell in love with the game, without ever questioning it, or doubting its reality. Every few seconds her eyes sparkled with the innocence characteristic of children; they sparkled with a trust that had not made an appearance on her face before, a part of her that had been torn away by her cruel reality. Mary could only wonder why it only appeared now and then, when really, a girl Katelyn’s age should have the privilege of savoring her innocence every second of the day.

The girls played for hours. Hours and hours. They played until they had danced with all the princes on the list. They played until Katelyn had memorized the coronation speech. They played until Mary made sure that the game would be long enough for Katelyn’s eyes to keep sparkling, as if the babysitter was creating a reserve
of happiness which Katelyn could access when it was time for her to leave. They played until the game had to end, and with it, the magic disappeared too.

The two girls sat with their legs crossed, hidden under a table. Mary barely fit, but she ignored her discomfort.

"Mary?" the little girl whispered.
"Yes?" the teenager whispered back.
"Can we keep playing?"

Mary didn’t want to, but didn’t say it. They had played for so long that she had exhausted all her ideas, and pretending to be enthusiastic about the game had become a burden. Every second, Katelyn’s smile became more of a straight line, the sparkle of her eyes becoming a little dimmer. Katelyn looked down at her lap, and held her own hand, as her hopes drowned in the silence which had taken over the room. "You are my only friend. I just want to keep playing," Mary bit her lip and looked away, resisting the urge to cry.

"Of course we can!" Mary said, finally giving in.

"We can play in the dungeon this time!" said Katelyn, smiling playfully. "I’ll tell you a secret if you promise not to tell anyone."

Mary had started to find the work tedious, but reminding herself of how sad Katelyn had been when she found her she kept acting as if the game was still enjoyable. "I promise," she said smiling back.

Katelyn leaned in, and putting her hands around her lips, whispered into Mary’s ear. "There’s magic downstairs, dark magic." As irritated as she was, Mary couldn’t help but laugh. Katelyn looked at her, indignant. "You don’t believe me!

"But of course I do," she said in the high pitched voice people use when talking to little children.
"No, you don’t! I’ll show you!"

Katelyn crawled quickly from underneath the table and ran towards the staircase. Once in a while, she looked behind her shoulder to make sure her babysitter followed her, and giggled when she realized the teenager was trying her best to catch up with her. Mary, willing to play any kind of game for the little lonely child, went down the stairs.

The stairs were very much different from the rest of the house. They seemed isolated from everything else. The ambiance Mary got from that section of the house sent chills up her back. The sole sound of her feet going down -echoing through the house- confirmed that the stairs lasted forever.

When they finally reached the basement, Katelyn turned the lights on to illuminate the room. Unlike the rest of the house, the plain walls showed nothing more than their own color – no expensive TV’s, no mirrors, no paintings, not a single nail inserted in them. The only artwork found were sculptures of women, identical to the ones in the upper floor, except these ones were carved on black stone. Mary stopped for a second and looked around the room, wondering if they should keep going or if they should go back to the upper floor, but Katelyn didn’t give her the option of deciding.

"Why are you stopping? We have to keep going."

Mary was scared of what Katelyn was going to do, but in a more realistic way than worrying about magic. She had no idea what the basement held, and as far as she knew, the girl she was babysitting could be getting mentally ready to jump into a fireplace. In general, when little children try to show off with stunts, things go wrong.

Katelyn walked into an aisle, but she didn't turn a light on; she just kept walking, swallowed into the darkness. Reluctantly, Mary followed.

"Katelyn?" she called out, but there was no answer. "Katelyn?" she asked again, but the only thing she heard was her own voice coming back to her, bouncing off every surface.

She continued through the aisle, with one hand on the cold wall, and the other one in front of her. The deeper she walked into the passageway, the colder it became. She could feel her fingers starting to stiffen and the hairs in the back of her neck straightening. The aisle curved. The texture of it changed, the smooth surface turning into bare brick. The floor changed as well, from shiny tiles into dull cement. She became desperate and worried that they would get lost, that they would never find the end, or even if they did, that they would never be able to return to the beginning. All kinds of ideas started creeping into her mind, all of them including unfortunate endings. Maybe Katelyn had left the aisle. Maybe she had trapped her inside the aisle on purpose. Maybe the coldness that first tinted Katelyn’s expression was not only a sign of a spoiled child, but a threat.
When she had become so desperate that her eyes were aching from trying to contain tears, she found the little girl. She was sitting cross-legged at the end of the aisle, in front of a green granite counter. That was where the aisle ended. There was a small metallic sink on it, and above, a light wooden cabinet was recessed into the wall. Katelyn’s head moved side to side, as if there was music playing and only she could hear it.

Everything was illuminated only by three small lights on the ceiling, one of the light-bulbs buzzing, flashing on and off, about to die.

"I told you there was magic in my house," Katelyn said like she was pointing out something obvious, as if Mary could see it as well. "My daddy comes down here a lot, all the time. He comes and opens the doors, but I’m not supposed to know that. I guess his magic is vanishing somehow, because I can see it now. I didn’t used to. He used to disappear for days, turning invisible, but he doesn’t anymore. I can see it now. I don’t know how the magic works, but he turns into something like a monster. I see it all."

Minutes dragged on, as Katelyn waited for an explanation.

“You can see it if you want, you know? It’s inside there. It won’t harm you, I promise. I think it can only harm me.”

Mary raised her hand several times a few inches only to let it fall back down. She did this over and over, debating whether to open it or not. Her knees were locked and her toes were clinging to the inside of her shoes. Finally, curiosity got the best of her. Hesitantly, she walked forward and with a shaky hand she brushed the handle of the door—the only thing colder than her own fingers. In her mind, she counted to three. Holding the metallic handle in between her fingers, she slowly pulled the door open. Her hand fell back to her side as she stared into the cabinet contents.

The light of the half working light bulb made the bottles of vodka sparkle.
A peer into the most fragile moments of life, filled with the utmost feelings which are indescribable with my limited vocabulary of ways I can describe depression. It wasn’t an out-of-body experience or a coma dreaming off into the dark space orbiting the globe; it was real. It was being sent off to war with my mind—my soldiers only protection being the clothes on their backs. Or being pushed into a lion cage, a family of carnivorous beasts, hunting my blood every bite a piece of me gone until I was left bare. My brick house blown down by the big bad wolf and I was left to pick up my bricks and build it again. I was a smashed mirror, I could glue the pieces back to my body but I will always have my cracks and stories.

Seventh grade first day of school. I ask her if she wants to hang out after school and she rolls her eyes and fixes her skirt, saying she doesn’t want to hang out with losers. Seventh grade second day of school. I ask her why she didn’t text me back and she said she didn’t want to text someone as such a faggot as I. Seventh grade third day of school. I told her I didn’t get why she answered my letter, she told me to grow up and get lost. Seventh grade fourth day of school. I didn’t ask her anything.

Seeing yourself as disgusting for the first time isn’t what I thought it would be. I started noticing things; stretch marks under my arms, how my thighs touch and rub against each other, how if I poke my stomach I could feel the pudge. I thought I blew up into the ginormous doll and everyone could see those stretch marks and pudge and I considered myself worthless. Me being young and uneducated I searched “how to lose weight” and found a suicide forum. It was the right answer for me—cutting and no eating and shoving my finger down my throat. Bringing a razor to your skin while crying and shaking at three am wasn’t how I imagined my seventh grade year.

It was when my mother told me she should be dead, I was two years old and my brother was sixth months. She couldn’t take it anymore; kids weren’t everything she imagined and more. She would be dead now unless it weren’t for my father who found her in their room filled with pills. That was when I knew I had to get better and that if she could make it I could too.

Then I changed myself. I stopped thinking dirty comments about my appearances, weight, face, arms, thighs. I distanced myself from the friends who were still in the same loop as I was. I slowly started to integrate colors into my life. I accepted my sexuality and didn’t feel like a bother to everyone around me. I was finally me.

Finding self-worth has taken thirteen years of my lifetime. I matter even if I am a percent in hundreds of calculations. Even if my time is long or short I have made an impression on this planet and I do matter. I’ve seen suicide take away her thoughts, stripped the leaves off her branches and left her bare like a tree in winter. I’ve seen self harm take away the light behind their eyes and make them lost in a sea where every man is for themselves. I’ve seen my mother take pills every fucking day of her life to take away the mishaps in her brain. I’ve seen mental illness cloak her into the monster she thinks she is. I’ve seen my eleven year-old get bullied for the first time and cry himself to sleep. Maybe I don’t matter to everyone in this town but I matter to myself.
Keegan Justis
Poetry: Reason
Park Hill South High School
Ideen Bindel, Teacher

O, mottled sky, who breathes but clouds,
will he ever know what lurks
past your azure smokescreen?
A child tries to wax poetic over
how the simplest clouds might
ruin summer days with their
downpour
of shadowy,
clammy,
damp.
Down on his shoulders clamp
two fidgeting, made-up hands
and
moreover
as if he’s lost his lucky clover,
he’s crying,
despite (and with help from)
the fact that he feels no pain.
He rambles on about clouds and rain,
showing us
nothing but just how insane
he is, having allowed the texts of Salinger
to convince him he’s not to ask his mother
for the warming embrace
of skin-slowed sunrays,
for the warming embrace
of the other,
of love.
Still now, he wallows in his room,
condemning the fine weather as some cruel accident,
with each shower he takes no more than a shampoo
for cattails, each tooth of his comb merely
a reasonable solution—
more so, not one word
is uttered against that presumptuous,
self-serving "love" whose name his lips choose
fraudulently, for love is stranger to him
than shampoo on hair or laces in shoes.
Unfortunately for the rest of us,
though he might shut up, he won’t ever lose
his voice, by which his best sentence moves
some number of men and women in the room
to snooze—
to find salvation at last
inside their heads,
for it behooves no one
to maintain the ruse
of listening
intently to him.
Their words may ring true,
should they happen to bear
the burden of truth,
as they see a future him
pulling out his hair
as he slams back vermouth
and chokes back despair,
and the sands of time
cry rebel tears
into the palm of his hand,
where they pile up to rest
like a hundred grand
in counterfeit notes
produced by the folks
in his basement
in greyscale
on toilet paper.
That'll teach him (as it should)
all he hasn't understood.
That'll teach him to mind the signs,
stay completely inside the lines,
and lastly – this one would be good –
to stay on track when his path winds
off its original course. If ever he could
trade his mind
for a more stable kind,
what
would he
even
do
with it?
Spencer Kunz
Poetry: The Problem With Poetry
Platte County High School
Angie Perkins, Teacher

The problem with poetry is that it’s exclusive –
Its doors barred to anyone whose picket fence is white
“You have no business here,” it says,
“If your knees are unscraped and your back is upright.
Be gone.”

So I try to emulate the poetry I read:
i write without capitalization or structure
(to better express the freedom of poetry)
I break my poems into all sorts of shapes
(To better appreciate the beauty of poetry’s symmetry)

I say, “To hell with this!”
And write with anger and obscenities!
(To better demonstrate my rage toward the higher powers)

Yet when all this is done,
Poetry’s doors remain tightly shut

I make eye contact with a man
(A poet, by the look of him)
He glances at my palms (smooth and uncracked) and laughs bitterly
I feel the glares of other poets mocking me
So I leave

You see, the problem with poetry is that I can read it
But not write it
And perhaps that is a blessing
“C’mon, Ginny, we’re going to be late!” Lilly practically bounced off the walls, a combustible ball of nine-year-old energy. She twirled around the granite kitchen island with the lithe grace of a dancer as the black robe swished behind her.

“You act like I care or something.” I shrugged. The top of my priority list included playing softball and making out with Michael Welton. Chaperoning my sister on Halloween didn’t make the cut this year. Sorry.

Lilly swiveled to face off with me, hands on hips like Mom when she’s about to tell me to clean my room. “You have to take me; You have no choice.” In retaliation, I plopped down on the living room couch with an issue of *Us Weekly* and made myself comfortable. Lilly appraised this act of open defiance a long moment before she motioned me to get up. Eyebrows arched, I smirked and shook my head.

Elfin features contorted by rage, her face screwed up with childish indignation. “You’re mean!” she snarled, her dark eyes turned to mud puddles. Lilly sprinted back to the kitchen, and I hooted with laughter as I listened to her pound out Mom’s work number. “Mom, Ginny doesn’t want to take me to Hallows Fest. Make her take me, Mommy!” Lilly wailed uncontrollably. I had to hand it to her, this breakdown trumped all her previous attempts.

Before I bothered to sit up, Lilly appeared beside me, the cordless phone flung in front of my nose. I snatched it with mild irritation and nestled it into the crook of my ear. “This is Disappointing Daughters Incorporated, my name is Ginny, how may I help you?” I chirped, staring dully at the pads of my fingers.

“Ginevra,” Mom sighed. She sounded exhausted, and I imagined her seated at her desk, surrounded by towers of paperwork that took the whole night to work through. I hated when she used that voice, because it made her sound like a flat tire.

I hated that voice because it made me feel guilty.

So, I imagined her in an unfamiliar setting instead-at home with us. The task of cooking dinner usually fell to me because she typically failed to arrive home on time. Half the time I made Lilly’s breakfast and lunch on school days, picked out her clothes, and made sure she brushed her teeth. Hell, I served more as a mother to Lilly than our actual mother. Earlier that week when Mom cancelled on Hallows Fest for overtime, Lilly bawled. Nothing soothed her; nothing stopped the waterfall of tears or quieted the sobs. I hugged her tight, stroked her hair. “Why doesn’t Mom ever spend time with me?” She asked me between hiccups. "I don’t know, sweetie."

This train of thought fueled the rising anger and fed the flames as if it were gasoline. “Don’t waste your breath or your time on a lecture, Mom,” I cut her off. “I will take Lilly to Hallows Fest, since you wouldn’t. And she’ll enjoy herself just fine despite an MIA mother. By the way, just because Dad ran out on you doesn’t mean you ought to run out on us.” I hung up and slammed the phone down on the stupid ikea couch. Lilly stood immobilized, eyes the size of quarters.

I offered a rakish grin. Lilly quickly returned it with one of her own. I hopped up, grabbed the fifty dollar bill Mom left for the occasion (while I steadfastly ignored the attached post-it note warning not to spend it all) and headed out the door. We squeezed into my dainty but efficient 2000 Toyota Corolla. Most of my friends knocked the car as a drag; they preferred their sports cars and gas-guzzler hummers, but I loved her because she handled like a dream through any inclement weather. And that Corolla pulled a u-turn faster than a wall street broker. Not to mention its capacity for doughnuts.

I checked my phone for messages while the Corolla zigzagged a path through Wendlefield’s narrow streets. One from mom, which I deleted without reading, one from Melissa, asking what I was wearing to Brad’s party, and one from Uncle Merle, telling us to have fun and stop by on our way home for some free goodies.

Great Uncle Merle masqueraded as Albus Dumbledore every year for Halloween. Probably because his natural appearance fit the description so well. Uncle Merle’s tall, willowy stature, offset nose, brilliant blue eyes and waist-length beard lent him a wizened persona. Glasses were the only missing component.

I whipped the Corolla into an open parking spot and pointed towards the Ferris wheel and makeshift roller coaster that loomed overhead. “Well, here it is, exactly as you wanted,” I said. Wordlessly, she threw her shoulders back and nodded, the witch’s hat falling further into her eyes.
My best friend, Joan, waited for us by the gate. The simple dress she wore failed dismally to protect against late October’s frigid bite. Not that it bothered her. Joan’s white bob of hair rested perfectly against high cheekbones despite the blustery wind that disaffected my usually styled tangle of auburn hair. Lilly waved excitedly as we hurried to meet her. Seeing right through her, the twenty-something ticket salesman with bad acne waved back enthusiastically.

Lilly giggled delightedly; Joan shook her head, forlorn. Everywhere she went, Joan travelled as an invisible vapor, unbeknownst to the populace. Except for Lilly and me. We were the only two who knew she existed. But when you’re a ghost, you come to expect it.

As I paid for the tickets, Lilly chatted with Joan in hushed tones. “Kids and their imaginary friends,” he said to me. I nodded in agreement.

We made our rounds through the festival, slowly working our way back around. Joan entertained Lilly with horror stories from her childhood during the longer lines. She even coaxed her into riding a roller coaster for the first time. “C’mon, Lil. Live a little for me.” Joan nudged Lilly’s bony shoulder with an encouraging smile.

No one else but Lilly knows about Joan. I avoid the whole ‘I see dead people, and I’m best friends with one of them’ advertisement. I leave that sort of activity to Joel Osment. Living people are alright, too, and I hang out with the softball girls often, but I can’t confide in them the way I confide in Joan.

We came to a clearing, a vendor’s tent at the center. Lilly, an avid collector of souvenirs, rushed for it at once. “Guess we follow,” Joan chuckled, floating after her. “Antique” costumes of various sizes and colors lined the walls of the tent, hung upon white, metal racks. The tables, stacked to the brim with other strange Halloween odds and ends, left the poor legs buckling at their knees beneath the weight.

Lilly cradled an ornate, wooden box. Extraordinarily crafted, jewels lined the exterior, and more curiously still, some message read across the front in an indecipherable language. The vendor lunged at her and shouted, “That is not for sale!” I caught up to them as he reached for it.

I considered the box. Months from now it would probably be forgotten by Lilly, and then I could utilize it as a decorative jewelry box. “How about fifty bucks for that thing?” I slapped the bill on the counter. He pretended to think about it, and then joyfully plucked my money up into the cash register and bid us a good evening. I insisted that we walk through the main attraction, the haunted house. Lilly jogged to keep pace with Joan and me, fingers clutched securely around the box.

“Do you really think it’s cursed?” She asked, fear laced in her features. I shook my head affectionately and wrapped an arm around her shoulder. Our trio stepped into the dimly-lit foyer; candlelight dispersed the darkness. “Well,” Lilly said, “I want to open this thing.” As soon as she lifted the lid, black smoke billowed out in an opaque cloud that snaked through the room. “What the hell is happening?” I cried, fumbling through the darkness for Lilly, who cried out in alarm.

A slender figure rose from the shadows. The shadows dissipated, and there she was. Statuesque and dark eyed. Her hair fell past her waist in black tresses, and no doubt, beauty surrounded the woman. However, something malicious burned in those eyes like coals, a bloodlust I never thought capable. “Finally, freedom at last,” she cried in a false sing-song voice. “Now,” she pointed at the three of us, “I know just what to do with you. This run-down shack is under my curse, and you have until dawn to escape it, but beware the surprises I left for you.” She vanished with a snap of her fingers, a wicked cackle followed behind her.

I threw my arms around Lilly, terrified out of my wits. She cried openly, her head in her hands, distraught. “Maybe this is part of the act?” Joan smartly suggested. I shook my head fervently.

“No,” I replied. “No actor pulls a stunt like that. Besides, I swear I recognized her face from somewhere.” With that, we set off down the first hallway. At the end a door stood ajar. I went first, followed by Joan and then Lilly. It landed us in the foyer again, and I screamed with pent-up frustration. “Time warps and trap doors, of course,” I growled, fists clenched white against the bone.

We tiptoed down the hallway for the second time only to discover another hallway magically splintered off the first. After the briefest hesitation, I pushed the door open and led the way inside. “Lilly vanished!” Joan shrieked, and I whirled around, quick as a cheetah. Indeed, the witch had stolen her away.
“Lilly!” I bellowed to the vast emptiness. I hurled myself into the hallway and discovered new doors lined both walls like a Scooby Doo episode. I thrust open every door, calling her name desperately. Suddenly, the witch appeared with Lilly straddled to her hip. “Lilly!” I cried, rushing forward, heedless.

“Not so fast,” she sneered, index finger raised. I froze in my tracks, unable to move. “I said this house holds surprises. On each level of this house you must all three face your deepest fear. Remember, until dawn,” she pushed Lilly towards me before she dissolved yet again.

“Whose fear was it?” Joan asked, but I knew. Lilly, who never wanted to be alone, who wondered why our mother and father both chose to abdicate her life, feared losing me, too. At the next level Joan’s fear roared to life in a terrible display of sorcery.

Joan’s mouth gaped wide with horror as SS men carted apparitions of her long-dead family in the direction of a large factory building I understood to be the gas chambers. “No,” she wailed, throwing ineffectual punches at the apparition men. She clung to her mother’s skirts, wrapped her arms around her younger sister’s ankles in a tackle. Filmy tears layered her ghostly face, and I, speechless, didn’t know what to do. How could I help when a grief too deep to bury resurfaced? Joan’s worst fear was reliving the scene in which, all those years ago in 1944, the SS stripped her family past the bone and reduced them to cinders.

“Joan, it isn’t real.” But it was. This happened to her family; this happened to her. “Marion,” Joan sobbed, desperation swelled deep within her gut, tore from her chest like a wounded animal. “Marion, please. Please come back to me!”

“It’s too late, Joan, they’re already dead. You can’t save them!” I reasoned. Finally, I struck a logical nerve in her brain, and she let go of her sister’s ankles and silently watched the SS men escort her family to their fiendish demise, shoulders slumped in the deepest sense of human agony and defeat. When I reached her, my heart caught at the base of my throat, lost for words. Her eyes reflected an almost divine suffering and mirrored the true atrocities committed by the Nazis. For a moment in time, I could actually see the pain through her eyes. I could actually picture the unwanted advances, the stolen food rations, the upswing of a whip, the swollen bellies of corpses. They weren’t starved to death; They were starved of life.

Even though she couldn’t feel it, I hugged her misty frame. “I am so sorry, Joan.” She nodded absently, and we stayed like that several minutes, an understanding that sometimes circumstances defied speech. Once separated, Lilly unfolded herself from the fetal position she assumed like a blooming flower. She scooted between us and took both our hands in hers.

“She is very mean, guys. We will get out of here, right?” She glanced nervously between us, a child in need of reassurance.

I squeezed her hand hard. “Of course we will.” Ugly thoughts swam in the back of my mind. Will we really escape before dawn? What is my fear? What other surprises await? I swallowed my doubt and drew to my full height, which, admittedly, isn’t much. “Well, two fears down, only one to go,” I said. “We’ll be out of here before we know it.”

A gross miscalculation. We pointlessly wandered the house’s halls in search for the exit to no avail, but we did discover two more time warps that cost us precious minutes. Joan hummed to fill the charged silence and Lilly complained of hunger. Suddenly, a shadow shifted in the darkness, though I initially dismissed it as a trick of the mind. You’re losing it, Ginny. That’s the last thought I formed before that harmless shadow sprang for us. The inordinately large wolf’s razor sharp jaws salivated at the prospect of tearing human flesh apart. A blood-curdling scream split the air, and to this day I refuse to admit that the scream belonged to me.

We ran so hard I thought I’d left my shoes behind. My leg muscles burned with adrenaline. We ran with abandon, with no thought other than to put as much distance between ourselves and the beast as possible. The devil gained on us quickly, its inhuman howls too close for comfort. Certain of imminent death, I prayed for a spot in heaven, or at the very least a reserved seat in purgatory. Just then, the floor beneath our feet collapsed. We freefell for what felt like forever before landing perfectly unharmed in the attic.

“This bewitched house is totally bonkers. For all I know, I’m at home on the couch, suffering a seriously bad acid trip,” I spat, fear and agitation mingling into a deadly combination.

Lilly knelt before the dusty boxes on the floor. She leafed through its contents with intrigue. “Hey,” she said, “This is our family, Ginny.” Dumbfounded, I stumbled over to her and snatched the book. It was our family, minus one. Me. All the pictures depicted a perfectly happy family, happier than we ever were. They would be happier without you, Ginny, and you know it. Instantly, I recognized the witch’s harsh voice, a grating nail on the chalkboard of my brain. You were supposed to be the glue that held them together, not tear them
apart. You failed, Ginny, just like you always do. You weren’t enough to make your father stay. You aren’t even important enough for your mom to leave work early. She can’t bear the sight of you.

Hands clamped over my ears, I moaned. I vaguely heard other voices talking to me. Their voices were horribly distorted, waterlogged, travelling through the ocean to reach me, a lonely anchor in the middle of the deep, dark ocean. No, I think. “Get out of my head!” Enraged, I flung the boxes this way and that until I tired of it. Joan and Lilly drew a collective sigh of relief. Fear number three, check. A door with a giant red exit sign materialized out of thin air. “Let’s go home,” I said.

Lilly and I found ourselves on our hands and knees, wonderful, ordinary grass underneath and Uncle Merle glaring at Sade beside us. I kissed the ground, uncaring of anything else. Uncle Merle pulled both of us into a tight embrace. “Thank God,” he sighed. I couldn’t form words; I couldn’t think. Uncle Merle withdrew a long, slender wooden stick from his sleeve and uttered a nonsensical incantation. The box exploded into a thousand pieces as we stared, sure this was yet another one of the witch’s optical illusions.

On the drive home, Uncle Merle explained. Turned out he’s actually Dumbledore’s real life counterpart: the great wizard Merlin. Mother did not know and we could not tell her, not yet. We both inherited Uncle Merle’s aptitude for the weird and magical, because only a magical being could have released Evannca, the witch he imprisoned centuries ago. I couldn’t muster any comment to this speech while Lilly cheered that she could finally ‘be a real witch.’ Uncle Merle placed a loving hand on my shoulder. “You did well, Ginny. You learned that love is a more powerful magic than any conjured of darkness.”
In Mary Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein* (1818), Victor Frankenstein becomes obsessed with the animation of the inanimate, resulting in the creation of the Creature, a ghastly being composed of a motley of body parts stolen from graves. This Gothic novel details the struggle between creator, Victor, and creation, the Creature, particularly in relation to the duties of the creator to the created. In explicating a small well-chosen passage of *Frankenstein*, one is able to gather ideas and motifs that can be expanded to fit larger themes prevalent throughout the book, which, in turn, can become universal statements about basic human nature. In this particular passage, the Creature, still learning the ways of the world, comes across a small, isolated French family, the De Laceys. Immediately mesmerized by the love and kindness these cottagers show one another, the Creature desires a similar bond of love and family. Despite the foreboding change of seasons, the Creature desperately yearns for love and affection, a need, which leads him to idealize his beloved cottagers, giving him a false perception of reality. Through the Creature’s blind, irrational yearning, Shelley describes a fundamental part of human nature: the deep desire for companionship and acceptance.

Entranced by the benevolent and seemingly idealistic cottagers, the Creature fails to notice the foreboding change of seasons, as winter steadily approaches, delivering bleak prognostications of events to come. It is interesting to note that the Creature came into being during the wintertime, as winter also represents the loss of the Creature’s innocence and naïveté. In this passage, the transition of seasons from summer to winter seems to foreshadow the Creature’s change in attitude and perception of the world. Too distracted by the kindness of the cottagers, however, the Creature “[does] not heed the bleakness of the weather” and plows forward with his ill-fated plan to ask the cottagers for their sympathy (107).[1] The looming bleakness of winter also represents a possible return to loneliness. The Creature first came to being during the wintertime, alone, and, after the passing of a full year, returning to loneliness would allow the Creature to come full circle, however, with a new outlook on life.

Starved of love, due to his lack of a nurturing figure and his repellent visage, the Creature desires, above all else, to be loved and to become the object of the cottagers’ affection. The very moment of the Creature’s birth, his creator flees in a flurry of terror because of the Creature’s hideous features, leaving the Creature alone to fend for himself without any guidance. Having only experienced loneliness for the entirety of his creation, the Creature wishes more than anything for an emotional connection with another being. Not yet a full year old, the Creature is still naive in both his experiences and his perception of the world. Upon seeing the gentle care and love of the cottagers, the Creature’s “heart [yearns] to be known and loved by these amiable creatures” and “to see their sweet looks [turn] towards [him] with affection” (107). His desire for love is especially poignant, as it has always been just out of his reach. For the majority of the year, the Creature watches the cottagers “[love] and [sympathize] with one another,” from afar, making no move to obtain their affections for himself, likely out of fear of rejection, which he experienced from Victor, his own creator (107).

The Creature’s desperate yearning for love and recognition, however, blinds him to the reality of his situation and causes him to idealize his beloved cottagers. When the Creature gazes upon himself in a reflecting pool, he shrinks away in horror at the deformity of his face, yet after watching and idealizing the De Laceys for several months, the Creature continues to believe in his beloved cottagers’ ability to judge one’s goodness, not by appearance, but by internal qualities. It becomes particularly apparent through the Creature’s diction how much he prizes the “amiable creatures” with their abundant love and “sweet looks” for one another (107). Furthermore, the Creature raves about the cottagers’ generosity, proclaiming, “The poor that stopped at their door were never driven away” (107), and in turn, the Creature believes should he approach the cottagers, they would not “turn [their affections] from [him] with disdain and horror” (107). The Creature’s idealization is heightened by the season. The spring and summer augment the generosity of the De Laceys, as the seasons allow for an affordable abundance of generosity. For example, a surplus of crops is not uncommon during the spring and summer, while, in contrast, during the barren winter, food is scarce and hard to come by. The Creature’s hopeful outlook stems from the idealistic belief that the cottagers would be able to overlook his wretched features and recognize his gentle personality hidden beneath his visage. The Creature’s
need for a connection and his belief in the cottagers’ innate kindness leads him to trust that the cottagers would easily sympathize with his situation and would share their overflowing love for one another with him, despite his repellent features.

The Creature’s loneliness and desire for a connection lead to his to naively idealizing the cottagers, and, in turn, to his ultimate loss of innocence. The Creature’s coming of age hurts all the more because of how the foreshadowing apparent to the reader, the oncoming winter, is juxtaposed with the Creature’s praise of the cottager’s kindness. The desire for companionship and acceptance drives the Creature’s actions throughout the book. At some point, after having faced rejection over and over again, the Creature turns against and targets what he perceives to be the source of his rejection, his creator, yet companionship compels the Creature to make this choice as well, in a backwards sort of way. In a phrase, misery loves company. At the end of the novel, the Creature achieves a sort of perverse companionship, in that both Victor and the Creature share a bond of loneliness.

Works Cited
Olivia Long
Short Story: The Son of Plenus
John Burroughs School
Shannon Koropchak, Teacher

My father Plenus had been the wealthiest merchant in all of New England. There was no one better than he in his trade. His success was made manifest in the furnishings of our great manor house. Ancient Persian rugs covered the rare oak floors and candles illuminated the wainscoted halls. In the winters, a rosy fire would crackle in the hearth as the aroma of tea permeated the air. Dark, ruby curtains were draped across the windows and kept us warm.

Music had been the joy of my father's existence. On the rare occasions when he chose to sing, the walls would reverberate, filled with the orotundity of his voice. It came as no surprise that I had grown to love the harmony of sound.

With his wealth, he had acquired a myriad of priceless instruments—Mozart's keyboard, Strauss's violin, Bach's harpsichord. Seeking to preserve the archaic aura of these musical relics, my father had refused to dust them. Thus, a thin film of gray enveloped the instruments, like the silvery strands of a spider's web. At night, they seemed to glow eerily under the ghostly pallor of moonlight.

We often received men of eminence in the depths of our home. Lawyers, bankers, and officials all came to Plenus for advice. Interjecting in their conversations, I was often lauded for my sensible mind and amicability. It was these gentlemen whom I saw as my equals; all other beings were inferior and thus did not deserve my time, for I was the son of Plenus.

I frequented the town's performance hall, accompanied by my cultured acquaintances. As we walked along the cobbled stone streets, we would pass beggars on the road. I despised the dirty urchins that groveled on the ground, pale as maggots. They were the dregs of society, a waste of life and a burden to us all. I was repulsed by the proximity of these creatures, for I was the son of Plenus and therefore should not have to lay eyes on such filth.

I remembered one indigent in particular. As I passed on my way to the music hall, he yanked at my coattails with claws of grime. His lidless eyeballs stared and his thin lips curled at me with malice. A weak breath escaped from his spittled mouth, like the smoke of a dying fire. “Please... please...” I stifled a gasp, then shook violently to rid myself of the emaciated figure. “I am the son of Plenus! Don’t you dare touch me!”

As I hurried away, I heard the raspy voice shakily call out, “Elatus will fall!”

It was during the concert that night when I became afflicted with the indescribable sensation. At first, the warm tones of the cellos permeated the air, thawing the cold December chill. The clear notes of the flutes weaved colorfully through the glittering melodies of the harp into an ethereal blend of sound. The music poured from the stage and washed over me, a refreshing ablation.

Amidst the mellifluous wave of harmony, a dissonant screech of an off-pitch violin struggled for recognition, fighting against the current. The dissonance sliced through the air, severing the phrases that united sound into music. I stiffened in my seat, horrified with the blemish in the otherwise celestial performance. A few measures passed before I became conscious of the scream of the flutes, which soon morphed into a constant shrill ring that tormented by ears. What was happening? I felt my stomach clench, squeezing with such tenacity that I could taste the sourness of acid in the back of my throat. The plague of the cacophony slowly festered and swelled until it infected all instruments. First the cellos, then the bassoons, then the violas, then the horns. Notes crashed and collided with each other in a feverish battle.

In mad confusion, I cautiously turned my head to the left, then to the right, lest someone should notice my unrest. Those around me smiled peacefully, enraptured. I cringed from the pleasant countenances of my companions. How could they possibly enjoy this abominable noise? What horror! I began to breathe heavily and rocked back and forth, faster, then faster. When I could tolerate it no more, I slowly brought my hands up to my temples and pressed, in the hopes of relieving the rapidly building pressure inside my skull. I did this all with an affected grin stretched across my face. Then, I rose slowly from my seat. My legs trembled, threatening to collapse under the weight of my bewilderment. I took longer strides, concealing the weakness of my body and mind. As soon as I had escaped from the cold stare of the public eye, my shaky walk evolved into a light
canten, then into a fast trot, until finally, I was galloping toward the exit. Finding the door, I flung it open. The coldness of the night stung my cheeks, which only moments before had been burning with a fearsome panic.

I heard voices cry out from behind me, unfamiliar and distant. “Elatus! Wait! Elatus!” Oh, the ignominy of being seen! I could not have run faster then. What was it about the music that had upset me so? The experience had been frightful. It was as though I could not synthesize the discrete parts into a cohesive whole. The sounds simply pierced my eardrums and sent a shiver down my spine. How could this be possible? I had relished music my entire life! Surely I could not be mad! No disease would dare befall me, for I was the son of Plenus!

Following that fateful night, I lost the ability to walk steadily. Regardless of how desperately I tried to synchronize the rhythm of my step, I could not move one meter without veering to one side or tripping over my other foot. My weight swung unevenly between the rickety posts that were my legs. I often outstretched my arms, one directly in front and the other to the side, bracing for a fall. My elbows locked instinctively, uttering a sickening crack whenever I tried to relax. The ground became ice on which I could not stand. What was happening to me? Consumed by frustration, I locked the heavy oak doors of the manor and retreated into its depths.

A few days passed before I began to take the company of others. I had decided that the companionship of my acquaintances in the quiet of my home would be all I could tolerate. No music would be necessary. We spoke of fluctuating stocks and international commerce, topics that only we, as highly educated men, could debate. For a blissful time, my peculiar ailment escaped my mind.

While we voiced our concern over the rising tariffs, the mellow conversation suddenly became distorted into a garble of indecipherable noises. My companions’ voices sounded alien to the point where their words were no longer distinguishable. Nevertheless, they seemed to have no trouble understanding each other, nodding and smiling. I suddenly detested them, these contemptible beasts who spoke with a foreign tongue that only I could not comprehend. Their mouths gaped like caverns. Their faces became gaunt and sallow in the flickering firelight. Despite the warmth of the room, a chill gripped my entire body, hardening the marrow of my bones.

“Get out!” I screeched and began roaring at the creatures that had invaded my home. I expelled them and slammed the door, bolting the cold, metal lock.

It was not an ailment of my ears; I could hear as clearly as in the days of my youth. No, it was certainly not that. What was it then? As I walked back slowly to the room, I was struck by the sound of my uneven footfalls echoing through the empty halls, as if another being was limping toward me, from the other end of the long, cold corridor. In terror, I brought myself up short, fearful of what I might find if I advanced any further. A low steady thumping seemed to come from the darkness of the hall, growing louder, faster. A familiar sense of panic seeped into my soul like a poison, and slowly, slowly, it infected my entire body. Like the horrid music and the despicable speech of my companions, this sound was maddening.

As I gripped my left ear with one hand, I clutched the other hand against my chest. It was then I realized that the relentless pounding I had heard was coming from within my own body. My own heartbeat! How could I, son of Plenus, possibly produce a sound of such atrocity! This madness I had succumbed to had induced my loathing of the world around me, and now, I had come to detest even myself. I quickly pulled away my hand, disgusted. In the confusion of the moment, I noticed a blue vein in my wrist, eerily protruding under the ghostly white of my skin. It pulsed with a fierce vigor, stretching and un-stretching the surrounding skin. With my other hand, I grasped the twitching spot and felt again the hateful thumping of my own creation. A cold gust of wind blew from my right. My eyes instinctively searched for the source of the chill. As I drew nearer to the window, I saw a familiar shag of dark hair, matted with grime. A pair of lidless eyeballs stared back at me, unblinking. It was the indigent! The vile creature had somehow slithered its way to me! What was this evil shadow that so dogged me!

“Elatus will fall!” His scratchy voice was stronger than before and his dry lips peeled back in a wretched smile.

I screamed and whirled around. Through the darkness, I discerned the outline of my father’s cursed instruments. They loomed in the shadows, casting a supernatural glow, mocking me. Oh, how I yearned for the peace of music! In a sudden upwelling of frustration, I shrieked and fell upon the devilish objects that taunted me, savoring the discordant crack of splintering wood, the shattering of keys, the dissonant squealing of the strings.
Then, amidst the jagged fragments, I collapsed onto the cold, stone ground. The dull thuds of my despicable heartbeat continued, yet all of my energy had escaped me, leaving behind a lifeless sack of skin and bones.

My eyes rolled back into my head and I saw the face of Plenus in the darkness of my mind. I saw his warm brown eyes, perpetually crinkled in the corners from his smile. I saw his open arms, outstretched for a heartfelt embrace, like the day he took me in and resolved to raise me like one of his own.

A low moan erupted from deep within my chest.
I am no son of Plenus.
A violent updraft rocked the plane, a shudder coursing down its metal spine. I gripped the armrests, obsessing over the 30,000 feet from the ground. The clouds were suspended against a picturesque azure sky like threads of cotton candy. Or were they more like mushroom clouds?

A classmate sat across the aisle to my right. He was a tall boy with a slight slouch, rapidly expanding into manhood, who prided himself on his “Chindian”* ethnicity and his nonpareil rapping skills. The sudden jolt and ensuing downward lurch did not seem to bother him; he continued his partisan rant on creationism versus evolution that had started before takeoff. I watched as the ice in his Cherry Coke trembled and clinked in the plastic cup.

The science symposium that united us on the plane had been in March, a three-day event that heralded the beginning of my spring break. Science projects were sorted into six categories, six presentation rooms filled with solemn suits and pencil skirts. I was assigned to an insipid lecture hall with rows of long, ascending desks that spanned the length of the room, like terraced retaining walls.

Anticipating my fifteen-minute PowerPoint, I paced through the hallways, clicking back and forth on the cold marble with the urgency of a drug addict. Patrolling room monitors interjected on my shaky thoughts, inquiring, “Are you ok?” “Do you need some water?” When my presentation time finally came, I was almost eager to enter the lecture hall, lest I truly become sick from all their questions. As I stepped cautiously into the room of scrutinizing judges, a girl with long auburn hair passed me on her way out, smiling at me with tacit encouragement.

Then, I delivered my presentation.

Awards were announced on a wooden stage, lacquered and polished until it gleamed. A crimson banner that read “Maryville University” in white block letters was strung along the back wall, daring us to matriculate. The Gordian knot that had taken up residence in my stomach dissolved, leaving it empty and grumbling. I was lamenting my untouched chocolate muffin when “Sophia” reverberated through the auditorium.

With gelatinous legs, I climbed onto the stage and fumbled with the framed certificate, my name printed in Lucida Calligraphy font, and a check for $500. My cheeks felt like they could warm the air within a two-inch radius from my face. Rouge au naturel.

As quickly as I had gotten there, I hurried off the stage and was prepared to plunge into the steady stream of people flowing out of the auditorium when I felt a tap from behind.

“Hey, you were the one who got second in Bio, right?” It was the girl with auburn hair. Her dimpled smile and small stature bestowed upon her a winsome quality. She held a dark wooden plaque engraved with the words: Biology - First Place.

“Yeah,” I exhaled.

“Listen, I really don’t wanna miss senior prom. Would you mind going to Nationals for me?” Her blue eyes glittered with expectancy.

I could only stare back in disbelief.

After braving the turbulent winds that bedeviled our plane and my peace of mind, we collected our suitcases from the baggage claim and headed straight for the hotel. The streets of Washington D.C. bustled with the usual tourist fanfare: vibrant scarves that whipped about in the rush of passersby, street artists who could paint the White House in a matter of seconds. Dogwood flowers danced on the capricious air currents, a spring snow.

When we pushed through the heavy glass doors of the Renaissance Hotel, the first thing I noticed was the walls. Whimsical designs of curlicues and spirals protruded from the textured, soft beige surface. I imagined a prodigious hand wielding a butter knife, smoothing and molding the wall plaster like peanut butter.

A dark man with a severe jaw line handed me an identification card and a flowery plastic room key. The hotel doubled as a convention center—convenient, like all 2-in-1s.
I followed the three-dimensional curlicues down the halls, found my room, two queen-sized beds, and wondered whom I would be sharing the lemon-scented room with. In an ideal world, I would have it all to myself, but I knew that this world was far from ideal.

A quiet electronic click sounded from my right, like a charged whisper. The cherry wood door of the hotel room was slowly pushed open as a girl peeped in. She had an aristocratic nose and brown hair, meticulously curled with a wand. Black liner rimmed her hazel eyes.

I remembered her from the March symposium. She had studied the effects of glucose concentration on cell metabolism. A fellow Missourian.

“Is this room 724?”
“Yeah, it is.”
“Great.”

She stepped into the room, lugging a brown suitcase sprinkled with pink polka dots. The scent of her body spray rapidly diffused into the air, until the small space was overpowered with cloying fruitiness. I could almost see the mangoes and oranges tumbling out behind her, marking her steps like in a video game.

“You’re Caroline, right?” I said as she knelt down and flipped open her suitcase.
“Yup! I thought I recognized you too. And you are…”
“Sophia.”
“Right. Nice to meet—“

Click.

The door whooshed open. A girl with flaxen hair burst in.

“Guys, we’re gonna have so much fun rooming together!” She exclaimed with a voice like breaking glass.

That night, sleep did not come easily. Becoming accustomed to new surroundings was not one of my strengths. I tilted my face toward the sleek black alarm clock. The fluorescent green numbers blared “1:25 AM.”

It was unusual for three people to be sharing one room. I flipped over onto my back, pondering the oddness of my situation. The third girl was from Dover and had come with a group of twenty. She and Caroline had instantly gravitated toward one another, bonding over makeup, fashion, and upperclassman seniority. I guess geographical ties didn’t count for anything. Naturally, they had chosen to share a bed, given that there was no room for a roll-in mattress.

“Hey, you still awake?” Caroline whispered into the darkness.

“Yeah.” The girl from Delaware replied. Bed sheets rustled.

“So you think she can hear us?”

“I sure hope she’s sleeping.”

Me. They were talking about me.

A strange tingling sensation coursed down my arm like an ignited string of firecrackers, exploding at my fingertips. I could hear my heartbeat pounding in my ears.

“I don’t really like her. She’s TOO sweet, you know?”

“Yeah… Like, no one’s ever that happy all the time.”

Was this really happening?

“She wasn’t even supposed to come.”

“I suddenly wished I hadn’t.

“Did you see all the books she brought? She said she wanted to study…”

APs were in two weeks...

“She’s just so… Chinese…”

The words were spat out, like dirt.

My cheeks burned. I could feel hot tears in my eyes.

Frustration.

Anger.

Shame.
I’d like to say that I had marched up to the bed and cinematically slapped them both, that I had fired back with words like bullets, that I had stood my ground. Unfortunately, the reality of my silent submission was as immutable as my Chinese heritage. Instead of speaking out, I had bitten my tongue, swallowing my voice. For many nights, I wondered what exactly I was doing wrong. Should I smile less? Did I read too much? Why me? In retrospect, I realize that it was not my problem. They had bolstered their own fragile egos at my expense, shattering my individuality, my dignity, my identity, leaving me to pick up the pieces.

In the arduous process of rebuilding lost confidence, I am strengthening the person whom I proudly call myself. My only regret is the very act, or lack thereof, that had vindicated my role as the victim: my silence. Society will not change with passivity, just as injustice will not end with muted misery.

So now, I unabashedly write with the voice that I have, the voice that I lost that night, and the voice that I still have yet to use.

*Chinese-Indian*
Morgan Luis
Personal Essay/Memoir: The Dangers of Exploring
Moreland Ridge Middle School
Karen Doolin, Teacher

There’s a reason barbed wire fences are sharp. I discovered this when I had to climb over one. Barbed wire fences are sharp and pokey, so people can’t get over them. But when you are attempting to get over one because you’re being chased, they can slice you, and rip at your clothes like claws.

It was sometime in the mid afternoon when my friend Allie and I were slowly walking back home from aimlessly venturing out into the woods. We were trotting along a dark chalkboard road. The asphalt looked fresh, and newly paved, as if it was made just for us. As we visited, we admired the variety of trees that were like mountains, and short bushes that resembled puff balls. It was the kind of day where it was quite warm, but when a blanket of wind came by, you got the chills from the top of your spine, down to your toes.

After we had been trotting a short while, the sound of a dirty engine broke the peace and quiet. When we looked back, we noticed that it was a motorcycle and didn’t think much of it, although it was a little eerie the way the man on the vehicle stared at us. He gawked as he rode on by, paying no attention to the road at all.

Instead, he just set his gaze on us, two young girls alone next to the woods. It was as if he wanted to say something to us.

The situation got even more uneasy, when he turned around a few moments later and rode along the road, staring at us again. His motorcycle was auburn. He had a matching helmet and a matching outfit. Because he was wearing such bright clothes, it was easy for us to see him coming. He spun around a few more times and each time, he would just watch, or rather, glare at us. Allie and I knew a lot about this kind of scenario from the horror movies we always like to watch late at night, where some girls are in an isolated area, and they try to run from a killer or a kidnapper. Because we already knew how all of those horror movies ended, we thought it was the smartest to go back into the woods so that the man couldn’t see us as he continued to drive by.

But in order to go back into the woods from the side of the road that we were on, we had to climb over a barbed wire fence. It was simple for Allie. She could easily get herself right over the fence with no cuts or bruises. Since I’m a bit taller, it was much more difficult for me. I put one leg over it and tried to move my other leg over it. I was afraid I would get hurt because it was so sharp. I felt like I was climbing a mountain, with broken glass scattered all over it.

I finally got myself over it. And as I was having a mental celebration, I heard a huge, “riiiiiiiip” coming from behind me. I guess one of the wires had snagged on my pants and as I lunged forward, it had ripped the denim, splitting the back all the way open. My favorite pair of $40 jeans was ruined. I wasn’t bothered by it at the moment, but now that I think about it, it’s pretty upsetting. The giant hole in the rear of my pants provided some momentary comic relief, and Allie and I started doubling over in giggles. The sound of the motorcycle in the distance quickly brought that moment to a stop and our hearts began to race again, almost shooting out of our chests. The man must have seen that we ran into the woods, so he was now riding his motorcycle on the opposite side of the woods. He was probably hoping we would come out that way, but we were smart enough to stay right in the middle of all the trees where we couldn’t be seen.

Because Allie was so terrified, she made the impulsive decision to call the police. I think it’s kind of hilarious now, because we didn’t end up in any true danger, but she was scared out of her mind. I guess that’s what we got for watching gory murder movies in our free time. Sheer unnecessary terror. I could see her trembling, and I saw tears begin to form in her eyes. I tried to remain calm as she explained to the nice woman with a soft voice on the phone line where we were and what was happening. As Allie was talking to the lady, I heard a rustling behind us. My initial thought was that the man got off of his motorcycle and we were both going to die a slow and painful death. Much to our relief, it was only an innocent squirrel looking for some nuts.

The dispatcher told us that the police were on their way to find us and give us a ride back home. In order for officers to get to us, we had to leave the woods. We were both too scared to do this for fear the man was still on the prowl. We decided to take a long way out so we had time to settle down and calm our jittering nerves. Because it had rained the night before, it was really mucky. Allie didn’t want to get her new shoes wet,
so she peeled them off and walked through the mud, making her socks disgusting and her pants gritty and drippy.

We came along a bunch of thorns that we had to climb under. A few got caught in my hair, so we had to stop for a few minutes, untangling them. Avoiding the thorns was like avoiding a swarm of bees after you’ve just landed a baseball bat right into their cozy hive. Nearly impossible. Eventually, we came to the edge of the woods where police had arrived. The officer was a nice woman with short blonde hair. She informed us that we were smart to have called her, and she was glad we were okay.

After she took us home, all we could do was laugh. We explained to each other how funny our faces looked when we were scared and all the stupid things we said out of fear. At the time it was a terrifying experience, imagining the man eventually finding us and killing us. Now it makes a great story that we can laugh about from time to time.
CHARACTERS
WILLIAM SPURLock JR. -- 37, eldest of the six Spurlock children.
MARTHA SPURLock -- 69, mother of William Spurlock and patriarch of the powerful Spurlock family.

PLACE
The Spurlock household in upstate New York.

TIME
The year 2014.

Lights come up on a Victorian living room. Various decorations inform the audience that its inhabitants are bourgeois. Faint sounds of a brewing thunderstorm can be heard. William Spurlock Jr. sits on a couch upstage. He sports a three-piece suit--dressed for business. Martha Spurlock wears an evening dress. She stands downstage and pours scotch into two glasses.

MARTHA. It's going to be a big year for the Spurlock family, Willie.
WILLIAM. Certainly seems to be shaping up that way. How've you been handling it?
MARTHA. Which it are you referring to? Planning the Christmas gala, relaying messages from Father to the board, or doing all the preparations for your honeymoon to that spring roll of yours?
WILLIAM. You see, you think that's real clever, but I know you know her name. Can't really plan a honeymoon without that bit of knowledge, can you? Also spring rolls are Vietnamese, she's Korean. (Martha finishes pouring the drinks. She walks upstage, hands William his Scotch, then sits down next to him--slightly too close for comfort.)
MARTHA. Well you should double check to make sure which type she is, Willie, because apparently we don't like the ones in the South.
WILLIAM. Again, you're confusing them with the Vietnamese. It's the North Koreans we're at war with.
MARTHA. Didn't that end fifty years ago? I think I had a lover who fought in that war.
WILLIAM. Gross. And technically, no, we've just kept a fifty year cease fire.
MARTHA. Maybe I should call him up then. (Trying to remember the name.) Robert? Robbie? Richard...
WILLIAM. (Sarcastically.) Lovely.
MARTHA. Well whatever his name was, at least it was normal. Not some oriental jargon.
WILLIAM. Sun Mi isn't "oriental jargon." Besides, it'll be Sun Spurlock in a couple of weeks.
MARTHA. "Sun Spurlock." Sometimes I swear you don't hear the words that come out of your mouth, Willie. (Beat.) Now did you ever consider she's marrying you for a green card?
WILLIAM. She's not. She got her green card after graduating from Yale, if it makes you happy.
MARTHA. Just be careful when dipping your toes in the soy sauce.
WILLIAM. You know, it's things like that you've gotta filter. It's a new age these days, saying things like that will...
MARTHA. (With a scoff.) "New Age," meaning everyone working in the sweatshops of inferior countries thinks they can get in with a free ticket. Willie, ever since the Spurlocks sailed to America all the way from Great Britain in 1893, this country's been overrun by immigrants.
WILLIAM. Yeah, it's stuff like that you gotta put a lid on. Especially around Sun once she flies in. (William takes a long sip of scotch.)
MARTHA. (Fixating.) Is it because Asian girls will be more willing to... You know... (Making obscene gestures with her hands.)
WILLIAM. (William choked on his scotch, spitting some of it out.) Christ, Mother! That's not even a stereotype... Where do you—
MARTHA. That's prescription scotch, Willie, from the prohibition years. If you spit it out like a toddler then I can put it in a sippy cup for you so that you don't spill it on that three-piece suit you bought to feel like a big kid. As for your love life, if you're getting bored, then I know plenty of nice American girls who would line up to-

WILLIAM. Don't finish that sentence.

MARTHA. All I'm saying is that your taste in woman used to be so much better—and Anglo-Saxon oriented.

WILLIAM. (Sarcastically.) As much as I love discussing this, Mom...

MARTHA. There's Linda's daughter, Millie. Not to mention that one girl who used to live next door, Elizabeth...

WILLIAM. Mom, please—

MARTHA. And if you're so inclined, there's always Rosie Thompson. She went to Catholic school, so she can fill your appetite...

WILLIAM. Stop that. I'm getting married to an immigrant. Whether or not you show up to the wedding doesn't matter to me.

MARTHA. I'm sorry if I've offended you, Willie. On the plus side, it will make for great press that the Spurlock family seeks on diversifying—since that's what everyone seems to be into.

WILLIAM. Whatever makes you get over it I'm fine with. (Beat). Anyways how've you been handling everything else?

MARTHA. Everything else?

WILLIAM. I mean Dad. He's why I got in so early. Even with how things ended between me and him, I drove down to the hospital today to pay him a visit.

MARTHA. Was he lucid?

WILLIAM. Not at all. (Beat.) But that's probably for the best. Have you seen him lately?

MARTHA. (Flatly.) No.

WILLIAM. That doesn't surprise me.

MARTHA. What's that supposed to mean?

WILLIAM. Well, it's not exactly a secret that you were never faithful to the old bastard. I've caught you in various affairs since before I was ten. I remember once, when I came back home from Sunday school, I—

MARTHA. Did you come here to insult me?

WILLIAM. No. Like I said, I came here because of Dad.

MARTHA. Really? You came here a week early to catch up with the man you told to "rot in hell"?

WILLIAM. Not quite. I just wanted to see him one last time. It's not like he's gonna make it to the wedding.

MARTHA. I'm not sure about that, Willie.

WILLIAM. How would you know? I'm the only one who actually visited him. You know a man's on his deathbed when the nurses take their cigarette breaks around him. (Beat.) He's got days left at best, mom.

MARTHA. So you're in my home right now, why? You want to comfort me, is that it?

WILLIAM. I wouldn't necessarily say that—

MARTHA. I wouldn't either. You brought a briefcase with you. (Martha nods stage right, towards a leather briefcase William has by his feet.)

MARTHA. So what are you actually here for, Willie?

WILLIAM. Insurance, so to speak.

MARTHA. Insurance?

WILLIAM. For the family name once Dad croaks. (William opens the briefcase and pulls out a folder containing a document. He hands it to Martha. She opens the folder and reads the cover of the document. She closes it and locks eyes with William.)

MARTHA. What am I looking at?

WILLIAM. That's a codicil—an amendment to Dad's last will and testament.

MARTHA. Why would you—

WILLIAM. You said it's gonna be a big year for the Spurlock family. It won't be without this.

MARTHA. Do you have no respect for—
WILLIAM. Don't pretend to be offended. You never loved him more than I did. After a certain number of affairs, you get to stop saying that you—

MARTHA. What's in the codicil?

WILLIAM. (Backing off some.) Rightful succession. I'll be made in charge of Spurlock Electric and absorb all of his shares.

MARTHA. How do you know his will doesn't already do that?

WILLIAM. Cause the old bastard hates me. He won't leave me Spurlock Electric. Hell, I'd be surprised if he leaves me a gift card to McDonalds. He's lying on his death bed right now and the company won't be able to trump our competitors overseas without me in charge. You're smart enough to know that.

MARTHA. What about Donnie?

WILLIAM. What about Donnie? (Beat.) Is that who Dad's leaving the company to? He would do that just to spite me. Donnie will run the company into the ground within a month's time.

MARTHA. What makes you say that?

WILLIAM. You know damned well what makes me say that. He blows all his cash on cocaine...

MARTHA. Yes?

WILLIAM. Hookers...

MARTHA. Sure.

WILLIAM. ...And Scientology.

MARTHA. Scientology? Why would he do that?

WILLIAM. I don't know. He's rich and bored, he was bound to try it one of these days. (Sighs.) Stock prices drop fifty percent if investors find out he's taking over the company, and then the other fifty drops when he actually does. I can already see his pompous face on the covers of all those tabloids the next time I get my groceries. You know, it won't be the first time that's happened.

MARTHA. What are you driving at, Willie?

WILLIAM. Look, in The Godfather, Frado didn't get control of the Corleone empire, Michael did. I'm Michael, he's Frado. He's a screw-up. You don't put screw-ups in charge of multi-billion dollar corporations!

MARTHA. Oh Sweetie, most people put screw-ups in charge of multi-billion dollar corporations.

WILLIAM. But not us. Not Spurlocks.

MARTHA. So you didn't come here to see your Father or comfort me. You just want a better job.

WILLIAM. No, I came here to do what's fair. Would it be fair for Little Donnie to gain control of the company just because of a few tiny words I exchanged with Dad? I'm trying to control what comes up when people Google our name. I'm trying to do what's best for the family.

MARTHA. (Surrendering.) So what do you need from me?

WILLIAM. You're chief executor to Dad's will. I need you to sign the codicil so that I can give it to our lawyer and make it legitimate.

MARTHA. Do you think Morgenstein would sign off on something like that?

WILLIAM. Yes, because Morgenstein already did sign off on something like that. He'll do anything for a nickel, it's why we hired him. Now we're just waiting for your signature.

MARTHA. What do I gain from this?

WILLIAM. Don't be coy, what do you want?

MARTHA. I want a larger stake in the company.

WILLIAM. Why do you want a larger stake in the company? Aren't you content with golfing in Orlando until you're in a grave next to Dad's? Doesn't that sound nice? (Beat.) Alright, you already own one percent in stocks, what more do you want?

MARTHA. Ten percent more.

WILLIAM. Ten! Christ, Mom, even if I wanted to, I don't know where I'd find—

MARTHA. Your shares. When Father dies, you'll inherit all of his shares, which add up to be twenty percent. Cut that in half, which makes ten, if you can do that long division, and give it to me. (Beat.) It's the only way you're getting my signature.

WILLIAM. That'd make you a member on the board.

MARTHA. Yes?

WILLIAM. Fine. I can put up with your condescension at meetings for the next decade or so. You have a deal, Mom. (Beat.) A toast to our next great endeavor? (William holds his glass up. Martha doesn't toast. He
shrugs and drinks the rest of his scotch anyways. William's cellphone rings. He sets his empty scotch down on a coffee table in front of him and picks up the phone.)

WILLIAM. (To the phone.) Hello? (William's eyes widen.) When? (Pause.) And you're sure? (Pause.) Yes I will, thank you. (William hangs up the cell phone. He grabs his empty glass and makes his way downstage to refill it.) Our timing couldn't have been any more perfect. William Spurlock Sr. is dead. I'll make the revisions to the codicil to fit our deal A.S.A.P. In the meantime, we need to prepare a statement for the press. Some bullshit about how we loved him and how the company will move forward. What do you suppose would look better on me: my gray suit or my tan one? (Martha stands up, appalled. William, unaware of her, takes a particularly large swig of scotch.)

MARTHA. Show a little respect for your father, William.

WILLIAM. What? Are you gonna tell me you loved him? With Jonathan, I got it, we were in need of mourning because we actually lost someone we cared about, not because of appearances. This is different—it's Dad. (Beat.) You know who I do love a bit more just now? You. Dad died in a hospital bed without his supposedly loving wife beside him. One final blow not even I could deliver. (With that, William unintentionally lights a fuse in Martha's mind. Martha grabs her glass of scotch and throws it on the ground, shattering it. This alarms William and he turns around, stumbling, to face Martha.)

MARTHA. You miserable little turd. You come into my home dressed like an ad for Forbes, drink my scotch, insult me, and still think I'll comply with your transparent attempts at greed? Yes, William, I wasn't faithful to your father. But it's not like he was faithful to me, either. We had an arrangement that benefitted both of us, so stop trying to make me feel guilty, like I'm the one who killed him. And you might be right in that I didn't love him, but you know what? I respected him. Don't mistake your hatred of him for mine. He built an empire on his own, did magnificent things that you could never accomplish. He was cruel, sure, but with our family the way it was—is—how could you expect him not to be? His brother and his son were both killed on separate occasions, and they happened to be the only two good men in this family. The rest of it is filled with cokeheads, dirty politicians, and worst of all, us: his conniving wife and self-serving eldest son who shares the same name as him. He didn't deserve any of this. I'll sign the goddamn codicil, William. But you know what you overlooked as you got drunk on my own scotch? By cutting ten percent out of your stake in the company and adding it to my one percent, not only will I be on the board, but I will own the most shares of anyone in the company. I will own you. And unless you think you can somehow buy more than one percent of shares with your own money, I'm selling Spurlock Electric to our competitors overseas. Then, the value of the ten percent you do own will plummet as everyone sells their stock because the company will be run into the ground. Sure, the value of my own eleven percent will plummet, but unlike you, I have my own money. I'll be content playing golf in Orlando until I'm in a grave next to Dad's because when I die it'll be with a smile on my face and a middle finger raised. I hope you have a lovely honeymoon with that spring roll of yours, because after that I'm lawyering up to drag you through the dirt all the way down to hell.

WILLIAM. But... (Beat.) We're family...

MARTHA. Like that's ever stopped us. (The lights fade down.)

End of Scene.
COPD stands for Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease. It concerns thinning of the airways and difficulty breathing. Can be caused from smoking.

I remember the hiss of a snake, the breath of machinery, Escaping from the twisted tubes encasing his face. He is in a coma, he can hear you but can’t respond in any way. I saw the dark circles under his eyes, empty eyes. There was nothing in him, But the oxygen forced into his lungs. He won’t be here much longer, you should see him while you can. What is there to say? A shaky breath escaped from my lips, It was returned with the hollow metallic breathing. Love doesn’t need words.

I close my eyes, And when I visualize him, For some reason his grey hair stands out. I see his eyes twinkling, But they are suddenly fogged over by the smoke blown out of his mouth. I see him light another cigarette, lighting his life on fire. Rising and growing, Casting shadows on the lives closest to it. A flickering and dancing deep red over the black of the night, The black of his lungs.

The sound of a smoke alarm turns into hospital beeping. Hope is the enemy, And I can promise you That you can’t find it in the ash of a cigarette.

When I step through the orange front door of Grandma’s and Gr-,
I can still smell the smoke, They try to conceal with Febreze.
Hunter Madison

Poetry: *Love Mends the Broken*

Bode Middle School
Josie Clark, Teacher

I see a loving grandma in her chair,
weaving the threads of all colors together perfectly,
To create one purpose that may not be indestructible,
But full of meaning and care for someone she loves,

And I see a string that connects us,
Intertwining our souls and weaving us into one.
As the woman chooses to not be a mother,
not caring to hold her baby creation to her ear
Just to hear its little heartbeat that she somehow made
This one is cut from the masterpiece.
As the father goes too far, again.
His eyes spark with an untamed fire,
That burns through the string,
Leaving scars on its recipients.
As the man that is too busy evades the beggar,
Like the others, he passes him like a stream around a rock,
That only slows its current.
Can a woven blanket with holes keep us warm?

The tie will stretch, bend, and it will break
With the fault of the human race
But there is nothing that stops us from replacing it.
We can weave ourselves back together,
    Fix the loose ends,
    Stitch the holes together,
As the man kneels down, takes the beggars hand,
And places the money and his selfishness into his hand,
As the father falls to his knees in tears,
And gently takes his family into the love of his heart.
As the woman takes her child,
Cradles its head with a smile,
Eyes moist from what she has made.
The string is replaced.
And this string,
It is Love.
Sophia Marusic

Poetry: Pandora
John Burroughs School
Jeanne Gillanders, Teacher

only hope was left
in her unbreakable house
she remained under the lip
and did not fly away
-Hesiod

the first girl was forged
at the blackened hands
of a crippled man. she let him rake
his sooty nails across her

shivery, new skin,
let him brand her with the delicate
names of lights and floras,
let him call her

a beautiful evil. she was told
the slope of her hips
were a sin, she was told
to house the world

within herself. when they left
her alone, she waited
in the dark,
worthing how could she be

the temptress and the box.
Alicia Meehan

Journalism: Paradise Lost: American Industry, Racial Divide, and the Decline of East St. Louis

Cor Jesu Academy
Kimberly Cowan, Teacher

By almost any measure, East St. Louis, Illinois is one of the most dangerous cities in America. Its national reputation relates primarily to its abysmal crime statistics, failing schools, and continued struggles with government corruption, but this was not always the case. Not so very long ago, East St. Louis was one of the fastest growing cities in the United States—diverse, full of opportunity, and a hub of American industry. A jaundiced and overly simplistic explanation for the decline of this once up-and-coming city is that it was the result of its changing racial demographic; however, the fact is that both the city and the African American community who flocked there in search of jobs were left abandoned in the wake of shuttered factories and the subsequent “white flight” that followed. It was this wholesale abandonment of East St. Louis that led to its rapid decline. Ultimately, it wasn’t the people who came to East St. Louis who transformed it from a center to industry to the deeply troubled city it is today, rather, it was all the people who left.

From its very beginnings, East St. Louis was a product of the times. Founded in 1797 by Captain James Piggott, this city on the eastern bank of the Mississippi was a natural trading and ferry center for frontiersmen. When it was officially incorporated as a city in 1861, it surpassed neighboring St. Louis, Missouri in many fields of innovation and industry. With the construction of the Eads Bridge, which began in 1868, East St. Louis quickly became the second-largest rail center in the nation. Due to its central location, rail lines from both the east and west converged at the Eads Bridge. Extensive rail traffic and the cheapest coal prices in the United States made East St. Louis the perfect place to construct an industrial hub (Gauen). Companies rushed into East St. Louis, hoping to get in on the action. During the 1890’s, the city was one of the fastest growing in America. The population doubled every ten years, reaching a total of 75,000 residents by 1920 (Baughter).

Many large corporations, such as The Stock Yards, who employed well over 10,000 workers, Monsanto Chemical Company, the Aluminum Ore Company, and C.K. Williams (now Pfizer Chemical) moved into town, as well as quite a few smaller companies, including Midwest Rubber, Phillips Petroleum, Socony, Obear Nester Glass Company, American Steel, Key Boiler Works, and Continental Can. (Yelvington). This vast array of businesses led to the commonly used phrase, “If you can find a job anywhere, you can find one in East St. Louis.” Needless to say, this message was received with much excitement, contributing greatly to the massive rise in population, many of whom were blacks seeking jobs after their still recent liberation. Indeed, this movement continued during the 20th century, as blacks moved north not only in search of jobs, but also to escape discrimination in the south.

As the black population grew in East St. Louis, racial tensions rose as well. Unfortunately, whereas jobs were abundant, high pay was not. Often, blacks found themselves working in factories packing meat, founding iron and steel, or manufacturing glass and railroad materials for unfairly low wages (Lumpkins). By 1915, blacks composed about forty percent of Missouri Malleable Iron Company’s unskilled workforce (Lumpkins). Most blacks obtained low level positions, because they “worked in a labor market where managers, structuring anti-black racism into the workplace, left the most unskilled, dangerous, or least remunerative positions for black men and women” (Lumpkins). At this time, many Americans were seeking unionization, and resistant companies found that blacks desperate for work were very effective strike-breakers. These broken strikes led directly to the 1917 Race Riot, inasmuch as whites were petrified that blacks would continue to take jobs that whites viewed as rightfully theirs. However, when the riots broke out, it was not only the whites who lost their jobs who lashed out, and it was not only black strike breakers who were the targets. The riots were an atrocity of the highest degree, with people doing things such as goading a National Guard soldier to fire upon blacks attempting to flee a burning building and cheering on members of the mob as they did the dirty work. Rather than mass arrests and systemic attempts to quell the violence, local officials attempted to suppress any media attention to the affair. Indeed, the Mayor’s own secretary “ordered police and guardsmen to arrest anyone photographing the beatings or killings or destroy their cameras” (Illinoistown). While very few pictures were captured during the riots themselves, there is much documentation of the aftermath. The next day, the front cover of The St. Louis Post-Dispatch (Fig 1) was filled with articles depicting the horrors that had occurred (St. Louis). Narcis Gurley, age 70, (Fig 2) is pictured with burns covering both arms (Narcis). A caption
accompanying the photo states that she was so afraid to leave her burning house that she stayed inside until the blazing walls collapsed around her. Mineola McGee (Fig 3), another victim of the riot, required an arm amputation after she was shot by a city police officer and an Illinois state militia soldier (Mineola). Ultimately, the riots resulted in at least 47 people dead and a large part of the city up in flames. It remains today one of the greatest atrocities associated with anti-black sentiments in the United States.

Little more than a decade after the riots came the devastation of The Great Depression. Both this and prohibition had a devastating effect on the economy of East St. Louis. Businesses closed, jobs were lost, and crime rates rose out of desperation, a foreshadowing of the city’s future. However, the effects of The Great Depression were not as drastic in East St. Louis as in other parts of the country. Because of East St. Louis’s production of many goods necessary for daily life, such as coal, metals, chemicals, food, and railroad parts, many businesses were able to remain in operation (Nunes). Prohibition, on the other hand, had a much more long-term effect on the city. Jobs at breweries were lost, and after the revocation of the city’s tavern licenses, the city lost half of its budget (Nunes). Organized crime entered East St. Louis by way of bootlegging operations and maintained a constant presence, even after taverns and nightclubs made their legal comeback. When World War II began, however, things turned around. East St. Louis’s plentiful production facilities worked tirelessly to support the troops (Gauen). With men off in the war, “Rosie the Riveter” was an idea living strong in the community. The production required by the war “had given the city a reprieve, times were good, business thrived, and the city one more had a job for anyone who wanted to work. Production had won the war, and East St. Louis played no small role in providing Allied governments with the tools and weapons that were needed to finish the job against the Axis powers” (Nunes).

After the war, East St. Louis was on its way to record highs. The city’s population peaked in 1945 at around 83,000 (Baugher). Industry was booming, and the city was again on the rise. In 1958, East St. Louis earned what was arguably its greatest achievement. The National Civic League, a “nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that promotes civic engagement and inclusive forms of community building and problem solving...in the forefront of efforts to make local governments more accountable and community members more active in planning and problem solving” named East St. Louis one of the 10 finalists of the All-America City Award, an award recognizing “outstanding civic accomplishments” (About). This award was the last great feat of a dying city.

Only a year later, East St. Louis was on a swift, downhill trajectory with no end in sight. A total of 4,659 jobs were lost before 1968, due to the closure/departure of the Armour Packing House, Alcoa, and Emerson Electric. Another 3,800 were lost with the departures of Swift and Company, Obear-Nester Glass, and Hunter Packing. In total, 13,000 industrial jobs vanished as company after company abandoned the East St. Louis Area (Baugher). In addition, racial tensions that had been put on the back burner during the social and economic trials of the early 1900’s resumed with a vengeance by the mid-1960s. The city, like many others throughout the nation, became a “hotbed of racial discontent” (Gauen). Attacks on homes and public places by both sides of the issue “scared off white shoppers and scared out homeowners” (Gauen). Many residents lost a great deal of money, simply abandoning their homes in an attempt to escape the violence. With no jobs left in the city, people began leaving the city in droves. In particular, the white middle class abandoned the city in a movement known as white-flight, seeking jobs and residence elsewhere. Effectively, “East St. Louis quickly became a city peopled by the unskilled who lacked the means to leave or the education and skills to take advantage of opportunities elsewhere” (Shaw). Between 1950 and 1964, the city’s population dropped by half. The city, which was one-third black in 1950, became more than 70 percent black by 1970 (Baugher).

With the dramatic shift in socioeconomic status of its citizenry and the related collapse in supportive infrastructure, crime rates skyrocketed. With little or no job opportunities, people began to fall into lives of crime simply as a means to survive. “In just the first seven months of 1968, major crimes increased by 67 percent, and crimes against property more than doubled” (Shaw). Both politicians and gangsters embezzled and skimmed money at every opportunity. The increase in crime rates, along with the lack of disposable income, caused a drop in retail facilities in the area. By 1970, Walgreens was the only national retail business left in the city (Shaw).

Despite all of this, some still predicted a bright future for East St. Louis, due to several strategic advantages. The city still maintained a “good supply of industrial land, a centralized market for products, abundant labor, excellent transportation networks, and an outstanding supply of raw materials, all of which would prove attractive to industries looking for a new location” (Shaw). Larger population growth was also
anticipated. Unfortunately, this hopeful prediction could not have been further from reality as East St. Louis moved out of the 1960s.

East St. Louis today stands in stark contrast to the burgeoning city it was in 1958. Rather than the predicted population of 105,000 for the year 1980, East St. Louis was home to 40,944 and fell to merely 38,404 by the year 1992 (Shaw). The city, rated amongst the ten worst cities in America in six separate crime categories in 2006 (2nd in “crime index per police officer,” 4th in number of robberies, 5th in number of assaults, 6th in “crime index per resident,” 8th in “least safe cities” and 10th in number of murders, is today one of the most stigmatized cities in the United States (East). Data shown in Figure 4 depicts the abnormally high crime rates from 1999 to 2011. Other data in categories such as murder, rape and assault per 100,000 (Fig 5, 6, 7) persons shows East. St. Louis’s drastic deviation from national norms (Crime).

East St. Louis, despite its faults and its scarred history, was once a diverse and thriving community—a center of commerce and industry. The once proud city’s tragic decline was not so much the result of race, but of racial divides and inequity. Its transformation was not the result of the people who moved there in such great numbers in its heyday, but the result of the devastation left in the wake of so many people moving out. East St. Louis was and is a city abandoned. Whereas one could argue that we’ve overcome much of the racial tensions that divided East St. Louis in the mid-20th century, let us hope that cities like Detroit, Michigan, once the center of the American automobile industry and now bankrupt, do not become the latest example of an abandoned city.
“That’s my seat.”

Armed with the knowledge that I was the newly christened principal violist of the Honors Orchestra, I stared a little harder at the offender who was sitting in the first chair. In other words, my seat.

She squirmed under my continued scrutiny, “Aww, c’mon. Rehearsal doesn’t start for another ten minutes. I was just talking to Bobby.” A neighboring cellist shrank back as my gaze swept over to her. In my twelve year old eyes, it did not matter what they were doing. All I saw were two people encroaching on the rarified seats of the orchestra’s elite—and one of them was actually sitting in my chair!

Sensing no sympathy from me, the pair finally got up and retreated farther away. “Fine. We’re going. You don’t have to be such a jerk about it,” they muttered. But I was no longer listening: the first chair was open and with a thrill that swirled through my every nerve, I sat.

***

Ever since the sixth grade, I thirsted to be the one who sat at the head of the viola section. I wanted to be someone important in the orchestra. I wanted to be worth something. And when I became the principal violist in the seventh grade, I believed for a short time that my desire had been fulfilled. However, my ambition did end there.

I began collecting titles like one collects flashy pieces of clothing and I wore them all with a satisfied smile. “Principal viola of the middle school Honors Orchestra,” “first chair of the Chambers Ensemble,” and “section leader” were names that I never took off. They became my confidence in my musical abilities. They also gave me the authority to tell others I was talented.

I want to be first slowly morphed into the monstrous I need to be first. When the teacher demonstrated different vibrato applications to the orchestra, I was daydreaming of my plans to conquer the high school Symphonic Orchestra, one seat at a time.

***

Then the eighth grade began and a new seating chart was posted. I still remember squeezing through the crowd assembled around that cheap piece of copy paper. Scanning the names under the cold florescent lights, I realized that this time I was not first. I continued to stare at the paper uncomprehendingly. Not first, not first tolled heavily in my head. Then I turned away from the chart proclaiming my doom: second in Honors Orchestra and last chair in the Chambers Ensemble.

That day, the bus ride home was a somber affair. I boarded early, choosing an empty seat at the very back of the bus. I gingerly settled against the cracked leather as other students clambered on. When I saw a contingent of orchestra kids make their way to my area, I tensed. I expected their eyes to fly straight to me in open accusation. But they were happily discussing their own placements as they sat in the seats in front of mine. I breathed a little easier.

Then they realized I was sitting behind them. “Anne, where are you sitting? First chair?”

I couldn’t lie—not with the paper copy hanging outside the orchestra room for all to see.


“Oh.” They stilled a moment and their eyes refocused on me as if they were seeing a different person in my place. They looked at me as if they had finally found me out.

It’s only a piece of paper! I wanted to shout at them. I’m still the same person.

Except, if I was being honest with myself, everything had changed: the titles with which I had justified my ability were gone. I no longer was the girl who wore her classmates’ awe around her like a cloak; I was the girl who got it torn away from her.

When my stop came, I could not leave those happy orchestra kids fast enough. As the bus rumbled out of my neighborhood, I felt like I was slowly being emptied out—becoming as groundless as the fall leaves that were left spiraling in the bus’s wake.

Months passed before I completely digested the chart’s implications. Without the list of titles to hide my person, I began to understand that I had come to believe in my achievements more than I believed in myself.
Rehearsal was a nightmare. I hated sitting in my new seat, so I tried to put it off as long as possible. I spent the time wandering aimlessly among the orchestra. Tentative step after tentative step took me from one end of the room to the other. During one of my circuits I ran into Bobby the cellist and her friend—the same friend whom I had given such hard time a year ago. With a start I realized that I did not know her name even though she was played the viola like me. All I could do was murmur an embarrassed ‘hello’ before disappearing into the crowd. Time and time again I discovered I was actually quite shy around the same people I had previously lorded over.

***

During one spring Honors Orchestra rehearsal, a guest conductor came to visit. As we settled in our seats, he only greeted the section leaders. We played for him our hardest piece. The finale passage required the violas to play an octave higher than normal. My left hand deftly travelled up the fingerboard and smoothly transitioned back down to first position. To my great satisfaction, I didn’t miss one note and triumphantly played the concluding chord.

“Wow, you’re really good!”

Startled, I looked up from my music. I hadn’t heard that phrase in a while. My eyes met the guest conductor...who was gazing admiringly at my stand partner. Annoyance welled up inside me and I thought that should be—but stopped myself. For once, it dawned on me that the attention was directed at the position, not the person sitting there. Finally the spell of arrogance, which had me in its thrall for over a year, was broken and I could see clearly again. I realized that before my public failure, I had been hurtling down a path of egoism and misplaced ambition. Although the new seating illuminated the insecure person I had slowly become over the past year, it also offered me a chance to be reborn as a musician. This time, instead of chasing after fancy titles, I chose music.

Of course, my musical transformation did not happen overnight. It took years. As a high school freshman, I made it into the Symphonic Orchestra. There, I learned fun and quirky people played in the viola section. Their ready smiles and helpful suggestions wore away any remaining desire I had to ‘conquer the viola section, one seat at a time.’ In the face of their open enthusiasm for the music and warm regard for each other, my cold competitiveness dried up.

By learning from their example, I no longer worried about what chair I held. Instead, I was more concerned about getting to know my high school viola family and adding to the team dynamics. Today, not surprisingly, most of my best friends play the viola.

Seats have so little to do with anything anymore. Before rehearsal I flit around the orchestra, laughing with the other musicians. We talk about sectional phrasing, about school, and about where we’re going to hang out for the weekend. My smile comes so much more easily now that I don’t see them as potential competitors.

In retrospect, I am grateful for that failure in the eighth grade. I now understand that failures are a way of telling you where you are headed and asking you if you really want to go there. My demotion freed me from a selfishly narrow perspective and allowed me to mature as a person. I have gained genuine confidence that no one—only myself—can take away.

Now as a senior in high school, I have played in district, state, and national orchestras. I have loved every minute of my time in those orchestras. Most importantly, I know I am a musician for the right reasons. That flimsy piece of paper is long gone, but I am still here, a better person than before.
On his deathbed, an old man asked his nurse to bring him the worn, wooden box off his dresser. The man’s family was either dead or away. She was all the company he had.

The nurse set the box on the old man’s lap where he sat, weak as a twig. The man opened the box and gazed at its contents. The nurse noticed a candle stub and an old fair ticket, but nothing of importance.

“Sir,” she asked the old man. “What is in your box?”

He smiled up at her, the skin around his eyes crinkling. “Treasures,” he said in a surprisingly clear voice.

“Treasures?” she asked.

“Yes, my dear nurse,” he said, wincing in pain as he adjusted his pillow. “Treasures. They are worthless to others, but they are the most valuable things I own.”

“Why?”

The old man picked up the candle stub. “When I was a boy, my family was troubled. My father died, and my mother, sister and I were poor, living out on the streets. My family worked hard, with two jobs each, to try to raise enough money to celebrate my birthday. They were able to buy an old cake and a candle. They had me make a wish when I blew the candle out. Do you want to know what I wished for?

She nodded.

“I wished that things would get better.”

“Did they?”

He smiled his crinkly-eyed smile again and nodded. “Much better. The candle reminds me that if your wish is of good intentions, it may come true.”

He took another object out of the box— a yellowed picture. “My mother met another man, who she eventually married. This man’s name was William. He was good to my family, so he became a part of it. We moved far away from the city streets we had known before and to the countryside. At first, I thought I would hate it there—hate the cows, hate the town, hate William’s family. But I was wrong. Just like William became my father, his family became my family, too. William’s aunt—Great Aunt Jeanie, I called her—sang to me fun songs she had learned as a girl. William’s brother, Glen, told me stories of swashbuckling heroes and evil villains. Grandma Wilma knit me sweaters. They were my family, and I was theirs. I keep this picture of my family to remind me that no matter how different family is, it’s still family.”

The old man gazed at the picture, no doubt remembering songs, stories, and itchy red sweaters. A lone tear rolled down his crooked nose and onto his hospice gown. He gently set the picture in the box and his hand returned clutching the fair ride ticket.

“My best friend was named Jimmy. He lived in a house down the road from mine and we would play every day. Jimmy’s mother died of pneumonia and I had to help him get through it. It was a test of friendship that I think I passed. Jimmy’s family moved on and found a new mother years later. She was their William and they couldn’t have asked for better.

“Our friendship lasted for years. I remember, one day, when there was a carnival. Jimmy and I saved up all our pocket money for months to get a chance to ride on the Ferris wheel. For years, we had watched from outside the fairgrounds the children riding in the cars. Each year we would try to save up money, but then a new comic would come out or something would happen in our family where we needed money. Finally, we stood at the booth at the bottom of the Ferris wheel, which towered above us. We were so excited we could hardly sit still. What we had been waiting for, for what seemed like a million years, was finally happening!”

The man smiled, still feeling the excitement of the boy he was so many years ago.

“But as soon as they started the ride, it gave a loud creak and shudder and stopped. The operator told us that the ride had malfunctioned and we couldn’t ride it. I couldn’t believe it. We had been saving for so long. I started to cry, but Jimmy took my shoulders looked me straight in the eye and told me that if I cried, I’d turn the carnival into a lake. We stared at each other for a bit and then we started laughing. Then Jimmy bought us a popcorn to share with his extra money and we enjoyed the rest of the day with each other. I keep this ticket
to the Ferris wheel to remind me that when something bad or disappointing happens, a friend can always carry you through it.”

He hesitated for a moment, his joyous expression fading. “Jimmy died five years ago.”

“I’m sorry,” the nurse said.

“Everyone has their time,” was his only reply.

The old man suddenly coughed and the nurse rushed to get him water. He took a sip and he smiled at her.

“Thank you, dear,” he told her as he set the ticket back inside the box. He pulled out a small wooden pendant of a bird and held it in his hand. “Now, as I was getting older, I was starting to notice how fine some of the girls were looking. After I got out of college, I got engaged to one of those fine girls. Laura was her name and she was beautiful, smart, and full of laughter. She laughed at my jokes, see? Even if they weren’t very funny.

“We were in love- as much as two could ever be. I worked in a wood-carving shop and she as a teacher at an elementary school. We could hardly wait to get married. But then I got drafted to serve in the army and we had to put off the wedding. The night before I left, we went down to a lake where we had met. I told her that I loved her and would miss her and she told me the same. I gave her this very pendant that I made just for her. Then I left.

“When I came home, there was Laura, the pendant hanging around her neck. We got married that very week and she wore it at the wedding. I keep this pendant, not only as a reminder of my wife, but to remind me that sometimes you just have to wait for good things to happen.”

The nurse couldn’t imagine how he could possibly have waited that long to get married. She was engaged at the moment, and she felt as if she couldn’t hold on another day. She ran her fingers along the pendant, her fingernails tracing the well-carved grooves.

“A dove,” she noted softly. The old man nodded.

Another nurse walked in the door with the old man’s noontime meal. She offered to take over, but the first nurse shooed her off.

“There’s nothing like a good colleague,” the old man said after he had finished his meal. He had put the pendant back in the box and taken out something else- a rusty bullet shell.

“I had a great one in the army with me. His name was Robert Hughes. We trained and worked together and became close friends. Robert was very brave. I figured I could never be as brave as him. I had fears.

“One battle we were in wasn’t going well. Many of our soldiers were dead. I was scared and weary from fighting. At one point of the battle, I was out of both ammo and spirit. The enemy had surrounded us and I was ready to give up. Shots were fired from an advancing opponent, but none hit me. I had closed my eyes, bracing myself, but I felt no sharp burst of pain. At least, not a physical one. I had opened my eyes to find Robert, who had been behind me, lying on the ground, a bullet embedded in his chest.

“Robert Hughes, the bravest man I’ve ever known, had jumped in front of me during the gunfire. He died defending both his country and his friend. While he had feared death, he died in bravery and honor.

“Later, I found a bullet shell from the battlefield and decided to keep it. It serves as a reminder that being brave doesn’t mean having no fears. It means sacrificing your needs for somebody else’s.”

The nurse stared at the shell, barely believing that someone could be that brave. “He sounds like he was a great man,” she said.

The old man nodded. “He was.”

The nurse was eager to see the next thing and must have shown it, because the old man grinned at her as he reached into the box once more. He held up a worn, gray plastic band for her to see.

“About two years after Laura and I got married, our son was born. He was a tiny thing, only 14 inches and 7 ounces. He was born premature, so he was sick. He had to stay in the hospital for a month. Imagine being nameless for a month! Poor boy. The doctors all said that he was going to die. There was no hope for survival. They just gave up. But Laura and I refused to believe that. Little No Name was going to live!

“We were given some time alone with him before they said he would die. We just kept holding his tiny hands and bracing ourselves for impact, but it never came. He just kept looking up at us, as if wondering what we were so worried about. The doctors came in, ran a few tests, and looked shocked. Besides his small size he
was completely healthy! Laura and I were overjoyed. No Name had beat all odds! But then we realized that No Name needed a name. We agreed on Mirus.”

“Miracle,” the nurse translated. The old man nodded.

“Yes- miracle. I keep this band that he wore for the month without having a name as a reminder that miracles are possible and do happen.”

“Mirus is a beautiful name,” the nurse remarked.

“It most certainly is,” the old man replied. He then returned the plastic band to the box and carefully pulled out the dusty piece of glass the nurse had glimpsed earlier. “Of course, Mirus got in trouble from time to time. We were out playing ball one day when he was seven. Mirus hit the ball too hard and it went through the glass of an older neighbor’s window.

“Now, I didn’t know this neighbor very well. All I had seen of him was him standing grumpily in corners of neighborhood gatherings. He looked like a stern no-monkey business kind of man who was always frowning. I was very nervous to go speak with him about his window, but I knew we couldn’t just walk away and pretend it didn’t happen, so I marched right up to his door with Mirus beside me and knocked on it. The door opened. Mirus apologized profusely and so did I. We both waited for him to get angry or tell us that we had to replace the window or something, but then he laughed. ‘I hope you weren’t aiming for my window, sonny!’ he chuckled. Mirus’s ears turned bright red and I laughed, too.

“He invited us into his home and we helped clean up the shattered window. I offered to replace the window but he waved it aside and claimed that it was nothing he couldn’t fix. It turned out that his name was Mr. Kelps. He was a quite the baseball fan. He showed Mirus all of his trading cards and relics. I then realized that Mr. Kelps was just a lonely man. I kept one of the shards of glass from the broken window to remind me that sometimes all it takes to turn someone’s attitude around is a little company.”

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“He invited us into his home and we helped clean up the shattered window. I offered to replace the window but he waved it aside and claimed that it was nothing he couldn’t fix. It turned out that his name was Mr. Kelps. He was a quite the baseball fan. He showed Mirus all of his trading cards and relics. I then realized that Mr. Kelps was just a lonely man. I kept one of the shards of glass from the broken window to remind me that sometimes all it takes to turn someone’s attitude around is a little company.”

“My brother broke one of my neighbors windows, too,” says the nurse. “My neighbor was angry, but then my mother sent him one of her apple pies and all was forgiven.”

The old man chuckled. “Sometimes it may even take a pie.”

The nurse laughed, too. She then glanced at the clock and told the old man to get some rest.

“No, dear,” the old man sighed. “Not yet. I haven’t shown all my treasures. Once I do, I will rest.”

The nurse nodded.

The old man pulled out a slightly tattered folded napkin. “Mirus grew up too fast. Soon he was out of college and engaged to a woman. The first time Laura and I met Susan, we went to a diner in Pennsylvania. I was sad to lose my little miracle boy, but once I met Susan, I saw in Mirus’s eyes how much he loved her and how happy he was, all feelings of sadness and doubt vaporized. I was overjoyed. They got married and still are today. I keep the napkin from that diner to remind me that other’s happiness sometimes leads to your own.”

The nurse nodded her head, remembering her brother’s wedding day. The tears in her eyes were at first from sadness, but then from joy.

The old man’s feeble hand took a tissue from his bedside table and he coughed into it. He crumpled the tissue, ignoring the splotch of blood on it. He then took another sip of water and returned the napkin to the box. He pulled out a little piece of paper this time, still crisp.

“Mirus’s family eventually grew. One day, about a year after his marriage to Susan, he came to me and told me that Susan was pregnant. I was to be a grandfather! I hoped and hoped, and wished and wished that it would be a boy. A boy that I could play ball with and take on hikes and play by the creek with. Another little Mirus! Nine and a half months later, I became the grandfather of a beautiful baby girl. Her name was Lacey. At first thought, I was a little disappointed, but then I held her in my arms and knew that with every missed opportunity, came a new one. I kept this note she wrote me when she was ten as a reminder of that.”

He passed the note to the nurse and she read the carefully done writing.

Dear Grampy,

You are the best Grandpa I could ever have. I love you with all my heart, soul, and mind.

Love,

Lacey

The old man smiled fondly at it, then put the note back in the box and shut it. All the treasures had been shown, but one.

“The box,” the nurse asked. “What about the box?”
“Ah, yes,” said the old man. “The box may be my greatest treasure because it holds so many. When my wife was on her deathbed, losing her battle with a cancer, she gave me this box that I had made for her. She had pressed it in my hands, looked me in the eye, and said, ‘Don’t ever forget to be a good person.’ And I haven’t.”

“No,” the nurse replied. “You haven’t.”

The old man took a deep breath and laid back. “Now,” he said, his voice labored. “Now I may rest.”

The nurse carried the box back to the old man’s dresser. “Sleep well,” she told him, slipping out of the room to find another patient. “Thank you for telling me the stories.”

The old man smiled, his eyes crinkling once more. “It was my privilege.”

“See you tomorrow, sir,” the nurse said. The old man said nothing.

The next day, the nurse hurried to work, eager to see the old man. She rushed to his room to find a man, a woman, and a teenager, tears flooding down their faces.

The nurse then saw the old man in the bed, as still as a statue, with a faint ghost of a smile on his face. He was dead.

“Were you his nurse?” asked the woman. The nurse merely nodded as a tear slipped down her cheek. The woman gave her a sheet of folded paper. “He wrote this to you for his will.”

The nurse tried to swallow the lump in her throat as she opened up the paper and read what it said.

To my dear nurse, I leave the wooden box on my dresser, all its contents, and this message:
Remember that if your wish is of good intentions, it may come true.
Remember that no matter how different family is, it’s still family.
Remember that when something bad or disappointing happens, a friend can always carry you through.
Remember that sometimes you just have to wait for good things to happen.
Remember that being brave doesn’t mean having no fears. It means sacrificing your needs for somebody else’s.
Remember that miracles are possible and do happen.
Remember that sometimes all it takes to turn someone’s attitude around is a little company.
Remember that others’ happiness sometimes leads to your own.
Remember that with every missed opportunity, there comes a new one.
And above all, remember how to be a good person.

And the nurse grieved.

Years Later:

A little girl in a soft blue dress looks at an old, worn box sitting on the table in front of her. “Grandma,” she asks a woman who sits across the room. “Why do you keep that old box?”

The retired nurse smiles at her granddaughter, the skin around her eyes crinkling.

“Because, my dear, it reminds me how to live.”
Lauren Pike
Writing Portfolio: A Meshing of Moods
Francis Howell North High School
Jani Wilkens, Teacher

Abstractions of Who We’ve Become

My tongue grazes my top lip, warm, soft, yet undetectable. A habit I’ve always fallen into when in deep concentration. With a tight grip on the paintbrush, I dab lightly at the canvas with uniform, somewhat streaky strokes. I continue in a similar motion, building the base color for the painting. A light tannish brown. After an even coating, I move to the next color, a crisp lime green, using a rounded foam paint brush to create uniform blotches layered symmetrically across the canvas. My style is methodical as I alternate between brushes and colors.

I glance up at my aunt as she rests her warm hand on my shoulder as she squeezes between me and the kitchen counter. She leans against the refrigerator, watching my as my sisters and I paint artwork for her newly designed bathroom. I can’t help but notice the slight apprehension in her face as she observes the three of using permanent paint in her newly decorated kitchen. I smile slightly at her. She asks me what I’m going to paint.

I think for a moment before telling her that I’m not sure. Actually, I do know what I am going to paint, but telling her I don’t seems easier at the moment. I need to focus at the task at hand before my ideas slip away. She nods, then walks to the end of the fold-out plastic table where we’re working to talk to my youngest sister, Mia. Mia’s face is pinched and distraught as she stares at her blank canvas. Kristen, my other sister, locks eyes with me as Mia starts to whine about not knowing what to make. She constantly seems to struggle with finding her own style and voice without imitating her older sisters, but she’s afraid to make a path for herself. Afraid to fail. A trait that we both share. But Kristen and I are both used to this by now. I give a tiny half smile, the get back to work.

Acutely, I’m aware of the distant slapping sound as paint splashes onto Kristen’s canvas. With no evident pattern, she flings turquoise, greens, and blues, and browns onto the canvas with little regard for wasted paint splattering onto the newspaper surrounding the table, or onto the freshly painted walls. With a snide smirk, a sarcastic comment regarding the amount of paint on the table pops into my mind. There’s always a sarcastic comment. Judgments materialize in my head with rapid speed before snapping off and attaching themselves to people. It doesn’t matter if they are friends, or acquaintances, or strangers, or family.

I open my mouth to blurt it out, but at the last minute, I decide to shut up and watch her paint instead. I don’t understand her painting. It’s foreign to me. A canvas filled with sweeping curves and swirls and intricately blended colors brushed on with deliberate, yet chaotic strokes. I don’t know where to look. It’s a loud, screaming blast of color. I add a slightly darker green to my painting, once again switching brushes, creating another layer of blurred swoops on the canvas. From my peripheral vision, I catch a glimpse of my Kristen’s expression as she practically hurls more paint onto the already heavy-handed canvas. My eyes flick up to her face for a moment. She’s happy. Her blue eyes shining with determination and something I can’t quite place - mischief? Her thin lips are also quirked into a slight smile. Such a contrast to the hard line and stormy eyes I see when we’re arguing.

I’m taken back to a memory. Can I have a little taste, she asked me in her innocent three-year-old voice. She tugged at my sleeve and reached her stubby fingers toward my birthday cake. No, Kristen, I had said. I didn’t want my cake messed up. I wanted it to stay perfect as long as possible. She was upset, I think. But it didn’t matter. We were friends again in a few minutes. Now we could stay mad for days.

I look back at my canvas trying to figure out what to do with it next. I’ve used all of the brush strokes I can think of. Vertical, horizontal, diagonal, curved, circular. But I’m not satisfied with it. I don’t dislike it, but something is missing from it and it seems unfinished. I stare at the design, scrutinizing each line and blended color. My aunt rests her hand on my shoulder. Oh, I love it, she says.

Kristen asks her if she can finger-paint. She’s fourteen. Before my aunt can manage an answer, her hands are already plunged into a puddle of grayish mixed paint. Intently focused on the canvas, she slides globs of paint with her fingertips. For a moment, my mind again replaces her teenaged face with her three-year-old
chubby cheeks and bobbed brown hair with bangs - the straight across kind. I can hear her high-pitched toddler voice saying my name, asking me to play chalk or for rides around the block in the Barbie jeep or to push her on the swings at the playground near our old house. It's nice to see that the little girl is still in there. Lately, it's been so hard for me to see through her superficial, popularity-crazed façade. Or the ditzy act that she puts on around boys who don't care about her. Or her ever-changing group of friends whose names I never know. Or the heated string of curses that we fling at each other in arguments.

She would be mortified right now if a boy saw the flecks of paint in her hair or her makeup free eyes. I smile at the memories and ignore the tinge of loss stabbing through me. Right now, none of it matters. She's completely carefree at the moment, sloshing paint around the canvas, creating an intricate tangles of lines, shapes, and curves. I never could have created it, and maybe somewhere in the depths of my mind, I wished that I had. Maybe I wished that I was as outgoing and spontaneous.

She tells me that she has an itch on her nose, breaking me out of my thoughts. I put down my paintbrush. I suppose my painting will just have to be good enough for now. I reach across the table and scratch her nose, but pause momentarily as I notice the faded white line across the bridge of her nose. It's still there -- the place where she still wears the scar that she got from a tricycle accident when she was five. I thought it had faded over time along with our closeness. I remember her -- with her manic pedaling, hair streaming, cheeks flushed, breath huffing, not a care in the world -- really remember the little girl that I once knew. The girl who looked up to me, who held my hand when we crossed the street. The girl who threw screaming, kicking tantrums when my mother ended her naps and used her stubborn cuteness to fight for what she wanted. The girl who undressed my Barbie dolls just to make me mad and wanted me to make up elaborate bedtime stories that filled her with glee. The girl who shared a bunk bed with me and let me crawl into the bottom bunk with her when I woke up from a nightmare.

I reach across the table to scratch her nose. I wonder when she'll wake up.

America the Ignorant

“In our age there is no such thing as ‘keeping out of politics.’ All issues are political issues, and politics itself is a mass of lies, evasions, folly, hatred, and schizophrenia.” - George Orwell

In America, citizens pride themselves on three key factors individual to their country: the bustling fast food industry, the morality of their celebrity icons, and the latest technology available to engross themselves in. Further down on the list of American priorities, somewhere between job security and education, lies government and politics: industries of honesty and fairness. Industries built on the American ideals of apathy, coexistence, and acceptance. In George Orwell’s quote regarding politics, Orwell incorrectly reflects the nature of politics as an inescapable, all-consuming beast, that dictates the everyday actions of citizens and determines their behavior toward others of differing opinions. Through this comparison, Orwell unfairly classifies the participants of politics as driven and outspoken individuals and casts a negative shadow on the apathetic, free-thinking members of society who bravely distance themselves from politics.

While Orwell claims that “there is no such thing as ‘keeping out of politics,’” this notion is negated by the generally accepting attitude of the American public toward those who are able to distance themselves from politics. In our age, rather than taking a stand of polemic issues, it is the duty of Americans to remain apathetic so as not to risk the possibility of offending those who wish not to have an opinion. While those who are close-minded enough to believe that politics are a driving force in our society spend their hours engrossed in frivolous wonderlands of social media and world news, the apathetic majority must distance themselves from these sources in order to remain misinformed regarding the importance of the issues that have a direct impact on their lives. This duty embodies the key spirit of the apathetic majority, blissful ignorance, which is reflected in the nearly 40 percent of American voters who did not participate in the 2012 presidential election. While many believe in the necessity of democracy as a means fairness and involvement, “the best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter” (Winston Churchill). Although labeled complacent, these non-voters represent a high-minded ideal regarding the nature of our current government system. To the remaining 60 percent of Americans, I humbly suggest what the 40 percent have already decided upon: the eradication of American democracy in order to bring back the century-old tradition of monarchy. After all, “I would rather obey a fine lion, much stronger than myself, than two hundred rats of my own
species” (Voltaire). This shift to monarchy diminishes Orwell’s claim by removing the individuality from the American political and governmental system by leaving power in the hands of a single, capable ruler, thus leaving the rest of the nation free to remain separate from the world of politics and enjoy their lives in peaceful oblivion.

Orwell’s idea that “all issues are political issues” is further refuted through the governmental style of monarchy in the ruler’s consideration of the common good of his people. Through monarchy, citizens are no longer vexed with the trivial issues of health care, education, and religion, but rather leave these decisions to the monarch. Following the example of King Henry VIII of England, the monarchy should remain responsible for the dictation of religion and is required to impress upon the citizens of the entire nation a single religion so as not to risk the clashing of opinions on the matter. By separating himself from the Roman Catholic Church and proclaiming himself as the Supreme Head of the Church of England, Henry VIII stands as a model for the integration of monarchy in our current-day governmental system, and through his wisdom, his subjects were able to remain apathetic as to the choice and religion, leading to overall peace and minimal suppression (though ultimately lead to the founding of our country).

The institution of monarchy also diminishes the public insistence on political correctness. Because of the danger of offending people of different races, cultures, and religions, “in a world where political correctness matters more than safety, the only way you’re going to be safe in this world is to become a mugger yourself” (Greg Gutfeld). This phenomenon has leaked into society at all levels, including in the elementary schools of our children. It seems that the Valentine’s Day classroom party has morphed into a “friendship party,” the Christmas break has turned into winter break, and the casual “merry Christmas” has turned into an all-encompassing, “happy holidays.” Monarchy crushes this insistence on political correctness by encouraging conformity in the subjects, leading to smoother lifestyles without the possibility of accidental offense. This leaves more time for Americans to indulge themselves in the morality of reality television and the candor of grocery store tabloids.

Orwell’s claim that “politics itself is a mass of lies, evasions, folly, hatred, and schizophrenia,” is negated once more by the honesty government and politics, specifically in the form of monarchy. Through monarchy, the changes in the culture of politics would radically change, leading to the extinction of political parties and the rise of a singular party built on the ideals of conformity, coexistence, and acceptance. With this revised form of government, the citizens would no longer live in fear of having their voices heard because this method of politics encourages people to believe the same things, causing the ruin of disagreement, confrontation, and argument. A contract of openness is also created between ruler and subject through monarchy, promoting the acceptance of laws and taxes. This contract is exemplified through the successful ruling style of King Louis XVI of France. While the people of France starved and fought for bread in the streets, they were aware of the life of luxury and extravagance Louis and the French nobility lived, thus causing a feeling of openness between people in government and eradicating feelings of hostility and disillusionment. Under this honest and prosperous reign, Louis XVI was able to maintain a stable relationship with his subjects and was able to relate to their lives, bettering his ability to make decisions on their behalf.

Based on his quote it is not only evident that George Orwell had minimal knowledge as to the role of government and politics in the everyday lives of people, but also was close-minded to the abundance and equality which can only be simulated through monarchy. While Orwell seems to have forgotten the nature of democracy, the apathetic 40 percent of Americans who refuse to vote have not forgotten that “democracy... while it lasts is more bloody than either aristocracy or monarchy. Remember, democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts, and murders itself. There is never a democracy that did not commit suicide” (John Adams).

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A light mist of rain sprays through the hazy sky. Water droplets cling inside of the etched crevices of stone statues and gather on the twisted iron arch which frames the narrow path leading through a garden of metal work, fountains, and statues to the store’s chipped-painted facade. Various metal lawn ornaments creak lazily in the slight breeze. Welcome to Gringo Jones Imports: a wonderland for eclectic garden and home decor fanatics from across the country.

“The terms I’ve heard most are ‘sensory overload’ and ‘eclectic’ if you like it, and ‘junk shop’ if you don’t,” Owner Leon Jones said.

After a short trip through the garden of metalwork, the 10,000 square foot store opens up into a maze of shelves stacked to the ceiling and teeming with the vibrant reds and oranges of talavera pottery from Mexico. Furniture pieces from as early as the 18th century are packed with person-sized ceramic pots, old books, and other knick-knacks. Vintage chairs, more pottery, and other items are hung from the ceiling.

“I really like all of the chairs that are hanging from the ceiling,” junior Emma Cleaveland said. “I think it’s an interesting way to store them.”

But before customers can explore the store, they must make it past Jones’ four security systems: the dogs. Brownie, a 13-month-old Labrador-Collie mix who belongs to one of Jones’s employees, playfully greets the customers by jumping up on their legs and chewing shoelaces, plastic containers, and pretty much everything else. Jones’ boxers Lola Mae and Sugar Rae lounge lazily on the their personal chairs at the front of the store; and, Baby, a three and a half-year-old Shi Tzu owned by another employee, evades Brownie’s attempts at play. All of the dogs have called Gringo Jones their home since they were puppies.

“I like dogs better than people and dogs always bring in people [to the store],” Jones joked. “And if they don’t like dogs, I don’t let them in the store. It just makes the store appear more friendly, and I really don’t trust people who don’t like dogs.”

From there, customers are led through the store’s 12 rooms by friendly note cards scattered around the store and taped on doors or merchandise. Jones is responsible for these crafty phases and often thinks of them prior to buying the items which they describe.

In Sharpied block letters an index card on a nearby door reads: “No room is off limits- the basement’s open- there are seven rooms upstairs- ask if we can help.”

Taped to a piano, another index card jokes: “If you’re a good pianist feel free to play, if you’re a little pecker, don’t.”

Since opening 18 years ago, Gringo Jones Imports has been selling a variety of goods for the home and garden. Straying from typical furniture and lawn ornaments, Jones, who has also worked as a hairdresser of 40 years, and his staff have made it their mission to seek out unique items that reflect the interests of their customers. These items come from auctions and antique shows from cities in the United States, like Chicago and Atlanta, to countries across the globe such as Mexico, Guatemala, and Indonesia.

“We’re different than anybody else,” nine year employee and friend of Jones, Kim Chandler said. “We sell to people who make a dollar or people who make six million dollars. So everybody in between. My philosophy that I have is treat everybody like they have a tuxedo on because you don’t know who has money and who doesn’t have money. I just want to serve everybody the same and give them the customer service.”

Stemming from a Spanish slang term for Americans, the name of the store was a creative way for Jones to display the jocular personality of the store as well as reflect his fondness for Mexican culture and products which the store boasts.

“I wanted something that people wouldn’t take too seriously,” Jones said. “People in Mexico call us gringos and my last name is Jones.”

Among the many various items that Gringo Jones sells, some of the most popular items are the Mexican talavera, or brightly-colored glazed ceramics, which are displayed through every room in the store. In addition to the talavera, Jones imports other Mexican products ranging from furniture to blown glass.

“It’s really interesting and kind of like a homey feel,” Cleaveland said. “It’s just a fun place to look around, and it seems like you’d always be seeing new stuff.”
Rummaging for Rare Finds

In order to bring these items into the store, Jones organizes several buying trips to Mexico each year where he and other employees travel throughout the different regions of Mexico to purchase goods to bring back to the store. According to Chandler, almost 70 percent of the store merchandise comes from these buying trips. Often, Jones and his staff travel to a market in Guadalajara where vendors from all over Mexico gather. That way, he and Chandler can choose items for Gringo Jones from all over Mexico without having to traverse the country. Occasionally, Jones will travel outside of these markets in an attempt to find lower prices, but the markets are a typical stop on buying trips. On these trips, Jones usually purchases around $30,000 worth of merchandise and can fill two semitrailers with these purchased goods.

“I wanted something different and I've always enjoyed the folk art and gardens [of Mexico],” Jones said. “I've sort of tailored it to what I like. Originally, I would fly to Mexico and spend a week at a time and fill two 53-foot semitrailers. When the economy changed, business went down and I started driving down and bringing stuff up in my trailers.”

According to Jones, talavera and types of furniture are common throughout the country, but other items are particular to different regions of the country. For blown glass, Jones purchases from various dealers in Guadalajara. For silver products, Jones used to purchase from the silver mines of Taxco, but recently had to end visits to the area due to the danger of kidnappings.

“It’s merchandise that most people can’t find outside of the St. Louis area,” Jones said. “It’s a bunch of products that aren’t made in China.”

Adding to the cast of characters at Gringo Jones, Chandler plays a large role in the buying of goods for the store. Formally an employee of Famous Barr, with a background in retail fashion and interior decorating, Chandler spends a majority of her time, when she’s not in the store, at auctions and antique shows across the country in search of items for the store. She has also gone with Jones on two buying trips to Mexico.

“I have a list,” Chandler said. “When people want something, I compile a list of what they want, and then that list we go out and buy. If it’s one person who wants it, I figure at least five or six may want it, so we might buy three of them. We don't always buy the same stuff because we don't want it to be repetition, and we don't want everyone to have the same thing, so some things we may repeat, like our concrete and stuff like that, so basically everything inside. We just have fun.”

An Evolving Dream

Gringo Jones originally began as a part-time job for Jones. When he opened the store, he still had several hair clients and for about a year and a half after the store opened, Jones continued cutting hair while running the store. Currently, Jones takes one to two clients per week in a barber chair that resides in one of Gringo Jones’ many rooms.

“If you work here, you get free haircuts,” Jones said. “Some customers have been coming for 30 years.”

Jones found out about a space available for a store through one of his hair clients. In the 1920s and 30s, the building was a German bakery and it had been vacant for five years by the time Jones acquired the space. The location was also a key factor in choosing a place for the store. Because the building was located near the Missouri Botanical Garden and right off of Highway 44, Jones thought that this location would be ideal.

“It just seemed to work,” Jones said. “Plus it was a reasonable price. I also looked for a place in Chesterfield and if I had bought there, we wouldn't have had enough money for inventory.”

After purchasing the store, Jones began buying in order to fill the store’s 12 rooms. Over time, he bought a warehouse located near Barnes Jewish Hospital in order to house the overflow of merchandise.

“It just evolved,” Jones said. “No master plan, I was just cutting hair and running this. I just thought it was going to be a part time job.”

Today, Gringo Jones continues to bring new items into the store to satisfy the unique tastes of their customers.

“If just like working here because it’s fun, and we’re open every day from ten to six,” Chandler said. “You cannot beat that.”
Hurricane

I had a thought today, and it sailed out into the blissful waters without a passing glance.

It slipped soundlessly along the current, and traced its way, skimming the waves, foam bubbling up.

It found its way, brushing softly against the supple rim, feather soft, silently withheld, blocked by pearly dams.

Whispers bounding against the rocks, breathing, caressing, speaking the words until the tide receded.

How is it that the words have capsized and plunged freely, bobbing and swirling in the midst of the still expanse?

Vanished

I wasn’t lost. Not exactly. I had come to the edge of the neighborhood, a small cluster of trees which backed up against Thompson’s Creek. Jason and I had always referred to the area as “TF,” or Thompson’s Forest. It had seemed bigger when we were kids. I stepped into the soft earth as I began wading through the trees, running my hand along each trunk. I stopped in front of a massive oak tree and crouched low as I ran my hand along the base of the trunk, feeling for the etched outline of our initials. I couldn’t see it in the dark, but I knew the tree house was up there. Feeling my way around the oak’s thick trunk, I found the haphazardly strewn pieces of wood that served as the ladder hammered to the tree.

As easily as when I was a child, I climbed. The moon illuminated my way until all at once, the treehouse seemed to appear out of the darkness. It was as I remembered it, cradled between the tree’s biggest branches, only smaller. It still had the same crisscrossed pattern on the trap door and a rectangular window on the house’s eastern wall.

At the top of the ladder, I sucked in a breath. This part of the climb had always scared me. The trapdoor needed a good jostling to open and in order to do so, the climber had to momentarily use both hands to press up the door, requiring them to balance for several seconds. The rung creaked precariously under my weight as I slowly brought my arms up over my head. 1, 2, 3! I let go of the tree, driving my palms up into the trapdoor. With the squeal of metallic hinges, the door flew open in a shower of dust.

The familiar smell of ashes hit me as I climbed up. Ashes and empty bottles and various other drug paraphernalia strewn across the wooden boards. It reminded me of my mother’s apartment. I hated Jason. He did this. The beginnings of hot tears welled in my eyes and my throat constricted. No, don’t. I brushed at my eyes with my sleeve, feeling furious and distraught and confused all at once. I reached up, breaking off a leafy switch from above me, and began sweeping all everything out of the treehouse. I plucked a joint from the ashes and kicked at the broken remains of a syringe. I bit down hard on my lower lip until I tasted blood, but I refused to let a scream escape from my lips.

I didn’t miss him. He could fuck up his life with his idiot friends for all I cared. Hell, they could even smoke up the tree house- in fact, I hoped they would destroy it completely until all that was left was a pile of shit. I didn’t need any more reminders of our friendship, and I didn’t want to remember. I had practically forgotten already.
I was glad that we were no longer friends. A break was inevitable from the start of the friendship because we were such opposites. Jason always had this carefree spirit about him and fun seemed to follow everywhere he went. The other kids worshipped him. He was outgoing and funny, and always said the right thing. I was quiet and introverted. My friends were in books and my main interest was in my school work.

I stared straight ahead whenever I saw him in the hallways now. If we ever spoke, it was in icy formalities. And if he was with his friends, we didn’t know each other. There was never hostility between us before, but this? This act was one I couldn’t forgive. Jason had created an impassable void.

Sighing heavily, I slumped against part of the oak’s trunk that jutted from the treehouse floor. I couldn’t stop my hands from shaking. I sighed heavily. Jason and I had been friends since kindergarten when I traded him my tuna fish sandwich for his ham and cheese. From there, it had just seemed like a natural friendship. It just occurred with ease in a matter of seconds, with no judgments, but it had broken down in the course of four high school years.

My gaze shifted to the treehouse window about a foot in front of me, remembering our small bodies pressed against wood as we peered out. Blankly, I stared through the window and up at the sky. Stars shone brightly against the inky blackness and the crescent moon glowed. Dimly Jason’s laugh, a loud, unadulterated, goose-like, guffaw, echoed in my mind. I could picture the crinkled corners of his closed eyes, the intense redness of his dimpled cheeks, and the quivering of his entire body. Maybe I even loved him in those moments. None of that mattered now.

I stayed like this for a long time, thinking about everything and nothing at all.

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“Jase, I had a great time tonight.”

I stared blankly at my date from across the console of my car. I honestly couldn’t remember her name. I felt like a dick.

“Oh yeah,” I fumbled for words as I stared at clueless green eyes. “I had a lot of fun.” Liar. She tucked a bleached blond strand behind her ear and batted her false lashes expectantly.

“Well aren’t you going to walk me to the door?” She leaned forward, exposing the lace trimmed edge of her bra underneath her low-cut t-shirt. I paused for a moment.

SAY SOMETHING, YOU IDIOT!

“Uhh no.”

She was completely dumbfounded by my rudeness. With a look of disgust, she jammed open the car door and stalked into her house. I released the breath that I hadn’t realized I was holding and leaned my head against the seat. Since high school started, Craig and the other guys from the soccer team made it their mission to set me up with a “real girl”. I pulled the car out of the driveway and headed back home.

Lately, things had seemed wrong to me. Something was missing from my life. My friends only cared about parties and sex. And more than anything, they liked to brag about it. They discouraged me from books and studying and the future and my old life. They were fun enough to be around though. The laughed at my jokes and coveted my attention, but none of it seemed worth it. The prospect of graduation looming tomorrow made me cynical. It make me dwell on the past and how I had changed.

My house was completely dark when I entered, and I was forced to fumble around in the darkness, trailing my hand against the wall so as not to wake my parents. I navigated toward my room feeling completely drained, I flopped onto my bed with such force that several posters I had tacked onto my wall rustled. As the posters settled back into place, a small crumbled photograph floated from behind one of them and into my lap. I squinted to make out the image in the darkness. A younger me and a girl gave crinkled-eyed smiles at the camera. We both clutched school books and modeled two new backpacks. The girl’s black curls were windblown and my arm rested around her shoulders. It was Cat and I on our first day of first grade.

It was odd to me that nearly every childhood memory I had included Cat. I frequently wondered what my life would be like had we stayed friends. I hadn’t felt as understood or accepted by anyone before or since her. I wondered how she was doing. Between the heated arguments she had with her mother and her impulsivity, I hoped she was doing okay. Or at least if I continued to believe it, it would be true. I told myself that she would reach out if she really wanted to continue our friendship, yet she seemed to ignore any attempt I made to say hello and kept her hood up and eyes to the floor if we passed each other in the halls. Damn, I was an idiot.

I attempted to switch my thoughts to happier memories of my friendship with Cat. I smiled as I remembered her doing flips on my trampoline, I remembered her bravery as she climbed the tallest trees and
egged me on to follow her, teasing me for my fear of heights if I didn’t follow her. But mostly I remembered her quiet brand of steely determinism when she was faced with challenges. She never lashed out at the other kids when they poked at her secondhand clothing or questioned her about the neighborhood she lived in or asked her why she lived with her father instead of her mother. Instead, she kept her head down and worked hard to best them in academics. She had been near the top of our class since middle school when grades started to matter. We were as close as we had ever been during those years, but somehow it had all fallen apart.

Maybe I had blown her off one too many times for my newfound soccer friends. Maybe it had gotten harder for her to spend time with me as she spent late nights doing homework from her AP classes and days buried in novels. I felt I was mostly to blame for our break. I wished I could take it all back.

Maybe because it was after midnight, or because I was graduating later today, or because I wanted to make things right, I made the decision. I softly opened my window, stepping out onto the deck which led down into our backyard. I raced through the dewy grass toward Thompson’s Forest and didn’t stop until I found the familiar cluster of trees at the edge of the neighborhood. My heart thumped against my chest as I counted the steps toward the treehouse. 17,18,19,20. I stopped in front of a massive oak and ran my fingertips across trunk. Nothing. I stooped lower and sighed with relief as I felt the outline of our initials carved into the tree. Feeling around the trunk once more, I located the pieces of scrap wood that had been tacked to the trunk to serve as a ladder. Steeling myself, I positioned my hands on the rungs and began hoisting myself up the tree.

To battle my fear of heights, I started straight up as I climbed. Out of nowhere, the treehouse seemed to materialize and before I knew it, I was at the last rung. This was the tricky part. Cat was always the one to open the trapdoor since she was always the first one in the tree house. I gripped onto the last rung with one hand and felt my way along the trapdoor with the other. It was just as rough and splintery as I remembered it, but it didn’t seem nearly as heavy. I pushed slightly on it to test the weight. A sudden burst of jostling erupted from above, and I nearly lost my grip on the rung.

“Who’s there?” a hard female voice rang out. I paused before answering.

“Cat?”

She tore the trapdoor open and before I knew it, she was glaring down at me with those piercing gray eyes.

“What the hell are you doing here?” she growled. “Back for a late night high?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about.”

“Are you going to let me in?” I tried. “Maybe we can figure it out.”

I glared down at Jason trying maintain an image of composure despite the tumult raging in my brain. I hoped he didn’t see my shaking hands as I weighed the options. I pictured myself slamming the door on Jason, but my curiosity nagged in the back of my mind.

“Fine,” I muttered after a pause. Don’t think this means I’m not angry.

He smiled slightly as he hauled himself into the treehouse, but his expression quickly changed as he detected the odor of sweat, smoke, and desperation that lingered from his last visit with his friends.

“What the hell?”

I couldn’t help but laugh as he tried to play innocent, however the look of disgust and reproach that he wore cut me off instantly.

“Must not smell the same way when you and your idiot friends are stoned up here.”

“Cat,” he sighed. “Look, I know my friends can be dicks, but I promise you, I haven’t been up here since middle school.”

“Yeah, okay.” I narrowed my eyes and made sure that my tone oozed sarcasm. I had mastered this tone in similar conversations with my mother.

“I’m sorry, Cat. For everything.”

Okay.”
He cleared his throat and proceeded to ask me how I had been doing— as if he thought I couldn’t picture my life without him in it. Bull. I gave responses no more than five words in length. I was still upset, but my curiosity still nagged at me. I wanted to believe him, but I knew we could never go back to the same friendship. He couldn’t mend four years of damage with one apology. This was easier. Finally, Jason’s jabbering stopped, and I was broken from my thoughts.

“Cat, are you even listening?”
A quip hung on my lips, but when I looked up to meet his eyes, a pang of sadness shot through me. His eyes were so sincere and yet full of masked pain. He was really trying. Cautiously, I attempted conversation.

“Yeah,” I fumbled. “So, uh have you decided on college yet?” It was a random and out of place question, but a faint half smile tugged on the corner of his mouth.

“Soccer scholarship to Jameson,” he said casually, but I could see the pride in his eyes.

I nodded in response. He’d been talking about playing at Jameson, a local university, since we were kids. Jealously clawed at me. Scholarships weren’t needed when your family could easily afford tuition. Meanwhile, my father was scrambling to make up tuition despite my scholarship to the Rhode Island School of Design. As much as I wanted to leave for Rhode Island and never come back, I wasn’t even sure if I was going anymore. I didn’t want to place that burden on him.

“What about you?” He asked.

I chewed my lip and flicked my eyes in the other direction. I was hesitant to answer, but I kept my tone light as I responded.

“Not sure yet,” I said.
“Well, I’m sure you’ll figure something out.”

Our eyes shifted toward the sky as conversation trickled out. I studied Jason from the corner of my eye as he searched the sky for constellations. He tapped my shoulder, then pointed toward the Big Dipper hanging in the sky. We sat in silence for several minutes, listening to the crickets chirping in the balmy darkness.

“Cat,” Jason whispered after a while.

“Yeah.”

“I really am sorry.”

I was about to ask him what specifically he was apologizing for, but when I gazed into his eyes, all I could see was him laughing in the halls with his friends, or his pleading expression when he had cancelled our plans to bond with his teammates.

“Do you think things can go back to the way they were before?” he sounded uncomfortable.

No. I sighed.

“I just need time to think, Jason.” I paused, emotions clouding my mind. “I have to go.”

And with those last words to Jason, I scrambled down the trapdoor and ran through the dewy grass away from the treehouse.

“Cat!” Jason called after me.
I raced off into the night.

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The auditorium buzzed with the senior class and their families as I searched the rows for my seat. But mostly, I searched for Cat. After last night, all I wanted was to talk to her again. Maybe I’d be able to decipher her erratic behavior or get more than five words out of her. Friends patted me on the back and their parents offered congratulations as I meandered through the rows of seats.

“Jason, congrats.”

I whirled around to find Cat’s father, Mr. Dean standing behind me, eyes crinkled and smile bright. Despite him and Cat’s meager lifestyle, Mr. Dean remained just as upbeat and friendly as ever. I shook his hand eagerly, and he patted me on the back.

“Have you seen Cat around here?” I asked expectantly.

“Oh, I’m afraid you just missed her, Jason,” Mr. Dean chuckled good-naturedly. “She left early this morning for Rhode Island. She’s doing a summer program at the college before school starts. I’m just here to pick up her diploma.”

I stared at Mr. Dean dumbfounded before I gathered my wits. How could she have left without so much as a goodbye?

“Oh, well best of luck to her then.” I didn’t care that my voice radiated disappointment.
I excused myself to my assigned seat as the lights dimmed. I slid my phone from my pocket to check the time, then dropped it on the floor with my shaking hands. As I bent to pick it up from the floor, I noticed a folded slip of paper taped to the bottom of Cat’s empty seat. I plucked it off inconspicuously and turned it in my hands. I unfolded the paper to reveal a short note scrawled in hurried print.

Jason,
I’m still just trying to figure it all out.
-C
I flipped the paper several times, searching for some way to contact her, but she hadn’t left anything. I sighed heavily wondering how to find her.

A Dubious Decision

The Normandy School District is on a path of uncertainty. The June 11 Missouri Supreme Court decision regarding the transfer of students from unaccredited districts has provided transfer students with the promise of a quality education, but between the issues of transportation and tuition costs, the behemoth of bankruptcy is a looming possibility for the district.

“If a school district goes bankrupt, the surrounding touching school districts will absorb that area,” State Representative of District 63 Bryan Spencer said. “It’s gonna be tough situation for Normandy. Can they bounce back? Yes. Is it going to be difficult? Absolutely. Is it something that can cause Normandy to be dissolved? That’s a possibility too. It’s hard to predict the future of Normandy. It really lies in the community, school district leaders, and the parents and kids.”

Due to the threat of absorption, there was an immediate push for Governor Jay Nixon to call a Special House Session to discuss changes in legislature. According to State Representative of District 73, Courtney Curtis, the session was not called due to the unlikelihood of reaching a solution to problems, such as potential bankruptcy and the regaining of accreditation, in a short session. Representatives hope to solve most of these problems when they reconvene in January.

“The financial issue is today’s biggest problem, but that’s not the larger problem,” Curtis said. “The larger problem is that it’s an unaccredited district and with these challenges, it just couples the challenge of being an unaccredited district with having less funding and facing maybe even the potential closing of the district if they ran out of money.”

Financial issues play a key role in the immediate future for unaccredited districts, like Normandy, even though the dilemma of re-gaining accreditation is largely on the forefront. Because of the overturned ruling, the sending school district is required to foot the bill for the tuition and transportation of transferring students. The differing tuition rates of schools and cost of transportation are draining the budget, leaving the potential for bankruptcy if students continue to leave the unaccredited school district.

“My first course of action would be to provide additional funding to the district and then additional resources to Normandy so they could become accredited,” State Representative of District 85 Clem Smith said. “If the students wanted to stay in the school district, they have that right. If there were any budget shortfalls, which there are, there would be additional money to come to that district. I would also put up holds on any future transfers until the financial component is worked out.”

The Missouri Supreme Court ruling of Breitenfeld v. The School District of Clayton originally upheld the state statute regarding the transfer of students from unaccredited schools as unconstitutional. However, it was overturned in a unanimous Missouri Supreme Court decision which stated that students in unaccredited districts have the right to transfer to accredited districts which must accept them as long as sufficient capacity is available.

“I don’t think it’s the best answer,” Chief Academic Officer of Francis Howell School District Mary Hendricks-Harris said. “They have about 3,000 students, and Normandy is paying lots of money to send students to other districts when they should be focusing on their students.”

While the process of coming to a solution for potential bankruptcy remains up in the air, a common goal of the House of Representatives remains to make sure that kids across Missouri are getting a quality education.

“I’m definitely for figuring out a way to make sure that all of our school districts are accredited and to make sure that the kids are being educated because that’s our number one goal,” Curtis said. “At the end of
the day, the thing that's best for the state is to educate the students and figure out a pathway to make sure that all districts are accredited and making sure all students are being educated, period.”
The plane touched the runway with a barely noticeable bump. As I walked into the terminal, the scent of sandalwood overpowered my senses. As I pushed the rattling luggage cart out to the arrivals, the heat rolled against my skin. Yes, this was my India.

Businesspeople, street vendors, children, and people of all kinds lined the dusty street outside. I stood in a daze, listening to the bustle of busy lives and words spoken in Tamil. My brother, less focused on soaking in the surroundings, was the first to spot my grandfather in the throng of waiting faces.

“Thaatha!” he shouted. I whipped around to see, and one by one the faces of my family members separated themselves from the strangers. Before I could breathe, I was smothered with love in the form of hugs, smiles, and kisses. The heat, the dust, and the crowds seemed paradisal. Every step I took felt solid and deep, as if the ground was waiting to welcome the touch of my feet.

I spent the ride to my grandparents’ house with my nose nearly pressed against the glass. Traffic tends to be slow in such densely populated areas, but I didn’t mind. My eyes were content to memorize the whitewashed shops and variety of people that lined the street. Only a thin pane of tinted glass separated me from the world outside.

Before long, we became caught in standstill traffic. Someone, or likely more than one person, had decided not to obey the traffic lights, causing four directions of traffic to converge indignantly into the middle of an intersection. Beside me, Thaatha tapped impatiently on the steering wheel and my mom sighed heavily from the back seat.

“That was when it happened.”

At the edge of the angry swarm of vehicles, a car rammed into the back of a motorcycle. In horror, I watched the motorcyclist tumble from his seat into the air and hit the pavement.

“Oh my god!” the words tore from me. I turned to my grandfather and my mother, who both looked pained and sickened. The motorcyclist barely moved, his body in a painful position on the ground that slowly became stained with red. The waves of walkers on either side glanced at him, some looking upset, but continued to move almost as if nothing had happened. None of the car drivers moved to help the man either.

“Oh my god,” I repeated, my mouth open in shock. I turned to my grandfather for guidance. “Thaatha!” I appealed desperately. Thaatha merely made a mournful sound and shook his head rapidly, hands tightening around the steering wheel.

“Oh god…” my mom echoed. I did not understand their inaction.

“He’s still alive!” I shouted. “Why don’t we do something?”

“I’m calling the emergency number,” Thaatha said, but his face was still etched with worry. “I don’t think they will get here in time, however.” The ambulance system was not nearly as efficient as the system I was familiar with in the United States.

“Thaatha, why don’t we do something? Why don’t we see if he’s alright? Why isn’t anybody doing something?” I frantically demanded.

“If we try to help, and if anyone else tries to help, the police will take us in for questioning about the incident. The police here are so corrupt that we will have to pay them off to keep them from holding us responsible for it,” Thaatha said, as if stating an inconvenient fact. I couldn’t stomach it. This could not be the natural order of things. A man’s life hung in the balance. Leaving him could not be the natural order of things.

“But what about him?” I asked again, pointing at the man who hovered between life and death.

“Thangam,” my mom said to me quietly. “Your grandfather is right. Who knows how long the police may keep us at the station? What could we even do to help? We need to go home.”

As if on cue, the gridlock of cars started to breathe and untangle itself. I thought about my mom and Thaatha’s reasoning and swallowed it bitterly, powerless in this suddenly unfamiliar world. My eyes locked on the man’s body while the car pulled away. I felt numb with shock at the tragedy that had just been allowed to happen. I was just a child, barely thirteen, but maybe I should have done something, if only to comfort the man
as he lay on the pavement. I will never know if he lived or died. I will never know whether I actually could have helped him in any way. I will never know if any of his loved ones ever wished that someone had tried to helped him in that moment that I didn’t.

I was furious, upset, and heartbroken all at once, leaking silent tears all the way to the house. The enchantment I had felt earlier at being amongst the crowds was replaced by cold, crushing dread at what the crowd had done - what I had done. The tragedy was not that a man was injured or killed falling off a motorcycle. The tragedy was that dozens, if not hundreds, of people knew it and couldn’t find it in them to help him. In that moment, each of us bystanders had allowed fear, apprehension, and indifference to stifle our humanity and restrain us from reaching out to another human being.

Life had placed before me blatant evidence of the ugliest qualities of human nature. I chose to look that evidence squarely in the face, lift my head, and say, “Not if I can help it.” The motorcycle incident showed me that people can be terrible to one another, and in response, I tried to put trust in other people’s goodness. I threw myself into volunteering, frantic to root out the apathy within me.

One day, at the nursing home I had started volunteering at, I was asked to bring a woman in a wheelchair to church. It seemed like a fairly simple task. However, when I got to Dorothy’s room, expecting nothing more than to push her barely 100 feet from her room to the chapel, she had a request.

“Could you take my socks off for me?” she asked. Her back problems left her unable to bend and take care of it herself.

I froze, gaping in momentary indecision. I had never met this woman before. I was willing to help people, but the idea of touching a stranger’s feet was less than attractive to me. It felt overwhelmingly awkward. In those seconds of hesitation, the memory of the injured motorcyclist, whose life was disregarded because there wasn’t enough compassion to go around, flashed through my mind. On some level, I had always thought that I would be faced with another life-threatening situation by which I could heroically redeem myself. However, I finally realized that the woman who needed my help now needed the same compassion that we refused to give the motorcyclist. Mother Theresa once said, “We cannot do great things, only small things with great love.” I finally understood.

“Of course I will, Dorothy,” I said, getting down on my knees in front of her wheelchair and gingerly peeling her socks away from swollen feet and ankles. I guided her worn legs into comfortable shoes while chatting with her about her family. When I finally took her to church, her “thank you” meant more to me than she could imagine.

I now believe that a single act of compassion and trust, however insignificant, outweighs the indifference and mistrust of thousands, ultimately saving lives. It is unlikely that I will be faced with another incident like the one in India, but I believe that the small pockets of love I can share will spread and make their way to someone who needs it. Maybe that way, I can succeed where I failed all those years ago at that jammed intersection in India. I will make the world more ready for the next motorcyclist who comes along.
Katie Reed
Poetry: Underland’s Champion, A Story’s Beginning, Fairytales, Fresh Page
Kirksville Middle School
Matt Copeland, Teacher

Underland’s Champion
With the famous vorpal sword in hand
She set out as the Queen’s champion.
Her armor shining in the sunlight
As she rode the fearsome Bandersnatch.
The Jabjub bird awaited
Ready to silently catch his prey.
As the Queens’ champions fought
The crowds looked on in horror.
Only one smiling face was seen that day,
So confident she was.
The Jabberwocky would slay the girl.
But as the cards fought below
The Queen’s champion had no time to waste.
She rose the sword,
And with confidence unseen before,
She brought it down.
Thump!
Thump!
Thump!
Down the stairs it fell,
The jabberwocky’s head.
The White Queen’s victory.
But as the champion descended
The happiness would not last.
With the Jabberwocky’s blood
Underland’s champion,
Alice Kingsley traveled home.
And in her hand she held a heart,
One with just a touch of madness,
leaving our dear Mad Hatter
Never to futterwacken again.

A Story’s Beginning
Fur, cotton, silk.
Coats of all different types and styles,
Sizes and textures.
Their warmth envelopes me,
But it soon disappears.
The soft, smooth texture turns rough and prickly.
The smell of pine invades my senses.
And I keep walking
Towards the soft light of the lamppost guiding me
To a moonlit clearing.
Back to my home
In which is known by many
Believed by few
And visited by even fewer.
  My story began,
  And will end,
In the exact same place.
Inside the wardrobe.

Fairytales
  A dashing knight,
  A deadly foe.
A beautiful maiden,
And a glorious land.
So the stories say.
But look beyond,
And you might find
The truth within the pages.

Fresh Page
  Vast plains untouched,
  Waiting to be built upon.
  An enormous forest,
  Waiting to have color.
    A lonely castle,
Waiting for a touch of emotion.
  Land after land
  Without a single soul,
Just waiting to be molded.
For you to pick up the pencil,
  To finish the story.
To add to the vast collection of knowledge already made,
  Just hidden inside the pages,
    Waiting to be written.
I slammed the car door violently and glared out the window, refusing to even acknowledge my dad as we pulled onto our tree-lined street. Despite my pronounced eye rolls and heaving sighs, he cheerily accelerated onto the darkened highway and turned on music from his iPhone. The metallic guitar opening of “People of the Sun” filled the small car.

“People come up!” he shouted, bobbing his head wildly, in perfect harmony with Zack de la Rocha.

“Do you even know where we’re going?” I whined, twirling the volume dial until the song barely whispered from the speakers. “I’m bored already.”

“Well,” he patiently replied, “we have to find a good place to see the comet. It has to be high enough and dark enough. Hopefully we’ll stumble across something to your liking.

“But what if we--” I began to argue, then stopped abruptly as he turned off the music. We drove in silence.

Twenty minutes later, Dad veered onto an exit excitedly. The Milky Way arched overhead, stars twinkled, and the moon bathed the earth in silver. An owl hooted in the distance. We were in the middle of nowhere. I gently rested my head on the dashboard, suppressing the urge to scream. Dad pointed out a dark hill surging out of black skeletons of trees and I noticed people lugging large objects as we pulled into a dim parking lot at the base of the hill.

Stepping out of the car, I grumbled as the freezing air bit at my face and fingers. My dad ignored me, quickly grabbed his telescope from the back seat, and hurried to catch up with another man carrying a telescope. Moments later, he jogged back to me, words tumbling out of his mouth in a stream of excitement.

“We stumbled across a group of astronomers. They’re here for the Pan-STARRS comet, too! They even invited us to watch with them! And this is the best part…” He continued on like a little boy on Christmas morning, but I tuned him out.

I simply nodded as he kept chattering, yanking my itchy scarf around my nose. We followed my dad’s new best friend to the base of the mound. Dad and the man began to climb the steps together, bonding over astronomy in general, as I crossed my arms indignantly and climbed behind them, wallowing in my misfortune.

At the top of the massive hill, the wind howled even more ferociously and the icy air snaked inside my jacket. My breath beat raggedly against my scarf, my thighs burned, and blood pounded in my ears. Wiping my nose, I trekked over to a distant bench and collapsed. After collecting myself, I tightened my hood and surveyed the scene. Despite the miserable conditions, about fifteen men and women of all ages were mingling, examining each other’s collections of telescopes and binoculars and cameras. I overheard their banter; I heard them greeting each other; I heard them laughing softly as they hugged. One matronly woman bundled head to toe in purple wool was passing out hand warmers and coffee. The enticing aroma of coffee floated over to my bench. My frosty fingers ached for the hand warmers. But I pulled out my phone and turned away scowling.

It wasn’t long before the woman in purple wool tapped my shoulder and handed me a steaming cup of coffee. Her eyes crinkled warmly as she smiled and her cheeks were pink from the cold.

“My name is Cathy,” she announced cheerily. “Why don’t you join the rest of us? We stay warm in packs!”

Before I had the chance to answer, she placed a firm hand on my back and guided me over to the group of strangers. My dad gave me a “behave” glare and turned back to his conversation. I introduced myself to Cathy, and she appeared very pleased with herself for initiating this outcast into the group.

She motioned me over to the largest telescope I had ever seen. A bearded man peered into it, occasionally talking quietly into a walkie-talkie. Cathy introduced me to the man, apparently her husband Mark, who handed me a pair of huge binoculars and brusquely told me to search for the comet. Clutching my warm cup of coffee with one hand and hefting the binoculars in the other, I scanned the velvety black sky, which was punctured with glittering pinpoints of light.

The hushed tones of astronomers around me seemed to drift gently away and the howling wind was now no more than a cool breeze.

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Mark shouted, “Got it!” followed by a long string of numbers which the other astronomers, including my dad, understood. Everyone began adjusting telescopes and murmurs of excitement filled the air. Bewildered, I searched the sky, trying in vain to find the speck of light that was the Pan-STARRS comet. Then my dad put his arm around my shoulder and led me to our telescope.

“Look,” he whispered, for the entire world had fallen silent as people gazed at the beautiful comet. Slowly, I peered into the telescope, fumbling for the knob to bring the image into focus. At last, I saw the brilliant speck of light with its green tail cascading behind it. The world was frozen in time. I didn’t even breathe as I gazed at the comet in awe. I glanced backwards at my dad to thank him, but he had already picked up my forgotten binoculars and was staring at Pan-STARRS once more.

The wind had died down entirely.

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I helped my dad dismantle the telescope, and as we packed it away we shouted our thanks to the astronomers. Cathy waved to us as we carefully placed the telescope in the trunk and yelled “Come again!”

“Definitely!” I called back. “Thank you for everything!”

“Was that so bad?” Dad laughed, prodding me to admit my mistake.

I couldn’t bring myself to verbally apologize, but as we sped onto the highway my numb fingers and toes began to thaw and I fumbled for his phone.

“What are you doing?” he asked. I simply tapped on a song and leaned back into my warm seat.

He smiled, saying nothing, as the opening of “People of the Sun” filled the car once more.

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I turned on the car and cautiously pulled out of the driveway, my Dad craning his neck to view the plum sky. It was an hour before a lunar eclipse, where the moon would be doused in dark red.

“Where are we going?” he questioned, leaning forward to turn on the GPS.

I shrugged. “Somewhere new. Let’s just drive.”

I sped onto the highway, surrounded by flashing white and red lights, without any idea where we were going, but somehow more relaxed than ever before.
Kathleen Schmidt

Poetry: The Lone Flower, The Sunflowers and the Sun, The Wind's Insistence, A Scarred Tree, Falling Snow
Washington High School
Jenny Meers, Teacher

The Lone Flower

After the storm, as the Sun peeked
to the dark clouds,
a lone flower stood tall
at the top of a grassy hill.
Broken limbs and the odd green leaf
scattered atop the ground. A soft breeze,
so unlike the gale of the storm,
bent the seemingly delicate stem
of my solitary bloom. I mounted
the knoll and knelt beside it.
I remember the house
creaking and groaning beneath the wind,
the crackling bursts of lighting,
the booming thuds of thunder.
Yet this flower had survived;
not undamaged, but alive.
I cupped the soft white petals, tempted
to pick the flower, uproot
the brave little soldier, but
I stayed my hands and leaned back.
How cruel, how thoughtless
to destroy this delicate strength.
It fought a battle stacked against it
and stood to tell the tale.
I rose and returned to the road;
I took a few steps. Then, paused,
glanced back.
The flower will heal, and the storm
fade from thought.
Others will pass this spot, oblivious.
Little will the flower tell of its struggles
and even less will passersby search for them.
It will simply be a flower along the road,
But I won't forget, I will remember
-I have always remembered-
That lone flower's modest victory.

The Sunflowers and the Sun

Follow the sun
-every sunflower does-
with all its brightness and warmth,
but only their heads move.
Roots tie them to
the soil below.
Yet ever do they strain,
East to West, East to West
-day after day-
Up comes the sun,
the flowers point East.
The sun moves, they stare back.
So far away it seems;
nevertheless,
they reach,
but that reach will never be enough.
The sun, miles and miles away,
can hardly be expected to notice.
-their hope useless, their efforts futile-
The sun cannot come down.
Surely, they know?
Yet, how could they?
They stand tall, happily even.
If they knew,
their heads would droop,
their color fade away.
But who could crush their hope,
darken their lives with the sun’s seeming mockery?
I doubt I could.

**The Wind’s Insistence**
The wind fiddles with
anything loose.
-Making noise,
    fighting to be noticed-
Rustling the leaves,
causing the grass to shiver,
but most arresting,
nudging my hair.
Gently, it flies with the tender push of air.
Ebbing and flowing
like waves upon the ocean,
yet not so consistent.
I find the wind’s insistence bothersome.
Playfully tossing my hair about
-into my eyes, brushing my face-
It’s only a delicate reminder;
the wind whispering,
“I’m here. Don’t forget me.”
Yet, still I rebuke it,
unmindful of its plea.
Huffing and puffing, I fling my hair away.
For a moment,
the wind dies
-hurt, disappointed-
A second later, it picks up again,
hopeful, yet, that I will
give promising attention.
A Scarred Tree
Through Fall’s bright leaves,
sunlight filters down.
Some green mixed in, but
a cool wind hints
at the coming winter.
In this quiet wood,
a wire fence stands nearby,
running through trees,
no posts to be found, but the trees.
In times gone by,
the wire strung
-biting through-
yet the tree grew ‘round.
I touch the scar
-following the unseen wire below-
Once on the outside, incorporated in.
The original bond, weak and bleeding,
yet now,
the two, one and the same-
the rough bark and smooth wire,
the inward wood and wire running through.

Falling Snow
Laying, with my head resting
against the frozen ground,
crunching leaves, shh... not a sound,
I watch the snowflakes filter down
through that winding labyrinth of limbs,
from the sky up above
to the earth far below.
Their path curves and curls,
any route, but straight and simple.
One moment lifted, floating, so high
the next plummeting, crying goodbye.
Yet, with the wind’s folly,
riding the breeze once again.
I watch these delicate forms,
gliding and falling.
Soon, the shivers and frost overcome.
I head toward home
-warmth’s lure too strong-
I would never understand, they said.
Words. I hate them.
In books, newspapers, magazines, on street signs, in my cell phone, on the computer; in this day and age it’s impossible to escape them. And for me, it’s impossible to understand them.
That’s what they told me, at least.
Letters.
How do they expect me to read the words when I can’t even recognize its letters?
And it seems as if whoever decided to make some letters symmetrical, some big and some small, some curvy and some straight, never considered the sanity of those with brains like me.
My brain is in a perpetual state of war with my eyes. I can never seem to process what I am seeing, and I can never seem to create what I am thinking. A normal book to you is a battlefield to me, the letters and words being their own weapons.
Mom took me to the doctor in second grade when she realized I was the only kid in my class who couldn’t write simple words, let alone my own name. Did “dog” start with a lowercase “b” or “d?” I could never remember.
I will never forget that day Mom took me to the doctor. What I thought would be a thirty minute visit turned into eight hours. Eight hours of words, lines, charts, shapes, colors; all of the things my teachers asked me to identify every day at school. I don’t know why they suddenly expected me to know it all when the doctor asked me.
I even suffered through the infamous dog question that day. I recognized a picture of a dog without any hesitation, but the second he asked me to write it down on a piece of paper it was like I was asked to send a rocket to the moon.
And the only conclusion that my tall, brown-haired, overly-paid doctor could come to was that there was no way to “make me better.”
“Your brain is different from the rest, Sweetie.” Looking back on it, I don’t know why I let him talk to me like I was still a baby. “The left side of your brain, the one that comprehends language and math, is weak. When you try to recognize a letter or read a word, it starts in the right side of your brain because it is stronger. By the time the thought process reaches the left side, you’ve become sidetracked and move on to something else. It’s a vicious cycle I’m afraid, and there is no medication that will make you better.”
I hated that phrase. “Make me better.” Mom says I am perfect just the way I am, and that people won’t love me less just because I can’t spell, or sometimes even remember, their names. But according to the doctor I needed some serious fixing.
And my teachers over the years seem to agree with him.
“Stupid” was a label that commonly confronted me from all types of people, and way too often would they pretend it slipped out by accident. I know deep down I’m not stupid; my brain can hold just as much as the name-callers. And I am definitely smart enough to realize that these types of insults do not just come out on “accident.”
At the start of each school year my teachers usually try to defend me and understand that I am different, but by October they typically give up.
Fifth grade was by far the worst, because my teacher refused to even let me have extra time on tests. “My classroom will not put up with students who aren’t willing to work hard to meet every standard,” were her exact words. Those words have become permanently engraved in memory ever since they were said. I wish people realized that I work twice as hard and don’t get nearly the outcome that everyone else receives.
I’ll never know what it feels like to see an ‘A’ next to English and math on my report card.
I’ll never know what it feels like to read a book cover-to-cover once and be able to talk to my friends about how great it was. It took me at least two times to begin to understand what I read.
And worst of all, I’ll never know what it feels like to be normal.
Because according to them, I would just never understand.
My mom was the only person who consistently believed in me, even though she wasn’t around much to help. Mom is a flight attendant, so she’s home three days a week if I’m lucky.
But things turned around this year when I started high school.
I was expecting the same type of treatment I received the first eight years of school, and I refused to be put in the special-education classes like my mom and doctor asked me. I just couldn’t bring myself to do it. I’m a smart person, and I was determined to let that show in high school.
That is why I was pleasantly surprised when I walked into Ms. Payne’s freshman English class this August.
Ms. Payne was different than any teacher I’ve ever had, and on the first day she noticed I was different, too. But unlike the rest, she wanted to help me succeed rather than wait until I failed.
My first semester of freshman year, I stayed after school three days a week with Ms. Payne, and she helped me until I understood the class at the level everyone else did. Sometimes it took twenty minutes, sometimes two hours. It didn’t matter to her; she was willing to help me no longer how long it took.
This is what I have been looking for all along. Someone to believe in me, and to see that I am not this “stupid” person everyone seems to enjoy calling me. Ms. Payne saw my determination to prove these people wrong and she was willing to help me get there.
And after a while, things started making sense. I could write my name every time on the first try. As long as I read a book slowly, I began only having to read it once to understand its content. I even wrote “dog” every single day for a month and never put a “b” instead of a “d.”
By winter break, it seemed as if the battlefield that holds the war between my mind and words was ceasing to exist.
On the first day of second semester, I walked to Ms. Payne’s room at the end of the day for our normal Monday meeting. My mind was going crazy with the list of things I had been so excited to tell her, from the news headlines I remember reading and even the poem I had start writing all on my own over winter break.
These things were still taking me a very long time to do, of course, but the idea of starting to do them all on my own was an accomplishment in itself.
“I can’t meet with you today,” Ms. Payne said as I eagerly opened the door to her classroom.
“Oh, okay,” I said with slight disappointment in my voice. “I will just see you tomorrow then.”
“No,” she responded, “you won’t. I don’t have time to work with you anymore. We spent so much time together first semester and I feel like you haven’t gotten as far as I wanted you to. You still aren’t up to par with the rest of the class, and I’m running out of ways to help you.”
My face became red and beads of sweat starting dripping down my face as Ms. Payne’s words were settling into my mind. I was so confident in how far I’ve come since the first day of freshman year and she decided to give up now? It just didn’t seem fair.
Without saying anything, I turned to walk out of the door when Ms. Payne said, “I just don’t think you will ever understand. I’m sorry.”
And those were the only words I needed to hear.
The exact same phrase that has been said to me a million times from all of the people who have given up on me. I honestly thought Ms. Payne was different and I thought she cared, but I guess not.
As I walked in the front door of my house that day I couldn’t help but replay in my mind all of the times I’ve been laughed at or called stupid.
The letters. The words. The numbers. The stories.
Everything and everyone suddenly jumbled back together and no longer made sense. Ms. Payne had lost faith in me, and I suddenly had lost faith in myself.
The mental war was starting again. But this time, I didn’t feel like fighting it. Instead, I just let the letters and words stab at my brain until I forced myself to pay attention to what they actually meant.
Unfortunately, they got my attention in the worst way possible.
I had gotten really good at reading news headlines. Even though they only flashed on the screen for less than a minute, I liked challenging myself with a time crunch. It was my way of winning the war, at least temporarily.
But when I walked into the house that day and turned the TV on, it took me a lot longer than normal to depict what the lady in a suit was trying to tell the world.
“Fl... flight.” Okay, first word. Got it.

“Orash.. orashes..” Orashes? I thought long and hard about what that word could mean. Ten seconds later I realized that capital letter was a ‘C’ instead of an ‘O.’ Why must they look so much alike?

And just as those two words began to make sense together, a picture popped up on the screen of a giant white plane slowly sinking into the ocean. My heart immediately dropped as I thought about all of the innocent lives that weren’t going to make it.

But something caught my eye on that TV screen; a word that looked all too familiar.

“DELTA.” I would recognize that airline anywhere, capital letters and everything.

I have seen it way too many times in my life, that even I can’t mistake it for anything else.

It’s the word I see on my mom’s shirt every time she leaves the house to go to work. It’s on her suitcase she rolls around. She has a water bottle with those exact letters on it. And when I go to get the mail out of the mailbox, I often find a paycheck with that airline written on an envelope.

But there’s no way it could be my mom. It’s impossible. She’s been on hundreds of flights in her career and never had to experience as much as an emergency landing.

Just as I was about to flip the TV off I heard the same lady in the suit say a series of numbers. A flight number.

“8231,” she said.

I repeated those numbers out loud a dozen times but I still couldn’t picture them in my head. Numbers were my weakest subject, and right now that flight number was just a bunch of sounds.

“8231..8231..8231..” I was like a broken record.

I ran from the living room into the kitchen and began frantically searching through all of the paperwork Mom had left on the counter.


What felt like an hour passed before I finally found my mom’s work calendar buried under the pile of randomness. I continued to repeat the number, still sound without meaning.

“8231..8231..”

And then suddenly there it was. The meaning.

The numbers 8, 2, 3, and 1 were spelled out on today’s date in my mom’s calendar, in that exact order, just like the lady in the suit had spoken them.

I have always struggled to learn to read and write numbers because they are meaningless to me. But I guess today was the exception. I’m not stupid; I knew what those numbers meant the second I saw them written down.

I would never understand, they said.

I understood.
Gwen abruptly skidded to a halt. She stared openly at the tall, freckled boy looming behind the clean white counter of Ellen’s Diner. Gwen did not recognize this boy, and she knew almost everyone in Tacitus. It was a dainty town of only 4,000, tucked into the backcountry hills of central Missouri. Describing this unfamiliar face as a “boy” however, did him no justice. He had the build of a serious athlete, lithe and sturdy, with thick ropes of muscle along his shoulders and arms. His sandy orange hair fell over gleaming sapphire eyes and continued down his sharp jaw into a pair of thick sideburns. The stranger towered over his coworkers. He had to duck through doorways as if he were in a doll house when he emerged from the kitchen laden with weighty plates of food. His broad shoulders and enormous hands looked hilariously out of place in his tacky white paper hat and apron with “Ellen’s Diner” written across them in looping red cursive.

The buzzing chatter and clanking of dishes seemed to fade into white noise as his freckled face turned to Gwen. She tilted her head and narrowed her dark eyes up at the stranger. The corners of her mouth tugged down into a slight frown. The young man’s clever gaze traveled down her slender frame, admiring. His eyes flickered over her thick braids of dreadlocked hair, the silver rings through her petite nose and pointed ears, and her loose-fitting flannel shirt and khaki shorts. Her cheeks were a burnt pink and her skin was just beginning to turn bronze as the summer season was starting up. After the blatant checking-out, the young man dared to wink at her.

“What can I do for you, Grumpy?” he called over the sizzling and clattering sounds of the kitchen behind him. A confident but mischievous grin slid into place, and his deep blue eyes sparkled. He chomped his bright pink gum and lifted his eyebrows expectantly. Gwen’s narrow face defaulted to a scowl.

“Where’s Ellen?” Gwen deadpanned. A stoic and utterly disinterested expression settled across her elfish features. She stood rigid, an arm’s length away from the counter instead of immediately coming to plop down at her favorite barstool the way she would have if her middle-aged friend had been working. Bright morning light filtered in through the streaky windows, throwing a harsh glare up at Gwen off the top of the counter like a spotlight. The girl’s sour face deepened.

“Aw, loosen up, Sugar. Come sit down! I don’t bite,” the young man gave a warm smile, revealing a dimple in his left cheek. He hunched down to lean his elbows against the sticky counter and raised one sly brow. “Unless you ask real nice,” he stage-whispered with a chuckle. His eyes were like rich jewels as they bore into her, studying every detail from her battered hiking boots to her painted black fingernails as if she were the most interesting person he’d ever laid eyes on.

Gwen shifted awkwardly under the unwanted attention. Being a woman of many words, she simply raised one unimpressed eyebrow of her own and glared. She waited for an answer to her question, unmoving.

“I like your hair. It’s unusual,” the giant ginger drawled lazily, ignoring her crossed arms and the impatient lilt to her hips. Gwen’s fingers subconsciously tugged on the end of a dreadlock, and she dropped her eyes to the checkered black and white floor tiles momentarily.

She was out of her element with this much attention and the newcomer’s unabashed confidence threw Gwen off. There weren’t many people in this puny town who were brave enough to start a conversation with Gwendoline Amber Black. Certainly not attractive young men with freckles and muscles and blue eyes and dimples. Most of Gwen’s friends were either in their fifties, like Ellen, or cats. Except for Ellen’s daughter, Emma. Emma was twenty seven, only five years older than Gwen. The girls were like sisters.

“Ellen,” Gwen growled, very ready to move on from this unexpected conversation with this unexpected man with his unexpected charms. Gwen hated surprises. They were right up there on her list with stupid questions and vegetarians.

The too-friendly man held up his giant hands in surrender. Gwen couldn’t help but notice the name tag pinned to his broad chest between his raised hands spelled out “Miles” in crooked black sticker letters.

“Mom’s not workin’ today. She’s sick at home,” Miles conceded, his flirtatious smile never wavering. The brilliant morning light reflecting off the counter turned his hair and freckles into spun gold.
Gwen’s honey brown eyes widened slightly as she connected the dots. This “Miles” guy had just referred to Ellen as his mom. Gwen suddenly remembered her older friend mentioning a son away at college. She had gone on and on to Gwen about her mysterious son’s impressive basketball career, his pursuit of a business degree, and how he would one day take over the O’Conner family’s diner. Anywhere the woman could work him into the conversations, she did just that. Over coffee at the diner, back at the campground where Gwen worked, or during commercials on the couch at Ellen’s house, she often brought him up. Gwen had eventually admitted interest in meeting this elusive son of hers one day, and now here he was. This shameless, redheaded sasquatch was the infamous Miles O’Conner.

Gwen didn’t know if she should be disappointed or impressed. For the first time in a long time, Gwendoline was very unsure of herself. Before either of them could utter another word, Gwen turned her back on Miles. She stomped out of Ellen’s Diner without a second glance, leaving behind the aromas of freshly brewed coffee and sputtering bacon.

“What, no coffee? Breakfast?” Miles called, leaning over the counter after her. His voice rose an octave in surprise. The man watched Gwen retreat to her charcoal black pickup truck with pouting lips and furrowed brows.

“Don’t look so glum, little brother. You just got back in town.” Emma squeezed his hearty bicep as she skittered past with a pot of coffee. She smiled warmly at her regular customers as she refilled their steaming mugs from across the counter. A ribbon of crimson hair fell from behind her ear when she leaned with the coffee pot and she tucked it back into place as she turned to face her brother.

“Hey, Em.” Miles sighed, crossing his sinewy arms and leaning a hip against the counter. “Did you know that girl who was just in here?” Emma pursed her rose petal lips and narrowed her hazel eyes at his vague question. “She had dreadlocks, and nice amber eyes,” he clarified.

“Oh, so you’ve met Gwen!” Emma brightened with a wide smile. “Ma and I adore her. Did she get her morning coffee?”

“Gwen,” Miles murmured to himself, trying out the name, tasting the syllable. He shook his head to clear it, and his copper hair swished against his forehead. “Nah, she left as soon as I told her Mom was sick. Didn’t even say goodbye.” Miles frowned slightly, a line creasing between his eyebrows and cast another lingering glance at door.

“Yeah, that sounds like her. Probably speeding over to the house as we speak. She’s real close with Mom. Gwen’s own mother died when she was nine. I think it was cancer. Anyway, Ma kind of adopted her as her own when Gwen moved to town a few years back.” Emma was babbling in her usual manner, but Miles didn’t stop her this time. He wanted to hear more about the quiet girl with the amber eyes who was so close to his own family. “Poor girl never knew her own mother back when she was a healthy woman, so she insists on being at Ma’s side anytime she has so much as a common cold.”

Miles suddenly broke into a half-grin and turned to face his sister, his cheeks suddenly flushed with determination. “How does Gwen like her coffee?”

Gwen rapped her knuckles against the hard wooden door, loud enough to echo through the stuffy one-story house. Her other hand held the frayed screen door aloft. Morning birds sang as they flitted through the still-rising sunlight. Gwen cast an annoyed look over her shoulder at them. She tapped her feet on the peeling white paint of the front porch. After a few seconds, she let herself in with the key from beneath the chubby ceramic garden gnome beside the swaying porch swing.

“Ellen?” Gwen called into the empty space, worry lacing her voice. The walls seemed to be holding their breath the way houses do when their occupants have not yet stirred for the day. Gwen picked her way down the hall and ran her fingers absentmindedly along the familiar rose bud wall paper. She creaked open Ellen’s bedroom door and spied a snoring lump in bed under the heavy quilts. Butterly sunlight fell through the window above the headboard, turning the sleeping woman’s gray-streaked maroon hair into a fiery halo. Gwen laid a tender hand on her mother-figure’s wrinkled forehead and tutted to herself as the heat glowed against her skin. Ellen hummed at the touch and stirred beneath the girl’s hand. She peered up at Gwen and a foggy smile pulled at her chapped lips.

“Hi, Gwen, honey.” Ellen sighed before adjusting her head against the fluffy pillow. She hummed again and went back to her timid snoring. Gwen couldn’t help the affectionate sparkle in her cinnamon eyes. She crept

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into the master bath to fetch a cool washcloth for her friend’s clammy face. After she was satisfied with her impromptu visit, Gwen closed the bedroom door behind her with a soft click.

Gwen whistled to herself just to weave some sound into the hushed air of the house as she started back toward the front door. Just as she reached for the tarnished knob, the door lunged at her, swinging open from the outside. It collided with Gwen’s shoulder, sending a dull throb through her lanky arm. After spouting some colorful profanities, Gwen glared up into a pair of startled blue eyes.

“Oh, jeez, my bad!” Miles O’Conner sputtered with a sheepish grin. He quirked his head at her language. “Well, that’s a wicked tongue you got there, girl.”

Flustered heat crept up her neck and cheeks like magma, and she pushed past the tall man. Miles turned and followed her out of the house, easily keeping up with her hurried steps on his mile-long legs. Gwen’s boots crunched toward her truck in the auburn fallen pine needles and shifting gravel of the long driveway.

“Hey, wait up a sec, Grumpy!” he laughed good spiritedly. Miles gently caught Gwen’s elbow, his long fingers easily catching the soft flannel. He held up the steaming coffee to-go which he had brought with him from the diner. “Two sugars, no cream. On the house,” he announced proudly, puffing out his trim chest a little. Gwen stared at him uncomprehendingly.

Miles had removed the paper hat and apron, and seemed more real and tangible to Gwen now. Back at the diner, he had been an unforeseen embodiment of a distant idea. Now he was standing in front of her with one sizable hand still resting on her elbow. Gwen could feel the heat of his skin through her thin plaid shirt and thought his hand could probably engulf her entire forearm. Miles held the coffee out to her expectantly. The curl of steam rising from the lid wafted toward Gwen, sweeping in front of her nose.

“Thanks,” Gwen clipped with narrowed eyes. She took the cup from him gingerly, never moving her suspicious gaze from his dopey grin.

“Oh!” Miles removed his hand from her arm and ran in through his ginger hair. “Uh, Emma told me how you like it.”

Gwen nodded, the suspicion leaking from her stare. She suddenly turned on her heel, causing the gravel to rumble beneath her boot. Her willowy frame started back toward where her dingy truck was pulled unceremoniously to the side of the narrow country road.

Miles hurried after her again. “So, I hear you’re pretty close with my family,” he prattled to the back of Gwen’s head. When she didn’t so much as nod, he continued. “Well, I guess that means that you and I will inevitably become close too, since I am in fact a part of the O’Conner clan.” Miles leaned against Gwen’s pickup, waiting for a reply of some sort. Gwen only climbed into the driver’s seat and yanked the door closed behind her, sipping at her rich coffee and pointedly ignoring him. Miles brushed his hands down the front of his faded blue jeans. His smile had begun to waver when he spied Gwen’s new camera sitting in the passenger seat. “You a photographer?” Miles blurted through the open window, trying to sound nonchalant.

Gwen finally turned her honey brown eyes on him. “Only when I see something I like.” Her voice was light and even, her face almost bored.

This was the most he had heard her say since they met, and he took that as a good sign. Miles gulped, his uncanny confidence momentarily stilled by those piercing eyes. They reminded him of sunshine through sweet tea.

“That’s a real nice Pentax film camera you got there.” The young man rested his forearms on Gwen’s windowsill, and leaned down into the cab slightly, regaining confidence. “Is it a 35 millimeter?”

“It is,” Gwen caught a whiff of pine and pink bubble gum as she studied the sprinkle of freckles across his wide cheekbones. “You like photography?”

“I dabble,” Miles grinned down at her and showed off his dimple. “I’m a jack of many trades, and a master at none.” He gave his best self-deprecating shrug.

Gwen’s face seemed to relax. Her eyes were no longer narrowed, the small frown was gone from her plump lips, and her brow smoothed out, yet she remained impassive. The silver ring in her nose glinted in the pale sunlight. “Except for basketball, I hear,” her voice was careful, like she was afraid the words would crack to pieces before they left her tongue.

“So, you’ve heard about me,” Miles’ smile widened, showing off a row of perfect white teeth. He rested his chiseled chin down on his folded arms. The young man peeked up at Gwen through long golden lashes and his dark blue eyes seemed to shimmer on their own like pools of fresh water.
Gwen suddenly yanked her camera into her hands and snapped Miles’ picture with practiced ease before he could move. She let her hands drop the camera back onto the passenger seat with a muted thud. When she looked back at him, Miles had sat up straight again but was still grinning at her with that charming sparkle in his eye.

“See something you like?” he inquired knowingly.

Gwen smirked at him and started up the truck with a sharp twist of keys. Miles got the hint and backed away a step. He caught her eye one more time and winked.

“Enjoy that coffee!” he spoke up over the grumbling engine as she shifted into gear. The tangy smell of gasoline rose into the quiet forest air. “And that picture too!” he added with a hearty laugh as Gwen’s truck pulled away. He stood with his hands sunk in his pockets and watched her disappear down the long street. The wheels of the truck kicked up a trail of dust that seemed to wave back at Miles, promising to see him again.

“She took my picture,” he marveled aloud with a slight shake of his head.
I slam the car door shut; my seat is warm from the mid-October sun. Resting my arms over my protruding hip bones, I shrink back into the seat and stare out the window sullenly. This is not where I wanted to be today; six hours in the car with my parents is more than enough. I feel uncomfortable from the lunch I was forced to eat, and fat. “Fat is not a feeling,” I try to tell myself. It doesn’t work. I jam my headphones into my ears; the music drowns out the voices in my head. I don’t want to deal with them right now anyway.

Six months ago, if you were to tell me that I was being sent away, I would not have believed you, at all. Initially, all that I desired was to be the best I could be, because I thought that it would be the only way I could be happy. I thought that what I was doing to myself was harmless, but that is exactly what the voice wanted me to think. “Just a little bit faster during practice, then you can be a better runner,” it says. Initially, it is right. I become a better runner, but suddenly I stop getting faster. I look to the voice for answers, “Just a few less bites of food,” it tells me. Certain foods need to go; there is no room for junk food in a champion athlete’s diet. Again I become a slightly faster runner, but again I stop improving. “Just a little bit longer workout,” it tells me now. I don’t question the voice. It has guided me and made me better, so I obey and add more.

We are an hour and a half into our drive. It is going so much faster than I expected. I stare out blankly at the trees as they rush past. Orange, yellow, red. I used to think that fall foliage was beautiful, but now I could care less. My parents and I do not talk much on the ride. My mom absorbs herself into a knitting project; she doesn’t want me to see how much leaving me breaks her heart.

Summer flies by and without the distraction of school, the voice only gets stronger. I must observe its rigidity. Every day starts the same: wake up, throw on some running clothes and my trainers, and walk out the door to the car where my team is waiting for me. We run every morning, except for Sundays. That is supposed to be our rest day, but I cannot rest. My ‘rest’ is a brisk, hour long walk on the treadmill while I watch TV. The voice would never let me skip a day of exercising, it is practically a sin. After our run, I come home and begin my daily workout. Sixty sit-ups, twenty push-ups, sixty more sit-ups, a three minute plank, and then repeat. By this time it is already 10:30am. My stomach rumbles, but there is no need to eat a large breakfast, I will have to eat again within a few hours anyway.

Lunch and dinner are the same way; always taking as little as possible. Even though my stomach claws at my sides I cannot bring myself to eat more. If I do, the voice will force me to exercise it, and more, away later. It does not matter what the food is, I can never win. I cannot even eat a baby carrot without feeling extremely guilty. At meals when I make a plate of food, my mother eyes it with apprehension, but does not say anything. She knows that if she makes a comment, I will rip her to shreds with my words. Inevitably one of us will end up in tears. Most of the time it ends up being me.

As we approach the fourth hour of the drive, hardly anybody is talking. I am resentful of them, and the fact that they are leaving me in a psychological ward makes my blood boil. All I want to do is scream at them, tell them they are abandoning me. If they really loved me, they would not leave me. Yet, I know that they really do love me. They love me so much, that it kills them to watch me suffer and not be able to fix it.

As the summer continues on, I only succumb to the power of the voice more. I stop communicating with friends and classmates, and although I want to spend time with them, I am afraid. Afraid of what they may think of what I have become, and also desperately hoping that they notice. Notice that I am absent from everything, hoping that they miss spending time with me. If my classmates actually liked me, I would have heard from them by this point. When I do not hear from them, I automatically assume that I am hated. The voice takes hold of my insecurities and shoves them back in my face, “You are worthless, you are pitiful, you are unloved.”

Around the fifth hour of the drive, snack time nears and my anxiety skyrockets. Tears begin to stream down my face like a rushing river breaking through a dam. There is no stopping the flood of emotion that comes with it. I have to eat though, I have no choice. It is either eat now, or have a rubber tube guided through my nose, down my esophagus, and into my stomach later, pumping calories down my throat. Begrudgingly, I persuade the voice to let me eat.
At the beginning of the school year, I am a shell of the girl I used to be. There is no glimmer in my eye and no joy in my face. Clothes hang off of my body like I am a coat rack; I do not even use the zippers on my pants, there is no need to. My skin is gray, my eyes lifeless with dark, purple bags underneath them, and my bones stick out at every angle. Yet, I feel beautiful. Now when I walk down the hallways, people notice me. Though they do not realize it, I see them staring and hear their whispers about my skeletal figure. On occasion, someone will approach me and comment on how thin I look. Though they intend it to be a concern, it only fuels the voice.

The final hour. In less than sixty minutes, I will be walking into my own personal prison. In less than sixty minutes, my parents will leave me. I will be abandoned in an unknown city, living with eleven other sick, teenage girls, and my health will be in the care of complete strangers. I cannot do this. I open my mouth to demand my parents to turn our car around, but I cannot. I know my parents will not. Fortunately, for my sake, they are not going to stand by while I slowly kill myself.

Now, as I sit in this small room in the treatment center, my mother wraps her arms around me. My father sits down on the other side of me. As I look up at him, I can see the pain in his eyes. None of us can hold back the tears hiding behind our eyes. We all know that they will have to leave as soon as the doctors come in, leaving me to deal with my problems. There is nowhere to run; I cannot escape them any longer. It is time for me to either do, or die.
The magician stalked through the sea of red velvet chairs, parting the crowd with sweeps of his ring-laden hands. “I need a volunteer,” he informed the audience. Eager children stood on their seats and shouted for the magician’s attention: “Me, me! Pick me!” The magician politely ignored them, instead scanning the crowd as if looking for someone specific. His eyes fastened on a young girl near the back of the theater.

“How about you, young lady?” He strode purposefully towards the girl. “Would you like to be my volunteer?” He didn’t wait for an answer, just grabbed her hand and pulled her to the stage.

“Now, what is your name?”

The girl stared at the magician with wide eyes, a deer caught in the headlights. She mumbled something that no one but the magician heard.

“Well, Arabelle. You’re going to be part of a disappearing act today.” The magician whirled to address the audience. “I will perform a marvelous disappearing act with this young lady. She will step into this wardrobe,” and here, he gestured to the oak contraption sitting hesitantly in the center of the stage, “And I, the amazing Illuminatus Incognito will make her and the wardrobe disappear! Prepare to be fascinated and baffled, ladies and gentleman!”

Illuminatus beckoned Arabelle into the wardrobe, which shook and groaned, coughing dust when the doors were slammed shut, Arabelle safely inside. “Are we all watching, ladies and gentleman?” asked Illuminatus. The mustache perched on his upper lip quivered with excitement. He conjured a wand out of seemingly nowhere, waving it around feverishly. “Emazdad!” The crowd hushed in anticipation, and it was several long moments before, with a burst of blue smoke, the wardrobe was replaced by a vacant spot on the stage.

Applause roared in the cramped space of the theater. Illuminatus didn’t pause to savor the appreciation. He whipped out a match, announcing, “Now I will proceed to light a dove on fire. The dove will not be harmed in any way.” There was a brief uproar, then a frantic voice cut through the hoots and hollers: “Where’s my daughter?” Those in the vicinity of the mousey woman echoed her calls. “Aren’t you going to bring back the girl, Illuminatus Incognito?” “Surely the impressive Illuminatus Incognito can bring the girl back. Can’t he?” The magician didn’t answer.

“Hey, what’d you do with the little girl?” The entire theater thundered with protests and unanswered questions.

“Let’s not get rowdy here,” Illuminatus told the crowd. “After my next act, I shall bring the girl back.” Everyone was appeased but the mousey woman that was Arabelle’s mother. Eventually, though, she too sighed resignedly and settled back into her chair, wringing her hands.

Illuminatus removed a dove from the top hat placed haphazardly on his head. With his other hand, he lit the match. “This is an act of great danger, ladies and gentleman, children and adults. I shall set this beautiful bird on fire without burning a single feather.” The dove wriggled in the magician’s hand, eyeing the dancing flames of the match with beady orbs. The flames licked at the bird’s white feathers, and with an alarmed squawk, the bird took flight, wings tipped with flailing wisps of gold and red and orange.

There was a gasp of breathless awe, faces turned upward at the flaming comet of a bird. Until the bird reached the ceiling of the theater, and the wisps of gold and red and orange grabbed hold of the wood and hung on, eating it away, feasting upon it.

There was only screams as the theater collapsed in on itself.

No one noticed Illuminatus Incognito vanish from his spot in the center of the stage, unsinged.

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Arabelle sat hunched in the corner of the wardrobe. She had been locked in by the magician, and then the wardrobe had heated up like an oven. It had shaken and rocked and trembled, sending clouds of dust flying all over the place, making her cough something fierce. When the shaking had finally stopped, Arabelle had tentatively cracked the door of the wardrobe open, expecting to face the glare of the stage lights.
She had been greeted by the sight of a hundred foot drop down to the sea. The wardrobe must’ve somehow appeared on the edge of a cliff—she hadn’t honestly believed that the magician could do real magic, but he had proved her wrong. Arabelle slammed the wardrobe door shut, certain that she would puke if she kept looking at the sheer cliff drop.

*How in the world did I get here? The sea’s miles from the city, there’s no way that magician could’ve put me here. Real magic’s for fairytales, anyway.* Arabelle couldn’t deny that magic seemed to be the most plausible explanation, though, as much as she hated to admit it.

A knocking sound startled Arabelle from her worries. “Arabelle?” said a familiar voice, “You can come out now. There’s no need to be afraid.” When Arabelle didn’t reply immediately, the wardrobe door creaked open. Illuminatus Incognito came into view, but something was different. His hair was white, as if he had gone forward in time and left her behind.

“It was supposed to be an act, an illusion,” Arabelle spat at him. “You can’t go around making little girls disappear to cliff edges.”

Illuminatus stared at her unblinkingly. “Send me back,” Arabelle commanded him.

“No.”

“Why not? You brought me here, so you owe me a free trip home.”

“Calm down,” said Illuminatus, “And get out of that disgusting wardrobe.” He pointed at Arabelle, mumbled senseless words, and she was suddenly overwhelmed with the urge to obey him. Her mind resisted, but her body moved against her will. She tried to stop crawling forward, to stop stepping out of the wardrobe, yet she couldn’t. It was as if an invisible puppeteer was controlling her, manipulating her whether she liked it or not. She was out of the wardrobe, and the puppeteer had her suspended over the hundred foot drop to the frothing sea below. A scream ripped its way from her throat before her mouth was yanked shut with a flourish of Illuminatus’ hand.

“I hope you are more willing to listen to what I have to say, Arabelle.” The silent *or else* jostled for attention amongst all the other fears crowding Arabelle’s mind. She couldn’t nod her agreement, though. She couldn’t do much of anything except listen and pray the puppeteer didn’t get butterfingers.

“You, Arabelle, are in an honored position. I have recruited you to take care of my magnificent collection of birds, as you can see,” said Illuminatus. Arabelle’s eyes were forced down to gaze directly below her, and she gasped. There, built into the side of the cliff and extending far over the sea was a glass dome. Inside were five bright blue birds as big as horses, each with shimmering emerald scales dotting their backs. Where their tail feathers should have been were long serpentine tails that whipped the air. Streaks of red ran down their necks, as if they were bleeding. They called to each other in shrill whistles and warbles.

“They look like dragons,” Arabelle thought. Illuminatus seemed to read her thoughts. “These rare birds are the very offspring of the mighty sea dragon and the kingfisher Halcyon. Surely you have heard of Halcyon, the Greek goddess, turned into a kingfisher by the Greek gods? No? Well, no matter. I made it my life’s goal to collect all of these birds, and there cannot be many more for me to find.” Illuminatus walked on air from his place on the cliff to where Arabelle was suspended. “I do not need you to help me find the remaining birds. No, I need you to collect their eggs. You see, for seven days after the winter solstice, the birds will lay eggs of pure gold, worth millions of dollars, surely. I have tried and failed to collect them, for the birds are fiercely protective. Thus, I have resorted to having children such as you collect the eggs. The birds seem less likely to tear children apart.”

Laughing, Illuminatus dragged Arabelle back to the cliff top. The invisible puppeteer released her, and Arabelle nearly face planted. Illuminatus leaned in close to her ear and whispered, “The last girl that I recruited tried to escape before the birds even got to her. If you attempt the same, no one will hear from you ever again. I have powerful magic, little girl. Do you understand?”

Arabelle nodded, trembling on the inside. He’d already demonstrated what he could do with a wave of his hand. She didn’t want to know what else he could do.

“Good,” Illuminatus snarled. “Let’s get you acquainted with my feathered friends.”

**

Arabelle had always wanted to fly, but not with a psycho magician who could actually do real magic. He’d grabbed her and literally flown off the cliff, landing with a bone-jarring thud on the glass dome. “Tomorrow’s the winter solstice. The eggs you collect will be kept in this basket and returned to me when the week is over,”
he’d told her, handing her a basket from seemingly out of nowhere. Then he’d simply said a spell and poof, there she was on a sandy beach, surrounded by glass.

The birds weren’t bothering her yet. Arabelle watched them lazily glide from the shore to the island out in the middle of the sea, towards the far end of their glass enclosure, and wondered how she had ever gotten into this situation.

Food and water was not a problem—there was a freshwater pond and some sort of tropical fruit in a little grove of trees pressed up against the cliff face. No, the problem was that she needed a way out, before the birds noticed her.

Or before the magician decided she was a burden. The thought made Arabelle shudder. Thank goodness the winter solstice was hours away. That gave Arabelle plenty of time to curl up under a tree and breathe a little longer.

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A whistling noise woke Arabelle from her dreams. She jumped to her feet, dazed and uncertain of where she was until it all came rushing back to her. The magician, the birds, everything.

The whistling noise vibrated through the air once more. Arabelle wiped the sleep from her eyes and focused on the distant shape on the shore. It was one of the birds, pawing at the sand. The winter solstice must have already started.

The bird fanned out its shimmering wings and began to flap them frantically, as if swatting away nonexistent flies. The great plumes of sand grains it stirred up with its wings hid it from view. When the debris had cleared, Arabelle noticed that a golden egg—about the size of a basketball—huddled in the sand bowl created by its mother’s whirling wings.

The egg’s mother arched its neck and gave a half scream, half melodious whistle. It looked proud of her accomplishment. Arabelle felt terrible, knowing that she’d soon be taking the bird’s pride and joy away. It was her own life at stake, though, tethered to the magician’s will. I’ll wait until the bird leaves to eat, Arabelle decided, and she crouched behind the tree she’d been sleeping under, ferns hiding her from view. The magical basket twitched by her side, waiting to be filled.

It was at least an hour before the bird left the egg. The creature seemed hesitant, but hunger must have beckoned because it reluctantly took flight, out to the fish that called to her stomach. Arabelle waited until the bird was a speck in the distance, then darted out across the sand. Hurry hurry hurry hurry, chanted the basket banging against her hip. The sand sucked at her feet, yet she reached the egg and took hold. It was heavier than she had expected, but the magical basket stretched to hold its weight. Hurry hurry hurry.

Arabelle turned to run back when bam! Something crashed into her, something large and feathery. Oh oh oh, the bird’s here. It screeched in her ear and pinned her to the shore. How could she have been so stupid? Why did she ever think her plan would work? She closed her eyes and waited for the bird’s beak to tear into her flesh. And waited. And waited.

THIS. EGG. IS. MINE.

Arabelle’s eyes flew open, and she looked up at the shape holding her to the ground. Was it the bird’s voice in her head?

MY. EGG. It must be the bird talking to her in her mind.

“I know it’s your egg,” Arabelle wheezed out loud, wriggling around to lessen the pressure on her chest.

Why do you take my egg?

“It’s a long story.”

The bird glared at her. He sends children to steal my eggs.

“I’ve heard. Listen, I don’t have a choice in this.”

I do not like to kill children. I am tired of killing children. Stop stealing my eggs.

“I don’t have a choice in this,” Arabelle repeated.

Get rid of him for me. “He’s got magic and I’m just a little girl! What am I supposed to do? You’re the one who’s magical, not me,” Arabelle protested.

I want to feel the unbridled wind in my feathers. I want to fly as far as I want. I want to go home. Take me home.

“I can’t.” Arabelle sighed. “He’ll kill me with his magical powers or whatever when I’m done with the eggs, unless you kill me first. Why can’t he just use his magic to get the eggs, anyway? Why make me do it? Why ME?”
The bird whistled. Magic from one magical being does not affect another. However, the glass imprisoning us was created from the life source of his soul, and neither magical beings nor non-magical beings can break through until his soul is extinguished. Of course, his magic does not affect my eggs. He must get others to steal for him, because he knows that we will destroy him if he comes in.

“Wait. You said if he dies…the glass breaks…” Arabelle pondered the thought. The magician’s life in exchange for hers and the birds’. But now was not the time to argue about ethics. “Tell me, bird. How do we destroy a magician?”

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“Arabelle, bring me the eggs,” called Illuminatus. It had been a week, and now the magician was standing just outside of the glass dome, having magically carved a doorway for Arabelle to exit from. He had looked surprised to see her relatively intact, as if he hadn’t expected her to survive.

Arabelle feigned a broken leg, lying on the shore and moaning. “The birds have torn my leg. I can’t move, you must come get the eggs yourself. I’m near the end, I can feel it. Take your eggs before I perish… The birds are out feeding, they won’t notice…”

Illuminatus hesitated. Arabelle moaned some more, hoping he didn’t notice that she looked nothing like a dying person. “Please, all my hard work…” Greed filled the magician’s eyes, and his fingers quivered with the need to feel the treasure in his hands. The golden eggs, pure gold, almost in reach for the first time in years. He would be fast, would simply run in and grab them. It wouldn’t be so hard.

“Please…” Arabelle coughed and Illuminatus scrambled through the door, lurching towards the eggs. He only had eyes for his golden eggs at this point, and he was almost there when the birds descended on him from the grove of trees where they had been hiding.

“YOU LIED!” roared Illuminatus, trying to pull Arabelle into the fray, but she scooted out of the way. The birds tossed him around, enjoying the game. He tried to use a spell on them, anything, but the blasts of white light slid off their feathers like water sliding off a raincoat. Arabelle averted her eyes, not wanting to see the imminent bloodbath.

The screams lasted for only a few seconds before the birds lifted off into the air, carrying a silent body out to the sea for a burial the dead man didn’t deserve. Arabelle felt a brief pang of guilt. She tamped it down, refusing to succumb to the doubt in her heart.

With a sound like wind chimes in the wind, the glass dome above her began to disintegrate, melting into snowflakes that fell to the ground in flurries of crystal white. The cliff face receded from the sand, and the sea bucked a rampaging bull free at last from the grips of dark magic. Arabelle stuck out her tongue and reined in a snowflake. It tasted sweet, like cinnamon—not what Arabelle expected magic to taste like.

Child. Arabelle looked up. The bird she tried to steal from cocked its head and folded its thing legs so that it was eye-level with the girl.

We are free to go.

“I know.”

The bird appraised her. Would you like to come with us? We are going home. You are free to join us. I will take you where you need to go. It motioned towards the other four birds turning loop-de-loops in the open sky.

Arabelle considered the bird’s offer for several long moments. All that had happened, with the magician and the eggs and the glass dome; could she really just go back and act as if all was normal? The bird stamped a foot impatiently, and Arabelle realized what she needed to do.

“Take me home,” Arabelle said. The bird held still as Arabelle climbed onto its broad back, then spread its wings majestically. The pair, human and bird, magical and non-magical, rose into the sky, a black silhouette against the reds and purples of the sunset.

They were on the path to home at last.
We filed our way out of the crowded airport that had been our final destination after nearly 24 hours of exhausting travel. Our large group had managed our way through customs and baggage claim, which had been an event all in itself. The tinted sliding doors opened for us and the sunlight was blinding. I looked up. Above us was a larger than life sign that read “Shanghai International Airport”. I looked around. Our group contained eleven American 8th grade students from Gentry and Lange Middle schools, three American teachers from the same places, two moms of kids that were attending, and four Chinese natives that would be helping us along the way. Together we were the Columbia Public Schools 8th grade Chinese class, and we were here for the time of our lives.

We climbed on a special charter bus that had been reserved for our group. Slowly, we pulled out of the airport shuttle pick-up place and onto the main highway. I was completely unprepared for what I saw. All around us, thousands upon thousands of high rise apartment buildings of every size, color, and shape imaginable looked down on the land surrounding them. They towered up like candles on a birthday cake over the otherwise flat landscape. Intermixed were skyscrapers that held various workplaces, offices, shops, and restaurants. There were plants and trees on either side of the highway, but otherwise there was very little green. The sky was a dull gray, and the air around us smelled faintly of smoke and oil.

One of the most memorable parts of this two week long experience was the day trip to downtown Shanghai. We stepped off the air conditioned bus and onto the sweltering sidewalk in front of the fourth tallest building in the world. I stood outside the Shanghai World Financial Center in awe. It was a massive building in an odd shape that was a rectangle vertically, but had an unfamiliar diamond-like base. The entire building was covered in black reflective glass. I craned my neck to look to the top, but upper floors disappeared into the dense gray clouds that loomed above. Everything about the building looked like something out of a science fiction movie. Inside, all of the floors, walls, and ceilings were either a reflective black or white, with a blue LED light peeking out beneath each edge. Our group of just under twenty people took up every inch of the elevator. It would shoot us up at 10 meters per second- more than 22 miles per hour. A minute later the elevator doors opened to reveal one of the most astounding things I had ever seen.

Before us was a huge room filled with tourists of countless ethnicities, all of which were as amazed as I was at the scene around us. The room itself had clear glass windows on all sides with transparent holes in the floor so the view was nearly unobstructed. Upon looking out of the window, I saw what was really worth gawking about. The city was all around us! There were magnificent skyscrapers and antenna structures of every shape, size, and color imaginable that we were able to look down on. Below us hundreds and hundreds of feet were lost in pure air until our eyes were filled with the sight of the busy land below. The cars looked like ants and the people were mere specks of dirt that dotted the roadways. This view stretched on for an eternity. This, I thought, was incredible.

This summer, I left the US for the first time in my life. With a group of people I had really only just met, I was able to travel across the world. I saw so many amazing things that I had never seen before. I had the privilege of touring around the largest city in the world. And then, I was able to look down on that beautiful city from an entirely different angle. When I first stepped out of the airport in Shanghai, I had no idea what to expect. But what I saw completely amazed me. I am so happy I could experience the magic that happened in a place so different from what I knew, and I am looking forward to whatever adventure comes next.
California was the first to get hit with the wave of attacks. Russia had seized power there, completely obliterating Sacramento and allowing their own way into our country. Since then, they had released something unexpected—a disease as a form of biological warfare. But the problem was, the US didn’t know of the attack, and in turn was not prepared. This wasn’t war; it was an invasion. An invasion that our country couldn’t defend itself against.

Since the first release of disease, millions had fallen ill. Millions more had died. There were a few that were lucky. They had left the country before the attacks began, as they had been warned by unknown sources. Others had fled at the first sign of danger. That’s when I had managed to sneak Cara, my sister, onto one of the ships that were fleeing the country. It was painful, but she had to stay alive. She was the only family I had left. I am still worried for her. Rumor has it the disease has spread far beyond Russia’s control, and there are few safe countries left in the world. Since then, the country has been put under quarantine, and those of us that were still alive have been left to our own devices.

I decided to move inland; not so far that I can’t flee the country if I need to, but far enough that I can avoid the ever-present disease. I think they call it the Plague. This Plague attacks the brain and the nervous system, controlling the entire body of its inhabitant. The infected get ungodly welts on their skin, as well as bloodshot eyes and horrible breath. Early signs are high fever, drowsiness, as well as memory loss. Most call them zombies, but those who know call them The Infected.

I want to be able to help find a cure, but first; I have to survive. I have four basic necessities—water, food, shelter, and weapons. Even these are hard to obtain, because those who aren’t infected with disease are scrambling for survive. Rations are low and laws are practically unheard of. The government was the first thing in our country to fall, and what’s left of the military gives no effort to protect the civilians. Those of us who aren’t crazy are seeking refuge. That’s what I’m doing now. I might have found a place to sleep for the night; an abandoned mall. From the looks of it the front door had been bashed in, but it seemed empty. By the time I enter, the sun is setting and the interior is barely lit. I shine my dim flashlight around the lobby of the mall. Maybe I could find a brighter one in one of the shops. I begin to make my way through the mall after scouring a large map of it on display in search of something I could use to my advantage.

From what I see the mall had been ransacked multiple times before I reached it. Clothes, food, and other ruined goods lie in every corner of every shop. I search each store for something, anything, that could help me survive me in any way. So far, I’ve found a can of soup and a baseball bat.

After what I assume are a few hours of exploring, I decide to call it a night. I’ve found a small boutique with a loveseat inside, and decide to sleep here. After eating my soup with a plastic spoon, I drape a heavy gown over myself to serve as a blanket and hunker down. Sleep comes easier than I expect.

Before I know it, I wake up to the sound of arguing voices. An older man is standing before me, with a young teenage girl, a woman, and a young man surrounding him. I attempt to pretend to stay sleep, but my efforts are futile.

“Oh, thank god. She’s awake,” says the old man. He’s wearing a tattered military uniform, rows of faded medals on his chest.

“Want me to check for signs?” says the woman, who looks as if she has medical experience.

“Go ahead, Marge,” the man replies. The woman, Marge, reaches for me, but before she can reach me, I’m up and in a defense position.

The teenage girl sighs with relief, “She’s obviously not infected,” she says. She pushes her fringe bangs back and crosses her arms. “Can we go now? She can fend for herself.”

“We’re not leaving this young woman behind,” The man, who wears a grey business suit, says, “From the looks of it, she has fighting abilities, so she’s valuable. What’s your name, Girl?”

By now, I have dropped my arms to my sides, an uneasy look on my face. “I’m Diana.”
The man gives me an affirmative nod, “Look, if you want to survive you’re going to need help, because it’s nearly impossible to survive on your own. I’m surprised you’ve lived this long. So if you want to stay alive, I would advise you to stay with us.”

He doesn’t have to tell me twice, “You’ve got it. Nice to meet you all.”

The girl grunts, “It might’ve been nice to meet you, you know, if we weren’t under constant attack from the undead. I’m Leslie, this lady is Marge,” she points to the business man, “He’s Thomas, and the old guy is Roger.”

I give them a small wave, “Alright, so, should we move out?”

The woman hands me a surprisingly fresh apple, “We already ate.”

We make our way through the mall, the others pointing out the best places for supplies. I’ve gotten a military grade backpack, and within two hours, stocked it with enough food and supplies for a week. I’d never be able to find all of this on my own, and I’m grateful. These people seem really kind, though Leslie can be a bit antisocial. They’ve even showed me where they sleep; a furniture store with rows and rows of soft beds. It wasn’t until we heard a high-pitched shriek come from somewhere inside the mall that I begin to panic. There was never just one lone Infected, they travelled in packs of at least fifty. Roger had estimated that this place was going to be secure for at least another week, but upon hearing the Infected, he’s decided otherwise.

“We have to get out of here,” he mutters under his breath as we begin to pack up our supplies once again.

“Where are we going to go?” Leslie asks, her voice laced with worry.

“What, and guarantee our eventual deaths? We can’t hold them off forever, you know. I’m with Roger,” I say in my calmest voice, attempting to calm the man down.

“You don’t get to have an opinion! You just got here! How do we know we can trust you?” Thomas continues to shout.

From there the room is filled with arguments. Who to believe, who to follow, who’s side to take. The arguments reach their peak when Roger’s voice booms above the rest of ours, “Everyone, quiet down!” You can hear a pin drop after that.

He gives each of us a hard stare, “I know where we can go. There’s a military base twenty miles west of us. If we could find a way to get out of here, and over there, they might take us in. I know they’re collecting refugees.”

Leslie agrees immediately, as do I. Marge is a bit on both sides because she isn’t much of a risk-taker, but Thomas is completely against it. He states over and over that it is too much of a risk, but Roger won’t have it. Roger finally suggests we split up, and each of us can choose where we go. Leslie and I had already sided with Roger, so it’s left up to Thomas and Marge.

“There is no way I am coming with your stupid entourage. Leave, go die out there. See if I care,” Thomas says, his voice dripping with venom, “What about you, Marge? Want to die or want to live?”

She looks down. “I...I don’t know. I don’t think we’ll be safe either way. It’s more of a matter of which is less of a--”

Marge is cut off by the blast of a gun. I look over to Thomas, who is holding his hand gun in front of him. Marge drops to the floor with a dull thud.

“She was useless anyway,” he says as walks away, “Consider it a favor! Bye, now.”

We are left with our mouths agape until he is out of sight. Leslie grudgingly reaches down and checks for Marge’s pulse, and after seeing her grimace, we know Marge is gone.

“I guess we should get going,” I say, as I sling my bag over my shoulder. Leslie, who hasn’t said much since we started arguing, nods. Roger pulls a small handgun out of his backpack, handing it to me.

Roger, ever the leader, begins to plan again, “There’s a delivery truck outside, by the back entrance. If we could make our way through the mall without being attacked and infected, we could drive up to the base and through the gates. They’ll offer us food and shelter there. Diana, I need you to back me up. Leslie, I need you to be strong. Understood?”

We nod once again, and soon we are heading out, our weapons drawn. Soon we hear more shrieks, ones that are louder than before. They’re getting closer, I think. Just as the back doors are in view, the Infected are as well.

“Diana, shoot!” Roger shouts above the sound of grunts and shrieks. Up close the Infected look more sickly than I thought. I pull the trigger, my mind as well as my body going numb. These people had lives, families,
and they were unfortunate enough to get so sick that they now don’t even remember them. I shake the thought away. One after another fall to the ground, but others are beginning to gather.

“Roger, Leslie, we have to go now! Our gunshots are attracting others!”

They shout in agreement, and soon we’re charging towards them, swinging out bats and guns and crowbars around. My own gun makes contact with a head, and the Infected lets out a pained shriek. I make a realization as we’re attacking them, There’s no way we’re going to make it like this.

“Roger!” I shout, “This isn’t working!”

“I know!”

“Wait,” I allow myself a moment to think as I continue to swing my bat in all directions. The Infected fear only one thing, I think, remembering the matches in my pocket, “Leslie, where’s that gasoline you had?”

She grabs a canister of gasoline from her backpack and she swings and hits another, sweat and tears making her dark makeup run down her face. She tosses it to me with a look of understanding. Then I begin to pour the large canister on everything that surrounds me.

“Be ready to run!” I shout. Three, two, one, I think before striking a match and setting the place on fire. I don’t have to tell the others to run, they’re already making their way out the door. The Infected’s shrieks grow louder as we exit the mall, but I know they can’t escape the fire now. It’ll probably spread through the entire place. What about Thomas? I push the thought away; he decided to stay here.

Roger leads us to one of the many trucks, and we hop in as fast as our bodies will allow us. As soon as we start it up we all breathe a sigh of relief. As I look around to see Infected all around us, I know that we’ll be safe.

Despite the circumstances, I let out a bubbly laugh, “We made it.”

Leslie grins through her tears, “We did.”

As we make our way to the military base, night falls. And in the distance, we see a glowing flame take over the mall, reminding us that we will survive.
I was five when it happened. Their screams still echo in the darkness of my mind. Her eyes still boring into my soul. I put up shields; fortified my position; placed my traps. But They're still there. Still sitting in a cavernous corner of that thing called my soul.

The smoke stabs and chokes at my lungs. As they fill, I hear a scream. "JERRY!"

That word floods my ears, filling them with an impossibly high pitched ringing. A man in a black and yellow suit runs toward me in slow motion. He wears a mask like he's an astronaut on the moon. A beam falls from the roof right in front of the man. He ignores the flames the timber omits and makes a heroic leap. I cower back in partial fear. He's massive; much larger than my own father and sporting many alien growths. The flames roar and grin in the black of the night. Their eyes dance and sparkle. The man snatches me up. I look desperately at the cradle where my sister lies, stretching a hand out in despair. The man keeps on running, still in slow motion, the whole world still moving slower than normal. We pass the room where my mother sleeps, then the bathroom, then the kitchen, then the office. The whole scene has a hot, orange glow. The astronaut-looking man barrels out my beautiful oak front door, knocking the whole thing completely off its hinges. My eyes try to well up when I see my mom scorched and burned lying on a stretcher, but the ash that flows through the air doesn't allow it. I hear a small whine behind me as the man sets me down. I whip myself around, only to see my estate crumple to the ground with a massive thud, taking with it the heart of the flames and the eyes of my sister, still resting in her crib.
full blown dead rat on top of a perfectly terrible salad. Then there was the time when this kid got ebolaidsanceritus from some raw pink slime; and then there was the time when Claude saw one of the "chefs" poor a bit of rat poison onto some chicken patties. Needless to say, the lunch system is not well.

I move to my breakfast seat between the pillar and the window. When you look out, you can see the rich part of the city in the distance. I, however, do not turn to see the world. There's now a government office standing on top of the ashes of my home.

The news begins to play on the T.V. above me. I look up to see what horrors have been happening recently.

"Welcome back to K-XHV News Now," the anchorman says. "We have received notice of talks between the United States and People's Republic of China's governments, discussing a possible 'merger' between the two nations. As you already know, the States are already in such deep debt to China that China is practically in control of the U.S. already. Their logic is probably along the lines of, 'We already own them, why not make it official.'"

The woman reporter picks up after the anchor finishes. "Tensions between America and the World are rising once again. Terrorist groups are growing; Africans are growing resentful; Putin is changing Russia back into the Soviet Union; and South Americans are becoming annoyed at the U.S.'s attempts to stop the deforestation of the continent. It seems that Canada is once again America's only friend."

The newscasters continue to ramble about world events, fires, death, and murder. Sometimes it seems that's all they talk about. I just blot the noise out and continue to go about eating my breakfast.

A shape sits down next to me. I think it's Kyle, but I'm not certain. I don't really care to find out, either. The body speaks even though it appears to be shoving five hamburgers down it's throat at one time.

"Did you hear about China's plan in the news today?" Kyle asks.

"Ya," I say.

"Interesting, isn't it. I didn't know federal policy allowed two countries to combine via merger, especially if they're on separate landmasses."

"Well, it won't be our federal policy if the deal goes through."

"International policy," Kyle corrects.

"Well, I guess anything is better than what we have right now," I mumble.

Kyle gasps, almost choking on his breakfast burger. I get a few shocked glances from a couple of other faces up and down my table.

"Don't say stuff like that!" Kyle says. He was a little bit too eager to conform to the new laws instituted a couple years back. The ones I have grown to despise as time passes. "You could get yourself killed! Or worse, I might have to testify in your trial, and then either go through extreme emotional stress for knowing that I practically gave you your death sentence or risk getting caught not telling the truth!"

"Well, good thing I'm not dead, then. How're things going in getting freed from this prison?" I ask, trying to move the conversation away from more controversial topics.

"Prison?" Kyle says.

"Ya. Prison."

"Well... I wouldn't call it that...." Kyle says. "They're the only place I know that serves sausage with eggs and bacon on a biscuit that I know of."

"And you're the only one I know of that likes it," I say, kind of annoyed.

An awkward silence continues from the both of us from this point on. Finally, Kyle breaks the spell.

"Are you going to eat that?"

I just shrug. He takes it as a yes.

Shouts sound throughout the square. The protest is growing violent. I see some people start to arm themselves with large sticks and stones. The police back up a bit, but they do not by any means back down. I start to think I should be running back to the boarding school, but then I remember I that I came here against school orders. Single people are nonexistent in this crowd, we move as a whole, like the Buggers Andrew Wiggin exterminated. We consist of many different personalities, though, ranging from geeks to gays to minorities to bronies and any other groups that were brought down by the Thirty Fifth Amendment, aka Rule #2 of the New Law, along with any activist supporting any of these groups or promoting civil rights.

Our mob lashes out against our human chains, causing the troopers to take up more defensive positions. One of them takes out a megaphone and yells something threatening, though nobody can hear it through the rage of
the mob. Finally, someone throws a Molotov, and the cops advance. Our swarm doesn’t back down though. We retaliate, rushing the force with clubs and rocks. A shot is fired, and our anger only strengthens. I see a cop yell something into his microphone.

By now our horde has broken through the lines and acquired some of the gear from the officers. The ones who were taken down are now no more than a pile of bruised flesh and broken bone. The cops fire with more meaning now, fueled by the rage that was previously exclusive to the crowd. I see on T.V. an aerial view of our brawl, and see ones like it going on throughout the country. It looks like some WWI soldiers are going “over the top” for the first and last time from that point of view.

Then I see what that cop was yelling into his radio for. Tanks and troops march their way over the nearest hill. Helicopters buzz in the sky. It is now that I really start to question my place here in the throng. I back up a bit and assess the situation as the first rounds are shot by soldiers’ guns. This causes the raging thrawl that controlled me to subside for a bit, lifting the veil of red from my eyes. The mob is starting to retreat with the addition of the army now, and I’m one of the first ones to quietly slink into the shadows before I get caught or killed. If I get caught, I will get killed anyways, since I’ll be violating the two of the new most important bills in history, Rules #1 and #2.

I quietly watch the violence die down from my new third person point-of-view on a fire escape a block away from the square in which the fighting took place. The first rays of sunlight crawl over the hill as dark turns to…

“Mr. Thompson, are you sleeping in my class?” Mr. Daniels snaps.

“Uhhh... Ummm... I... guess I was... possibly?” I say, not wanting to admit the truth, since it’d mean my demise. My demise for a week, at least.

“Tssk Tssk, little boy. You know that kind of behavior is strictly forbidden in this classroom. Now what do you think is a worthy punishment?”

“Lunch detention?” I ask. I get a few small laughs out of the class, at least. Those giggles are soon silenced by Mr. Daniels’ glare.

“I don’t believe that is nearly of a high enough degree, Jerry. How about increased rations for two months?” Mr. Daniels says, evoking several gasps from my peers. Very rarely is such a terrible fate handed out, and it more often than not causes a poor social standing for the recipient, as it usually means significantly worse food for the rest of the school as well.

I gulp, then nod.

“Very well,” Mr. Daniels says, grinning from ear to ear.

I walk slowly through the campus park, Kyle on my left and Katherine on my right. I see the fence and its gate down the path we are taking.

“So how was your day?” Kate asks. I can’t say I’m in the mood for chatter, but I can’t deny my need of it right now.

“Fine,” I say.

“Hope you got increased rations for two months!” Kyle chirps. Sometimes I really hate the guy.

“Really? What did you do to condemn us to such a fate?” Kate questions.

“I may have taken a little doze during Mr. Daniels class,” I admit.

“Jerry! I thought you were high than that!” Kate says.

I can now see through the fence to the city outside. Despite the school’s best efforts, we’re still surrounded by working-class housing. I see an African American rocking in a chair in the distance. There are no children outside right now, since most of the schools outside aren’t out yet.

A beggar crosses the street as I keep silent to Katherine’s question. He stares at me, his eyes full of remorse and pain and envy. I see a piece of cardboard beside him. It reads something along the lines of Help the Homeless like Me, although it is barely readable. I pity him, but there’s nothing I can do. Nothing legal I can do, anyway.

I look around briefly for other students before putting my hand in my pocket and pulling out a five bucks. My friends stare at me, their eyes speaking all kinds of messages, but the overall theme is Don’t do it. I do it.

I stick the hand with the money outside the barred fence. The man looks at me with deep eyes, as if to say You’re really doing this for me? I nod, and he hastily snatches up the bill. I feel all warm and fuzzy inside, but the wind suddenly gets cold. I see a person on the inside run quickly into the main building of the school complex.
I’m thrown into a small, dirty jail cell. There’s a wall cot, a toilet, and that’s about it. I’ve already been outfitted with my orange jumpsuit, and my head is freshly shaven. I cower against a wall as the door slams shut.

It’s dark without the light from the hall. There is a single window, but it’s tinted as a side effect to its strength. There’s no food, and no route of escape to be found. I lay down and cry on the bed.

Five months later and it’s the day of my trial. Life in this jail wasn’t really all that bad compared to life at my school. It makes you wonder; if this is a real prison, then what does the boarding school rank up as?

I’m brought into the courtroom. The evidence is presented. My lawyer states my case. The prosecutor states his. There’s a video of my actions, and several eyewitness accounts going against me. When it becomes my turn to testify, I barely say anything, just that I was simply being kind and ethical. I don’t really try, though, because the evidence is loaded against me and even if I did plead guilty, I’d still be hanged. Finally, it’s time for the jury to decide. They go into their little private room and discuss the issue. The decision seems almost unanimous, because they don’t take more than fifteen minutes.

Then comes the time for their announcement. I prepare myself for the worst, hope for the worst, because that’ll mean I can see my family again. The elected head juror stands up to speak his word.

“We have found the convict...”

He never finishes. The crowd bolts up and opens fire on the court. I feel an explosion of immense power from the side of the room, and my hearing rings, and my skin tingles, and I taste blood, and my eyes see nothing but black.
I consider myself to be a very impressionable person with a natural inclination to trust people, regimentally follow rules, and even fall prey to hypochondriac worries. (At age four, my mother convinced me that I came from rabbits.) It is for these reasons, I am grateful that I was raised without the preachings of a minister and the fear of a death-by-fire Hell that could have dominated my thought every Sunday. Instead of experiencing the judgment and singularity of a certain denomination, my parents explained to me the idea of God, and in turn, taught me the morals of Jesus through quality parenting and mindfulness. Now, as I enter adulthood, I can reflect that I am ethically stronger than many peers who have been life-long members of churches. Even the good intentions of pastors and parents are trumped by the corruption and hypocrisy that often come with religion. In a world that is changing exponentially with each day, the advent of religion is presenting itself as unnecessary; religion has divided the human race, caused mass dissonance with modern times, and ultimately slowed progress.

The very existence of myriad religions creates a weak structure of tolerance throughout and has become yet another tool for human division. One failed aspect is the ideological peace and tolerance, juxtaposed with the underlying messages of a “this way, or the highway” (to Hell) mentality. There are two ways in which the system of multiple denominations is flawed. Most omnipresent is the implicitly aggressive stance that only one sect can communicate with God. The second, which correlates directly, is that even if an individual believed there to be another route to Heaven, a truly religious person would completely and utterly tolerate this believer. Not only are mixed signals sent, but also the innocent and ethical preaching of Jesus have been twisted and corrupted in many cases. Because the plurality of religions has entertained the idea that each is overwhelmingly more correct than others, division in a church is accepted as God's word. People take these views from the Power on high earnestly. If one denomination is correct, followers tend to completely throw themselves into the system. Once, after a sleep over, I went to church with my friend's family. We were herded into the youth group strictly made up of girls—already I felt uncomfortable. The youth leader began by welcoming us with a video. We watched as a writhing person strapped into a chair looked on towards a ticking bomb. The building was desolate. Meanwhile, a man with a remote stood outside the building, pushed a button, and we all watched it explode. Was I sitting in a children’s meeting at church, or a lecture in the Hitler Youth? According to Miss Church Leader, this was what happens to homosexuals in Hell. She then asked everyone in the room to share their thoughts on why gay people were bad. This is a shockingly blatant example illustrating that those who have power in the church seek to ostracize even more. A more public case is the southern fundamentalists’ protest for creationist textbooks and the days of yore when all good school children could recite the Lord's Prayer before their arithmetic lesson. Although this violates many principles, one would think that, as the followers of God, these Christians would recognize that not all children in school may happen to be Christian or even religious at all. Religious ideas of respect and tolerance are belied by the action of religious followers.

Religion is anachronistic and no longer blends with today's society. The entire system of praying to a higher power and following a strict moral code came about for want of explanation and desire for hope; today our modern advances clash with its former usefulness. We no longer need to follow myths to explain our environment; we have science. As the average second-grader knows more about the world’s workings than a fourteenth century man's understanding, it is odd, then, that we are still using religion as a crutch for understanding. Even more dissonant is that people are in a completely different mindset—driving around furiously in suburbia, stressed out about meetings, and getting obsessed over the next phone upgrade. Religion was, at least, more practical 150 years ago when farmers were plowing crops by horse and hand, hoping they had enough food for the winter. In a world of cutting-edge science, where we can now grow human organs for transplant, it is hard to keep up both charades. Yet, we are confronted daily with religious extremists who are willing to kill in the name God. It is imperative then, that we, “no longer ignore the fact that billions of our neighbors believe in the metaphysics of martyrdom, or in the literal truth of the book of Revelation and are now armed with weapons” (Harris 741). It seems strange that we need massive amounts of
proof that our ice caps are disappearing, but we accept the existence of an invisible higher power sans evidence. Citizens concede that scientists need to operate with keen observation and proof, yet they do not apply that same reasoning to themselves. Can we truly be following the ideals and principles concocted centuries ago when stoning dissenters and sacrificing humans was common practice? The American Bible Belt would reply with a resounding yes! Every Christmas near my home, a Baptist church puts on “The Living Nativity: Moments at the Messiah.” This drive-by, roadshow-esque scene is replete with donkeys, camels, thatched huts, the wise men, and yes, a real baby Jesus. Children run around with Arab clothes as men with staves explain to the viewers what a miracle this all is. Across the street sits a toxic-bright Sonic and a spotless new gas station. This contradiction of a time ancient and present bears too many cultural gaps. We are operating on a completely different level: there is such a thing as a business world, we ride in cars, not on camels. Yet, the rituals continue to inculcate the people,

While moderate religion is respected, revered even, its disguise in society has allowed these religious thoughts to command for so long, thereby slowing progress of the modern world. What is most unsettling about moderate believers is their very act of judging what is prayer-worthy and what is not. This means that the religious are potentially looking past the horrors and hypocrisies that occur within the sacred text. Although they tolerate reason, unlike fundamentalists, they are giving the hard-core followers a pass to continue outdated trends. More likely, moderates are simply unaware of the facts because “religious moderation is the product of secular knowledge and scriptural ignorance,” (746). People who believe the first two humans were Adam and Eve will gallantly say so. When the idea that further procreation would only have been capable if their children had children together, the Adam anecdote story seems so utterly pure and God-like. Because they have never challenged this thought, it has seemed like fact. A people with an insular mindset is not what the world needs now on the brink of an energy and population crisis. It seems that with each new theory, political-action campaign, or scientific phenomena, religion—rigidly stuck in the past—causes a great slowing down. The Bible—thought to be a self-improving text—truly provides few progressive benefits. The unfortunate aspect is that moderates are people who are more inclined to be open-minded to ideas such as stem-cell research or alternative energy. If they opened their minds to science, instead of hiding behind memorized Biblical scriptures, we could make serious scientific advancements. For instance, I overheard a student in my class comment on how she did not approve of stem-cells but her cousin, recently diagnosed with cancer, is seeking the latest gene therapy treatment and Kansas University. Ultimately, we get the worst of both aspects as these religious people do not faithfully and consistently follow Jesus’ code of conduct, and as they are less able to approach new theories of solutions. No one follows Sunday as a day of rest, nor do many dress to the nines for church. If followers are not consistent enough with their actions, why should the world be subjected to a brick wall?

Religion was founded on upstanding principles—which is the crux of this predicament. It is because people still respect the idea of religion itself, and those who aim to follow it, that we still have fundamental and moderates believers. The more open-minded and knowledgeable our younger generations are, the more secularized our world will become. It is by no means bad to want to do well unto others, what is, is forcing your views onto your surrounding society.

Works Cited
Lights up. On stage left, about six people stand in a line, roped in by black belts, which stretch on off the stage. The line is at a standstill. The last MAN in the line, not particularly young and wearing a jacket, idly smokes a cigarette, a little way off from the rest of the people. JOURNALIST, a bright and optimistic young woman, enters from right, on her cellphone, nodding and adding the odd “okay”. She hangs up, puts the phone in the pocket of her coat, rubs her hands together in the cold and blows on them. Then she walks towards the line.

JOURNALIST (taking a small notepad out of her pocket and approaching MAN): Hi, I’m wondering if you’d mind doing an interview with me. I’m doing a series for the Daily Journal about the lives of ordinary workers, a slice-of-life, how-the-other-half-lives kind of thing, and I’d love to hear about your job.

MAN (gruffly): Can’t you see I’m busy?

JOURNALIST (confused): You’re just waiting in line.

MAN: Exactly. I’m trying to do my job here.

JOURNALIST: I don’t understand.

MAN (turning away): It’s my job.

JOURNALIST: What is?

MAN: The line.

JOURNALIST: But how is that a job? What do you actually, you know, do?

MAN: I wait on the line. That’s my job.

JOURNALIST: But you have to do something, once you get to the front. What are you waiting for?

MAN: I give them my name, my social security number, a small blood and stool sample. I answer a few questions. You know, the usual.

JOURNALIST: And after that?

MAN: What do you mean, after? I’ve done my duty. I do what they ask- a few questions then a nice wad of cash in my hand, about a hundred bucks. Pretty nice deal, huh?

JOURNALIST: All your life, just sitting and waiting for the guy in front of you to move out of the way… Pretty nice.

MAN (uninterested): Yep

JOURNALIST (after a brief pause): Okay, so but what kind of questions?

MAN (clearly apathetic): Oh you know, the usual. What’s your mother’s maiden name? What was your first job? What’s the highest level of education you have? What’s the most you would pay for a banana split with 2 bananas and three scoops, topped with the works? Can pure love be selfish? You know, the usual type of thing. Stop pestering me, kid.

JOURNALIST: But, did the company ever tell you what they do with this information? I mean, they have to be doing something with it, right? I mean, you can’t give away money for nothing. Aren’t you worried about your privacy? Aren’t you worried about giving away a piece of yourself to a nameless, faceless corporation? Are you still you if you’re reduced to a collection of 1s and 0s? (seeing that the MAN is losing interest, she tries to regain his attention as he walks away from her, closer to the rest of the line) Aren’t you afraid of unmanned corporate drones tracking down your family?

But the MAN has already turned away, smoking a cigarette and intently watching something occurring just offstage. The line budges forward.

JOURNALIST: Okay, fine. (She approaches the next person in line, a woman holding a baby).

Suddenly, the WORKER, dressed like a silicon valley up-and-comer, enters from left, downstage of the line, holding a tablet that, throughout the character’s entire duration on stage, pings and buzzes incessantly. WORKER stops
and eyes the people in line suspiciously, squinting intently at a young man at the front, then continues moving right. JOURNALIST, intrigued, attempts to ask questions.

JOURNALIST: Hello!

WORKER continues walking without responding, not even glancing to see who spoke.

JOURNALIST: Excuse me, hello.

WORKER still does not respond.

JOURNALIST (raising her voice in an irritated way): Excuse me, hello!

WORKER stops, spins around to face the JOURNALIST and makes a noise of annoyance, perhaps a click of the tongue, obviously annoyed and seeking to avoid conversation. The WORKER types a little on the tablet, then distractedly, looking down at the tablet grunts and nods by way of a greeting.

JOURNALIST: Hi, do you work for this company?

WORKER (still distracted, but with a tinge of irritation): Grunts again.

JOURNALIST: Well, I hope you don't mind me asking you a few questions. Before WORKER, still anxious to leave, can walk away: Can you tell me what your job title is?

WORKER (monotone): Company policy precludes answering that question.

JOURNALIST: Really? It's just a job title.

WORKER (with identical inflection): Company policy precludes answering that question.

JOURNALIST: Okay, okay. Well if you can’t tell me your job title, can you tell me your job responsibilities?

WORKER (more robotically): Company policy precludes answering that question.

JOURNALIST: Okay, you don’t want to talk. That’s fine. Can you at least tell me the purpose of the line?

WORKER (even more robotically): Company policy precludes answering that question.

JOURNALIST (starting to be annoyed): Oh come on. You won’t even tell me the purpose of the line? What are you doing with the information?

WORKER (same): Company policy precludes answering that question. Company policy precludes answering that question.

JOURNALIST (clearly irritated): But what’s the point?

WORKER: Company policy precludes answering that question.

JOURNALIST (more irritated): Is that all you can say?

WORKER: Company policy precludes-

JOURNALIST (angrily): Are you kidding me?

WORKER: Company policy-

JOURNALIST (nearing the end of her rope): But why?

WORKER: Company policy-

JOURNALIST (a little too loud): Just stop!

WORKER nods agreeably, smiles, and continues off stage right, reengaged with the tablet. JOURNALIST, clearly shaken by this incident, anxiously brushes the hair out of her face and rubs her hands together again. She stands for a moment, trying to decide what to do next. She turns back to the line, which has moved forward rapidly during the last scene, with the woman with the baby at the front and everyone ahead of her now offstage. About three more people have entered during the last scene and joined the end of the line. The last person in line now, a distinguished looking middle-aged WOMAN in a business suit, catches the JOURNALIST’s eye. The two make eye contact, and the WOMAN beckons her forward.

WOMAN (kindly): Hello, dear. You look a little lost. Is it your first time waiting on the line?

JOURNALIST (stunned by the WOMAN’s warmth in the face of the rudeness of her previous interviewees): No, ma’am, I’m actually not waiting on the line. I’m a journalist, I’m doing a piece for the Daily Journal about the economy and employment.

WOMAN (in the slightly condescending tone of one who is much worldlier and wiser): That’s wonderful, dear.

JOURNALIST: How long have you waited on the line, ma’am?

WOMAN: Aren’t you going to ask my name, dear?

JOURNALIST (bewildered): Yes, please, what is your name, ma’am?

WOMAN: Rita Carlyle.

JOURNALIST (baffled): Rita Carlyle? Did I hear you correctly? You’re Rita Carlyle?

WOMAN: Why yes, of course.
JOURNALIST: But why are you here? You were the CEO of a Fortune Five Hundred Company? I thought you retired! Why are you waiting on a line for a few bucks?

WOMAN (with a pleasant laugh): Oh, it’s more than a few bucks—plenty to keep up with the bills and other expenses.

JOURNALIST: But you’re rich!

WOMAN: Well, what am I supposed to do all day? Simply sitting around my house doing nothing is hardly intellectually stimulating. You must keep the mind active through diligence and a good work ethic, my dear.

JOURNALIST: But all you do is wait on a line!

WOMAN: Come now, I answer questions. I chat with my fellows in the line. I give blood. It’s really not any less complex than my last job. Plus I must say, the hours and benefits are really quite better: so much more time to spend with the family.

JOURNALIST: I—

WOMAN: Just try it. dear. I’m sure you feel that your journalism job is your passion, your place in life, your contribution to society. But you are only a cog in a machine. It took me thirty years with the corporation to realize that was all I was—a smiling, mechanical cog in a smiling, mechanical machine. Every job is a grunt job. Every job is a job you’ll learn to hate, mark my words. Why would you give your lifeblood, your heart and soul to a job that means nothing when you’re done and won’t give you anything in return? They wedge you farther into place until there’s nothing left of you, dust off the shavings and then they put in a shiny new version of yourself, all burnished and brassy, in your place. You’re fit for the scrap heap the minute you outlive your usefulness, in their eyes. So why not spend your time polishing yourself to a mirror-like shine instead of grinding and corroding yourself into dust on the wheel of work? That’s what I thought anyway.

JOURNALIST (slyly): Now I understand. They fired you, didn’t they? The board of directors at the company.

WOMAN: I understand why you’d be resistant to the idea of the line, my dear. I was too. But just try it once, and tell me what you think. I really do think it will suit you, even though we have just met.

JOURNALIST: I really—

WOMAN: Try it my dear. What’s the harm?

JOURNALIST: But my job—

WOMAN: The news of the world won’t change in a half hour, dear. The line is moving quickly now. Are you going to join us?

JOURNALIST: I guess I can spare a moment, just to see what all this is about.

She joins the line. The lights fade, and in the final glimmer of light, the rest of the line flows offstage.
Emma Willibey

Poetry: Lou Reed
St. Teresa’s Academy
Dianne Hirner, Teacher

Late-night revelations in East Village dives
Silent strolls down graffiti-streaked Ludlow
Wry exchanges with disenchanted artists
Wiry melodies entwined with cigarette smoke
With hard-won sneers, you dismiss New York’s charm
Yet, the city manifests in each track
Guitars echo streetlamp-glow reverb and scratch at subway grime
Unfazed monotone slicing like an ax
Orneriness overthrew your collected aura
Interviewers paled as you fired one-word replies
While fans protested 64-minute noise-blast “Metal Machine Music,”
You relished the chaos with glinting black eyes
To ’50s star Dion, you confessed a fear: “Living in suburbia”
Urban grit invigorated you like fuel
New York’s overworking minds and mish-mashed cultures
Ignited the Velvets’ leather-jacket cool
I never slaved over limited-edition singles
Or defended the Metallica collaboration
Only spied “The Velvet Underground & Nico” in Rolling Stone countdowns
As critics profiled your work with admiration
But, you reside in the grooves of my generation’s bands
Evoked in the Strokes’ clattering “Last Nite”
Name-checked in LCD Soundsystem’s “Losing My Edge”
Mirrored in the smirks of music bloggers nationwide
Your low-lit Bowery now hosts Whole Foods stores
But, since New York’s adrenaline never wanes,
Midtown lawyers and wild-eyed Brooklynites will absorb your insights
And revel in the thrill of “Sweet Jane”
The island was alight, casting a red glow on the crashing waves. Spray flew in my face, mixing with the smoke and ash in the air. There wasn’t a tear-streaked face among us that wasn’t coated in thick gray ash, making us look charred ourselves. Mothers clung to their children, fathers stared out at the churning waves, and the island burned through all of it, staining the sky red with its blood. Or maybe that was the sun. It sunk in the sky as though nothing had happened at all, as though my life wasn’t burning before me. As though it could possibly still rise in the morning after all that had happened.

Of course, I knew it would still rise. It was a fact of life, like time, or laws, or the Elders. Except all the Elders were dead and all the laws died with them and all the time in the world couldn’t change that. The island was burning and there was nothing I or anyone else could do about it. With that thought came a rumble deep within the ground. I knew what it was. Long ago the city was set to self-destruct if anything like this happened. The first Elders knew if anyone got their hands on the technologies our society had created, those who survived the situation would have no peace. Slowly the island began to sink down, causing whirlpools and enormous waves. It would only be a matter of hours before my home was gone without a trace of having ever existed.

It was actually kind of bitter, considering the first Elders broke away from society by spreading rumors that the island had sunk into the sea. Apparently the Elders felt that the Moderners had become too greedy, that they would abuse the wonderful technologies we were rapidly inventing. So our leaders pulled away to protect our peaceful island nation from the violence of the mainland brutes. They put up three enormous walls in a triangle formation around the island that teleported any Moderner from one side to the other if crossed, and they stopped all outside trade and communication. It was as though we had never existed, although from time to time the walls malfunction and allow a plane or ship to come crashing in. The problems were always immediately fixed, of course, so it often seemed to the Moderners that the ships had simply disappeared. However hard the Elders tried, though, there still lingered a faint memory of the amazing technology, and even of the island itself. We became one of the most debated upon Modern myths of all time.

I looked away from my sinking home, unable to watch. The volcano had given no warning before wreaking havoc on our beautiful city. I was one of the lucky ones, a refugee who made it to a boat on time. It had helped that I had already been on my way to the docks. My parents were not so lucky. They were probably sleeping, like so many other people, when the volcano erupted. They would never find the note. They would never know I had been planning to run away.

Ever since I was little, I had been obsessed with the Modern world and their silly gadgets they thought were so advanced. Everything they had ever invented had been invented by us years ago, sometimes so long ago they had even been lost to us. But the Moderners fascinated me anyway. I especially liked the Americans, with all their “cars” and “iPhones”. The touch screens were old tech, and cars hadn’t been used for centuries, but I didn’t care. It was the people that fascinated me. They had so much freedom, so many choices they could make. There were no Elders to govern every part of their lives, no strict laws to impose order. I dreamed of running away to America. I even taught myself English so I could understand them. But of course, it was against the rules to travel to the Modern lands. Ironic that my wish was finally coming true.

A clap of thunder rolled over head. Sheets of lightning lit up the thick clouds with electricity. A nervous whisper leaked through the refugees. I knew what they were thinking. I was thinking the same thing. Would our little fishing boat hold up against a storm? The thought that we could drown after all we had just been through made our hearts beat a little faster.

Just as that thought went through my mind, the rain ripped the clouds open with an enormous boom. Ferocious winds tore at our hands and faces, making them raw. The people panicked. A few tried to stand, rocking the boat and causing more chaos. Some started screaming, others praying, and others yet hugged each other tight and rocked, humming a sad tune. I did none of these things. I had read enough books about disasters in the modern world that I knew the worst thing to do was panic. Unfortunately, the others didn’t. We were a very peaceful people. Wars and natural disasters had been eliminated from our lives long ago. It
was shocking enough when one violent thing happened, but two? They didn’t know what to do. There were no more Elders left, no more rules to guide them.

Someone had to step up and take charge. So I did. I began running through all the things we would need to do to survive. When I was sure I had everything, I stood cautiously, steadying myself against the boat that was swaying faster and faster. Raising my voice to be heard, I tried to calm things down.

“Everyone!” I yelled. Surprisingly, the passengers’ heads jerked up to me. They were so used to taking orders from someone, even a person my age could tell them what to do and they’d do it. I was only fourteen, but my parents and friends had always said I looked older. Maybe that helped.

At the thought of my parents and friends, I nearly sat back down again. They were all dead. Fresh tears rolled down my raw cheeks, even colder than the air of the night that was quickly closing in. There had been a few other boats, but they had all gone off in different directions. A small flutter of hope grew in my chest. Maybe they had been on a different boat. But the flutter was silenced the second I looked out at the storm coming toward us. Even if they were on another boat, they wouldn’t be for long. Without someone like me who knew what to do, they would be lost. I shoved the thought down and turned back to the frantic refugees.

“We need to stay calm!” I had to shout to be heard over the screaming wind. “Everything is going to be all right.”

“Look!” someone screamed, jabbing a finger at something behind me. I barely had time to turn toward the horror before the wall of water slammed into me. One thousand pounds of force tossed me like a rag doll from the boat. Water forced its way down my nose and throat, filling my lungs. I can’t breathe! I thought frantically. My chest burned as I thrashed in the water, clawing desperately at the surface that was getting farther away.

Relentlessly the water sucked me down, crushing my attempts to escape. Every cell of my body was screaming with exhaustion. My thoughts blurred together into one hazy numbness. My legs and arms slowed, growing heavy. A quiet voice in my head whispered Just give up. You have nothing to live for. Your parents are dead, your home destroyed. It’s okay. Just let go. But it wasn’t okay. I had to live because my parents were gone, because my home was destroyed. Someone had to go on. Someone had to tell the story. My body didn’t seem to agree with me. It started to go limp, giving up despite my frustrated screams.

Just then my head broke the surface. Immediately I started coughing up thick nasty fluid back into the waves, my lungs fighting between breathing and getting the water out so I could breath. My arms were still unable to move. I fought to find some strength to hold onto, but I felt like a drained battery. Something scraped against my arm, dragging a jagged edge over my skin. The heat of the blood startled me as it gushed from the wound. The salt stung like a thousand wasps were stinging me in that one place. Never had I been so happy to feel stabbing pain. New vigor flowed through my appendages. I grabbed frantically at the piece of the boat while I choked the ocean out of my lungs. My arms like jelly, I struggled against the ever moving water to pull myself up. The second I did, they collapsed, all the energy drained from them. The only thing keeping me on my makeshift raft was my stiff fingers, gripping the boards so hard they were completely white. They held on for me as wave after wave slammed into my body, trying to drag me down again. My fingers were the only things that kept me alive.

All time was lost to me except that one moment, holding onto the raft. Me and the raft and the waves were the only things in the world. I don’t know how long it had been before the waves calmed. It could have been hours or days or weeks or years. I couldn’t tell. My body was limp and wet, my clothes clinging to my tired frame. I fought with my eyelids as they grew leaden, drooping closed. What if another storm came along? The waves could wash me away and no one would ever know, not even me. No one would tell the story, no one would ever know there was a story to tell. But my body won and I clacked out, still clinging with my cold, pale fingers to the little shard of my shattered life.

I woke up to an unfamiliar roar surrounding me. It grew louder with every beat of my heart, which I took as a good thing, since I still had a heartbeat. I looked out across the horizon, searching for the source of the noise. What I found instead astonished me even more. All around me were enormous gray buildings that reached to kiss the sky. High above me to my right a giant green statue of a woman stood staring off far away, as if she could see something I couldn’t. But the most amazing sight by far were the people.

There must have been thousands of them. They crowded all along the water, pointing and talking over one another. All different sizes, skin colors, and clothing styles were lined up, trying to get a look at me. I must have looked awful, beaten up with my clothes plastered to my body. I could hear snippets of at least six different modern world languages. All I could understand was the English.
“Where did she come from?”
“How did she get here?”
“I bet she’s been through a wreck. Poor thing! She looks starved!”

The sound grew louder again. I looked up to find a giant flying machine hovering above me. It was the strangest thing I had ever seen in my life. It had a body vaguely resembling that of a dragonfly, with blades on the top that chopped the air to stay afloat. The words COAST GUARD were plastered on the side of it and I could just make a pilot flying it.

“Stay where you are!” the thing commanded. “We’re sending someone down for you!”

As promised, a neon orange clad rescuer dropped down on a harness, descending like a spider. When they reached me, they hooked me up to another harness and suddenly – amazingly – we were in the air, my feet dangling. I had never experienced anything like it. My jaw dropped as we slowly rose up to the flying machine. Once we reached it, I was unbuckled and sat in a chair. I looked all around me in wonder, craning my neck to take it all in.

The inside of the machine was even stranger than the outside. Lights and buttons flashed everywhere, making mechanical dingling sounds. Everything else was a hard black metal. Sharp ninety degree angles dominated the levers and everything seemed crude and old fashioned. It took me a while to realize I was being spoken to.

“Everything is going to be all right, kid.”

Somehow I could believe the pilot. “Where am I?” I asked absent mindedly, still in awe of the machinery.

“You’re just above New York City, kid. You’re gonna be just fine.”

New York, I thought numbly. I had made it. I had survived. I was the last of my kind.

“Yeah…” I muttered. I was the only one. I was the story teller, the remaining heir. I was the last Atlantean.
Abby Wolff
Flash Fiction: Today I Will Get Farther
Rachel Wolff, Teacher

This was the first thought she had when her eyes opened, and it was the only thought that she could remember from the day before. She sat up, looking around the black room. The only things occupying it were the bed, a side table, and her. On the side table, there was a small card. Picking it up, she read the name Remi Osbourne, which was accompanied by a picture she guessed was her. ‘Remi. My name is Remi.’

There was a door on the other side of the room. Remi got up, already dressed, and opened it carefully. Peeking out, she looked up and down the empty hallway. Seeing no one, she stepped up and turned right. It seemed like the most logical way to go. Her footsteps echoed down the wide hallway, and she wondered what she would find. All she knew was that she was supposed to get farther, whatever that meant.

“Hey! Stop!” Remi whirled around and saw three men with guns running towards her. Waiting for them to catch her was not something she wanted, so she turned and bolted. “Stop or we’ll shoot!”

‘Not if you’re chasing me,’ she thought as she sprinted down the hall. She turned left, her sneakers skidding around the corner. Her heart jumped the cracks of gun fire trailing behind her, but if she kept moving, there was less of a chance that they’d hit their mark.

“Remi!” A new voice called to her. There was a young man waving her towards him. “Come on! Hurry!” She put on an extra burst of speed as the cracks coming from the men chasing her got closer. Suddenly, an explosion of pain shot through her body. Grabbing for her bloody shoulder, Remi was able to reach the man at the end of the hall. He pushed a button, causing a new wall to close between them and Remi’s pursuers.

“Here, this will help with the pain.” The man stuck a needle into her forearm. It stung briefly, but the pain from the bullet that had ripped through her t-shirt and into her shoulder started to subside.

“Who are you?”
The man gave her a puzzled look. “I’m Charles, your husband.”
“Husband? I don’t remember getting married. Then again…” She looked at the little card that she had been gripping, “I don’t remember much of anything.”

“Come on, we need to move.” They started down the hall, looking for an exit. “Peg should be waiting for us.”

“Peg?”
“You don’t remember me, and now you don’t remember your own sister?”
She was speechless. What had happened? “I’m sorry. I wish I did.”
He shook his head. “It’s alright. It’s not your fault.”

“Whose fault is it then?” He didn’t answer her. They came a door, that was locked by a keypad.

“Any idea of what to do here?” Charles asked.
This seemed familiar, but Remi couldn’t pin down where she had seen it before. Without thinking, she pulled the scanner off the wall, revealing a jumble of wires. After some wrestling and rearranging with the wires, the lock finally clicked off.

The door opened to a horrible sight. A woman lay in a heap on the ground. Charles ran to her, and after rolling the limp body over, he looked at Remi solemnly.

“Peg’s dead.” Remi’s chest tightened. She couldn’t remember her sister before today, but an overwhelming feeling of grief filled her. Where was this feeling coming from if she couldn’t remember her own name without a plastic card?

“We’ve gotta go.” But before Charles could stand up, he started to convulse, and he collapsed. An electrical dart had flown out from the ceiling, and others were raining down. Remi rolled away, dodging the tiny killers, and scrambled up to run through yet another door. She kept running, her feet pounding on the tiles. She felt like she should be crying, but she didn’t understand why. She didn’t remember these people. She didn’t feel any connection to them, but she still felt horrible. Something was missing.

Another door greeted Remi, but this one was labeled “END”. She flung it open, and found herself in a room filled with screens. Flashing lights filled the room, along with video footage. Footage of her. She was running, fighting armed men, and working through complicated puzzles. A counter read, “TEST #792”. Test? This was a test? How long had she been here? What was this place?
A screen to her left started flashing. “Would you like to run the program again?”

Startled by the voice, she hesitantly asked, “Can I turn the program off?” Alarms started to blare. “What did I do?” she cried, covering her ears. “Someone let me out of here!” A group of guards ran in, pointing their guns at her. “No, please!” All of them fired, and Remi fell to the ground. One of the guards tossed her over his shoulder and carried her out of the control room.

The two researchers sat in their office, watching Remi being carried back to her start room. “She almost figured out how to turn the program off this time,” the younger said hopefully.

“This project is a bust. We’ve spent four years on it and she’s never been able to completely turn off the program.”

“We’re too close to stop now! If the subject can get through these last few tests, who knows what else we’ll be able to crack about the human memory? We’ve been able to manipulate her time and time again, but yet her brain is working 95% faster than when she started the tests.”

The older sighed. “Alright. I’ll restart the program tomorrow, but if she can’t get through it in the next few days…”

“Don’t worry, she’ll get it. Tomorrow, she’ll get farther.”

‘Today I will get farther.’

This was the first thought Remi had when her eyes opened, and it was the only thought that she could remember from the day before.
The boy dreamt dreams the consistency of chilled molasses throughout which birds outside pined hymns. He had fallen asleep to the last forlorn sun of daylight savings and when he awoke the clock read 6:31 am. The sparrows still strung out their dirges.

Dad, he said. His dad had promised to take him apple picking. Today was the day. He dragged himself down the hallway on legs still sloggy with nightmares. He walked into the room and his brain cracked with foreboding. It already smelled empty.

Dad?
Dad?
Dad.

The boy called his mother first and she took an hour to arrive. By then he was sitting at the breakfast table with a slice of the pumpkin pie they had bought the previous day. She stood in the doorway in her new fur coat that smelled of another man and looked at her son’s milk mustache.

Will.
Is he here? He asked.
Who?
You know who.
What are you talking about. She might have been crying.
Mark. Is Mark here.
He’s outside in the car. I couldn’t drive myself.
Okay.
Why are you eating pumpkin pie?
The boy finished the slice. She stayed standing with the door cracked open behind her. His fingers on the milk glass were slender and cold. He put the plate and fork and glass in the sink. The fur around his mother’s neck glistened.

Dad’s upstairs. In his bed.
I know, honey.
We need to go get him.
Yes, we do.
We need to go get him.
I can’t do it right now.
Do you want me to get Mark?
What? No.
We need to go get Dad.
I’m going to call 911 soon.
You should go see him.
I don’t know if I can.
Okay. We were going to go apple picking.
I’ll take you apple picking, she said.
No, you won’t.

She finally closed the door and took off her coat and laid it across the back of his dad’s dining chair. Like the big dark animal that had eaten him from the inside. Big and dark and unknown. He went to the window and saw a silver car behind his dads with Mark’s silhouette staining its driver’s side window and its exhaust spinning sad spirits into the morning. Behind him his mother had sat down in the chair still warmed by his fevered body and set her head on her forearms. A mousy bird flew into the glass. Why did the bird want to be inside? He hated the bird for singing his dad’s elegy. If it came inside he would kill it.

I’m going biking.
You shouldn’t do that right now.
I’m going to say hi to Mark.
You’re going to go biking anyway aren’t you.
Yes.
Okay.
Okay.
A shadowy arm behind the silver car’s tinted window batted a greeting but the boy passed without acknowledging that the formalities or desires or squelching heart or rasping lungs of the thing inside the vehicle. He rolled his dad’s bicycle out of the garage. The sun pricked the exposed chrome. Garish flecks. The seat was too high for him so he leaned it against the corner of the garage and tried to scrabble his way up. He slipped and the sparrows laughed as his body scraped pink against asphalt.
Pink the rims of his dad’s eyes. Opened wide but not seeing the blank ceiling.
The sky was of the bottomless deep autumn variety. The kind of sky in which the boy’s supple body could almost lose itself as it leapt from bough to bough rattling the overripe apples into heaps. The orchard was a five minute drive down gaunt gravel paths along the two lane highway. His dad had said any pedestrians on those paths must have a death wish but he had also promised to take the boy apple picking. The boy pumped through the neighborhood of sleeping houses and out onto the big road.
He thought about Mark getting out of the silver car and sitting down next to his mother in his dad’s old dining seat and he almost turned around. It was too early for anyone to be driving on a Sunday especially after daylight savings ended so he biked along the yellow double lines. He had forgotten his gloves. And a satchel to bring back apples. The apple satchel would have been in his dad’s closet balled behind rows of dress shoes so shiny he had once begged his dad to not wear them. He wondered whether they would take the shoes. He did not know who they was. The grassy nothings on either side of the road reminded him of his mother’s eyes. He hoped she would not touch the shoes.
He knew the orchard owners still slept because their Labrador was not outside to bark at him when he leaned his bike against the halfhearted fencing around their trees and slid through the small gate for friends. He thought about going to the front door his dad had helped paint rich navy and telling them. They would still be wearing the velvet slippers the wife loved so much. She had given a pair to his dad. They nested at the foot of his bed every night. This is how it would go.
Good morning mister and missus.
Good morning Will. It’s awfully early to be picking apples isn’t it. Although you’re always welcome you know.
Yes. Thank you missus. Dad just passed. I thought you should know.
Oh goodness poor darling come here. Is your mother—you came all the way by—have you called anyone—
He left the navy door untouched. The orchard reeked of fermenting fruit. The tree limbs barren so barren against the rich sky. He crunched apples underfoot as he walked to his favorite tree. When he had climbed the highest he could go he dangled himself from the branch and flailed off and splattered apples as he hit the ground. He climbed and leapt and climbed and leapt until the slight bones of his ankles moaned and his knees ground small earthquakes with each landing. He twisted limp apples from their stalks and threw them down to break them.
Yellow tinged white flesh shivering nakedly in the dull grass. His father’s face in the slivers of light that slid from between the slats of the blinds. A worm inching for cover.
When the boy heard the Labrador he walked to the bicycle on bruised joints. He followed the yellow line. He heard a honk behind him and veered to the left. As the hulking metal passed he saw a pink tissue box tumbling in the back window and suddenly another windshield was coming at him. Which way to go.
He wanted to stay where he was. His poor bent legs and broken heart. Motionless like his dad. Instead his arms twisted him to the right and he was on the asphalt again. This time red. Blood from some unimportant part of his frail body. The car had stopped. Mark was picking him up.
No no no.
Oh Jesus Christ Will what the hell oh god I have to get you home. Your mom is going to be—
No put me down. Where’s the bike. Where’s the bike.
We’ll put the bike in the trunk but oh god you have a big cut on—
No no no no no. He tried to get away and there was blood on Mark’s neat white shirt but he would not let go.

Will you have to go home your mom needs you right now okay. I have an extra towel in my trunk. Let’s just clean this up okay.

No. He wanted to bite Mark’s eyebrows. He wanted to go back to the orchard and kick in the navy door and be adopted by mister and missus.

Okay.

The neighbors were clogging the yard already and when they saw the boy get out of the silver car with a raw elbow they clucked condolences. The paint of his dad’s bike was chipped black where the asphalt had gnawed it and Mark wouldn’t let him roll it back into the garage.

Oh my god what happened, said his mother.
I went to the orchard. For apples.
Oh my god. She brought him inside to the foot of the stairs and her tears dripped into his hair.
Have they taken him away?
Not yet. I can’t.
So his shoes are still there?
What?
Are his shoes still in the closet?
Yes.
Okay.

He went to his room with another slice of pumpkin pie and laid out a black shirt and black slacks. His mother had made his bed but his dad still lay in the other room with the blinds closed. When he went to go get the shoes his mother and Mark stood at the end of the hall so he went back into his room. She had stopped crying again.

He locked the door and said nothing even when his mother and Mark and the neighbors all called his name. He hoped they couldn’t take his dad away with asking him. He knew they had.

When it was getting dark again he looked out his window and the neighbors were all gone. 6:31 pm. In the faint moonlight a sparrow still called and his dad’s bike glinted against the mailbox. He thought about climbing the drainpipe down to the bike and following the double yellow lines forever. He pictured himself biking in his dad’s velvet slippers. His knuckles strong around the handlebars. A satchel for apples and Labradors. Legs steady on either side of the sleek metal frame. Biking forever under an anorexic moon drowning in the sallow premature dusk.

Will, said his mother.

He thought of the scratched paint and his elbow. The slippered people behind the quiet navy door in the orchard. He would never see them again. A bloody towel in a silver car’s trunk. The smell of dead animals in his mother’s voice.

Will we have to go.
Okay. He began to cry.

---

**Broken Line**

I forgot to call you last night and
I dreamt we made love in the waste of
a nuclear warhead
I woke up with a bloodied tongue
salty with the dead aftertaste of my retainer
and the dying dance of your tongue
I dreamt we played catch with your violin
and when I tossed it across the
shattered space to you,
it landed in the dust and we all exploded.
I’m going to Skype you tonight and cry pixelated tears until you try to hold me through the webcam cooing apologizing, as always, for my mistake, my broken brain splashing in the waste of my nuclear war head.

**Straying Fingers**

ing ring finger wavering, the pulse of creatures too fleeting for our dull eyes to own; if I had your chilled ice tea pupils I could trace the callus lacquered into its tip, veins lustrous as strings writhing beneath, thrumming.

right hand helms the swoops of a Grieg quartet; pinky, vagrant, inconsequential slip of flesh just slighter than you manning us to demise, splintered across bad notes frayed phrase marks eulogize every digit I will never hold or suck again—but I’d rather listen to the dissonances you wring from your fiddle, envy as you caress it with hands that used to, wholeheartedly, make a human girl (softer) (colder)

not just an instrument groan with joy.

---

My husband is worried about our daughter. Yesterday, he glimpsed her in the stairwell with her torso in a tight right angle as she scuttled up the stairs, a sleek can of something caffeinated in her veiny hands.

“Coffee at nine pm?” he asks me. “Do kids do that these days?”

“A lot of them are drinking vodka by nine pm.”

“Anne.”

“David.”
We make the trip to the school’s counseling office and wait. I uncrinkle a cherry Jolly Rancher from the bowl on a glass table between our sofas. David shoots me a look.

The counselor is named Ms. Samora, one of those intriguingly apolitical names. It sounds just one round, forgivable consonant away from Japanese, but her cheekbones aren’t angled right.

“Anne,” says my husband.

“Have you noticed any strange behaviors on your daughter’s part?” prompts Ms. Samora, clearly familiar with the signs of an unengaged worrier.

“I don’t think so,” I tell them.

“There have been a few times I got up at 3 am and saw the lights in her room still on,” volunteers David. “But even on the average night she’s up past midnight. Do all the kids here do that?”

“A lot of students are under pressure. The curriculum is demanding.”

I should be angry about the evasive jargon. Samora’s unplaceable dark eyes flit over us and I feel only detached amusement.

“She drinks coffee at nine pm. She looks as if she’s lost ten pounds in the last month. Don’t tell me that’s all the students here.”

“Let me pull up her file,” says Samora, gliding to her monitor in her rolling chair.

“Four APs, six total courses, two electives...”

“She’s also the varsity basketball team captain, and a violist in an honors—”

“She has ever discussed her schedule with you?” asked Samora.

“No,” says David.

“We usually assume that she can handle it,” I chip in.

“What your daughter...Stephanie?...oh, just Steph? Steph, what Steph’s doing, it’s not unheard of, but yes, it is a lot of classes.”

“Can she drop one? Without consequences?”

“You’d have to talk to her academic advisor about that.” She clicks a ballpoint against her leg a few times, tickTICK, tickTICK. “Do you have any idea of Steph’s study habits? Whether she has distractions that make her homework take longer than it should?”

“Steph’s always been very disciplined. We just...she goes into her room, we don’t make her put her phone away or anything. We just let her do what she needs to.”


“Why don’t you talk to Steph about this,” she finally offers. “If she’s not receptive, I’ll call her in after lunch or something. Sometimes they’ll open up to people they don’t know quite so well. Let me know.” Samora procures a card from a drawer; David’s hand moves toward it but she hands it to me. “Just for reference.”

The thanks, the yes-we’ll-keep-in-touches, and we are back in the car. David starts the engine. I still hold the card, its surface pearly and benign against my coat.

—

David and I met as undergraduates. A “prestigious” university, they call them nowadays, “highly selective” institutions. We were just two flyover kids with what David jokingly calls the dumbass work mule gene. It’s not so funny anymore now that he has a sitting job at the bank.

“My new boss,” he told me after his first day on the job, sitting on the edge of the bed, his belt’s silver head unbuckled but his slacks still wilted around his waist, “during his lunch break, he stays at his desk and eats two slices of bread. On Fridays, he adds a slice of Parmesan cheese.” Trade desk in an open floor, each man to his eight monitors. Constant scrutiny, I suppose, though that’s not what David would call it. David does not voice a single complaint about the new post.

—

Steph has always been a very disciplined girl. When we get home the house is sustained only by the ice machine’s wheezing and twin slits of under-door light that indicate Steph and her brother Nick’s presences. David goes to the office to finish something from work; I go upstairs and tap on Steph’s door.

“Whatcha up to, Steph?”

“Homework.” Her desk lamp in the far corner is the only lit bulb in the room. It butters one side of her face jaundiced, oozes into the crescent valleys beneath her battered storm irises. She blinks at me, her mouth so still I know there is nothing she is even remotely thinking of saying to me.
“Okay. We talked to Ms. Samora tonight.”
“Ms. Samora?”
“One of your school counselors.”
“Oh.” Her lips vegetate for a few moments. “What, do you think I’m like cutting myself or something?” She ironically flashes her wrists.
“No, you just seem to have a lot of work.”
“Yeah, yeah, of course I do. Everyone does. I’ve gotta get into college. Well, obviously. As if you’ve forgotten. Anyway, like I said, everyone has a lot of work.”
“Is it...too much?”
“No...I mean, nothing’s ever too much work if you work hard enough.” Face settled, she looks down at me.
“We just want to make sure you’re not overextending yourself. Now’s a very important time for you, and your grades, and if you’re overloaded—”
“I’ll be fine, Mom. I’ll be fine. Everyone’s doing it. I can do it.” She closes the door. “It’s not too much work,” I hear her mumble on the other side. “Not too much, not too much.”

We first visited Boston when Steph was five and Nick a pending surprise. We fed her oily lobster flesh and let her lean against the railings, shrieking, as our whaling boat sprayed past hunchbacks. On the last day we visited Harvard. Even in our almost-middle-aged security, we paled a little in that eminent institution. I drew some petty dignity from the thought of our framed diplomas hanging at home. We bought a sweatshirt for Steph, incomprehensibly tiny on the rack and overwhelming on her. On our mantle sits a photo of us in front of the John Harvard statue, Steph in David’s arms, one miniature hand patting the worn toe that drunken Harvard students—we later learned from a tour guide—regularly inundate with their urine. It is the only baby picture of Steph displayed in the house. When we took Steph back to Boston a decade later and she learned about the toe, after David forgetfully rubbed it again, she laughed and laughed and laughed.

“It’s not funny,” whined Nick, futilely rubbing his right hand on his jeans.
“No, it’s funny,” giggled Steph. “Irony. You wouldn’t get it. You’re just rubbing pee onto your pants.”
At the end of the visit, Steph refused to purchase anything from the gift shop.
“I’ll do it after I get in,” she told us. The grimace on her face set just between cocky determination and bitter sarcasm.

The first time Steph brought home a B, she was in third grade. 16/20, the test read, a smiley-face looped dopily across the margin. It took twenty minutes to coax Steph out of her bedroom.

“Stephy, what didn’t you understand?” asked David. He squinted at the questions slashed by red.
“I didn’t know the answers,” she murmured. “I...I couldn’t remember them.”
“Well...yeah, except maybe this one was from the website.”
“Did your teacher tell you questions from the website were going to be on it?” asked David.
“I think so,” whispered Steph.
“Well, why didn’t you review those?”
“I did.”
“Were there too many of them for you to remember?”
“...probably not,” hummed Steph, her chin pressed into her chest. Probably not, this response will become a refrain, pulled out when she feels that proactively guiltling herself get the affair over with the quickest.
“Can you bring your book here, please? And open the website on the computer?”
“I left my book at school.”
“...did you read the book before your test?”
“Yeah.”
“I haven’t seen it at home in a while,” I said.
“Mmm,” said Steph.
“Did you leave your book at school before the test?”
“...yeah.”
“Steph, we keep telling you to check your backpack before you leave school every day! Now something bad finally happened when you didn’t do it. If Mommy leaves her presentation at home, she can’t show it to her students. And if she does that enough times, she doesn’t get paid anymore! This may not seem like a big deal, but sometimes these little things are. Do you understand?”

“Steph, listen to your dad,” I said. Her eyes are still glued on her toes.

“...okay,” she finally said.

“Okay, so why don’t you open the website on the computer. If you can remember the web address. Or did you not remember the web address, either, and that’s why you couldn’t review the website questions?”

Steph’s little anchovy fingers fumbled around the keyboard. David had had a long few days at work, I knew. A single tear darkened Steph’s t-shirt collar.

The actual mistakes are always inconsequential. An antiderivative written incorrectly, a reaction unbalanced. Nothing, as Steph surely points out silently, that will derail her down the road.

“You don’t want to be a B-student of life, though,” explained David, once upon a time, or maybe all the time. It makes no difference.

- David is not a light sleeper, but he rolls out of bed at 2am. Our house—in a nice neighborhood, perhaps the nicest if I’m not feeling modest—muffled in suburban weeknight. The silence of those whose worries must be mimicked from soap operas and midlife crisis romance novels. Medicated with anything wallet-draining: food, pills, gambling, cars, vacations, a second graduate degree, homes, divorces. Or so they must think, those who drive by our classic brick colonial Whatever with the two pedigreed silver cars out front. David staggers through this lethargic darkness into the hallway; I follow him out of curiosity, and there glows the telltale pool of light from under Steph’s door.

David raps on the frame. “Steph, go to bed!

“Steph, it’s 2 am. Go to sleep.”

He sighs. We both wait until the light fades out and he groggily stumbles back to bed. I wait until it flickers back on.

- David bike five miles to high school because the bus didn’t navigate the route to his family’s remote farm. Most Friday nights as his friends rattled around in other people’s cornstalks, spilling vodka onto the harvest and girls, he flirted with functions and dead generals. He had no aspirations of attending ———, just a mean competitive spirit. The bus in my town stopped for me—my father was the mayor—but that was the only difference between us.

Steph likes to tease us when we tell these stories again over our extra glasses of wine. “Just a small-town girl...”

- “Steph, honey, how are the apps coming along?”

This is the first thing David says in the morning. I regret it for him. He means to ask her why she was up so late, but her mouth, which had unfurled in a half-hearted yawn, petrifies again.

“All right.”

“All right?”


“I mean, they’re not finished yet,” sighs Steph. “Good morning, Dad.”

“How many college applications does she need to fill out, again?” I ask David after Steph has driven off to school.

“Twelve? Sixteen?”

“Jesus.”

Steph hears back from our alma mater in a week.

- Steph always took after us, both of us, in the most judicious sense of the word. Traits we differed in she split equally, or found happy mediums to; traits we shared, she adopted. The dumbass work mule gene lives on.

One night last winter, I walked into her room to see her lying on the floor, tears on her face as her thumbs blurred around her iPhone’s screen.
“Steph, what’s wrong?”
“I shouldn’t go to Steven’s birthday thing.”
“Seems like you really want to go.”
“No, I shouldn’t. I need to study for my physics test on Monday.” She stood and padded to her cluttered desk, opened a bloated tome, her cell phone still lying in the middle of the floor.
“Steph?”
No response, so I left and closed the door gently behind me. The weekends Steph spent out and about are easily countable.

Two days until the decision comes out, and I have scheduled another meeting with Ms. Samora. Steph has a biology test in the morning, reports the completion of yet another essay. A safety school, but a completion nonetheless. An A from a big test last week, another win for the basketball team. From school to the courts to her room. After she comes home, she seems justified in locking her door and drowning sounds of everyday life out with her earbuds; her wolfed meals are a time-conserving tactic. We do not begrudge the sacrifice of our company.

“What are we going to tell her?” David asks me when I mention Ms. Samora. “We haven’t talked to Steph about anything, really.”
“We could tell her that.”
“Well, if we’re going to be honest, neither of us tried.”
“What do you think Steph would have said, anyway?”

Last spring, “Mom, I’m so fucking tired,” Steph moaned. After a week riddled with assignments and games and concerts, an outburst on my part over her room’s pig sty-esque state, in the car on the way home from tutoring, her forced to by my passenger because my car is in the shop, me asking her how classes are going. Spring finals looming, the crucial last stretch.
“Excuse me?”
“I’m really tired,” she mumbled into the windowpane.
“Ohkay. So am I. So’s your father. You’re almost there.”
“Yeah. Yeah, I am.”

Steph comes home in the evening red-cheeked and toothy. She hums “Don’t Stop Believin’”,
“Hey, how was your day?” David asks at dinner, where Steph has chosen to linger rather than going straight to her stack of books upstairs.
“Congrats on finishing another essay.”
“Yup. I mean, thanks, Dad.”

The rest of the night proceeds as usual; an hour and a half of viola, then homework. I stay up with a book David and I tried to read together, which he gave up on last week. At one am the light is still on in Steph’s room.

“If you work hard enough, you can be anybody.”
“Really, Daddy?”
“Yeah. Ask your mom.”
“Yeah. I used to be a farmer’s daughter.”
“And now you’re a professor.”
“Yes, I am.”
“Because you worked hard.”
“Yes, ma’am.”
“Okay.” Steph smiled through the gaps of her newly missing teeth. “Okay. If I work hard enough, I’ll get to be like Mommy and Daddy later! With a pretty house and family and love. Right?”
“Right,” said David. I nodded.
It’s twenty minutes past the time Steph usually gets up to eat breakfast. I notice first and knock on her door.

“Steph? Steph, it’s time for school!” I can’t remember the last time she’s overslept, though lately she’s been more and more sluggish in the morning.

I go back downstairs to slip her bread in the toaster. David finished showering realizes she is late, too. I hear him knocking. “Steph? Steph?”

The moment I see David at the foot of the steps with our daughter in his arms, I understand. He is shouting and for some reason his first instinct is to carry her outside and lay her across the brick of the front steps, as if the cold will be enough to revitalize her.

“Shit,” he says, “Shit, shit,” and Nick has come and gone, his face a haunting flash in the turmoil. What has he just seen? His father curled hysterically over his older sister, her stomach full of allergy medicine. His mother standing a safe distance away, watching him watching. The latter will be more traumatizing.

David will never get over this, even when Steph is gray-haired and content, which I somehow know she will be someday. He is ready to beg every passing nurse for forgiveness. He assumes a tortured relationship with the call button, even before Steph is conscious enough to need anything beyond the obvious. He wants everything for her but suddenly sees her face in the strained swoosh of every set of scrubs dashing by. He sees young people one unnecessary burden away from their own hospital beds. He will spoil Nick beyond belief from now on. I will play bad cop for the next five years.

Eventually, Steph sits up.

“What’s my laptop?” she whispers. “My phone?”

“Steph,” says David.

“What day is it? What day is it? Is it the fifteenth yet?”

David is crying, Steph is crying but still demanding her electronics, Nick hugs himself close and stores these moments in some dark corner.

“You can’t have them,” I tell her.

“Sometimes, Mom and Dad,” she says, “I really, really, hate you.”

She is home for the first, late snow of the year, for which I manage to coax her outside. A snowflake melts on her pressed lips. She does not want to be here—well, she wants to be outside, Steph loves to be outside, but not with me.

“Steph,” I say. The wind rattles around my knees. This is the price of our righteousness, this stranger staring back at me across the cold winter emptiness and offering the slightest of tight smiles.

“Yeah, Mom?”

Mom. I would not have been surprised if she had addressed me as Anne. Though it takes more mental energy than she has, Steph steps across and embraces me, presses one cheekbone against the top of my head. “It’s okay,” she says.

Still working hard as she pushes forgiveness against whatever dark, poisonous hollowness the doctors could not pump out of her stomach. Our daughter through and through.
Yueyi (Emily) Zhao
Flash Fiction: Under the Sunset Maple
John Burroughs School
Eleanor DesPrez, Teacher

They sat under the rusting maple tree and scratched their woes into the loam’s withdrawing warmth. Their eyes skirted speckled fingernails and split hairs of grass, alighting hummingbird-restless on broken things, though they did not look at each other. In the end, names like Amsterdam and Chicago and ifsonBilly and ifdaughterVeronica were mixed in with all the rest of the universe’s debris. An atom of a worm’s sigh settled between cold mingling toes, a forlorn alcoholic shard lodged between pages of a joint tax form.

“How’re your grandparents doing?”

“Good. She’s a big fan of the new lava cake at the nursing home. I’d like to say it was good, but since she basically force-fed me four pieces it’s….”

“Four pieces, huh? I can really tell. You better hit the treadmill hard tonight.” In the tree a crow laughed. Ha. Ha. A week ago she might have slid a finger under his sweatshirt and touched his sunken belly, just one square centimeter of skin against another. A week ago, he had worn flip-flops; a week ago, breathing was still an invisible, discreet act. Not so long ago, everything she did appeared a magic trick; when she said his name, it was doves exploding from a grimy hat into the deep sky. He could see her breathing now, both in the frost plumes and the shudder of the red poncho she wore. He could see her gnawing the rind of her cheek, breaking apart the words that oozed from under her tongue and filled her mouth with a tang.

She waited for syllables to fly from the pulsing inadequacy of her throat. She waited for them to bubble up from the tenderness that had fermented in all creases of her viscera. But the crow continued to laugh, and all the right words had been used up since the first broken heart, the relics of their bones long since buried beneath the patter of cold squirrel feet and the whispering dirges of shattered leaves.
Yueyi (Emily) Zhao

Short Story: Triumph

John Burroughs School

Eleanor DesPrez, Teacher

I.

Her

She strode from place to place in an inexorable heel-toe-heel-toe. Her shoes were all loud-soled and loud-souled, even the rubber-bottomed ones: they insistently heralded the path of legs stretched impossibly long not by genetics or yoga or outlandish surgery, but by the velocity and determination with which they yanked through space and time.

She arrived at one location before she had left the previous, shoes beating faster than the natural pulse of physics. Iris, the messenger of the gods, he used to call her jokingly, before their jokes corroded down to the acidic pits. She would laugh coyly at the comparison as he kissed the endless expanses of muscle that roped up and down from her hip to ankle.

She laughed frequently, rich lips unrolling over angled, broad teeth, but no crow’s feet swept out from the corners of her eyes. Ambrosia, he wrote across a wallet-sized photograph of her. A goddess.

Him

Lacquered limbs, lanky with the physicality of a violin bow: all corners and edges, he had a way of spiking himself around, his schizophrenic writer’s thoughts rattling in his bloodstream. She kept expecting his body to be inked with prose and profundity. In the beginning, as every precious square centimeter of lotus skin had been revealed to her she’d inspect it with the scrutiny of a cryptographer. She was convinced that at some point words would diffuse through epidermis and bloom darkly for her to read.

Mathematics broke everything into ten digits, computers broke that into 1’s and 0’s; he broke everything into twenty-six characters. What was it like having the power to understand everything just the way you wanted to, to bend the essence of humanity in a Word document? There was the core fact, but that was just a few electrical impulses zipping around inside people’s decomposing brains. There was the core fact and then there were the twenty-six letters that could make lies out of truth and truth out of lies, something out of nothing and nothing out of something.

The closest she got to the words was through his eyes. As they walked down the street he would turn abruptly as a phrase rang through the air or a person blew past them. In his eyes she could see alchemy, words curling into soft gold and paving over those reserved hazel irises.

Why are you looking at me like that? he used to ask, his mouth twisting as it searched for the perfect posture of mirth.

You're beautiful.

II.

Him

Always save half. She’d read the money-managing tip in an old copy of Seventeen magazine in a dentist’s office. She wondered if he had found the same tip somewhere and, possessed by one of his fits of exaggerated inspiration, applied it to his entire life. She felt he always kept half of everything stashed away in the golden vaults of his eyes: twenty-six more letters of the alphabet, two hundred thousand dollars more in family savings, one hundred percent more love. Half of him, half of her.

He always deleted as he wrote. What are you working on? she would ask. Conciseness, he would say. He could have said making it shorter (she definitely would have said it that way), but instead he said conciseness. He could always do with less. The irony: his eyes were papered in precious metals as his word counts sank into poverty.

Her

Once when she was eleven, she claimed, she had actually swung high enough on a flimsy, plastic-flap-attached-to-two-chains swing to flip herself forwards (or was it backwards?) over the bar. Her parents and siblings and friends had never been able to push her that high. He could imagine her as a small child on the playground. Higher, higher, Daddy, higher, HIGHER! Her big barrel-chested father would push and push but it would never be high enough for her.
He did the physics research himself. She loved the hard numbers and infallible equations; she also loved to break them, the length of her legs and the momentum of her slim eleven-year-old body crossing out formulas for power and centripetal acceleration. Higher, higher, higher.

It’s impossible, he told her. He showed her the paper with neat lines of math sifted through Wolfram-Alpha and Physics Classroom. He had even looked up a children’s weight distribution chart on the National Institute of Health’s website.

She loved the statement of impossibility; she had wished for it, he could see it in her eyes. I did it, she insisted, still glistening from a run. I did it. I promise.

It was so easy to believe her, to take her word over that of dead scientists portrayed in sepia with hair electrocuted and toupéed and powdered. Iris, the messenger of the gods, winged feet planted firmly into the carpet of their living room. Higher, higher, higher, faster, faster, faster.

III.
Her

He stood at the finish line of every single one of her races. In the beginning he did so because he loved her and he loved, perhaps even more than he loved her, to see her fly down the asphalt, gravel, or beaten grass and smash through the finish line and limitations. Later he did so because it was a habit; he still had a vague notion of what had moved him in the beginning, the idea of an idea that was enough to find him dutifully receiving her with a gallon of water and a stopwatch. She always PR’ed. She would read her time and smile a divine smile, the numbers ticking down—for once it wasn’t higher, higher—toward the deepest parts of her heart.

Him

Let me read a story, she said. Show me the first piece you ever got published.

It was a poem, a villanelle. He had to explain to her what a villanelle was. She liked its orderliness and predictability; he scoffed at his inability to write free form. The poem revolved around a eucalyptus tree—he had grown up in California—that in alternating last lines of each stanza burned leaf by leaf and fertilized graveyards with its ashes.

What does it mean? she wanted to ask, but did poets like to explain their poems, or did they like for you to wring your brain into emptiness only to conclude something totally wrong? She Googled “eucalyptus tree symbolism;” eucalypti apparently stood for wealth and foretelling.

And even as she debated whether she should ask, she knew that she needed to know exactly how to ask. Words were his lifeblood. She shouldn’t poison him with bumbling phrases and dull queries.

IV.
Him

He lived in past tense, that schizophrenic writer brain of his pressing three dimensions into the template of twenty-six letters of preterit and past conditional. He even regarded the future as a past yet unwritten. Wasn’t now enough for anyone?

Sometimes she would speak to him and see earnestness in his face, only to realize that he was not excited by what she was saying but by the fact that she was almost done saying it. Afterwards he could return to his desk and there ponder the other places, the ones her mind could never reach. His whittled night hours away with people whom he could not touch and kiss and fuck but whom he preferred to her anyway. She feared and expected that someday as they writhed together between the sheets he would moan a name that wasn’t hers. It wouldn’t even belong to a real, flesh-and-blood person.

Her

In bed she sometimes insisted, Fuck me, FUCK me. At first he had assumed it was just dirty talk. When the phrase never evolved, however, when the language never elevated itself as the rest of her was constantly elevating itself, he realized that the demand was made because he couldn’t reach the proper pitch of ardor, the correct frequency of passion. She would grab his buttocks and press him even harder into her, saying Fuck me, FUCK ME, like a track coach telling an obtuse pupil to pick his knees up, goddammit, pick his knees up. Pick your knees up. Fuck me, FUCK me.
He wondered if she had the neurology of orgasm bookmarked in Safari, a careful map of her nerves wending across a screen somewhere in cyberspace as she calculated pressure and friction and angles of applied force. Maybe one day she would whip out a protractor along with a condom.

V. Her

When the “ambrosia” photograph started to look a little too dated, he printed out a more recent one. She looked exactly the same as before, of course; he was the one who needed to be upgraded. Love is inertia, his pen wrote, in drunken, bemused glyphs.

She thought love should be accelerated motion. She thought everything should be accelerated motion. She thought he should be constantly blurring in an out of her frame of reference just as quickly and wildly as she flitted around in his, but someone had to be at rest, right?

Him

What did he want from her? What did he want at all, other than conciseness?

She didn’t know how to ask. She didn’t know if she wanted to ask. She knew she couldn’t properly understand the answer.

VI. Him

When the layoff notice came she said nothing. In those volatile moments to phrase condolences wrong—the mix of obvious sorrow at the loss and relief at his emancipation from his previous job’s drudgery—would be to drive him further into his golden cavern of thought.

She said nothing, and he said nothing. Her nothingness meant that she was unsure of what to say; his nothingness meant a multitude of things, all of which he intended it to mean and decided best expressed through a precise lack of words.

And the nothingness later, when he told her he had found a new job in LA—was that nothingness intended to mean the same as the post-layoff nothingness? Was there, in his nothingness, the implicit knowledge that she would of course go with him?

The night after the job offer she stuck a paper map of California onto their corkboard and smudged the route down the highway with blue highlighter. Google Maps said the drive would take six hours, so they would get to LA in just under six. The traffic lights would be, for him, always green or yellow. The trip would be concise. She imagined the ride, just under six hours of silence, her in the passenger’s seat watching his eyes watch the road, stewing in a silence full of words that could dazzle the pickiest of readers, but to her might as well have been gibberish.

VII. Her

When the lay-off notice came he felt perverse pride. Finally, some evidence of change. When the job offer followed shortly afterwards he felt an even more perverse pride, because it would require her to change even more drastically.

It was only, he explained, 360 miles down the coast. They would still live in California, so no legal finagling would be involved. (Should he have wished for more legal finagling because it meant more change? Was it possible for any state to improve upon California, though?) She would have to leave her job, leave her running mates, leave her trails, but she could do it. She always did.

What am I supposed to do down there? she asked. She opened Google Maps and mapped directions from their front door to the front door of his new office. The software calmly displayed the pastel blue of the ocean and mild yellow and pink of the land. The interstate stood out thickly, the route a swollen green umbilical cord between Los Angeles and San Francisco. He saw her fingers twitch on the mouse, the pixelated black triangle temporarily hovering over the icon for the walking route. The running route.

I’ll take the U-Haul and you can run behind me to make sure nothing falls out, he joked. She smiled her crow’s-feet-less smile. The lack of wrinkles indicated an omission, one far more piercing than any unspoken words could make.
Those legs—they finally grew long and strong enough to yank her against the inertia of love. He could have gone on every mad sustained sprint with her as she trained for 5Ks, 10Ks, half marathons, full marathons, triathlons, Ironmen; he could have beat her to every single finish line, and he still would never have caught up. She was powered by resentments he would never share: his inability to fuck me, to go higher, his generally unchanging frame of reference.

_Him_
He finally wrestled the word count low enough to cut her out, too.

_VIII._

_Him_
He must have sensed the finish line. He must have known that she would step across before she had made the decision herself. He knew, and he offered her another one of his eloquent silences, a beautiful glass rose, but that wasn’t what she wanted.

She wanted to slice those eyes open and pour them onto paper, pour out the gold and watch it squirm into the glyphs and numbers and sensations and love he had squirreled away. She wanted to rattle him until, disoriented, the words in his veins gasped to the surface for breath and she could finally read them. She couldn’t have this, of course, so she took the primary escape route of the disappointed: doing the opposite. She left him behind and hoped that time and distance would reduce the tantalizing significance of his hidden half.

He would find a way to fill her space back in. It would be easy for him, the magician of twenty-six hieroglyphs. What were his soul and heart but words, heavy with humanity? One or two paragraphs from his fingers would be worth more than she was.

All she had wanted was to feel his full, awful, glorious weight. She ran away, instead, toward an equally unbearable lightness.

_Her_
In those last days he constantly fought the impulse to drag her smug runner’s shoes to the backyard by their laces and hack at them with a meat cleaver. And then burn them, watching her eyes water as she inhaled the toxic fumes of evaporating cloth and lolling rubber. Better the shoes, he figured, than her legs. He could hear what she would say if she knew about this fantasy: _Just remember, cubic centimeter by cubic centimeter of material, those shoes are worth more than you are._ And by what standard unit, he wanted to scream at her, did she measure capability to love, to tolerate, to wait, to encourage—humanity? He liked to think that if placed on a cosmic scale of justice, her soul wouldn’t tip a grain of salt. It was, after all, full of the emptiness of miles spent going nowhere.
My parents and I sit in the waiting room, impatiently waiting for my name to be called. I wouldn't say that I was scared of not waking back up so much as the healing process that I was about to endure. All for a stupid volleyball.

“Meghan Amos, come on back,” the nurse called. My mom and I get up and slowly walk towards the door that the nurse is holding open for us. She shuts the door after we walk by and asks for my birth date and middle initial.

“May 3, 2001 and J.” The nurse nods and slips the band around my wrist, labeling me off for the doctor.

“All right, thank you.” My mom says as she closes the curtain.

I change and get situated under the covers. I lay on my side patiently waiting for the nurse to come back in.

“Okay sweetheart, let's get this over with. I smile and nod because I feel the same way. “I am going to pat and massage your hand and see if we can't get one of the vanes to pop up for us.”

She started to exactly what she said and my hand turned the color of a tomato. After the vain finally came up she put the IV in and it actually isn't as bad as you think. It only hurts after a while when it gets clogged and the nurse puts it in wrong. So my mom called the nurse back over and she confirmed, as my mom said, that she had put it in a weak vain and it was clogged. The nurse puts the IV in again but this time she places it on the inside of my elbow where the big, noticeable veins are. After she gets the needle in it is so much more comfortable and I barely feel it.

When Doctor Smith finally arrives I am ready for this all to start and be over with. He comes to my room and tells my parents and I how the whole thing is going to go down. He draws line on my thumb that represents the incision. “Since you are the youngest that I have today you will be going first. The surgery will take around 45 and then you will be in recovery until you wake up, which will probably be another 15 minutes. Everything sound good and we ready to get started?” My parents and I look at each other and nod towards the doctor. “Okay, I will see you back there, Meghan.” He shakes both my parents hands and leaves the room.

“Are you ready sister?” My mom asks me as she gets up and comes to give me a hug.

“I'm as ready as I'll ever be, I guess.” I say and hug her back.

“We'll see you in an hour sis.”

“Bye, love you.”

“Love you too.” They both say back in unison.

All I remember next is being wheeled to the surgery room and I'm just lying there. When they give me the anesthesia I fall asleep almost immediately and poof, I'm out.

When I first come to I remember my throat being as dry as a desert. The oxygen mask still helping me breathe. Both my parents are sitting next to me. My mom has a hand on my arm and my dad has a hand rubbing my shoulder. I open my eyes and the light is as bright as the sun and I close them again immediately. My mom notices and stands at my side.

“Hi, sweetheart. Do you need anything?” My mom asks as she takes the mask off.

“Water, please.” I say with a rough voice. She gets me a cup of water and I feel much better now.

“The doctor said that the surgery went great.” My dad says as he stands up next to me.

“Did they do surgery on both hands?” I ask because I feel something pressing on both hands.

“Oh no you dork, there’s a cast on your right and an oximeter in your left finger.”

I laugh as I still feel a little loopy and tired at the same time, I am just ready to go home. “Mom, how much longer do we have to stay here?”

“Not much longer sweetheart, I'll go get the nurse to tell her that you woke up. Dad will stay here with you and keep drinking your water.”
I drink the whole glass before she comes back with the nurse. “Hey Meghan, your mom said you’re ready to go? It looks like you’ve already had a whole glass of water, awesome!”

“Yeah when I first woke up my throat was really dry.”

“All right well I am going to get you unhooked from everything and after, while you get back in your own clothes, I’ll go get a wheelchair. Does dad want to go pull the car to the front.”

“Sounds good.” My dad says as he gets up and kisses me on the forehead.

After the nurse unhooks me from everything and pulls down the covers. My mom helps me get dressed because I’d probably fall over if she didn’t. Just as I get fully clothed again the nurse knocks and asks if we’re ready. I sit in the chair and as she wheels me out she talks about how I need to take it easy for the next couple hours and some other stuff but to be honest, I zoned out. The nurse helps me into the car and I don’t remember much from the ride home.

The only good thing that came out of this whole situation, besides a really cool scar, was all the candy, flowers, get well cards, and visits from everyone I knew to see how I was doing. Everyone was so helpful and I couldn’t have healed so quickly without them. Thanks Dr. Smith. Can’t say as much for the volleyball.
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Batool Anwar
Personal Essay/Memoir: Ayla’s Gift
Parkway Central High School
Jason Lover, Teacher

Never in my life have I felt more morally violated than the time that Ayla burst into the bathroom while I was in the shower.

“Get out! I want to use the bathroom!” she yelled.
The audacity. The nerve. The camel’s back had been broken. Straw or no straw, I wanted her out — out of my bathroom, out of my house, out of my life.

A conservative lady of foreign descent, Ayla’s mother was somewhere between an acquaintance and a friend to my mother. She was going through some tough times as her husband had relocated to Jersey City, NJ. The evacuation notice from their foreclosed home came just at the end of Ayla’s freshman year of college. My mother offered our basement to store her belongings while they searched for an apartment to rent. However, they decided to go back home to Bosnia for a month, or until life settled down a little, and be back for Ayla’s summer classes at UMSL, before moving to Jersey City.

Fate devises uncommon ways to entwine peoples’ lives, and on June 14th, Ayla returned from Bosnia alone. Her mother could not return as she had lost her immigration card which could take several weeks to replace. With no family or friends here, Ayla would have to stay with us.

For someone who never had the need to share any material or non-material blessing, I was rudely awakened by my mother’s announcement that I would be sharing my room with our new guest. After the initial shock and my mind’s natural resistance to incorporate any changes to my perfectly contented, satisfied life, my fourteen-year-old brain immediately launched itself into this-could-actually-be-beneficial-for-me mode. In an instant, a swarm of ideas and images flashed and crowded my brain — pajama parties, nail-polish nights, girl-talk revolving around ear-piercing, hair-dyeing, shoes, and lemon soufflés. For the three years that I had known her through my mosque’s youth group, I remember Ayla always being the center of everyone’s attention. brightening the darkest room with her vibrant personality, enlivening the most boring of conversations, and invigorating the laziest of couch potatoes, all while playing catch with oranges and sipping ice tea in her green camel-back. I could easily imagine an eighteen-year-old college-going room-mate helping me with my homework, thus making the idea of sharing my “sacred” living space with Ayla not so bad an idea.

Ayla’s raised eyebrows, upon seeing my clothes strewn on my desk and dresser, immediately put a damper on my expectations. Soon my entire room was rearranged according to her whims. Refusing my invitation to hang out at the mall under the pretext of “jet lag”, she aimlessly lay around all day with her headphones glued to her ears. Unaccustomed to subjugation and rejection, my teenage mind reacted by labeling Ayla as demanding, aggravating, easily irritable, and constantly grouchy. Perhaps she was plotting to dominate my turf.

Ayla’s demeanor indicated a “Not interested in anything you have to say” attitude, whether I was inviting her to hang out with my friends or just courtesy-chatting. Without any hesitation, she would blatantly reject all my ideas before I could even voice them. Each one of those twenty-six days that Ayla was a guest at our house was a challenge that tested not only my patience, but more than ever, shook my essence to the core to reveal a new threshold for my comfort zone of tolerance. If there was anything that could be intentionally or unintentionally designed or performed to outrage me, it manifested itself in those four weeks.

After two weeks of continuous, premeditated attempts on Ayla’s part to sabotage every fun activity of my summer break, I decided to completely ignore her, even if I had to pretend to have a busy social life. She, too, continued with her annoying antics, like purposely sitting on my chair at dinner, not rinsing her glass of milk on the day it was my turn to do the dishes, holding a Kleenex in her hand at all times that would inadvertently end up all over my room. It was as though we were competing to prove who cared less about the other.

However, in a moment of utter exasperation and determined to get my life back, I did get carried away once to do something I am still ashamed of. One day as she returned from summer school, I locked her out of the house and pretended not to hear the doorbell. After a while I forgot all about it and got lost in Season 4 of White Collar on Netflix. It must have been a few hours because when my mother got home she found Ayla
sleeping inside her car in the scorching heat. Furious, my mother gave me the look. I glared at Ayla, grudgingly, for ruining the tranquility of my existence.

Her eyes returned the gesture as her icy gaze did a slow burn on my face, saying “I hate you, too, you insolent, spoiled brat.”

Outraged at the injustice of the situation, I retreated to my room. I could not wait for Saturday for her to leave.

Friday had been a particularly tough day. Her used Kleenex was strewn all over the floor. Ms. Sleeping Beauty slept almost all day while I willfully crammed my brain with vocab words to study for my ACT but more so as an effort to clear my mind out of unpleasantness and anger. When she woke up, she sat with her laptop with the music blaring through the headphones, which I believe was more to bother me. Later it would be Netflix and some old sitcom with so much canned laughter that I was seconds away from canning her! Sensing my glare, she looked up, unamused by what was playing and indifferent to what I was feeling.

“I have to talk to you,” she said, putting her laptop and headphones away. I shrugged my shoulders as if to tell her OK go on let’s get it over with.

“No. Outside. On the deck,” she said, firmly yet indifferently. Hesitantly, I followed her out to the back of our house.

With dwindling courage, she forced out the words “My parents have separated because my dad is abusive. He does not support us financially at all.”

She paused for several seconds and then, in a barely audible voice, uttered “I wish my mother was here.”

It took me a few seconds to digest that she did not want to go with her father the next morning. In contrast to the black and white backdrop of the night sky and the moon, my mind was full of gray confusion. Her fear and desperation was evident from her decision to share these thoughts with her recently-acquired sworn enemy. The blaze of anger and frustration I had earlier felt for her got instantly doused by the tears of sympathy that swelled up. For the first time it dawned on me that she had no money, no job, and no friends or relatives that she could reach out to.

With mixed emotions, we said goodbye to Ayla as she left with her dad early next morning. With a lot of effort and no urgency, I dredged up to my room with a heavy heart and with Ayla’s face on my mind. Guilt, like a dense fog, crept up on me till it occupied every cell of my non-essential existence and my heart ached under the burden of its weight. She had reached out to me and I did not act and the moment was gone. There was a different kind of quiet surrounding me, a void of some sort, perhaps from a sense of unfulfilled desire to help, of missed opportunity.

It was not until the next few months that I felt the true impact of Ayla’s legacy - a series of self-realizations that awakened me. Over the course of the next few months, I had come to realize that there was a world beyond my little superficial world of wants and comfort - there was a world of souls faced with struggles. Beyond my self-imposed importance to the world of social systems, I realized that when my expectations were not met, I was quick to judge and label others, and, quite instantly hit the “Like” or “Dislike” button. I also realized that when you dislike someone, everything they say or do seems like a personal attack on you. The used Kleenex was not a plot to aggravate me but, rather, the evidence of her crying herself to sleep. And the loud music was perhaps to drown the screaming of her desolate soul. Living with someone requires tolerance, sympathy, understanding, and knowing when to leave someone alone.

Autumn rolled a soft hush over the loud, cheerful summer. The weather got cooler and the landscape became progressively devoid of life with each passing day. As the afternoons got quieter and the evenings got depressingly solemn, I thought of Ayla. Quiet times always make me think of Ayla. I dialed her cell phone but did not leave a message as I was reminded of my earlier callousness towards her and wanted my next interaction with her to be a warm one. I tried a few more times, several weeks apart, but could not reach her. Wisdom comes from unexpected sources and experience teaches important lessons in life. My encounter with Ayla in this manner has morphed my life from a mindless existence in a world of superficialities, from name-brands and vain talk, to a keen awareness that tingled every nerve of my body with consciousness. I awoke to the realities of life that challenged me to discover a new frontier of my soul. I became alive as a human. I could feel, think, and understand more, outside my world. Ayla came to my house with nothing – no money, no friends, no energy, no will, no security, and not even words to express her predicament – and yet she gave me the world.
Afton Apodaca

Poetry: Smoke Signs
Shawnee Mission Easy High School
Laura Beachy, Teacher

i.
I like to think that the moon is jealous
of the way I look at you like you are my sun.
How your laugh makes me tremble
like piano strings. How your voice
turns me into a pillar of salt.
You are the ground under my feet and
you are cold sand on the beach before sunrise.
You have the world inside of you and
you have swallowed me whole.

ii.
When you are gone,
I organize my sock drawer. I try not
to remind myself that my sweaters still smell like you
even though it’s been days since you last wore them.
My insides are bloody knees
bruised from weeks of tripping over thoughts of you,
hoping you’re okay.

iii.
I try counting the days you’ve made it through
at night instead of sheep whenever I’m worried most
about the number of lines on your arms.
Wishing you wouldn’t treat yourself
like a paper doll so easily sliced to shreds.
You always touched me with careful hands,
like your home was embedded in my body.
Now I just wonder if you were trying to discover
what it felt like to touch someone
you thought was whole.

iv.
The homeless man sprawled
across the doorstep on the next street over
looks at me with forgiveness every time I pass.
I don’t know what I have to be sorry for.

v.
There are still beds I’ve slept in that remind
me of you: messy, rumpled, beautiful,
trying to find your way back to being clean.
You tell me you want to draw the sheets back and
find a new you underneath.
I tell you that I can’t remember
the last time I made my bed.
vi.
When you’re low, you are like a cigarette.
You fill my chest and cheeks with warmth; your words fill my lungs like smoke and burn my throat. You tell me that the pills will tie weights to your arms; that they will fill your head with clouds and false memories and make you normal. I don’t know how to tell you that your lows are slowly poisoning me.

vii.
In this neighborhood, the roads part like two outstretched hands.
The cars pass in threads like loose teeth and every smashed window reflecting the sun just reminds me how cracked you feel even on the days when you burn the brightest.
You’re usually the pessimist in this relationship.
I’m not the optimist, but something in the middle. I don’t know what you’d call it.
Maybe trying to love you twice as much as you hate yourself.

viii.
The worst nights are the ones I call you up just to hear your breath to clarify that you haven’t killed yourself yet.
The worst nights are the ones I want to remove everything sharp from your room and throw it out with the used milk cartons but I’m so far away I could just as well be in another country.
The worst nights I barely hear from you and have to wonder whether this will be the night they find you.
The worst nights come so often now that they can’t even be called worse because now they’re just normal.

viii.
I tell you it’s alright.
I tell you it’s fine.
They taste bitter in my mouth like cheap lies every single time.

x.
I love the coffee spill on your back and the eight freckles on your left cheek.
I love the half-moons of your fingernails and those eyes that I swear can light up the darkest of rooms.
I love how you cradle my elbows and kiss my neck.
I try to focus on these things to take my mind off
the fact that your depression is slowly killing you.

xi.
Sometimes when things get bad,
I listen to your favorite songs and try to decode the lyrics
just to make sure they’re not suicide notes
waiting to happen.

xii.
The doctors told me to quit smoking.

xiii.
I told them that life’s purpose is to
find what you love more than anything else and
let it kill you.
Luke Arnce

Poetry: Take Me Back, Shadow, Water World
Carl Junction High School
Anne Nicolas, Teacher

Take Me Back

Take me back to peek-a-boo,
and macaroni landscapes
to oversized picture books,
and double-jointed action figures

Take me back to when 24 Crayola colors
defined the world

Take me back to sidewalk chalk,
and hide-and-seek
to lazy Saturday mornings,
and double Dutch

Take me back to when the world stopped
when the sun went down

Take me back to dewy turf fields,
and nervous first kisses
to never-ending classes,
and unflattering plastic portraits

Take me back to when the worst thing I knew
was my mom’s face when I lied

Shadow

I wish I could ball up my shadow and swallow it,
so I wouldn’t feel kept.
I wouldn’t have a problem with
the sliver of myself
that stains the concrete if
the night was
a shaded solace.
My self would wait for me on the front porch
as I wandered about the forest,
pricking my fingers on the pines and
tasting the salty consequence.
But the modern night is incandescent-
the eyelids of the globe
only droop
never click shut, and
my coffin mate follows me
into speakeasies and gentlemen’s clubs
that I will never be old enough to enter.

Water World

A day will come when you pluck
the spines from your skin
and stick them back
in the bleeding cacti
A day will come when
you put on your deep-sea gear
and watch Bluegills
squiggle by from your driveway

When you wriggle free
from the tendrils of your
bath towel bed
When you finally
soak the concrete and
settle into the gardener’s mulch
I’ll find some dry corner
and weep over the
Symmetry of my shoelaces
Luke Arnce

Poetry: Suburgatory & Rebirth
Carl Junction High School
Anne Nicolas, Teacher

Suburgatory

We used to walk across lakes
like it was easier than land,
but now the pleated surface
folds with every footfall.
The future was our skin,
but we forgot how to dream
and floated off to find safety
outside of the town in a
blemished suburban lull.

Now I sit in the porch swing
and look at the gray, lolling
tongues right across the way.
I can't tell which is more worn
or if they're even cracked at all.

Rebirth

I wish I could limp along an ocean beach
and bury myself
in the silicon to become
digital before a wrinkled sea.
I'd let the brine salve
my torn skin
and let the sun
warm me within
my sandy shell.
I would slumber there.
Sleep and heal until
the day I would shed
my gritty chrysalis and rush
through shattered sea towns,
into the company of fishermen lazing
in the lush underbrush,
who never wish on their eyelashes
and are never short on fish.

It’s funny the explicit details we remember from our childhood. We can’t remember each particular day or every exact word said, but we can remember the most random, trite specifics. The material of that shirt. The colors of those buttons. The tears shed in that chair. The sound of her laugh. The comfort of her presence.

I grew up in a quaint yellow house surrounded by charming homes, beautiful trees, alluring lakes, and big kids who wouldn’t let me play with them. In one of those charming homes lived an amiable, compassionate woman—the kind of woman who consoled and encouraged, the kind who made pink plaid shirts with butterfly buttons. She was my mother’s best friend and my daily comforter. She was Darnell.

Each day I would come bolting into the house, interrupting my mother and Darnell’s daily soap-opera-watching time, more tears swelling in my eyes with each dejected step and each trembling cry. They’d mute the TV; I’d wipe away the tears, collect myself, and finally say, “The big kids are being mean again! They won’t let me play!” My mother would scoop me up and place me on her lap in our favorite blue reclining chair. I would cling to her tightly, my tears dampening her shirt, my cries muffled against her reassuring shoulder. Together she and Darnell would tell me jokes, never failing to replace my tears with a smile. Finally appeased, I would sit and incomprehensibly watch Guiding Light and unenthusiastically listen to unstimulating adult conversations. I remember that chair fondly; it sits in my family room today. Darnell gave me more than laughter and blue-recliner memories, she gave me a tangible trademark of my childhood. It was pink plaid and handmade by her for me. It had orange and yellow butterfly buttons. It was my favorite shirt; I wore it incessantly. I'd sit on the dryer and wait for it to be done just so I could put it on again. I don’t remember Darnell being sick. I don't remember her having surgery. All I remember is that pink plaid shirt, those butterfly buttons, and that blue reclining chair. And I remember July 2, 2009.

We hadn’t lived in that quaint yellow house for ten years. I hadn’t worn that shirt in ten years. I woke up that morning and heard faint sobs emerging from the main floor. I scurried down the stairs, curious and concerned. There my mother sat phone in hand in that blue reclining chair. Tears streaked her face. One word was said. “Darnell.” And I knew. I staggered forward, my arms enveloping my weeping mother. There we were, ten years later, in that same spot. Only this time the source of the tears was my mom and the dampened shirtsleeve was mine. I held my mom. She relied on me. She needed me. I wasn't callow; I wasn't naive. In that moment death was those older, exclusionary kids and she was the heartbroken child and I was the reassuring mother. I was an adult, and an adult has to be the strength for the weak, the hope for the hopeless, and the comfort for the disheartened. It was my first time losing someone to death. In the blink of an eye, I became aware of a harsh reality and the fine line we walk between life and death. I grew in compassion, I grew in empathy, and I grew in understanding.

That blue recliner moved with us from Michigan to Kansas. That pink plaid shirt moved from my closet to my little sister’s. Darnell moved from Earth to Heaven. I moved from comfortee to comforter. I moved from child to adult.
The scent of kettle corn filled my nose as I listened to the screams emanating from the ride that passed overhead. Avery and my brother Jackson stood beside me in line as we waited to get onto the Patriot, Avery was swaying from side to side holding the kettle corn as if it were a baby. I looked at her with a questioning glance before asking her what she was doing.

“I’m rocking my baby to sleep,” she replied.

“Baby? What baby?” asked Jackson as he and I looked at her with confusion.

“This is my baby girl, Kenzie,” she said indicating the bag she was holding in her arms. “Please be quiet,” she added. “I’m trying to get her to sleep.” We moved forward stepping onto the platform and choosing a line for a car on the ride.

“Can I at least have some kettle corn,” I asked Avery reaching for the bag. She quickly moved the bag away from my grasp before readjusting her grip on the “baby” and swatting me away with her open hand.

“This is not food, this is my baby child,” she said addressing both Jackson and I, but glaring at me.

“So now we can’t even eat the kettle corn we paid for,” I questioned her.

“Of course not,” stated as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. “You cannot eat my child.” She then proceeded to glare down at me. Avery placed her sunglasses over her eyes and continued to rock the baby until our ride finally arrived. As I sat down and buckled in, I watched carefully to see where Avery put her “baby” down. She sat down and buckled in to the left of me, with Jackson to the left of her. The ride began to move, and as we ascended toward the peak, I started to think of a way to get the bag away from Avery so that I could eat the kettle corn. I was so concentrated on trying to get the “baby” back that I didn’t even realize that the ride had dropped. We surged forward and began twisting and turning in every possible direction. By the time the ride was over with, I had already formulated a plan.

We slowly pulled into the loading zone, and I rushed out of my seat as soon as the operator hit the release. I ran to the storage bin and slipped on my shoes, I searched the bins until finally, I found the kettle corn. I grabbed it by it’s top, and was out the gate before Avery, or Jackson, had time to figure out what was going on. Knowing that I couldn’t leave Avery, or Jackson behind, I stayed close to the ride and began to untie the knot at the top of the bag. I heard Avery yell my name and turned to see her rush down the stairs and run towards me with my brother in tow. As soon as she got within reaching distance, she grab hold of the bottom of the bag and attempted to pull it from my hands. I yanked back, determined not to let her hog the kettle corn all to herself, when she wouldn’t even be eating it. We pulled against each other back and forth until I heard the sound of ripping plastic and felt the bag give slightly, I released my grip and looked up to see Avery’s face showing that she was thinking the same thing that I was. I went up closer as we both inspected the bag for any tears, it wasn’t apparent until she turned the bag over to look at the bottom, and kettle corn spilled out onto the ground.

“What did you do?” Avery directed at me

“Me? This was your fault,” I snapped back at her. “You were the one who wouldn’t let me any of the kettle corn that I purchased with the intention of eating.” She gave me an annoyed look and hurried off with Jackson. I followed after her, she was acting angry, but I knew she wouldn’t be upset with me really over a bag of kettle corn.

“So what do you want to ride next?” I asked both Jackson and Avery.

“I’m not really sure,” Jackson said. Avery thought for a moment before agreeing with my brother.

“Well let’s just walk around and see if anything’s grabs our attention,” I suggested. They both agreed with me and we set off in no particular direction. I noticed that now that the bag had been ripped open, Avery had made the tear wider, and was eating handfuls of our treat. “Hey, give me some,” I said as I reached for the bag. She initially started to turn away from my grasp, but then gave in and allowed me to grab a couple. We all walked on, strolling through the park, fighting over a bag of kettle corn, and making jokes for the rest of the afternoon.
My hands moved slowly, carefully buttoning my blouse. I stared at myself in the mirror, noticing my flushed face and chest.

_Calm down Claudia_, I thought to myself, praying that my colorful complexion would settle. My hands shook as I turned the doorknob, exiting my room.

“Be careful today,” my roommate Emily said as I entered the kitchen. “I’m serious, Claud.” she added, noticing my eye roll. “This guy is clearly dangerous, and you are fully aware of that. Don’t think I don’t notice you’re shaking.” I glanced down at my hands as they struggled to keep the mug in them steady.

“I worked so hard for this,” I spoke, releasing a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding. “This interview will define me for the rest of my career.” I gripped the sink, my knuckles white.

“That’s not true,” Emily calmly approached me, resting a comforting hand on my back. “And besides, you’ll do great regardless.”

“It’s not just that,” I said, turning to face her. “This will define him. If I don’t ask the right questions, if I don’t do this the way everyone wants me to, the way those girl’s families need me to- If I screw this up, it’s too late. No do over’s.”

“I think the world’s already defined him.” Emily slides the New York Times across the counter.

“ROT IN HELL, SPENCE!” Printed in thick, black lettering, the title screamed the same four words that had been chanted outside the Pennsylvania penitentiary for the past month. Below the heading an image of bright eyes, messy hair, and an eerie smile stretched across the page.

He’d joined the ranks of Dahmer and Bundy in a matter of months. His trial was quick, admitting to the rape and murders of twenty-seven women and girls almost immediately after his arrest. The verdict was broadcasted across America in every media thinkable, and an uproar of satisfaction rolled across the country when his execution date was set.

Ryan Spence was undeniably smart. His words during his trial had been few but haunting. While his admittance had been satisfactory to the court, it hadn’t been to the public eye, and it hadn’t been to those whose families he had harmed. And I was sure he knew. People have a fascination with serial killers. There was an intrigue to the mind of a psychopath, and people desired to understand it. The more brutal the actions of a killer, the more people wanted to fully understand them. Ryan Spence had lost his life, but he still had the public wrapped around his finger.

“I’m fine, I’m fine.” I looked up at Emily, “I’ll see you tonight.” I grabbed my bag and made my way to the door.

Emily gave me a soft smile as I closed the door behind me and stepped into the cold January air. I attempted to slow my rapid breathing as I walked towards my car.

_How did I get myself into this_, I thought to myself as I fastened my seatbelt. I recalled the cool October day I can remember so perfectly.

…

“Eyes up here people!” My head snapped up from my keyboard to see Mr. Rienks in all of his plump, coffee stained glory.

“As I’m sure you’ve all heard,” he began, the fluorescent lights flickering above him. “Ryan Spence was sentenced to death last month. He will be executed January 16th of next year.”

“Good riddance,” I heard loudly proclaimed from a cubicle behind me.

“Yeah, well, it’s very good for us in more ways than one,” Mr. Rienks continued. “Mr. Spence has chosen Central News to conduct his last and only interview.”

I couldn’t help but snort at his words, and Mr. Rienks turned to face me. “Is something funny, Ms. Mills?” I blush as the office turns to look at me. “It’s just.” I sigh, giving up on my attempt to soften my statement.

“He picked us? Really? I mean, our view count is slim to none compared to the other broadcasters that must have wanted him.” I looked up, noticing a few nods from those around me.
Central News 4 had been running a whopping 11 years and had yet to offer anything of importance to the New York City area. When I applied for a job, I was fresh out of Columbia and determined to become the best journalist this city had yet to see. Yet, there I was, five years later, working for a channel that reported on the city’s best hot dog carts.

“Thank you for your confidence in us, Ms. Mills.” Rienks shot me a glare as he paced between cubicles. “It never ceases to inspire me.”

I muttered an apology as he continued. “As I have been told, Spence wanted to grace a smaller but committed station with the opportunity to tell his story.”

“Spoken like a true narcissist,” I speak, the room filling with quiet chuckles.

“That he is, Ms. Mills, but he’s the most expensive narcissist in the world, and if feeding his ego gets us on the map, I’ll take it.”

“Who’s conducting the interview?” a voice called out.

“That,” Mr. Rienks says, “is to be determined. Currently I have a few men in mind.”

“Men?”

“Yes, Ms. Mills, men” Rienks rolled his eyes as he turned to me. “I need someone who can control the interview, and for that I need a strong character. No murderous serial rapist is going to respect a woman.”

Rienks scoffed at my question. “Now, back to work,” he called as he retreated back into his office.

This interview could be my ticket out of this hell hole, I thought as I processed his dismissal. I stood abruptly from my chair and marched over to his office. I swung the door open without a knock.

“What the hell Rienks,” I spat angrily as the man stared at me, wide eyed, “You can’t just cut me out of the running for this! I do a better job than any man here and you know that!”

“I’ll admit,” he began, my eyes still boring into him, “You are talented. But I’m not about to send a 28 year old girl with an uncontrollable temper into a room with a man who killed people just like you.” He looked at me with pity, fueling my anger.

“Are you kidding me? I have a degree in criminal psychology, who could possibly be better for this spot? What do you thinks going to happen, that you’ll send some tough guy in a suit into the room and you’ll have Spence under your thumb? He’s a sociopath! He’s a sociopath who’s spent the past six months surrounded by men in suits, they mean nothing to him!”

“That’s the point, Claudia, the more comfortable we get him the more he’ll talk.”

“Talk? Are you being serious? You think if you make a narcissistic, sociopathic, pathologically lying killer comfortable he’ll spill you his secrets?” I shook my head. “He’ll lie. He’ll lie to you, he’ll lie to me, and he’ll lie to anyone you send in there. He’ll spit some crap about his childhood and avoid any questions about his killings. He’ll beat around the bush. This guy is proud of what he did. He feeds from the attention. And he’s smart. He knows that there’s one question, one thing people want to know: How did he do it? How did he charm these girls? How did he kill them? How could anyone possibly lure dozens of young women into his car, brutally murder them, and get away with it for over a decade? If he gives that answer, he’ll be remembered. But if he keeps that secret? He’ll be a legend. What is more appealing to a narcissist than the idea of being remembered forever?”

Rienks looks up intently at me. I had his attention.

“Want to know how to make this a good interview? Make him uncomfortable. Make him as uncomfortable as humanly possible. Evoke in him emotions that he hasn’t had to face since his arrest. Bring him back to all those moments, to all those girls. Throw him. Don’t have him tell you, let him show you.” I finished my speech with a huff.

“What better to throw him than a young woman who brings all those memories and desires back?” Rienks glanced up at me, a hint of a smile playing on his lips. “I’m sold. January 15th, Ms. Mills. Don’t disappoint.”

...
“This is where we, as well as your colleague John Rienks will be watching you and Spence.”

“How exactly will you being doing that?” I glanced around the black room.

Jacob flipped a switch and a dim light casted over the room. As my eyes adjusted, I noticed the large window in front of me. Through the glass, I saw. There, sitting at a metal table, was him.

His head was hanging, his unruly curls covering his face. His arms were sitting, perfectly folded, in his lap. He was dressed in a light blue button down and crisp khakis, much nicer clothes than I would have expected.

“As the lights flickered above him, his head snapped up. He pushed his dirty blonde hair off of his forehead as his eyes met mine. A lazy smile spread across his face as he leaned back leisurely in the stiff chair.

“He can’t see you,” I tore my gaze from the window as Jacob spoke, “The other side is a mirror. He’s just smiling at himself, I promise. Which brings me to the second part of my spiel.” Jacob turned to face me completely. “I don’t doubt that you have done your homework, Ms. Mills. I cannot stress enough, though, how manipulative this man is. The way he has been with us, well- I can only imagine how he will act with a woman. He’s going to try to get into your head, he’ll resist anything you ask of him.”

“I came prepared, sir.” I hoped my voice portrayed me as more confident than I felt. “I knew this wasn’t going to be easy. I trust my abilities.”

“As do we Miss. Mills,” Jacob smiled kindly at me. “If you ever need a break, though, just nod towards the window.”

“Thank you,” I offered a smile as the door behind me opened.

“Ah, there you are Claudia.” Rienks approached me, rubbing his hands together. “I trust Jacob has already explained everything to you?” I nodded. “Wonderful. As we discussed before, this is a live interview. If you need a break, we’ll roll cut to commercial, but try to stay in there as much as you can. Cameras are set up, we’re ready when you are.”

“There’s no one working the cameras?”

“Nope. Just you and him in that cell. We thought it would make things more interesting.” Rienks smirked at me, sensing my discomfort. “Still think you can handle this?”

“Of course,” I sent a tight lipped smile Rienks’ way as I turned away. I took one more look through the window.

Ryan Spence in the flesh. He couldn’t be more than 20 feet away from me. His eyes were still glued on me, on himself. Like a true narcissist, I couldn’t help but chuckle.

“I’m ready,” I finally spoke, facing back towards the men. Without another word, I turned on my heel and marched towards the door, gripping the knob. I breathed deeply as I twisted.

The small room was much colder.

To keep him on edge, I thought to myself.

“Well, I certainly was not expecting you.” I turned to fully face him. His eyes raked me up and down. He met my eyes as he shot me a smile. “Spence. Ryan Spence.”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes as he winked. “Claudia Mills.” I stuck out my hand as I sat down opposite of him. His hand grasped mine, calloused and warm despite the temperature. My gaze glanced down as he lowered our hands to the table before intertwining our fingers.

It was strange. There was a pulsating warmth running through me as his thumb began to lazily rub my palm. I met his eyes. A piercing green, they were the brightest things I had ever seen. He was beautiful close up. His skin was a creamy olive color, smooth across his sculpted face. He ran his free hand through his curls, which fell to the tops of his broad shoulders, and he smiled again, pink lips parting to reveal a row of perfectly straight teeth.

“What the hell,” I suddenly crashed back to earth, jumping from my seat, sending the metal chair clattering to the floor. Ryan burst into laughter, howling as I tried to collect myself. I scattered to reposition my chair before sitting back down, keeping a far distance from the table.

“I was told I was being sent one of New York’s best journalists.” His laughter had stopped, but I could tell he was fighting a smile and I met his eyes again.

I pulled myself together before leaning back into the table, settling in my original position. “You were.”

“Oh really? I wasn’t expecting something so…” his eyes explored my face before meeting mine, “delicate.”

“Someone.”

“Pardon?”

“I’m a someone, not a something.” I glared at him as I continued. “Preferably Ms. Mills.”
“Right, of course. My apologies.” he smiled, “I prefer Ryan, if that’s alright with you.”

“Where did you grow up, Ryan?”

“Southern California. Los Angeles, to be exact.”

“And what was that like?”

“Exciting. Always something to do.”

“And when did the drugs start?”

“What?” he suddenly grew serious, all playfulness gone. “I was told that this interview was only going to be based on what the public knew of my case.” Spence glanced towards the mirror.

“I’m from Huntington,” I spoke, his eyes snapping back to mine. “No teenage boy grows up in Southern California without getting into them at some point. I know from what I saw.”

He opened his mouth to speak, but I continued on. “Tell me, Ryan,” I leaned farther across the table, “Why is it that brutal murder seems to have no effect on you, but drugs do?”

His mouth set into a straight line. “I never did drugs. I never have, or alcohol for that matter. I stayed away from that.”

I snorted. “Is that supposed to impress me? The serial killer kept away from narcotics, congratulations.”

“You’re a feisty thing aren’t you?” His smile returned.

“Woman. Not thing.”

“Even better,” he added. I cringed.

“What came first?” I continued, “The urge to rape, or the urge to kill?”

“Both,” he spoke confidently, not missing a beat. “A girl moved in a few houses over when I was 17. She was gorgeous, all the guys wouldn’t stop talking about her. They wanted to love her, but I wanted to hurt her.”

I swallowed. “I can’t remember the first time it hit me, the first time I had those urges. I just know it was with her.”

“Was she your first victim?” My voice wasn’t much louder than a whisper.

“I saw her parents packing their car one night. They left, I assumed for a long weekend or something. So that night I showed up at her house asking if she wanted company. She did. For the first few hours I tried to restrain myself. I wanted to prove to myself I didn’t actually want what I had been fantasizing about. She kissed me though, and I gave in. The feeling of her neck in my hands… it was exhilarating.” My stomach lurched as he smiled, as if recalling a fond memory. “I took some jewelry and silverware when I left the next morning and buried it, so the police pegged it as a robbery. They assumed Molly was just collateral damage.”

“You didn’t try to hide her?”

“No. I didn’t care enough.”

“About her or being caught?”

Ryan smiled as I threw him another question. “Both, I guess. I didn’t care about anything.”

“Except yourself.” I stated it more than asked.

“No. Nothing I have ever done has been about my narcissism, whatever they call it.”

“Are you ashamed of it?” I asked.

“The narcissism or the killings?”

“Both.”

“No.” There was no hesitation to his answer, “Not at all.”

I attempted to act unfazed. “Tell me about your family.”

“My father left when I was seven, so it was just my mother and I. She had a baby girl, Sarah, when I was about twelve, but she passed before she even made it to six months.”

“Does that upset you?”

“Yes,” he looked at me like I was crazy, “more than anything.”

I stared back at him, shocked. “These girls, they were someone’s baby sister. They were daughters, wives, girlfriends, they had people who loved them, one of them was a child, Ryan. They were human. None of that means anything to you?”

“Nothing good happens here. They’re thanking me.”

“Where’s ‘here’?” He ignored my probing.

“They deserved it, every one of them. I never killed an innocent person.” His gaze was set on his hands, folded across the table.

I sighed, knowing I was losing him. I threw him another question. “What was your weapon of choice?”
“Didn’t have one. I always used my hands. It was always more...” He waved his hand, as if searching for a word. “personal.”

“And that was important to you?” I leaned farther across the table.

“Yes.”

“All your victims are quite similar in appearance. Dark hair, bright eyes, petite. Why was that?”

Spence remained quiet for a moment. His Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed. “I’d like to pass on that question, if you will allow me to.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Well, actually, I will not allow you to. You requested this interview, and I expect answers.”

He remained quiet, eyes gazing blankly into mine. “Fine, you don’t want to talk, I will. I think the girls resembled someone. Maybe someone who had hurt you? An ex-girlfriend, abusive family member. Tell me, Ryan, what did your mother look like?”

I sensed his anger as I continued. “It was your mother, wasn’t it? What did she do Ryan? What could she have done to crush your idea of women?”

He’s eyes glared into mine, and I could the veins in his forehead straining against his skin. He lowered his head and shook it, releasing a shaky breath. He seemed to physically relax as he brought his gaze back to me.

“You know who else my victims resemble?” I raised an eyebrow in curiosity. “You.” A grin spread across his face as he sensed my discomfort. “I had things I looked for in victims. Some of them were physically, yes, but not all of them. I liked women who had some fight in them, I liked the challenge. There was something so satisfying about watching them break.”

He had leaned farther across the table, and I could feel his hot breath fanning over my face. His words were so eerily hypnotizing that I could not pull myself away. “I chose them all carefully, I watched them for weeks before I decided they were good enough. But after, what, half an hour with you? I could already tell you would have been my favorite.”

“You...” I struggles to phrase my disgust as my heart pounded in my chest.

“What is it? Do I make you nervous, love?”

“We’re taking a break.” I breathed out my words, my voice barely above a whisper. I stood up and made my way towards the door, my eyes still wide.

“Oh, come on! Where’d that fire go?” Spence cackled from behind as I exited the small room that had seemed to get smaller.

The door shut behind me as I entered the main room. I slid down the thick metal and pulled my knees into my chest, burying my head into them.

“Ms. Mills. Are you alright?” I was startled, having completely forgotten about the other’s in the room. I jumped up, and faced Jacob.

“I am so sorry, I just completely blanked. I needed to get out of there.”

“I understand, Ms. Mills. It’s heavy stuff.”

A heard a cough from behind me, dreading what was ahead as I turned around. “What the hell was that, Claudia.” Rienks looked livid, his face red and eyes wide. “You were the one who was so convinced you could get control over him. You were the one who assured me you could break him! It looks to me that things are the other way around!” He had inched closer, now towering over me.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I can do this.” I took a deep breath, combing my fingers through my hair. “I’m not going to let anyone down.”

“Claudia,” Rienks seems to have calmed as he leaned down to get eye level with me. “He’s in his element. Talking to women has never been difficult for him.” He turned me so that I was facing Spence, a small smile still playing on his lips. “If your approach isn’t working, find a new one. What would make Spence most uncomfortable? Put yourself in his shoes.”

“Wanting to kill me but not being able to.” I kept my gaze locked on Spence.

“Exactly,” Rienks smiled down at me. “He killed with dominance. Like he told you, he liked fight, but he liked breaking women more. Give him the dominate role. Show him sympathy, and fall right into his traps. Right now he’s on the defensive. If he thinks there’s nothing to defend himself from, that he has you in the palm of his hand...”

“He’ll have nothing to hide.”
“Welcome back, love.” Spence grinned up at me as I returned to my seat.
“Hi,” I spoke quietly, finding that it was not difficult to act inferior to this man “I’m sorry about my abrupt exit, that was quite rude.”
“I didn’t peg you as the polite type.” He stared back at me with an unreadable expression.
I laughed. “Well, you would be right there.”
“So where were we?” Spence asked, his eyes still not leaving mine.
“You killings.”
“Right,” Spence smiled, “of course. What would you like to know, love?”
I inwardly cringed at his use of the pet name. “How did you get the girls to come with you? Did you ever use force?”
“No, it was never forced. It’s like a game, you see, getting them to come with you. To find a beautiful, seemingly intelligent woman, and getting her to walk into her death... It was a rush.”
“So why rape? Why was killing them not enough?”
I resisted the urge to pull away as he reached across the table to brush my hand with his own. I kept my focus on his eyes.
“Killing was too fast, the rape prolonged their torture.”
“But was it satisfying to you?” I questioned him further.
“No, not sexually. It seemed to hurt them the most, and that’s what it was about for me. Emotional and mental pain, as well as physical.
“Have you ever experienced that?” His brow furrowed together at my question. “Emotional and mental pain, I mean. Did you suffer a lot of that?”
His head snapped up as I squeezed his hand. He looked down at the table, almost disbelieving my gesture. Show him sympathy, show him sympathy. I repeated Rienk’s words in my mind as I felt his hand squeeze back. Even his touch was charming, I thought to myself as he let go, feeling the absence of his hand.
“Yes,” he finally spoke, “You could say that. Mentally, of course. If you haven’t heard, I’m a sociopathic narcissist.” He chuckled, and I joined in. “I drew quite a lucky hand.”
“And emotionally?”
“Yes,” his voice was barely above a whisper, “Who hasn’t?”
“Do you still feel that pain?”
“Always.” His eyes burned into mine with intensity. “I thought killing would end it all. I thought that first girl, Molly, I thought she would release all the anger in me. I thought she would end my urges but they grew, they keep growing, they consume my thoughts- I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” Spence ran his hands through his hair, pulling on the ends. He released a shaky breath. “Next question?”
I swallowed, knowing he was beginning to open up. “You say you had anger you needed to release. What had made you so angry?”
“I’m not sure.”
“Ryan,” I attempted to give him a look of sympathy, “please. You don’t have to hold onto this, we all do things we regret, don’t take this anger with you, tell me. Let me help you.” My pleas tasted bitter rolling off my tongue.
“You think you could help me?” He snorted. “You’re just like her. You all make it worse”
“Who? Who makes it worse?”
“All of you that look like her, that remind me of her. You’re the reason I can’t stop!” Spence’s head was held in his hands as he began rocking in his seat, his eyes lowered.
I stepped out of my chair and made my way around the table separating us. I lowered myself beside his chair, resting on my knees as I gazed up at him.
“Ryan, who is it?”
“That baby was the only thing I cared about, she killed her! That bitch killed her!”
“You got a girl pregnant?” I was lost as the man above me pounded on the table.
“No, my mother, damn it!” he cursed as he hit the table so hard it shook. “My sister, my baby sister, Sarah,” he cradled his now bloodied fist as he repeated her name. I saw the door creak behind him as Jacob peeked his head into the room. I motioned him to leave, and the door quickly shut.
“Your mother killed your sister.”
“Yes,” Spence cried, his head hung low, “she and my father were heroin addicts. My father didn’t give a shit about any of us. He left us,” his voice was barely above a whisper. “My mother would disappear at nights. She came home with money though, so I never asked where she went.”

He seemed to calm as the words poured out of him, “One night she came home and told me she was pregnant. She was terrified of having another kid, but I was so happy. I wanted this baby to be a clean slate. And she was, she was so beautiful.”

“But my mother was still using. She had a child to take care of and she couldn’t stop, even for Sarah!” I saw Spence’s anger returning. “So for six months, I took care of her, I loved her, so much. I considered her my own child.”

“And then one night I came home. I had gone to get milk or something, just a quick run to this store down the street, and it was so quiet, and I went to go check on Sarah- and my mother was there, going on and on about how she was mad and she didn’t mean to and it just happened. And there was Sarah. Dead. She had held a pillow over her mouth until she stopped crying.” Spence had tears now, silent ones flowing down his cheeks.

“But we couldn’t tell, my mother couldn’t go to jail. She kept saying how she couldn’t leave me.”

“He went on and on about how she was mad and she didn’t mean to and it just happened. And there was Sarah. Dead. She had held a pillow over her mouth until she stopped crying.” Spence had tears now, silent ones flowing down his cheeks.

“But we couldn’t tell, my mother couldn’t go to jail. She kept saying how she couldn’t leave me.”

“I didn’t care at that point. Sarah was gone, it didn’t matter. Nothing mattered. I haven’t felt anything since the last time I held her, nothing but anger.”

In that next moment, there was a flash. A few brief seconds where I saw everything human in him. I saw a young, curly haired Ryan, trying to give his sister a better life. I saw behind the monster Ryan Spence, for just a moment. Then as quickly as it came, the moment passed.

“Do you know how I got here, Ms. Mills,” Spence turned to me, a small smile on his lips, all traces of sadness gone.

“You were pulled over for speeding. You’re plates matched ones that a witness identified belonging to the car your last victim stepped into.”

“Ah, you did do your homework.” Spence stared down at me as I realized I was still crouched by his seat.

“You are wrong, unfortunately. I turned myself in.”

“Why tell the public the opposite then?”

“I was finished when I turned myself in. I’ve been ready to die since I walked in here. I wanted no sympathy, and I didn’t want to appear to be regretful. I’m not.”

“Why now? Why were you finished?”

“I killed her.”

“You mother.” It was more a statement than a question.

“I’m sure I’ve just caused quite the frenzy out there.” He smiled as he gestured towards the door, “No one’s reported her missing. She had no one left to care.”

“Did you rape her?”

“I did the same to her as I did to the other’s. She got no special treatment. I did think that the outcome would be special though, that I’d feel something more. I thought I would get a sense of satisfaction from her that I didn’t from the others.”

“But it felt the same?”

“Exactly the same. I knew if she couldn’t satisfy me, no one could. So I came here. I am finished.”

“Your own mother.” I shook my head in disbelief as I stood.

“She killed Sarah. I did what I needed to.”

“The other girls didn’t kill Sarah, Spence.”

“I told you to call me Ryan.”

“I’ll call you whatever the hell I want,” I gave up my inferior role as I began pacing the small room, dozens of women’s faces resembling mine flashing across my eyes.

“I didn’t care, they looked like her, that was enough for me.” He shrugged.

I stopped my pacing and turned to face him, lowering myself to his still-seated level. “You. Are. A. Monster.” I emphasized every word as I glared at him. He returned my harsh gaze as I continued. “You can’t blame her, Spence. She didn’t make you like this. She didn’t make you kill dozens of innocent people. You did that all by yourself. I can’t even begin to comprehend.” I was cut off as Spence’s chair clattered to the floor, and in a second I was against the wall, his hand around my neck.
“Listen to me, you bitch. I do not feel any remorse for what I did. I. Feel. Nothing. I would do the same to you in a heartbeat. You are worthless, just like her!”

In a flash he was off me, Jacob pushing him to the ground as I gasped for air. Another guard pushed me out of the room, slamming the door behind me. “Claudia, are you okay?” I pushed past Rienks and broke into a sprint as I made my way towards the exit.

January 16, 2015. I was seated behind a large pane of glass as I stared into the room before me. Execution day.

After my abrupt exit from the penitentiary, Rienks stopped by my apartment. After congratulating me on what he called “a heart stopping interview”, He delivered a message from Spence. He had requested my presence at his execution. I was more than willing to comply.

I could see inside the small room as a door opened. I recognized Jacob as he walked a quiet and cooperative Spence over to the medical table that served as the small room’s centerpiece.

“Is this a window on both sides?” I leaned over to Rienks, whispering quietly.

“Yes.” He kept his gaze set ahead of him.

As I turned back to face the room in front of me, Spence’s gaze met mine. His expression was unreadable, neither happy nor sad.

Minutes that felt like hours passed, and Spence was finally strapped fully onto the table. The needle was held above his wrist.

“Last words, Spence.” Jacob seemed eager to leave the confined space which we were all seated outside of.

“Claudia,” Spence’s eyes met mine. “It was lovely meeting you. As I said before, you would have been my favorite.” As he chuckled I was sure that my expression reflected the bile I tasted, rising in my throat. I could still feel his hand around my neck.

I didn’t deserve Ryan Spence’s last words. Those women did, those whom he had killed. His last words should not belong to me. By record, they do. But as the needle was pressed into Spence’s vein, and his heart began to slow, he breathed out one final word before it all went black.

“Sarah.”
I remember the day my neighbor said,
that you might leave,
as I swept cement you walked on
seconds ago , and stepped back
into a wooden box that held you,
told myself to hold back the tears that I felt.

Don’t forget, I reminded myself,
to stay composed, and to believe
you would stay forever.
Don’t forget to remember
the touch of your velvet fur,
my hands as they tickle your nose and
to watch as your hooves click
on the cement inside the stables

I remember
“Amy might take Rosie back to her farm,”
and the day I would roll unbalanced to your stall
with an empty wheelbarrow,
and would expect an exasperated whinny,
would expect to see you prance out of your cage
and fly to the ripest patch of grass,
a handful of cotton floating in the breeze.

I remember the show in St. Louis,
and victory, to earn a
blue ribbon because of your
right canter lead, a token
that stares at me as it droops on my wall,
like a violet wilts in a dry sun,
laughs as it tells me that I will never
see you again, and that I won’t
get to bounce next to your stout legs,
or even be hated when I tightened
the girth on your swollen belly.

Every time someone says
your name, I see your disobedient eyes
gaze back at me, and I think
of how you never perform
for anyone else.

I recall the moments I thought
‘Where are you?’ when I cry
into my pillow or ride another horse.
Sometimes I wish that you’d died
so that I wouldn’t be left to wonder
if you’d ever come back and find me
when I feel alone.

I remember how it felt to touch your brown coat
or brush your red tail, and agree that
maybe I belonged to you
and maybe I deserved to ride
a little red pony like you,
so that one day, I can finally,
completely admit that
I miss you.
Three children slowly crept inside the old Slotter house on Haunted Hill. They had heard many stories of disappearances in this house, and of the first owners, the Slotters. However, this didn’t hinder their efforts to pry open the window sills and find any hole they could crawl through. Once inside, they took out their flashlights and began telling stories. Raven began, “Little Tommy Atkins fell through the floorboards right where you’re sitting, Jackson!” Jackson scoffed, “He did not! You’re telling lies, Raven.” Despite his claim to disbelief, he slowly wiggled out of the spot he was sitting, hoping no one would notice. He took the flashlight from Raven. Just as he turned it on, it fell out of his hands and into a hole in the floor. “Wow, way to go!” Cayden yelled. The three kids stared down the hole where they had seen the flashlight disappear into abyss. The light had gone out. Upset, they began yelling at Jackson. “I knew we shouldn’t have brought your little brother, Cayden.” Raven exclaimed. “You’re telling me! Mom’s going to kill us. That’s our only flashlight.”

They were so upset, they started pushing Jackson. They brought him to the corner of the hole, and he finally said, “Fine! I’ll go get it.” He hopped down into the hole, using an old board as a step, and his sibling and friend waved sarcastically. Once inside the hole, Jackson smelled the must in the air. He couldn’t see a thing, and as he felt for the flashlight on the ground, something cold touched his hand. It felt like a switch. Out of instinct, his hand flipped the switch.

Suddenly, the house began to shift. The floorboards not only moaned, they let out a terrifying screech. The curtains fell to the floor. Windows shattered, and the hole they had crawled in through was nowhere to be seen. The teenagers above began screaming. “What did you do, Jackson?!” They yelled from upstairs. The house uprooted itself from the ground, revealing it’s metallic, mechanical legs. The legs began to gain momentum and run towards the cliff at the end of the hill.

Jackson thought to himself, “Mom is going to kill me.” He peaked over the top of the hole he had jumped into, only to see the house moving quickly towards the cliff. It was practically running at this point. Jackson let out a cry, “Cayden!!!!” The only thing he heard was a scream back, unable to make out the words. The next thing he heard, he would never forget.

SPLASH went the house into the water. Unable to see into the water, Jackson screamed again from the hole. “CAYDEN!!! RAVEN!!!” Terrified, he tried clawing himself out of the hole, but he couldn’t. It was simply too steep, and the boards he had used as a kind of stair remained inside the house. He was trapped. Jackson became especially scared when he noticed he didn’t hear screams anymore. The next thing he knew, the house was clambering up the side of the cliff, onto the ledge. Jackson had a sense that his brother and friend were not inside the house.

The house came towards Jackson, back to the exact spot it had been placed before. Jackson heard the house begin to fall back into place- hinges locked, doors closed, and wind blew through the windows. Dead silence followed. He slowly climbed out of the hole, using the board that had been there before and was now placed back in the same spot. He called out, “Cayden? Raven?” But his efforts were in vain. All he heard was the whistle of the wind.

Jackson knew he couldn’t return home. How would he explain this? Police would never believe him. His parents would forever see him as a murderer. He knew, he must stay in this Terror House. Forever.
I remember that night clearly, it was bitter cold. A cold that I felt all the way to my bones, as I have only once before. My Father and I had been walking in the snow to my bus stop, and there was a hole in my boot. I knew that if I told my Father I hadn't been wearing the wool socks he made me, he would be not only upset but also hurt because he had spent the last of our money on the expensive wool to ensure I could use them all this Winter and the next. I felt the snow slowly seep into my boot, and the coldness affected not only my skin but also my motions. I felt as if my blood was slowing down. I felt the guilt swarm me as well, I questioned myself as to why I hadn’t put the socks on this morning.

On this night, the chill of the snow was not unlike that day. I felt the dampness of it through my clothes. As the wind whipped my face, I pulled my hand knitted scarf over my neck and chin. I looked down the road, with hazy eyes blinking continuously, only to realize I had five more blocks to walk in this snow. As I began the journey to my apartment, I reflected on this gift my father had passed on to me. I remembered the countless, tireless hours we had spent on our front porch in summer and spring; crafting mittens, hats, scarves, and most importantly, blankets. We spent so many afternoons preparing for the oncoming Winter. Even when we were forced to live in our van for an entire Winter, we had blankets.

I remembered the hole in my shoe and how I wished I had put those wool socks on. Now, I couldn't imagine leaving my apartment on a day like this without the socks and scarf. I mentally thanked my Father for passing this skill on to me. Before I knew it, I was 4 blocks away, now 3, now 2, until finally I reached the corner of my street.

As I approached the stoop, I noticed a pile of snow-covered newspaper. Alarmed, I approached the paper, watching it stir and breathe with the wind that blew underneath it. I noticed a boot underneath the paper. That’s when I realized it wasn’t just a pile of paper. It was a man seeking refuge on the stoop to my apartment complex. As I came closer and closer, I noticed his worn hat, charred by soot. I noticed his scraggly beard, grown but not groomed. I noticed, most heartbreakingly, broken fingernails torn down to the bare bed of the cuticle. This trait, I knew, was specific to carpenters, just as my Father was. My heart sunk inside my chest. I felt a heaviness in my throat that I have never known. My eyes welled and burned from the dryness of the wind to the sudden change of tears.

Quietly, I filed into my apartment and searched for it—the blanket my Father had made for me that last summer we spent together on the porch. I rummaged through the closet quickly, tossing clothes and shoes on the floor carelessly. I let the hangers shower onto the floor. Finally, as I reached the back of the closet, I saw it. The quilt. I couldn’t help but weep. I wasn't sad to give up the final memory of my Father—Rather I was realizing the importance of what my Dad had taught me with this. The countless hours, arguments, and discussions had all led to this moment.

I grabbed the blanket and my sewing kit, and started stitching the holes that time had worn on it. Remembering, remembering. When I was done, I ran, back to the front entrance of the complex. The man was still there, still soundly asleep. Slowly, I took the blanket out of my coat and unwrapped it. I wrapped it around his legs first, then his torso. I remembered the way my Father tucked me in on cold nights, to make sure no draft came in the blanket and I slept through the night. I attempted to mimic the way he did it, cautiously tucking the blanket in at the shoulders. After making sure he was airtight in this bundle, I stepped back and watched as the man adjusted himself in his sleep. After many minutes of this, I walked back inside.
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I looked up at the voice to my shock it was the guy from the plane. You hear the stories of foreign love, but I certainly never thought anything about it. I was focused on my GPA or being the best girlfriend. But up until now I know that life has a few surprises for me.

“I’ve never been one to over pack.” I reply with confidence.

“As I can see, please excuse my rudeness, I’m Jacob. The real mystery is who are you, darling?” The twinkle in his eye was aberrant.

“All, and don’t call me darling.” Right when the last word came out of my mouth I wanted to admittedly apologize.

A slow, perfect smile spread across his face. “You remind me a lot of home.”

“Don’t you live in London?” Tilting my head and raising my eyebrows.

“You could say it’s my home. But my family lives in New York. I’d love to tell you more if you go to dinner with me the day after tomorrow.”

“Where would this dinner take place?” I could feel the blood rushing to my cheeks, I tried to seem as flirtatiously casual as possible.

“Kensington Gardens, 7:30. The guard to let you in. My mobile is (757)-867-7268!” With that he left leaving me standing there with my bags. Somehow I was too distracted by Jacob that I hadn’t noticed he’d taken all of my bags off the carousel. I’m used to getting attention from guys. Everywhere I go I cause people to stare however, my ex see this and would take me into his arms and drag me into a long kiss. Right in front of everyone, proving I was his. Jacob was definitely not one to go unnoticed either. Just in my few minutes of knowing him had I had R rated images of us fly through my head, reminding me why I was here, to forget reality.

The next day I didn’t get out of bed at all. I just texted Jacob to see if we were still meeting tomorrow and where he lived. I soon sensed the nerves coming to my mind as the waves crash onto the golden sand in California. It took a few seconds for my five star hotel room to turn into a massive tornado of clothes. My makeup lay open in front of the mirror in the bathroom. That night I lay awake overcome with anticipation of meeting Jacob the next day. I smile to myself thinking even if you have all the experience in the world, it still sends a chill through the air every time I think about him.

Here I am, at 7:25 I stand at the entry of a massive manor, it clearly has the same architecture that was given to it all those years ago. The house is an ivory stone, usually the kind that’s used in French chateaus, the door has a giant gold knob and knocker. Gripping the knocker, I make steady blows to the door. Hopefully the pounds are steadier than my heart beat, which is running wild and free. After a few seconds, a man appeared at the door. Opening the door, I saw his fresh suit and a polite smile as he said, “Good evening, may I take your coat.”

“Thank you.” Happily I replied with more grace than usual. As he relieved me of my charcoal trench coat, he exposed a mid-thigh length, long sleeved sparkly, black cocktail dress. My strands of golden silk hid most of the drooping back. My stilettos are pale pink with a silk bow connecting over the top of my foot.

“Master Hamilton will be pleased with your dress, miss.”

“Yes, he sure will.” A voice from behind me rang. Looking back I found Jacob standing on the extravagant staircase. He was in a blue oxford shirt. His brown delicious hair was styled and his Hersey bar eyes caught mine then slid down my body, bringing heat to my face. When his eyes slowly made their way back to my face, I thanked God for all the makeup I had on.

“Williams you can set out the food.” Jacob announced with a voice of authority. Turning to me with a smirk on his face he said. “You look lovely, Ali.”

“Thank you. Which by the way I like a lot better than the Yankee cap you wore on the plane.” He led me formal dining room with an intimate table fit for two. A few candles and a bouquet of red roses were at a table that was covered in an ornate table cloth. He pulled out my chair for me, I loved that he was such a gentlemen.

“Well, yes I prefer this better than anything my dad buys for me.”

“What exactly does your dad do?”

"He owns a large international communications firm. Why are you in London."

"I'm heading to Paris tomorrow for a couple months, I just took a year off of school." I lied without the slightest hesitation, I didn't want his pity. I wanted a blank slate.

I took his hand in mine enjoying the unfamiliar warm of his calloused hand as we talked. I learned he actually had a meeting in Paris while I was. When it was time to go it was two in the morning. Laughing as my
town car pulled up, he gave me the slightest whisper of a kiss. It seemed my blinding smile would never dim as I slid into the back of the black town car. Lying in bed, I thought maybe I could lose myself in every girl’s dream. Just maybe.

The drive to The Ritz in Paris took about six hours. Going through the Channel gave me the more anxiety than the London Eye. Once I saw the Eiffel Tower, my breath was taken away. My face was pressed up against the window, the feeling of a child on Christmas filled my body. Nothing seemed real. Setting into my hotel room, I heard a chirp from my phone. I wish I was there with u. I'll be there the 24-1—Jacob. My heart fluttered as I read the words, that was my last week in Paris. Never had I had such a spark with another person in my life, there was a connection.

The weeks before Jacob was due to arrive I did what any girl would do in Paris. I ate at the same cafe every morning, had dinner at exquisite restaurants, and shopped until I dropped. There’s this amazing feeling of waking up and seeing the Eiffel Tower, the Arc De Triomphe, or the Seine. As I walked the streets at night the Eiffel Tower glowed with thousands of lights. Jacob texted me every chance he had. The flirtatiousness of the conversations grew and our discussions turned into deeper topics.

The morning of Jacob's arrival I was ecstatic. There was a knock on the door, I opened it with the slightest hesitation. Jacob standing with flowers. I leaped into his arms, I felt him carry me into the room. I only broke apart to close the door, Jacob's arms locked onto my waist turning me so that I was facing him. Pressing me into the door he tangled one hand in my hair and pressed my lips to his gently at first then more deeply. His hands were everywhere in my hair, softly stroking my jaw and neck as my mouth kissed the hollow of his throat.

Finally he croaked. "We have to go. I got us dinner reservations at this really romantic spot tourist free." This made me giggle like a pathetic 14 year old girl. "I know exactly what we're doing for dessert." Jacob grabbed my coat off of the rack right next to the door. He reached and turned the door knob that was located right in the bend of my hip. His driver was waiting for us when we emerged from the hotel, walking so close together it looked like we were attached at the hip. The ride there was quite, it was me and Jacob sitting so close together. He used on hand to caress a strand of hair that had fallen from my braid, as if it was the most important thing in his life at this point in time. The car stopped in a meadow, where wild grasses and flowers grew in the most beautiful setting possible.

"Are we having a picnic?" I turned to Jacob, as his mouth turned into a smile. "Maybe..."

I leaped into his arms before lunging out of the car. Jacob came and spread out a plaid blanket, grabbed my hand and pulled me next to him. He began kissing me as he had at the hotel, I lost myself in him. Something inside of me faltered, I didn't want to lead him on in my last few days. I needed to feel something other than the worry of a painful death. Soon the joy of kissing him was gone and tears started to fall.

"Darling, what's wrong." He started to kiss the salty, bitter tears away.

"I'm just so happy you're here."

He pulled back to look at me and gaze into my eyes. Not letting go of me he started to unpack the food. His arm slipped around my waist as we lay there looking up at the blue sky, taking everything in. Later that night he walked me to my hotel room kissed me good night.

The dates with Jacob were a blur of intimate dinners and kisses that took my breath away. On my last night in Paris Jacob had something special for me. When the car stopped at our destination, I was shocked to find a chateau. "Is this the date?" I asked Jacob who was dressed in a black suit. When he'd picked me up he'd appreciated my choice of my new flowing violet floor length dress.

"I thought we should do something special for your last night." With pain in his voice, which seemed to hurt me even more.

At dinner we tried to avoid any discussion of leaving. After dinner Jacob took me into a room that looked like a ballroom. A string quartet began to play a slow song, as Jacob pulled me in close and wrapped his arms around my waist. My head fell onto his shoulder.

"I know that you're leaving but, I want to keep in touch. I've never felt this way about anyone." He'd moved us both so we were looking into each other's eyes. "This has been the most I ever loved anyone in my entire life. I love you, Ali. I know you probably think I'm..."

I cut him off by meeting his mouth with mine. "I love you too." He motioned to the quartet and they started to pack up as we headed back to the hotel. We were kissing in the elevator, more slowly and deeper
than any time before. As I fumbled for my room key, he was kissing the back of my neck. Before I enter the
darkness of the room I grabbed the Do not disturb sign and hung it on the door. My heart was beating as I walk
through the door.
  I wake to kiss on my shoulder, "You should probably get ready."
  "I don't want to leave." Kissing him again and truly never wanting this moment to end.
  "I don't want you to leave either, but I'll be back in the States before you know it and I'll visit you and your
family in Kansas City."
  With that I left him in the bed and went to get dressed. The ride to London Jacob and I didn't let go of each
other. When we started to enter Heathrow, he brought it to his lips and started to kiss my knuckles. Standing
at the security gate we kissed, saying see you soon instead of goodbye. The last thing I said was, "I love you." I
knew this was probably our last meeting.
  Silent tears fell as I gazed out the window watching the ocean disappear underneath the plane. When we
landed I was ecstatic to see my family. I ran to them. Something felt terrible wrong and I collapsed.
  I woke up to a beeping, a sound I come too familiar to me in the last year. I heard a weak, "Ali?" I turned to
the voice and it was my mother holding my hand. I tried to speak but, I couldn't find the words or my voice.
Then my mom confirmed my fears, "Ali, you had a stroke and you lost your ability to speak." I looked up and
saw the pain of her knowing that soon she'd witness her own daughter's funeral.
  The day was uneventful, doctors came in and out. My family all visited it was as if they knew I would get
worse from here on out. The next morning I could tell something was wrong, every breath was labored, my
eyes wanted to close. But I fought with all of my strength, through all the pain and medications. I fought for
something even if I didn't know what. That night my heart beat slower and my eyes grew cloudy. Then I saw I
figure standing in the doorway.
  Jacob yelled, "Ali!"
  "I love you" I said with all my strength and then all there was, was darkness.
Anna Blachar

Poetry: Burned
Bode Middle School
Josie Clark, Teacher

I am burning.
The smoke billowing all around me, my whole life up in flames.
Students burn through the hall, and I’m flammable.
Whenever they touch me with their flames, I burn a little more,
Until I am nothing, nothing but ash.

The rain never comes,
only fire, flames, and smoke.
Every day, my world burns down a little more,
Makes me crumble even more.

Once, when I thought that maybe the rain had finally come,
When he was sweet and smooth as water,
Repairing me, soothing my burns.
The water swam over me, blanketing me with its rejuvenation
Too quickly he realized my burns were too much.
They covered me, consuming me.

The rain left, and with the rain, went the last of me.
Nothing keeping me anchored to the ground.
The flames washed over me, sending me tumbling down for the last time.
I burned until I was nothing.
Nothing but ash.
THUMP
I jumped in my seat, hearing the weird noise. I looked around but saw nothing, then I returned my attention back to the girl in front of me. Patient 12639, Natalie Reed. She was admitted here because of strange behavior and random fits leading to harmful outbreaks. She was leaning forward; her black hair was covering most of her face. All I could see was her long thin nose and thin pale lips. She held a wood box, locked, with some hearts and flower carvings on it. She refused to go anywhere without her “lovely box”. I took a pen from my white lab coat, spotless and clean, and looked down at my stack of papers, ready to take notes.

“I’m going to tell you a word, tell me what you think when I say it.” No response. “Ok.” I looked down at my papers. “Family.”

“None.” She had a deep voice, a little horse like she hasn’t used it in a while. “Families are things I don’t know.” Adopted, she was adopted. “At least, not a real one.” She slightly shrugged.

“Okay.” I wrote down what she said. “Friend.”

THUMP
I saw her slightly flinch. Then she lifted her head and faced me like she could see me through her mass of silky, tangled hair.

“No comment.” Deep voice again, but this time with a flat tone.

“Okay.” I wrote it down. “How about, boyfriend?”

THUMP
I tried to act normal. I looked at her for a few more seconds, assessing her, then went to jot some notes, but then looked at her again. “What.”

“Do you want to hear a little girl’s sad story?” She asked, still smiling. She tilted her head to the side and I could see one of her eyes, light blue.

I cleared my throat. “Who is this little girl?”

“Me.” She stated without hesitation.

THUMP
She proceeded with her story without a word from me. “My first year of high school, a friend took me to meet one of her guy friends. A college boy with soft blonde hair and dark brown eyes. I fell in love with him immediately and a few days later, I asked him out. He said yes. It was the best day of my life.” She looked off to the her left as if she was in her own little world, reliving the moment. “We hung out every day and went on a date every weekend. Soon, I was skipping high school, forgetting about it and everyone in it, even my best friend.

“I would sneak onto campus, surprising my lover with visits. After dating for two months I thought we would be together, forever.” She shook her head. “How naive. One day, I officially gave him my heart by giving him something close to it. A pure gold, heart shaped locket on a silver chain.” Then, I noticed something shiny around her neck. It was a silver chain, polished and clean, and attached to it was a heart locket that the pale lights glinted off of. My uneasiness came back; oh I had a bad feeling.
“It was my real moms.” She said noticing me stare at it. “The only thing I have ever had of hers, and will ever have of hers.” There was a pause and I could slightly see the muscles in her jaw working. “I trusted him!”

Her arms tightened around the box in her lap. “One day, I went early to the campus. I walked around a bit, waiting for him to get out of class.” She paused, lifting her face up, but her hair still didn’t uncover the girl’s face. “I still remember the cool breeze, and I could hear the choir singing.” She hummed a soft tune. She had a light, beautiful voice, other than her scratchy deep talking voice. "What was it called, oh right, Shady Grove.” She looked down and hunched again. “What a lovely song.” She let out a puff of air. “Soon, I saw him. He was in the shade of a tree.

“I ran over there just to realize he was with another woman.” She pounded her fist against the table. “He was hugging, kissing, touching her up and down.” She was breathing heavily, the stream of words flowing out like a waterfall. Her fist loosened and she calmed down. I wasn’t ready for her outburst; I was a little shaken up.

“I pushed her to the ground, out of his grasp. I kicked over and over and over again.” She laughed, tipping her head back a bit. “I ruined her pretty little face. But, he just had to come stop me and save her.” She shook her head, like trying to shake the memory out of her head. Then, she suddenly stopped and continued with her story. “I tried to confront him, telling him he has my heart so he doesn’t need anyone else.” She lifted her head to me again, like she really could see me. It sent another crawling chill up my spine. “Want to know what he did?”

THUMP

I nodded, the chill still on the back of my spine, it would not leave me. I could hear my heart banging on the drum in my ear. “He tore the heart off his neck, over his head. Then, he threw it to the ground and stomped on it.”

THUMP THUMP

“I could feel my heart get smashed, ripped, and torn. It hurt so much.” She was wheezing, like she could feel it at that moment. Then she suddenly stopped, the memory passed. “Then he picked it up and gave it to the ugly b*tch next to him.” She was shaking from anger, it was easy to tell. I could hear the acid dripping from her mouth. “He gave my heart away!” She grabbed the table and shook it.

I moved my chair back, afraid, but not trying to show it. You never show the patient when you are uncomfortable, it’s a sign of weakness.

She sat there, breathing deeply. Then she clutched her box and composed herself. “Of course, I wanted it back, so I made a plan. One night, I went over to his house and broke in. That ugly b*tch was there, and I wasn’t surprised. They were sleeping in the same bed, so lovey dovey and cuddling.” She said in a mocking tone. “My heart was on the bedside table, I took it. But, that wasn’t the only thing I was there for. By now, I knew he wasn’t going to give me his heart, so I was going to take it myself. I wanted the real thing.”

THUMP THUMP THUMP

“And so I got it. I took that man’s heart, but either way it belonged to me. Now we can be together forever and that other girl won’t be able to have him, only me.”

THUMP THUMP THUMP THUMP

I drew in a deep breath and asked, “So, uh, where is his heart?”

THUMP THUMP

The noise grew louder, but she just stroked the box. “Hush, lover boy.” My eyes widened with a thought. But it couldn’t be true.

THUMP

“Now we are together forever, no one can ever break us away from our undying love, never.” The noise it was, coming from the box. It sounded like the beat of a heart. Her hair fell away from her face and I could see her eyes. One, a light blue, the other, a dark brown. She glared at me with a smile, her eyes mesmerizing me. “Never”

THUMP
Abigail Caldwell

Poetry: Writer's Block
Bode Middle School
Josie Clark, Teacher

And here I am again
Writing and writing
but nothing coming to mind

The block
stuck in the path of the story
trying to take shape

The block
trapping me in this
jail cell
of emptiness

The block
leaving you void of ideas
and no one able to help you

The block
telling you “STOP!
Don't go on!
Leave it be!”
Until you give in to it

Block
Writer’s block
The perpetual void ever preying on us
Sucking our ideas and inspiration
Block...
Block...
Block...
Block...
When I look at the pictures I try my hardest to remember.
I know that I am one of the lucky ones.
I was chosen.

I was ten months old.
I wonder what my life would be like now if I wasn't chosen.

In China, mothers leave the kids they can't care for under a tree or someplace they know they'll be found. That's what happened to me; I was found under a tree in Jiangxi, China next to the footsteps of an orphanage. My name was Wanjinshu. It means bright beautiful tree.

I was born up in the mountains. In a poor village. It was very cold up there. I would wear hats and clothes that were extra thick and that kept me warm.

I was adopted at the same time as nine other children in our orphanage. Before we were chosen, we traveled everywhere all together. I was the youngest and one of the smallest out of the ten of us.

After my parents adopted me, we would walk up and down the streets, visiting all the famous landmarks, while my sister would push me in my stroller. We would eat lunch together and my mom would use chopsticks, while my dad and sister would have to use my baby silverware if forks and spoons weren't available. When I look back at the pictures and the stories my parents told me, I remember going to the zoo and seeing tigers and dolphins for the first time. I remember the dolphin show, watching those dolphins jump so high and wave at us. There were peacocks with big tails that were three times the size of their bodies.

When I was a little baby, I was afraid of panda bears. I don't remember why, or how. As I was being unstrapped from my car seat one day, my dad opened the car door and what I thought was a panda jumped up to the side of the car. It was really our black and white dog, Snowflake but for some reason I thought it was a panda from my nightmares. I know what a paradox this is--a Chinese orphan who is deathly afraid of pandas. It's tough to explain to my friends. Meanwhile, I was crying and screaming and my parents removed all pictures of pandas from our home.

My mother and father are clearly Caucasian which makes it obvious that I was adopted which I truly don't mind, but whenever I go out to eat at a Chinese restaurant, the waiters and waitresses always assume I can speak the language. This isn't true. I have no idea how to speak Chinese. My mom and I used to take classes when I was a really young child, but I could never remember it. The only way I can speak a little Chinese is with the help of fortune cookies.

I don't remember much from China. I think often about going back when I am older. I would want to visit all the same places, so I can regain those memories from when I was younger. Still these days, twelve years, two months later, I wonder what my life would be like if I wasn't adopted. Where would I be? What would my family be like? But I was one of the lucky ones, I am one of the chosen ones.
Here we are. We both look down over the edge.

“How far down do you think it is?” There was a certain shakiness to his voice that I did not want to hear.

Not right now.

“I dunno. Couple hundred feet I guess.”

“Hmm…”

“Go ahead. Jump.”

“What? Are you crazy?!?” He looks at me like that is a totally foreign concept to him.

“Come on, you big baby! We’ve both been saying how long we’ve wanted to do this. I’m done. I want to get it over with, and I’m sure you do too. You talk about it all the time. We’ll go together. It won’t even hurt. It’ll be great! A huge rush, then it’ll be over. We came all this way, so please don’t chicken out on me now.”

We look over the edge of the cliff again. I could tell he was scared. All this weight on my back could be gone if he would just jump with me. I wasn’t about to go without him. I knew he would regret this decision forever if he watched me go and just stood there doing nothing. What would he tell people? He’d get harassed forever. The entire drive here I was itching to do this. We both were. Now I’m just getting irritated.

“I don’t know anymore…” he whines. What a girl.

“Then close your eyes, but that’ll ruin it. Don’t you want to see everything rush past you as you fly through the air?”

“Not particularly,” he says simply. Well, I see he is going to be stubborn.

“Woah, hey! Get back here!” He thought I didn’t notice him inching away from the edge. I’m about ten seconds from pushing him right over the edge and jumping after him. That would probably make this whole process simpler for everyone.

“What did you tell me on the way here?” I asked him.

“Take me home.”

“Before that.”

“I’m scared.”

“Before that.”

He thought for a brief moment. “I don’t know!”

“I believe it was something like ‘Let’s do this’, if I recall correctly. Sound a little familiar? Huh? Well I’m here, you’re here, and we’re standing six inches away from a story people will talk about for years. I’m going, and so are you.”

“Yeah, well—“

“This was all your idea, remember?!”

He opened his mouth like he was going to say something, shut it, and then admitted to it.

“It was, wasn’t it?”

“We made a pact. You promised.”

“Well…”

Guilt. I knew exactly how his mind worked. I got him. All summer he wouldn’t shut up about how much he wanted to do this. I didn’t blame him one bit. I saw his point. I wanted to do it too. Now the summer is almost gone, and we are running out of time. At this point, it’s basically now or never.

He looked up at the sky. A flock of geese flew not that far overhead in a perfect ‘V’. The sun was shining, making the lake in the distance sparkle like a diamond in the light. There wasn’t a cloud in the sky, and the breeze was perfect. Everything was absolutely perfect, the timing, everything! He can’t ruin it. Not now.

“We’ll be up there, huh?” He was still staring at the sky.

“Yep, and it’ll be gorgeous. More beautiful than anything we’ve ever seen before. Everyone says when you’re up there, you can look down and watch the world below you. The trees, the animals, the lakes and rivers, and all the people. The people you love below you, looking up hoping to see you somewhere in the clouds. I want to see the world from there. Don’t you?”
“But are we even sure we know what we’re doing?”
“How hard can it possibly be? You jump from here, take a running start if you need to, scream if you want to, then you land down there. Simple.”
“And it won’t hurt?”
“Oh course not, stupid. No pain at all,” I assured him. I saw the gears turning somewhere in the back of his mind. “You said it yourself: you’re sick of being a nobody. This, my friend, will give everyone something to talk about. You want to be a legend, and I want to show my stepdad.”
“Ha, this’d do it alright.” I saw a flash of his smile. He looked at the edge again. It was a little foggy, making it hard to see how far it really was to the bottom of the canyon.
“We take two steps forward, and we both get what we want.”
He looked me straight in the eyes. “Well,” he smiled again, “if I go, it might as well be with my best friend, right?”
“Exactly. You ready?”
We both took a deep breath. I hate to admit it, but I had some knots in my stomach myself.
“Ready when you are.”
I look at him again. Finally.
“One…” We stood side-by-side. I try to think of something to say to him, but decide it is best to just let whatever happens, happen.
“Two…” We scooted forward until our toes were over the edge. I straightened my back, bent my knees, and held my breath.
“Three!”
I thought he was going to chicken out again, but by the sound of his ear-splitting scream, I knew he didn’t.
The age-old question is this: if your best friend jumped off a cliff, would you jump too?
I quickly looked over to try to get a glimpse of him. Poor kid. He was gripping to that hang glider for dear life and all I could do was laugh.
Things are not always as they seem. Sometimes following your best friend off a cliff will give you the chance to see the world as you never have before; it may just give you the chance to fly.
I can still hear it. Those “harmonizing” screeches attempting the high note of “Let it go”, still echo as I trot into the vacant yearbook lab. It’s Summer now, but I always seem to be around.

Strolling towards my advisor’s desk, my smile widens, letting out a hardy, reminiscent chuckle as I catch sight of the curtain of pictures taped to the edge of her desk. It’s my team’s wall. It’s all there - the whole year through my team’s eyes. Stapled and taped at the corners, the nine pictures captured every sport we covered, each distant destination we somehow managed to find, and the unity that pushed our dream team to become just that. It was all there, every piece of it. But now, there were no more pictures to add.

After reminiscing in each irreplaceable posed picture, I slid into my advisor’s chair, the throne from which she conducted our word choice battles.

“Scamper? Mice and Cats scamper, not basketball players during warm ups,” Mrs. Long commented on the first line of my copy.

“No, you didn’t see them! I promise they were scampering across the court,” I pleaded, always prepared to support my phrase selection.

“Nope, I’m not budging this time. Change it.” She circled the verb then continued reading.

Long was always right, whether I wanted to accept it that day or not. Even though I managed to draw a compromise every once in a while, the majority of the time my oddly crafted phrases felt the wrath of the delete key, as I felt her “do it now” stare singe my back.

Across the room stands my armless swivel chair stationed where I made all of Long’s corrections. It faced my most treasured item in the room. I scamper over to the computer and log in, my desktop still scattered with cropped tennis pictures and layout inspirations from our most envied yearbooks. As the Google Drive icon bounces, my personal haven blooms open, revealing my niche amongst the deadline insanity of the once bustling lab.

Between a clutter of folders and shared documents, lies hidden the six stories I compiled that year. Reminiscing over the emotional basketball quotes and the descriptive dance team details, I reflect on how I developed into a member of each team I covered. I remember the heated halftime locker rooms, the inside jokes I still don’t quite understand, and the emotions I shared with each team when it was finally over. This is the true release. Not because writing sports copy meant an “easy A”, quite the opposite. But because the work came easily when the passion was there. And it was.

After rereading each story, pointing out things I should have deleted and intros that still make me cringe, I shut off the computer. I sit back in my chair to let it spin freely. When I look up, I see the Editor-in-Chief’s desk. It is empty now, but I know who is supposed to fill it.

I left my armless seat behind. It suited me for that entire year. It endured my heartbroken tears when I came out empty handed from the state competition. It stayed firm when my teams’ excitement of being selected for the graduation spread shook the room. And it held me down when I first realized everyone was already expecting me to step up as the Editor-in-Chief next year. It was only October then.

Plunging into my new throne, the daunting, new angle makes the whole room look different. I glance from the wall of extra credit, to my previous bickering space, to the chair I’d come so far from. Each spot led me to my new one.

Next year, I won’t have a team curtain or endless interviews crammed into one word document or battles debating whether or not “scamper” was the correct verb for that sentence. But I will still hear those screeches, and that will be enough.
The Final Stand

I have three moms.

It wasn’t your typical wedding. Instead of a floral dress, the rustling of my bedazzled jeans drowned out the piano as I scampered down the aisle. Once I joined my brother in the front pew, my procession concluded and the real one began. My mother entered, but it wasn’t my dad by her side. It was Carla.

Carla was always “my mom’s friend.” That label usually sufficed. However, I knew quite differently, but the world around me wasn’t ready to embrace their lesbian relationship.

Several years before the wedding, we moved into Carla’s house, unexplained and unquestioned. I remember the first time I saw them kiss within those creaky walls. The sound echoed. It was simple, yet felt like a secret I wasn’t supposed to know. My mom never exactly explained it.

Since my parents’ divorce, Jordan and I hadn’t kept track of our father’s dating life. That is, until Cheryl came along. When she tiptoed through the yellow grass by his side, it was not her curvaceous body or wide smile which stood out most, but her chocolate skin. For some reason, this widened my own smile. Though my middle school exuded diversity, interracial couples were a rare sight to my nine year-old eyes. She sealed our friendship with a handshake and a simple question:

“So, I hear you’re a chocoholic too?”

As a child, I took everything personally. So, when the sixth grade boys began interchanging the word “gay” for “bad,” I was left speechless. When I consulted my mom about their commentary, her explanation left me without any real answers.

“Some people’s views are just different than ours,” she said.
“But why would they think something like that?”
“I don’t know, baby doll. I don’t know,” she responded, shaking her head

Despite how much I wanted to fight back, my puny, “you shouldn’t say that” comments only went so far. However, the more I argued, the more I realized my mom never did. She and Carla never protested. They never seemed to care about the prevalent gay marriage rejection surrounding them in good old conservative Missouri.

However, when I entered my Catholic high school, the internal battle continued with each mention of the church’s rejection. During my Catholic social justice class, sophomore year, I finally snapped. The topic arose and so did my hand. Out spilled every bullet point I unconsciously compiled over the years for my pro-gay marriage argument. My views were obvious, and I didn’t care. What I did care about was acceptance. Even then, I didn’t know I was fighting for it. Only later did I realize, the more I argued, the more I realized my mom never did. She and Carla never protested. They never seemed to care about the prevalent gay marriage rejection surrounding them in good old conservative Missouri.

After years of debating, I know now acceptance isn’t gained like respect. For the most part, you receive it, or you don’t. However, the issue isn’t outside approval. Fortunately, I have not only experienced, but lived with the type of acceptance that truly matters.

When my graduation arrives and I scan the sea of proud parents, three women will rise for me, as I have for them. Diploma in hand, I will smile back knowing each awarded me more than a piece of paper ever could.

Modern Diet Based on Stone Age Eating Habits

It’s so easy, cavemen did it.

A flashback to millennia ago reveals the foundation of the paleo diet. The paleo lifestyle focuses on the available resources during the Paleolithic era, or Stone Age, and emphasizes the food scattered on cavemen’s floor. This was humanity’s first diet, experts say.

“The premise of the paleo diet is that it is similar to the original diet the human body adapted to, one that it can digest and then process in a healthy manner,” Daniel Gwartney, a pathologist based in Columbia said. Such a diet consists of lean meats and raw fruits and vegetables, excluding processed products. Since humans took their first steps, their environment has rapidly changed. However, they haven’t been able to keep up with the pace, Gwartney said.
“We as humans have not evolved as rapidly as the transportation, agriculture and technology changes that have come along,” Gwartney said.

Thus, the processed products that work their way into people’s everyday diet remain foreign to their bodies in comparison to the vegetables that have been consumed for millennia. Because humans don’t evolve as quickly as the food around them, Gwartney said, human bodies have a difficult time adjusting to the sugary cinnamon rolls and salty potato chips they often consume. Most interested in the paleo diet are consumers with particular health concerns.

“It’s supposed to help with heart disease — that’s the biggest thing,” Hy-Vee dietitian Megan Kemp said. “Other people have said it results in weight loss, but most of the people I see that started on their own don’t necessarily lose weight.”

Certain health and fitness communities also have adopted the diet, working it into their lifestyle. One of these is the growing Crossfit community, Kemp said.

“It’s the weight lifting, the sprinting, the overall well-being,” said chef Julie Bloomingdale, who has a paleo specialty. “But another way to maintain your body is to maintain a healthy diet and lifestyle.”

Compared to other diets, the paleo diet attracts men because of its heavy emphasis on meat, which allows men to still feel “macho” while participating in healthier eating habits, Gwartney said.

“It’s one of the diets that men aren’t afraid to ask me about,” Kemp said. “Men would never come to me and ask about trying Jenny Craig. It’s a little more geared toward men just in that it focuses on protein foods.”

While the diet’s 40 percent protein intake attracts some, the rather restrictive guidelines turn others off. Excluding dairy and whole grains, the diet lacks the fiber and calcium every person needs, Kemp said. Because of this restriction, there is a range in how closely people follow the rules of the diet. While some practice the diet by strict guidelines, eliminating all dairies, whole grains and processed foods, others take elements of it to adjust the concept of paleo into a manageable practice for their everyday lives.

“Most people go into it with the mindset that it’s going to be a long-term diet, and they try to get their family involved,” Kemp said. “However, the majority who go into the paleo diet slip back into regular eating because if you’re eating out and you’re on the go all the time, it’s very hard to follow, unless you have time to make things yourself.”

Processed food and the assortment of food options in today’s grocery stores restrict the accuracy of a valid “stone age diet.”

“What’s wrong with the paleo diet now is they pretend the primitive man had access to a variety of food sources and reliable food availability,” Gwartney said. “Variety was not something they had in their diet due to relatively restricted geographic range or territory.”

In addition to the wide spectrum of options, the antibiotics modern farmers inject into their livestock and the larger portion sizes have separated the modern-day paleo diet from its original recipe. However, conceptually, the diet can be beneficial.

“Overall, it is focusing on a lot of healthier food, so it can benefit you,” Kemp said. “But if you’re a little more flexible and relaxed with it, it’s a lot better. It can be just as good for you as being vegan or vegetarian.”

With a range in flexibility, the paleo diet can mold into a variety of people’s lives, creating a diet that is more than just a trend.

“It is something that’s going to stay around; it isn’t a fad like the gluten-free diet. It’s all about getting back to nature, back to unprocessed, and paleo is not hard to cook at all,” Bloomingdale said. “It’s the way of life for a lot of people.”

Welcome to the New Age

Glimmering on top of the marley floors, slick with their sweat and sparkles, stood the one thing they wanted the most. Teasing them, was the cluster of trophies they worked all season for, the symbol of their success. It was only feet away, yet it seemed so much further.

As dance team tiptoed through the All Star Sports Hotel in Orlando, Fla., rival teams’ vivacious verbal welcomed them to Nationals. With this year’s competition came a shift in mindset from a competitive squad to a top contender. However, some members were still unfamiliar with their newly acquired prominence.
To alter their mindset, the team gathered the night prior to competition. As Nicki Minaj’s “Fly” echoed in inspirational murmurs through the sugar splattered hotel room, senior Claire Kramer led the team in prayer. Next, a sack of Skittles was torn open, a “confidence pill” somersaulted in each of their palms.

“We’ve always had confidence issues because these teams come in looking like they’re going to take us down,” junior officer Maddy Lewing said. “We’ve had to realize that we’re one of those top teams now, so we “eat” our confidence then act like we own the place.”

The next day, 4:30 a.m. alarms awakened their trophy trances, the real competition was about to begin. Saturday’s sunrise brought their first and potentially last rounds of kick and pom. It was time to go big or go home. However, an unlucky draw would make that more difficult than anticipated. They woke up before sunrise for a reason; they were going first.

“Don’t think of this as a disadvantage,” Coach Shelli Vaughan said. “Think of it as all these teams have to follow you after. We’re setting the bar.”

Standing at the base of the entrance tunnel, they swallowed another confidence pill, and repeated a Hail Mary. Then, circled up, the team chanted, “TNT, TNT!”

“TNT means today not tomorrow. We have to put it all out on the floor at that moment,” Lewing said. “It’s only two minutes. Two minutes that will affect the rest of our year. We have to do it now; we can’t just say, ‘oh, it’ll get better next time.’ No, it has to be now.”

After the Kick SemiFinals performance, the team knew their first showing wasn’t their best, and tapped their fingers as Coach Sarah Koerper gathered them, the results in her hands. Revealing their advancement to kick finals, the team utilized their energy to fuel through their pom performance afterwards, winning a spot in semifinals.

After another sunrise makeup assembly line, the team next set their sights on qualifying for pom finals. Lighting up the castle floor with a flurry of facials and flittering poms, their smiles stretched slightly wider backstage when they realized it was their best pom performance of the entire year.

“You watch videos of amazing pom teams with their turns completely together. That was the first time ours were like that,” Kramer said.

Preparing for kick finals with more “TNT” chants and skittles, the team intended to find out their pom placement after; however, they soon realized that wouldn’t be possible. Seconds before they marched the stage, the intercom sounded, and they began announcing the teams who qualified for pom finals.

“Whatever happens, don’t let it affect your kick performance because this is it for kick. And if we screw this one up, we’re toast,” Lamb instructed the team.

As the announcers tumbled down the list of competitors, the team’s fate seemed dim, but their name suddenly sounded and the girls erupted in a half second outburst. Knowing another performance lay ahead, they refocused immediately. Now it was time to do what they did best.

“We’re ready for this,” Lamb said. “Go out there and live in the moment. Don’t think about if we don’t do well. Just go out there with what you have and let’s kill it.”

Following their final fueled kick showing, they entered their pom final with a drained daze. Wishing for the best with their remaining energy, a few formation fiascos kept the dance from perfection. However, their final spins were spun, and tears began to roll.

“It’s indescribable because you’re so proud of your team. More than the title that you have is your team,” Lamb said.

After a congregation of crying, the team joined the oval of opponents as the announcer counted down the top 10 kick teams. Their grips tightened with each number, and after four teams were called, it was time to celebrate. A mere two points separated the top six teams, and they stood only .03 points below fifth place Lindbergh.

“It made it so much sweeter that we were up with the top teams, our name up as a first place contender,” senior Jackie Meister said.

Content with kick, the true test was pom. It was time to see if their hard work put their name back on top. It was time to establish themselves once again. And that they did.

“Last year was the first time we made pom finals,” sophomore Daria Kinchelow said. “We came in this year to show it wasn’t a fluke, that we deserved sixth place last year and we deserved winning ninth this year. It was a defining moment for Sion Pom.”
As the cameras’ flashes exposed the senior’s bittersweet tears, one thing was certain among all twenty’s minds: last year a dynasty had begun, and this year it was established. And the next year when those marley floors would once again be graced with the presence of the team’s spins and splits, the trophies won’t appear so far away.

Welcome to the new age.

Walls

Gabriella Thompson arrives at school every day with a little more than just books weighing her down. Behind her smile, plastered on her face each day, lies a tattered, grieving soul. A soul which has never died, yet has already been through hell three times.

A soul which has experienced more than her share of cruel, undeserved hardships.
A young soul that is only sixteen years old.

Only Thompson knows the burdened journey and the tough turns it has taken. She wasn’t just born to it. She lived it.

Of course, people don’t know of this journey, the nagging weight. They can’t see it.
What they can’t see, is the six year old girl, who helplessly watched her mother die, before her very eyes.
They can’t see the guilt she continuously carries over not pushing three simple numbers. If she had, she might still have a mom.

What they can’t see, is the small child molested and abused to an extent in which it became normal. They can’t see the great mistrust she developed that formed the thick wall that she continues to hide behind.

What they can’t see are the scars left from the deaths of the two women she finally learned to trust. How both of Thompson’s guardian angels drifted from her side within four months.
They just can’t see the loneliness that led to a diagnosis of severe depression. And they can’t see what built up to it.

Although Thompson is growing reasons to smile naturally instead of painfully turning the corners of her lips up each day, the past is still very active in her life.

On the inside she knows she’s still not okay.

This is why, when she is finished unloading her books into her locker each day, Thompson continues to feel the same weight dragging her down. She’s still not okay.
Rachel Colligan  
Poetry: Freedom of Speech  
Ark Hill South High School  
Idean Bindel, Teacher  

I have it  
Freedom of speech is what I have  
because I was born in this country  
I have it from the government  
guaranteed and guarded  
They hand it to me, free of cost  
I have it from them  

But not myself  

Gatekeeper  
“Think before you speak”  
And I do  
Plenty, I do  
So I am the gatekeeper  
of my own mouth  
Happily, I am.  

But a strict one, too  

Rules  
I’m good with rules  
Rules are good  
They  
prevent harm  
protect people  
and things held dear  
are the bedrock of nations  
but then again  
rules  
were made to be broken.  

And I’m not so good with that  

Words Per Minute  
My mind  
the effective machine behind the scenes  
Well-oiled and effective  
Producing words  
Thoughts  
Millions per minute  
running on observation  
I fuel it daily  
by the hour  
the minute  
and millisecond  
(every eye blink)
I could not stop it,
the machine
if I wanted to

Full
More than full:
Brimming
with worth and power and merit:
the words,
they flow fast
as liquid
But sometimes
can't pass
the gatekeeper

and that is a shame
Dystopian novels such as The Hunger Games and Divergent are all over bookshelves right now, each set in a more gruesome and inhumane world than the next. Ray Bradbury’s novel Fahrenheit 451 is the insightful precursor to these other novels and was really quite ahead of its time, as it was written in 1953. Set in a world in which technology is everywhere, used by everyone, Fahrenheit 451 depicts a society in which technology interferes with relationships of every kind. The most prominent relationship “schisms” demonstrated throughout the plot of the novel are those between Montag and his wife and between the society and the government. These emotional craters left by technology prove to be detrimental to the happiness and well-being of those unfortunate enough to live in the society of Fahrenheit 451. In the insightful words of Wendell Berry, “As industrial technology advances and enlarges, and in the process assumes greater social, economic, and political force, it carries people away from where they belong by history, culture, deeds, association and affection.” When reflected upon, Fahrenheit 451 becomes a distinct manifestation of this phenomenon. While the novel may seem like a book about a completely imaginary society, it also can serve as quite the cautionary tale, teaching valuable lessons about the pitfalls of technology if we only look hard enough.

The beginning of the novel follows Guy Montag as he gradually realizes the true nature of his close relationships, especially that with his wife, Mildred. After witnessing a woman burned with her books the day before, Montag is deeply disturbed and wakes up the next day feeling nauseous and sick. His mind and body are in a dreadful state, but the one person he needs support from is so distracted by technology that he is left feeling completely alone. As he begs Mildred to turn off the parlor television so he can rest, she becomes irritable to have such a sacrifice asked of her. “I can turn it down” (Bradbury 49), she replies. Selfish and indifferent, she never actually does. This excessive dependence upon technology on Mildred’s part causes their marital relationship to be weak and superficial. This is again demonstrated later in the novel as Mildred demands that Montag sacrifice even further so that she can waste more time ensnared in the parlor drama. She asks, “How long do you figure before we save up and get the fourth wall torn out and a fourth wall-TV put in?” (Bradbury 20). Montag then reminds her that it would cost one-third of his yearly salary, to which Mildred replies, “It’s only two thousand dollars” (Bradbury 20). Montag likely feels that she has developed a sentiment for her television family more than him (although the society he lives in tells him not to think that far, not to think at all). If and when Montag begins to think for himself, he will come to the conclusion that Mildred values him to meet her own ends and that she has no true affection for him.

In these scenes, Bradbury demonstrates the very real way in which technology, if not kept in its place, can wreak havoc in one’s close relationships if not kept in its place. Montag feels an emptiness and anger that he cannot fully understand when he takes second priority to the television, and this same emptiness is the source of the misery felt all over his world. Technology is sold to Mildred and Montag, and in fact all of the Fahrenheit 451 society, as being a completely wonderful piece of genius, but this propaganda is in fact the reason that these same people will not ever realize the true source of their misery.

The damage that technology does in Fahrenheit 451 is not contained to personal relationships, but goes on to affect larger scale relationships as well. Through technology, the “establishment” (an entity that is never developed in the novel, but must exist) seeks to instill a certain mindset in the population. This establishment is vaguely referred to throughout the book as “they” because they have succeeded in their goal of stopping people from thinking about the who’s and why’s of the world. It can be logically inferred that the “establishment” is simply those power-seekers behind the scenes, perhaps even behind the government, using government officials as marionettes. Who and whatever this entity truly is, it has twisted technology into a predator in disguise. Clarisse McClellan, a somewhat quirky, but also surprisingly wise young woman, is the first to notice Montag to notice this early in the novel. By asking the most simplistic questions, she truly changes his outlook on life from complacent to questioning. Later, Montag recalls the words of her uncle as he describes what he remembers of a world that changed. “People talked too much. And they had time to think. So they ran off with the porches” (Bradbury 63). Perhaps this was the point at which Montag really started thinking for himself, realizing that the “establishment” had become his enemy instead of his ally. He also catches on to the
fact that this “establishment” has an operation behind the scenes to ensure that nobody ever does think too much. Captain Beatty reveals to Montag what happens when people think, describing the ways in which “they” can program the mechanical hound to hunt a person. He explains, “All of those chemical balances and percentages on all of us here in the house are recorded in the master file downstairs” (Bradb ury 26). This disturbing piece of information reveals that although society in general is forbidden to think, “they” are certainly thinking plenty behind the scenes in order to develop these horrendous tools. Clearly, the secretive use of technology by the elusive “establishment” has crossed the line and become abusive.

While this DNA operation is concealed behind the scenes, the government uses technology in a way that is visible to the citizens as well. It grossly abuses technology by using it to inspire fear in its people rather than trust. Everything that society is allowed to view on television is censored and monitored by the government until every ounce of truth is removed. As the televised search for Montag goes on in the novel and the hound is unable to find him, one of the “theys” behind the scenes realized that not being able to find Montag would show great weakness on the part of the government. So, an alternate victim for the hound is found and receives the so called “justice” meant for Montag. The murder of the alternate Montag is detailed in a newscast: “The search is over, Montag is dead; a crime against society has been avenged” (Bradbury 149). This commentary is no doubt broadcasted to make sure citizens remember what becomes of those that rebel. Through this we see that the government in Fahrenheit 451 uses technology to keep their people under control. Driven by hunger for ultimate power, the government has lost the trust of its people, but ensured their obedience. By using technology to instill fear in its people, the government heavily damages the subject/ruler relationship. In a healthy society, the link between people and government is trust, but in this very unhealthy society, the link is fear.

As we can see from examining these three types of relationships and situations, the world of Fahrenheit 451 is so overrun by technology that it hinders society rather than helping it. Technology damages close relationships, such as Montag’s marriage, as well as larger-scale relationships like that between the government and its subjects. Through technology, the “establishment” in Fahrenheit 451 has pressured its people to stop thinking critically so that it is in complete control of its terrified society.

Unfortunately, Bradbury seemed to be able to predict the future in his writing: our own civilization is heading further and further down the path to oblivion that is described in the novel. As we, the people of 2015, ignorantly embrace technology, we subconsciously let go of our power to control and think for ourselves. The need to think critically is greatly decreased when technology takes over our duties. We look for instant gratification, shortcuts, and a “hot deals” every day, but never stop to think, “is this really the right thing?” As we enthusiastically embrace technology, we hand over our power to those who control the technology, because oftentimes, the technology controls us. Thus, mega-corporations and the government enjoy more and more power as we pour all of our trust into the technology they provide. But what we must realize is that an establishment that wields enough power to give us everything also wields enough power to take it all away, as the government in Fahrenheit 451 did to Montag.

So, take a good look at Fahrenheit 451. Don’t judge a book by its cover: although the novel may seem like a dark fairy tale on the outside, a close look inside reveals many valuable warnings that our own society would do well to heed.

Works Cited
Luciano stared down the table at his six underbosses, slowly shifting his gaze from one to the next. Each of them fidgeted under his intense gaze. Malcolm was the only one of the six who truly seemed to feel like he was hiding something. Luciano cleared his throat and commenced the meeting. “I started this family to create order through the crime world. Before this family, crime was a wild and chaotic affair, but now, we rule the streets of the world, and criminals have an understanding. There is an honor among us all,” he said with a thick Italian accent, “Every now and then, a threat rears its head, and we strike it down before it becomes a great issue. Now we have a new problem.” Luciano stood and strode over behind Malcolm’s seat and gripped the head of his chair.

“This problem is a young man named Samuel Antonio,” he continued, “He’s one officer of the law who is taking down our men, trying to stop our money intake and shut us down.” Luciano started to walk slowly around the table, his eyes remaining on Malcolm. “I sent Malcolm in to take care of Samuel. Didn’t I, Malcolm?”

“Yes, Don,” Malcolm answered.

Luciano stopped at Malcolm’s chair again. “So why,” Luciano hissed just loud enough for everyone to hear, “is he still alive? Why is he still a problem?” The other underbosses tensed, sensing something bad was about to happen.

“He was more trouble to stop than I anticipated,” Malcolm stammered.

Luciano walked away from Malcolm’s seat and moved to the window facing the garden. “Sometimes, a beautiful, strong tree gets a weak or rotting branch that can bring down the whole tree. This weak branch needs to be cut out,” Luciano said, “This will allow the tree to grow back stronger. Our tree has been weakened by you, Malcolm.”

Two men stepped out on each side of Malcolm’s chair and grabbed his shoulders. Panic and fear spread across his face as he realized what was happening. “Wait! No!” he screamed in panic, “Give me another chance!”

“Our tree must be pruned and strengthened,” Luciano responded calmly, “The weak branch must be cut out.” The two thugs dragged a kicking and screaming Malcolm out of the room and slammed the door. Another man came in and placed Malcolm’s flipped seat right side up and sat in it, replacing Malcolm as one of the underbosses. “Jormungand rises,” said Luciano. A muffled gunshot rings through the thin walls of the mansion. “Jormungand rises!” The others in the dining room chanted. Luciano tapped one of the underbosses on the shoulder and murmured, “Take care of Samuel. If he won’t come willingly, give him some incentive.”

“Yes sir,” responded the man, “I’ll think of something.”

“Buono,” Luciano said with a smile, clapping the man on the back.

Sam was driving over to meet Maria, his sister, to get ready to go to his best friend Tommy’s 21st birthday party. He’d just gotten off from work after bringing in a couple of Luciano Vericci’s runners from the Burgess family. They were just being questioned when Sam had headed out. Sam was worried that these runners would be like the last few associates of Luciano and his families, and either didn’t know anything of real value or refused to talk. Sam shook his head, to clear his mind of these thoughts. He was going to a party after all.

His lights shined on the side of his and his sister’s shared one-story house. They’d saved up ever since they could get jobs to pay for one, and it reminded him a lot of his family home that he’d been raised in. The brick walls were dotted with windows that were adorned with decorative shutters, and the burgundy-colored wood door rested in a small covered porch. Sam walked inside and dropped off his keys and jacket before walking into the living room to find Maria watching some TV. “Hey Maria,” Sam said, giving his sister a hug.

“Hi,” she responded, turning off the TV and standing up, “You ready to go after we change?”

“Yes.”

“Cool. Hey, this is a real party with dancing and getting drunk and all that, right?”

“Yeah, and Tommy’s throwing it at his house.”

“More like mansion,” she said, “He’s so lucky his parent’s bought him that.”

“Well, yeah,” he replied, “at least he’s not one of those snobby rich people like the Andersons from high school.”
“That’s true,” she admitted, walking into her room, ending the conversation. Sam went into his room as well and changed into his normal clothes; a graphic t-shirt, dark jeans, and some sneakers. He walked out, grabbed his hoodie and grabbed his keys as Maria came out of her room. They excitedly walked out to the car and drove off.

The tires crunched as they rolled over the gravel of Tommy’s driveway. The party had already started; the music thumped through the house’s walls, and laughter could be heard inside. They walked in and waves of sound crashed into their ears. The music was blasting around the house, and lights flashed, illuminating people all around the room. People were dancing wildly, bodies bouncing and thrashing to the beat. Sam grabbed a beer and soon was among the wild partying people. Sam spotted Tommy in the center of the crowd and danced over to him. “You enjoying yourself Sammy?” Tommy yelled, grinning.

“You know it!” Sam yelled back. Sam brought his beer to his lips, but he’d already drained it. “Here!” Tommy shouted, handing Sam a red solo cup, “I think you need it!”

“Thanks!” Sam replied, grinning. Tommy smiled and moved off in the crowd, and Sam was left in the middle of the party. He took a big gulp from his cup and joined into the dancing again. He was part of a great beast, hungry for adrenaline and chaos and excitement. “You guys having fun?” Tommy’s voice boomed through the speakers. The crowd, Sam among them, roared their approval. “Well here’s something a little extra to keep this going!” At that moment, black lights flipped on, and neon paint was sprayed all around the room. A giant mix of shrieks, yells, and laughter filled the air as a rainbow of glowing paint fell on to the crowd. Sam felt the cool paint drip down his hair and fall on his arms and face. Some splashed on to the lip of his cup, but he took a slug anyways. A cheer went through the party and the partially glowing mass of people commenced dancing. Sam glanced over to see Maria as she looked over to see him and they smiled at each other. Sam raised his hands over his head and began dancing again with the rest of the party.

Suddenly, the windows smashed in, masked men in black holding guns flying into the house. Several people screamed as the intruders moved through the crowd. The music continued for a few seconds before it was silenced as one of the invaders shot the stereo. People were panicking, and their voices were growing louder and louder. The gunmen aimed their weapons at the ceiling and fired some shots, silencing the crowd. They backed up close to the walls and cowered as the intruders moved their guns to point at the guests. Sam heard a familiar shriek and looked over to see Maria fighting and thrashing against two of the invaders. He started towards her when he heard another yell and looked to see Tommy in the grasp of two more masked men. Before he could move to save either one, he felt a hand clamp down on his hand and twist behind his back, and he looked back to find another masked man restraining him. A gun was shoved into his back and he froze. “Walk,” his captor commanded, his voice muffled by his mask. As they walked across the room to the door, Sam’s mind raced, trying to think of a way to escape from his attacker to save Tommy and his sister.

He stomped on his captor’s foot, causing the man to swear and move his gun away from Sam’s back. Sam grabbed the gunman’s arm with his free hand, pulling the man in front of him as a shield and forcing the man’s own gun to his head. The other assailants turned and aimed their weapons at Sam, but no one fired. Sam’s captive, their comrade, had become Sam’s shield. Sam moved the gun from aiming at his prisoner’s head to the gunman. Looking past the attacker’s, Sam saw Maria and Tommy being shoved into different vans. He was filled with fury. He shoved his captive to the ground, and before anyone could move, Sam quickly shot at each of the invaders’ firing arms. Each one hit their mark as Sam ran out of the building and the men dropped to the floor, reeling with pain. He just got to the driveway when the vans peeled off, taking his best friend and sister with them. In a final attempt to stop them, Sam aimed for one of the van’s tires, but when he fired, all he heard was a clicking sound. Swearing furiously, he raced to his car. Fortunately, he’d installed a police scanner to his car, and he grabbed it to call for help. “Calling all available units!” he called into the microphone, “Armed kidnapping at 2205 Banderville Avenue. Some perpetrators apprehended at location. Two vans escaped heading east. These men are armed and extremely dangerous.”

“On our way,” responded an officer.

“I’m giving chase,” Sam reported, as he started the engine. He followed the direction the vans. Sam soon caught sight of them. He started gaining on them and was soon side by side with the first van. He yanked his wheel towards the van, but all it did was cause the van to swerve slightly and shake as the driver balanced the van out. The van’s passenger window opened up, and a masked man leaned out, aiming a submachine gun at Sam’s car. Sam ducked down and let off the gas as the windshield shattered. Sam opened the glove
compartment and snatched the gun he kept there. He shot at the gunman, hitting the target in the shoulder, causing him to tumble out of the van, crashing to the ground.

Sam revved his engine, driving up behind the van, smashing it hard. This time, the van swerved sideways and flipped violently, crashing and sliding before coming to a stop. The van in front screeched to a stop and a team of six gunmen got out. Determined to save Maria and Tommy, Sam got out, ducking behind his busted up car door. The gunmen kept him under fire, pinning him behind his car, but Sam returned fire, slowly taking out the gunmen one by one. Out of the corner of his eye, Sam saw two of them rush to the back of the van and open the back doors. Sam helplessly watched the men drag an unconscious Maria out of the totaled van and pull her over to the intact van, putting her inside. The remaining gunmen slowly moved back, still shooting at Sam to cover their escape until they were all inside. As they closed the back doors, one last bullet was shot at Sam’s car, popping his tire, preventing him from giving chase. They sped off, leaving Sam with the gunmen’s dead bodies, a broken and now burning van, and his destroyed car. Just as the van disappeared from view, police cars appeared from a side street. The lead car pulled over beside Sam.

The officer rolled down the window, assessed the scene, and said, “Get in. We’re going to the house.” “But they drove off with my sister and my best friend,” Sam argued, “We need to chase after them!” “The perps at the house will give us the information we need to find them and who they’re working for,” reasoned the policeman, “You can’t just rush after them blind.” Sam got in, grumbling, and they hurried off towards the house.

The scene was surrounded by police cars, with the attackers in handcuffs, being placed in the cars. Sam walked up to the nearest police officer observing the scene and asked, “How did you manage to capture them all? They weren’t incapacitated; they could have run off.” “We arrived on the scene to find some of the party goers had tied up the assailants with balloon string while they were too dazed by the pain to fight back, so they were just waiting for us up front,” the officer recalled with a faint smile of amusement.

“When they get brought in, let me be the one to interrogate them,” said Sam. “Okay. I’ll see what I can do,” responded the man. Sam walked over to the police officer who’d driven him there and requested a ride to the nearest car rental center.

The next day, Sam rolled up to work in his rental car, determined to get some answers. He went to the interrogation room. A flare of resentment coursed through Sam’s veins as the man who had tried to take him smirked at him as he walked over to the table. Quickly, he composed himself and masked his anger under a calm façade. “Who sent you to kidnap me and the others?” Sam asked.

“Who sent you to kidnap me and the others?” the man confirmed, “You'll never be safe.” Sam slammed his fists on the table, making the prisoner jump. “Who sent you?” Sam growled threateningly. “The Jormungand family did,” the man answered with a sneer. “Who's that?” he interrogated, “Who leads Jormungand?” “Luciano,” replied the man, “Luciano Vericci.” Sam’s eyes widened in shock. “Of course,” he thought to himself, “He was trying to get to me. The others were just to keep me in line.”

“Where did your friends take them?” Sam asked.

“Where did your friends take them?” Sam repeated, irritated. “We'll get you eventually,” the man continued, “You'll never be safe.” Sam slammed his fists on the table, making the prisoner jump. “Who sent you?” Sam growled threateningly. “The Jormungand family did,” the man answered with a sneer. “Who's that?” he interrogated, “Who leads Jormungand?” “Luciano,” replied the man, “Luciano Vericci.” Sam’s eyes widened in shock. “Of course,” he thought to himself, “He was trying to get to me. The others were just to keep me in line.”

“Where did your friends take them?” Sam asked.

“Where did your friends take them?” the man asked, “In Germany. The city of Hamburg.” “That’s all I want,” Sam said as he stood up. “A word of caution to you, Samuel Antonio,” the man said with a grim expression, “You will not be able to win this. Jormungand is stronger than you can fathom.” Sam walked out, leaving the station and driving off before anyone could protest.

Sam had to get some money to get to Germany fast. An idea struck him; Tommy always kept a bunch of money in his house for emergencies. He figured Tommy wouldn’t have a problem with him using it. He drove up to Tommy’s house and used his key to get in. He ran upstairs into Tommy’s bedroom, and when he checked behind the painting over Tommy’s bed, he found the stash of cash. He opened it to discover it was completely filled with money. There must have been half a million dollars in there! He threw it in one of Tommy’s Gucci duffel bags. Now it was time to get a ticket to Hamburg.
Sam set his feet onto the German land and felt a small surge of hope. He was so close to freeing his sister and his best friend, and to taking down Luciano and his Jormungand family. First he would need an address. He called the station back home to talk with the main officer on the case. “Hey, did you get an address from the attacker?” he asked. Once he had the location, he set off to find it, soon learning it was a warehouse a few miles off. He called a taxi over and drove off.

Sam entered the warehouse; gun in hand, he walked with great caution. He swiftly found Maria and Tommy gagged and tied to chairs. Forgetting to be cautious, he raced over to their sides and started to untie them. He quickly got Maria untied, and was working on Tommy when Maria ripped off her gag and said, “No Sam! It’s a trap!” Four shots rang through the warehouse and Sam was shot in each appendage, effectively incapacitating him. He screamed in pain and collapsed, blood staining the floor. Out of the dark, Luciano came over with a silver pistol glinting in his hand. Four thugs walked out behind him. “Benvenuto, Sam,” he said mockingly. “I was hoping to see you soon. I was worried I would get too bored and shoot one of your friends.” Tommy ran at Luciano with his fists clenched, but the four goons shot him down before he was a foot from where he started. He fell to the floor, dead, and Maria screamed, running towards the entrance, but she too was shot before she got anywhere. Sam yelled out in anguish, but couldn’t move, for it caused ravaging pain. “Such a shame, Sam,” the Don said, shaking his head, “If you had just stayed out of the way, no one would have gotten hurt.” He shrugged his shoulders, “Va bene.”

“Go to hell, you piece of scum,” Sam said through gritted teeth. Luciano’s eyes glinted coldly. “We always win Sam,” Luciano said. He pointed his gun at Sam’s head. Sam took one last breath and spat at Luciano. “Jormungand rises,” hissed Luciano. He squeezed the trigger four times, unleashing four bullets into Sam’s skull, killing him instantly. Luciano walked away, saying, “Find a place to take care of the body. Put it someplace no one will find it.” He glanced back one more time and said, “Arrivederci, Sam,” That was the last of Sam Antonio. The final thing he heard weren’t words of hope or courage or praise or love or even hate. They were just two words, but those two words meant a world crisis in the making.

Jormungand rises.
In the modern world there has been a realization that everyone is under one of two mindsets: the fixed mindset and the growth mindset. The fixed mindset is one of fixation, where your performance and intelligence are measured, your IQ is permanent, and another's view of you is final. In short, your ultimatum is to look "smart". The growth mindset is one where people believe in growth and development. Your goal is to improve your skills, basic and complex, to achieve your maximum potential, and continue to improve. Others views and criticism challenge you to improve, and you take opportunities, not to look intelligent, but to grow.

Under both mindsets, there is a focus on ability, potential and judgment, and a peripheral view of its effect. As you become aware of both, it is common tendency to judge yourself as fixed, or partially fixed, and set your sights upon being able to honestly judge yourself to the “standard” of the growth mindset. The current educators’ perspective on learning and development in schools is that a fixed mindset performance and education is being implemented. However, the recognition and goal of achieving a growth mindset environment needs to be applied to schools and districts in all areas to improve educational achievement.

The fixed mindset is being encouraged to the same degree a mother would her first child to take its first steps or say its first word. School districts are not looking at quarterly growth or even improvement from semester to semester; instead, they glance at annual performance for each grade level. The government, federal and state, pays heed to only the state standardized end of course tests, and does not look at individual student or class growth. Alternatively, the government looks fleetingly at each district’s scores, comparing the average annual improvement towards a fixed goal, such as 100% proficiency in grade level reading.

The education perspective needs to shift from one of annual performance to growth. The government needs to look at what schools are currently implementing and how each class is growing as they move on through school. While the district growth is important for comparison, the development of the individual learner and class needs to be reviewed and encouraged, at least quarterly, if not monthly, as well. This review needs to be one of scrutiny not on performance, but on development. The individual class and student needs to have a measured system of growth that charts improvement in comprehension, understanding, and fluctuation throughout different subjects and baselines.

What gets monitored gets done, as the adage goes. The government needs to do its part by holding school districts accountable to tracking teachers’ use of strategies and methods that include room for individualized growth, as well as provide resources for collaboration of peers, parents, and authorities. John Hattie recently did a meta-analysis on 800+ meta-analysis concerning what works best in raising student achievement. The top three in order from first to third were visual student learning, formative teacher evaluation, and acceleration. Visual student learning pertains to students being able to see what they are learning in the form of Venn diagrams, charts, graphs, slide shows, or any other visual presentation of information, as well as apply it to real world (visual) situations. Formative teacher evaluations allow teachers to review their teaching and deduce the areas where their instruction is falling behind and change their methods and lessons accordingly. They do this through periodical tests or assessments and reviewing the data to conclude the current level of comprehension in the class. Acceleration is allowing students to learn at their own pace, accelerating those above the bottom level as far as needed to meet that child's needs. If you would notice, all of these and more that follow include structures that revolve around growth, development, and improvement. They’re all one in the same as far as the effect is concerned. They show where the learning needs to be improved and how (Hattie).

Instead of having students watch YouTube videos on the unit they are currently learning, teachers need to incorporate more Venn diagrams, charts, graphs, and other organized arts to visually show and compare information. And instead of using quarterly report cards to assess student understanding, select different weekly assignments in different subjects and adjust the upcoming lessons accordingly. One last big step educators can take is allowing kids to learn at their own pace. Many teachers believe in keeping the entire class on the same unit, at the same speed, even though it isn’t in the best interest of everyone to learn at the same speed. Students’ education needs to have an is individualized aspect, and needs to allow learners to constantly
become more knowledgeable, rather than holding the more advanced students back with the lowest level kids.

Or another example of how education needs to change is Aaron Duff’s Ted Talk. In this he states that, "...the current 100 point grading system is stacked against you." He goes on to say how 59% of the current grading system is a failing grade, and how only 41% is in your favor. A little further along he explains how "...schools cannot accurately measure your growing knowledge." He gives an example of how when he was growing up he would often not understand the material until the day or even week after the test. So even though he knew the material, his grades would not reflect that. So, how can you be tested over the material, before you even understand it? (Duff). Which completely contradicts the reasoning behind being taught for eventual understanding, and wrongly contributes to judging someone’s “permanent” ability.

An alternative system that better judges the current comprehension of students is the 4, 3, 2, 1 System, or standards-based grading system. In this system a four is full understanding to the point where you could explain it to someone else. A three is a confident understanding, where you can do it but you don’t yet fully comprehend the unit. A two is a position in which you can do it, but you might need some help from someone. And a one is when you don’t really have a grasp on the concept at all. If you were to somehow prove that you had a knowledge above and beyond full comprehension, then you might gain a five. The system would need to be taught to teachers. They would need to learn to stop so associating scores with grades and learn to look at work and other means of showing your true comprehension level. However this system allows for failure, followed by improvement later on if the school was to expand their policy to measure eventual comprehension, not finalize understanding by a set date.

ASCD has published a page concerning the effects of converting to the standards based grading system by way of seven main topics. The first and foremost bring that grades should have meaning. This takes root in the fact that the 100 point grading system provides numbers that stand for measured intelligence, not comprehension of the topic that student was tested over. The second reason for supporting came in the form of the need to change the status quo. The current grading system allows for kids to actually learn very little but “play school” by doing homework and turning in extra credit to achieve decent grades. While students who learn quite a bit, but do not regularly turn in homework assignments can be given much lower grades not because they don’t understand the subject but because they fail to complete their assigned tasks. The third mentality applies to authorities and states that we can control grading practices. While many teachers and administrators feel many factors are out or their control, the classroom, school, or even district authorities can still control how students are assessed. By implementing the standards-based grading system which, if used correctly, allows for students to be judged by their understanding and comprehension rather than their effort or work ethic (Scriffany).

The fourth reason is one also valued by students as well as staff. The standards-based grading system puts a stop to meaningless homework and assignments. This grading system allows for teachers to assess their students understanding within every piece of paper. Rather than enter enough grades so that the computer can calculate a reasonable average for a student’s scores. The fifth states that the standards-based grading system helps teachers adjust instruction. This means that instead of seeing numbers you can see assessed levels of each child, like proficient or partially proficient, and allows you to differ the curriculum based on overall understanding throughout your class. The sixth reason has to deal with work level and is simply that the standards-based grading system teaches what quality looks like. The 100 point system allows for students to scoot their way through school on completion and extra credit. But the standards-based system allows for teachers to judge the students quality of work. And, after low comprehension marks due to lack of effort, the student will begin to develop a sense of self-sufficiency. The final reason is that the standards-based grading system serves as a Launchpad to other reforms. This reason encompasses the ability this system provides for teachers to improve their curriculum through better understanding of their students ability. Along with the different view of thinking that is imposed on teachers, students, and parents who have experience with it (Scriffany).

A policy addressing opportunities to redo work at a later time needs to be input into the 4, 3, 2, 1 system as well, to make it more effective. If the class as a whole finishes learning the unit and understands it completely, but a single student is behind, the class needs to be allowed to move on and so does that child that is behind. But that child’s needs to receive help in order to fully comprehending whatever unit they just finished, and their scores need to be adjusted accordingly.
Schools’ current system of measurement and methods of instruction needs to change. The current standardized 100 point grading system and implemented push on learning preset material at a preset pace is very inaccurate, ineffective, and provides incorrect information on student understanding. It also allows for students to achieve higher grades than deserves by simply completing their work and doing extra credit. In other words, it is a very fixed judgment on student academic achievement. It measures information from one test, and asserts a student’s final score in accordance. Whether or not the student understand the subject cannot even be accurately judged as it is a simple matter of memorizing the material for the test date, then letting it slip out of your mind. Not only is this very set, but the education works against students, as the currently implemented methods have been proven very ineffective by multiple people through personal experience and major studies.

If schools were to implement the standards-based grading system and the related methods and changes, even over say a ten year course, their image would become one of growth, not fixed scores for each child’s school year. Students would get a more individualized education while learning more about peer and authority cooperation. They would better understand quality work and learning for understanding, instead of learning for a test. The education of America’s youth needs to change, and I am providing a possible solution to the narrow, century-specific education that is being provided and has been for as long as I know. But the only way learning as we know it will change, is through hard work, new ideas, and continual growth.

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Tonight my dad was supposed to pick me up from work at 8, but he was late, as usual. My phone had died and was now just a useless accessory to the cold; sitting heavily in my pocket and leaving me suspended in anxious expectation of his arrival.

I stood in the wintry blackness, trying not to move so my skin wouldn’t touch the cold inside of my loose sweater. Every few minutes a car would approach and pass, leaving me with nothing but the unwanted sight of receding taillights. I kept telling myself that it was fine, the next pair of headlights would be for me. A little chant started in my head, “soon, soon, soon, soon…” to keep me company. After the first ten minutes, however, I discontinued my chant in favor of the quiet night air.

While I waited, unsure if there was actually anything to wait for, Nostalgia suddenly swooped into the silence and crushed me with its too-tight embrace. As every wrong car drove by and then out of sight, so did my hopes of a way home. Each one brought a stronger pang of uncomfortable memories. No, not memories-- a memory. The same memory, alive within a repeated scenario. Birthday parties, soccer practices, day camps, play dates-- every event had the same predictable ending. I was always the last kid there, overstaying my welcome as I fidgeted in nervous anticipation of a parent’s arrival.

That same uncertainty hovered over me tonight, surging and receding with each passing car. A hot lump forced its way into my throat, battling the icy weather my body had finally succumbed to and reminding me that I do still care about being forgotten, no matter how much I’d like to think otherwise.

Nostalgia was the culprit. It transformed my mind back into that of a nervous ten-year-old, who wants nothing more than to go home and forget the feeling of being forgotten.

Nostalgia is a thousand times worse than its sibling Memory. Memory recalls actual moments of time that you and others can recount. History is composed of Memories. The strongest ones eventually bully out the others and become fact. Nostalgia, however, transcends Memory. Its power comes from its ability to thrive within the most mundane circumstances. It does not need to rely on specific occasions or facts; instead, it feeds on emotion. There’s no expiration date on Nostalgia. It can extract equally potent feelings two weeks or ten years after an occasion.

Nostalgia can ensure a wonderful day from the sight of soggy cereal or make the smell of markers remind us of better times. It’s unpredictable and reliable, comfortable and distressing; a messy jumble of contradictions that is always ready to spring.

Tonight I did not wait for a ride. Tonight I battled Nostalgia as it leapt at me from passing headlights. I was the underdog in this duel, reminded that I can’t outrun emotion with age. The cliché “home is where the heart is” struck me with painful accuracy. Although my childhood feelings that resurfaced were uncomfortable, they were familiar. Nostalgia will always be the most dependable way home. No matter where I am, it has the chameleonic power to join me.

Maybe I allowed Nostalgia to consume me tonight because it was the most reliable way home.
On the outskirts of the English castle Lambridge, lays an old house where Jessa, a blacksmith lives. While Jessa was working on repairing the door to her house one sunny afternoon, a seven year old girl had secretly approached behind her. The girl watched Jessa for several minutes fixing up the door, till she finally spoke, "Excuse me!" in a loud happy tone, as she approached closer to Jessa. Jessa freaked out, she was very shy unlike this burst of hyperactivity. Jessa slowly moved away, but she kept getting closer, Jessa finally fell back into the bale of hay her horse feeds on.

Finally deciding to hear what the little girl had to say, Jessa listened, “So, you see my name is Stella. S.T.E.L.L.A, I was wondering if you could shelter me till I find another place to go. You see I have adventured that forest and lived there for quite some time and it isn’t just working for me!”

The girl talked a bit too fast to Jessa to understand. Jessa looked at the girl with a confused expression on her face, “S-So, your name is Stella and you want to live her-here?” Jessa mumbled. "N-No, I sorry but I don’t have time to care for little people...”

Stella observed the place carefully and then observed Jessa, "You're a smith, aren't you? The smell of charcoal fills this place! Let me live here! I promise I will help with any need chores! I can cook, clean, gather materials! Oh please!" begged Stella.

"But you are only...Err... Six? I can’t let you live here s-sorry!" Jessa announced in a delicate quiet tone. "I'm seven actually. But that's not the point. Pleaaaaaase let me stay with you, I would do aninnyhthing! I promise," protested Stella.

Jessa gave a sigh and thought; maybe she could go into town and do the socializing and buying for me. As Jessa took in a deep breath she stated, "Fine but, every Sunday morning I will leave you a list of things you need to buy from town. I want you to socialize and be careful when you are in town. Strangers can harm you, so take a dagger and hide it in the cloak that I will give you once you settle in. My name is Jessa, you can have the room, straight down and to the right once I get it ready for you. Tonight you can sleep on the couch. There are already clothes in the closet you can wear tomorrow. It was my room when I was little. Go on and get ready for lunch" Jessa felt her heart pounding full of embarrassment. She thought to herself, what if I was too demanding, I kept stuttering, and so on.

Stella did exactly what she was told, and Jessa was happy that she did. Jessa finished repairing the house and walked inside, to find lunch already served. Stella sat there waiting at the table and smiling, Jessa was very surprised that she could cook! Jessa approached the sink and washed her hands, then sat at the table while glancing at Stella, who was smiling at her. She attempted to smile back.

"Let's eat!" Stella said loudly and energetically. Jessa felt at peace, it was nice having company over, that weren’t asking to buy weapons.

"I'll show you around the house once you take a shower and ready for bed." Jessa told Stella.

Later that night, Jessa gave Stella a tour of the house. Stella was so amused by the beauty and interior design of the house and could not help but ask questions. "Did you build this house yourself?"

"No. But I did hand make each and every piece of decor inside."

After about fifteen minutes of showing her around, she finally noticed that letting Stella stay wasn’t such a bad idea after all. Stella’s presence brought a true smile to Jessa's face. Jessa couldn’t even tell if she was so happy because she wouldn't be lonely anymore, or the fact she wouldn’t have to do everything without any assistance. When the tour of the house came to an end, Stella had been completely tuckered out. Jessa set up a nice little bedding arrangement on the couch that night for Stella to sleep on. Once Stella was tucked in nice and cozy, Jessa started preparing the room for Stella to stay in, getting the feeling that she would be with her for a while. Afterwards Jessa went to make that cloak she promised Stella. Once Jessa finished making the cloak, she went to bed in her own room waiting for the sun to rise the next morning.

As the morning sun arose and the birds started chirping, Jessa had finally gotten up only to find Stella off the couch and up making breakfast. Stella had already gotten dressed and prepared some bacon, eggs, and
toast in the kitchen. That wasn’t all Stella did though. As Jessa got up to see what Stella was still cooking, she saw some potato skins in the trash bin.

"I'm making some hash browns." Stella shouted, although Jessa was nearby. "They are almost done, just trying to get a bit of a golden brown look so I know they're a bit crunchy, but at the same time nice and warm." Slowly, Jessa got some cups, plates, and silverware out of the cabinet and neatly placed them on the table.

"I will be right back, have to go wash up and get dressed. Plus I have a present for you." Jessa announced as she left the room.

When Jessa walked back to her room, somebody came and knocked on the door. Stella sprinted to the door anxious to see who had come. As Stella opened the door she was amazed to see prince Jedidiah.

"I've been told a great...actually amazing! Blacksmith lives here. Are you Jessa?" The Prince asked Stella.

"No, but I'm her assistant," Stella told the prince.

"Oh, well may I please talk to Jessa?"

"Why sure!" Stella said excitedly. Although on the inside she felt sad thinking about how she had an older brother who she hadn't seen in so long. Even though Stella was an energetic girl, she didn't have the courage to ask the prince if she might be his lost sister. Stella's name changed and she looked completely different.

"Jessa, someone's here to talk to you, it's a prince!"

That's when Jessa shyly walked into the room to hand Stella the cloak she made. At the same time asked the prince "What do you need done your royal highness?"

"I need some weaponry that would be great for fighting. I am on a mission to find my father, mother, and sister even if they are deceased. I never got to say my goodbyes to them when they left with my sister," Jedidiah told Jessa with a blank face that looked like it would turn to tears in an instant. But the prince remained calm and acted professional like he had told others before.

"On-Only if you can beat me in a sword fight. Selling t-to someone weaker than me is unacceptable," Jessa explained.

The prince had sighed and agreed. Jessa grabbed two foam swords from behind the door that were used to practice fighting by most swordsmen, and walked outside. With the prince behind her she handed him the sword, then stood in her place. As the prince took his basic stance, he noticed Jessa using a stance he had never seen before.

She was facing away from him and he couldn't believe it, "Are you ready Jessa?" Jedidiah asked dumbfounded.

"Why of course," Jessa answered still facing away. The prince rushed at her with the foam sword as Jessa looked over her shoulder. Something was different about her but the prince couldn't tell what. He swung the sword at her but unexpectedly Jessa dodged it by jumping! He couldn't believe it, what human could possibly jump that high. She came at Jedidiah and almost hit him right below the heart but he had dodged the swing. She came at him again and again faster each time.

For a moment in Jedidiah’s eyes it seemed like she was dancing with the sword so beautifully and gracefully. He eventually lost his train of thought thinking ever so deeply about her. That’s when he was struck down, but this time not my some foolish idiot trying to get in his way of finding his family. Jedidiah the prince of Lambridge was this time defeated by a normal peasant. But was she truly normal, he couldn't tell.

"You have lost and you will not get the weapons but, I may be able to help," Jessa told the prince as she started walking into the house while Stella and Jedidiah stood outside in astonishment of what just happened.

When Jessa finally came back outside she saw Stella and the prince talking together under an apple tree. Prince Jedidiah just sat there with one leg bent, while slowly devouring an apple as Stella joyfully rolled in the grass.

"Oh, your back," Jedidiah murmured quietly.

"I told you I would help, and I don't lie. Go to where your family was taken and search. Look where the peasants work and where the rich live. They are sure to be there somewhere, but if you feel they are dead," Jessa said in a hushed tone before silence swept the air and it felt as if time stopped. “I can no longer help you.” Then slowly and steadily Jessa walked back inside and just watched through her window. That’s when she noticed something mysterious.

"Where are you going Stella?" asked Jessa.

"With my brother of course, we are off to find our parents!" She happily announced like Jessa did nothing for her.
"What do you mean?" Jessa asked even more curiously. That’s when the Prince finally spoke up.

"When I said I had a long lost sister, father, and mother I had left out a lot of detailed information. My sister’s name was Grace. She was five when my family went missing but, I don’t remember much about my parents. Just that they may or may not still be living and I’m going to find out no matter what it takes." Jedidiah said triumphantly. He no longer looked emotionless as he said something about his family.

“If this means Stella I-is, I mean G-Grace is your sister, t-then it’s one I-less person t-to search for," Jessa added cursing under her breath for stuttering so much. Jessa walked inside for a minute and came back out with a sword. "Let’s go search! I will be coming because humans who hit once would likely hit twice," Jessa stated as she started walking towards them.

Should I give them swords too? Jessa thought to herself. What if they turned on me then stranded me. But then again we may need help fighting off some beastly human. "Let me go grab something out of the house real fast," she told Stella and the prince.

“Okay,” The two replied in perfect unison. As Jessa ran inside to grab another sword for the prince she remembered that she had already left Stella a dagger in her cloak. But since Stella left her cloak inside, she just grabbed an extra sword.

When Jessa walked back outside hoping to see Jedidiah and Stella waiting patiently for her, instead she saw the sun shining brighter than ever, the trees howling, the wind roaring, and blowing leaves around the front yard. The prince and his sister where nowhere to be seen from a mile radius filled with trees, bushes, and tall grass. Frantically, Jessa ran in the direction she had left them, calling out their names. For hours Jessa wouldn’t give up searching for Stella and Jedidiah knowing there were cruel animals such as coyotes near where she lived. If something happened to the two, Jessa thought she would be the blame.

Night time had finally come and Jessa hadn’t come as prepared as she usually did on her hunting expeditions. That was when the trees starting making noises... not any ordinary noise though. It sounded like laughter. Ever so quietly, Jessa looked behind the biggest bush too see the prince and Stella giggling, talking, and having fun.

“I thought you guys had gone missing!” shouted Jessa furiously. At this point, even though Jessa was usually so incredibly shy, she had a temper.

“I’m soooo sorry!” Stella told Jessa, hoping she would understand that she hadn’t seen her brother in so long. Jessa was so completely and utterly upset she stormed out as silence filled the night air.

Eventually the next morning Jessa calmed down and they went back to the house. For the next couple nights, the three stayed at Jessa’s house and got packed for the big journey. Stella’s bag was so crammed the zipper almost popped off. Jessa felt as if she was the only one who knew anything about journeying out into the wilderness and took it upon herself to make sure they had everything they needed to survive. She still knew that the prince and Stella could turn on at any moment and take all of the goodies even after being so kind.

“Tomorrow morning will be the big day we start the search for your guy’s parents,” Jessa announced. The next day, the sun came out nice and early filling the air with happiness. All of the clouds went away and all the birds started to chirp.

“Who took the map?” Jessa asked in a stern voice, because it was in her bag the night before.

“I was looking at it last night after you went to bed,” Admitted Jedidiah. “Do you even know where we’re headed?”

“I would know if I could have the map and if you told me where your parents went with Stella,” Jessa told Jedidiah. Jedidiah carefully studied the map one last time and then gave it back to Jessa. “Okay. So, where did your parents take Grace?” Jessa asked Jedidiah in hopes that it wouldn’t be too far away from the house.

Quietly, Jedidiah broke the news that they had traveled to Alaria which was all the way through the Spring Creek Forest, which isn’t as nice as its name may sound. Jessa thought in her mind that it would have been much better if they had to travel through Angel’s Heart Forest. But that wasn’t the case so she slowly and carefully showed Jedidiah the path they would have to take including every little detail possible.

“Okay, well if we ever want to make it there by dusk we need to get going right now.” Jessa told the Jedidiah and Stella. Luckily since Stella was always so energetic they were on their way in no time.

When the little group got about half way to their destination, Stella tripped while trying to skip around in the forest. Her leg slowly turned crimson red as the blood trickled down her leg. The poison ivy located all around the forest didn’t help the situation either. Once Jessa finished helping Stella get cleaned up by a small
stream in the forest, they were back on their way. Of course it was incredibly hard for Stella to get around since
the poor girl was limping and balancing with her one good leg that wasn’t covered in poison ivy and bruising.
It was almost 6:00pm when Jedidiah finally got so tuckered out that he collapsed in a little heap under a
big oak tree. Luckily the forest didn’t bring too much trouble. Stella and Jedidiah were ready to call it a night
and get some rest, but Jessa was on the move to get a fire started. Unlike Jessa, Stella and Jedidiah were not
big pros at hiking and camping.
“You guys would’ve been coyote chow if I wasn’t here for you,” Jessa sassed as she too had fallen asleep
on the hard rocky dirt floor under a big oak tree.
I saw the delectable cheese, a lump of yellow gold carefully placed on a wooden platter. It is anyone’s reverie, and everyone’s nightmare.

I was jogging directly to it, my feet gaining momentum “Pitter patter, Pitter patter, Pitter, patter” I stopped.

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He was so young, so innocent and naive, Squeak he was the last one to undertake the terrible journey. He had plunged into the snapper; a metal bar came down with a crushing force smashing his head. When we found him he was dead, a stream of blood trickling from his nose and mouth.

He was my best, and only friend.

It wasn’t long before a creator reached down and picked him up.

The shaman used this “Let this arrogant fool be an example to all of you.” He paused to get the full effect of her words and then continued “You cannot get food from a snapper; the only thing that you will ever get from a snapper is death.”

They, they made us pay for our existence we all suffer consuming crumbs. The massive blocks of cheese torment us, we know that we need food to survive, and if we try to get the food then we don’t get a chance to survive. Eventually all of us loose enough screws and attempt to get the cheese. The only thing that you will ever get from a snapper is death.

The creators are enormous. Even if sixty of our bravest warriors were assembled and armed, they would still cower in the presence of a creator’s shadow starting with the bravest. There are legends that others have come, but I have only seen the two of them.

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I saw a stale bread crumb just beyond snapper. “It’s not much but it’ll have to do” I squeaked. Doubt echoed through my mind saying, “It’s better to die in the hands of the snapper now than to live for a day, and then die in a week, through the pain of the only thing we know anymore. Hunger”

I walked on the cold red and black stone surface and passed the snapper. I was almost to my half morsel of food, when I heard something whistle through the air followed by a “SNAP” and a searing pain in my tail.

I jerked violently forward and tried to run away but something was weighing me down.

My curiosity got the best of me; I had to know what was causing me all this pain so I turned to take a look. “The snapper” I squeaked in horror, my voice cracking slightly.
Payden Dawson
Personal Essay/Memoir: Second Place is The First Loser
Maryville High School
Dennis Vinzant, Teacher

“If you’re not first you’re last.” This is a quote by Ricky Bobby, in the movie Talladega Nights. As funny as the movie was the quote really stuck out to me and had a lot of meaning. I have experience some great wins in my life and some horrible defeats. I love this quote and really think it applies in life. If you’re not going your hardest all of the time to be first then you will end up being last.

My junior year I had really high expectations for myself. The year before I had won a rodeo state title, had placed at many rodeos, and won a lot of money. My team roping partner and I had been a force the past two years and were expecting another great year. However that wasn’t the case. We have twelve rodeos for the rodeo season; six in the fall and six in the spring. During the fall rodeos are tough on us. Our schedules our crazy and we hardly have any time to practice together or even sleep. On a daily basis I get up, go to school, then go straight to football practice, and back home to rope and by the time I am back home it is nine o’clock and most of the time I still have homework to do. Riley, my partner, has almost the same schedule. With one exception he works on his family farm as well. Our fall rodeos didn’t really go according to plans and really put us down in the dumps. We weren’t doing very well at any of our rodeos. This was very frustrating because we knew that we were better than we were performing. We hadn’t practiced very much together because of our hectic schedules. It was extremely frustrating and we knew we had to do better in the spring if we even wanted to make nationals.

We went into the break in eighth place. That was the worst I had ever done in my rodeo career. During the winter we made a huge commitment to rodeo. Riley and I knew we were going to face a giant task in the spring. I went up to Riley’s numerous times to practice in his new indoor barn. We practiced in some really cold weather hoping it would pay off in the end. It wasn’t just all about practicing and preparing physically for the rodeos we had to prepare our minds as well. We were always so nervous and putting so much pressure on ourselves knowing we had to do well. I prepared by just relaxing and getting away from rodeo for a little bit. I hung out with friends and did a lot of fun things. I also listened to some inspirational speakers talk about rodeo and the mind games. After the winter I really felt as if I was ready to take on the world.

We came out of winter on fire, we didn’t miss a single steer in any rodeo. Also, we didn’t receive a placing lower than fifth. This really helped us towards our comeback. Riley was catching anything I turned him and that gave me a lot of confidence. We were really coming alive in the spring rodeos and we didn’t even know how close we were to the leaders. We were just going to every rodeo and doing what we love to do and that’s roping. Our moms on the other hand knew exactly how we were doing and even had a little inside joke. They said we were like Indians sneaking up on the enemy. We had started a comeback at the beginning of the spring, and now we were going into state finals in fourth place.

State finals is a rodeo where literally anything can happen, people go crazy it is the last rodeo of the season and people throw everything they have at it. For some people it is just another rodeo, but for others it is their make or break rodeo. For Riley and me, it was a make or break. The top six teams were all within twenty points of each other and that is two runs. So, most people could really capitalize on this. Riley and I continued our hot streak, we won the first two days and got second on the third day. We also ended up winning the average. We ended up with thirty-nine out of the forty points that were possible. We almost had a perfect finals, almost. Everyone went into the awards banquet curious. No one knew who had won the title. It was between us and another team. After about thirty minutes of figuring the lady announced the winners. Riley and I had gotten second place. We were extremely disappointed, but on the same note we were also very proud. This season had taught us a lot. We had to come from behind and battle adversity. It showed us that we needed to work hard to achieve what we wanted and to never give up no matter what. I was very disappointed that we didn’t win, but I am glad we went through a season like that it taught us so much. So, in the eyes of Ricky Bobby “If you’re not first your last.” We ended up being last, but that’s okay because we learned a lot and will be back the next year even hungrier for a state title.
Cars are speeding past us. The hot August sun is reflecting off the ink black asphalt. Boats are skimming the water under us. The narrow metal railing is the only thing between me and my deathbed. The cars are still. We are speeding past them. The traffic jam on the bridge won’t keep me and my drunken best friend from getting to another party. I barely hear the car horns and the screeching of cars scratching against each other over the pounding in my head. “Hey Lex get your head back in it car before you get it chopped off,” she slurred, obviously too drunk to drive.

“You mean my neck?” I laugh like a drunken madman at her fault, “I’m fine can I drive? You’re tired and I’m not drunk even,” I slurred, obviously drunk

“You so are drunk and I’m awake and you have no clue!” she screeched at me.

I dismissed it and just sat and watched us cruise across the bridge. More cars were hitting us but we had no cares in the world. We were intoxicated. We were on cloud nine. We were best friends. We were only seventeen.

Speeding past we got closer and closer to the railing.

“Hey Lex wanna see something cool?” she questioned in a chirpy voice.

“Sure, just be careful,” then I thought for a moment. “Actually do what you want to know why I am having so much fun right now?” I holler at her while having a fit of laughter.

“Okay Lex don’t say I didn’t warn ya!” she hollered back at me.

She floors the gas pedal and turns to me. Time slows to a stop. I see her normally blinding white teeth light brown stained with alcohol. I see her lips curling up into a smile and I see her wrinkles by her eyes and forehead from laughing so much. I can smell the reek of alcohol seeping out of her mouth. I see the happiness in her eyes. We are adventurous. We are society’s version of cool kids. When around our parents we are little angels, but with our friends we are true to ourselves. We drink and we smoke. We are young. We are reckless. We are free.

We have no cares in the world. Ellie and I throw our hands in the air singing along to the blaring radio. We don’t even notice a police man walking in the middle of the road trying to wave to us to stop. Suddenly when I look at the road he is centimeters away from us.

“Ellie!” I screech as I throw my arms over the center console and grab the sticky steering wheel and yank it to the right.
We are teetering on the edge of the bridge.

Time stands still as I look at her face and see the color drain and the horror in her eyes as she realizes the inevitable. I quickly grab her arm and pinch it.

“Is this really the goddamn time to pinch me!” she spits at me trying not to flail around.

I let my drunken thoughts get the best of me, “We are in a dream. When we start to fall we will wake up in your room, on your pink and green polka dot bed sheets,” I explain with vivid interest. “We can crawl back under the heated blanket and cuddle up. Me as the big spoon and you as the small,” I smile at her. Now that I think back, I think I was going insane.

“Wake up with me,” that’s all it took for her to floor the gas pedal and shoot us into the air.

We hit the water but I don’t wake up. The car jolts me and with the mixture of extreme ringing in my ears and my head hitting the car ceiling, I black out.

When I wake up, I feel vertigo in my ears and I feel like I weigh a ton. As if my arms are giant thousand pound tree logs and my legs are solid iron pipes. My torso is a giant wrecking ball, too heavy for anyone to even move. Opening my eyes was never this tedious of a task. I look down at the sheets and I don't see the pink and green polka dots. Instead they are white with a plastic feel to them. I look up to see my mother asleep in a chair and I realize I’m in a hospital room. I notice a continuous beeping coming from a machine next to me.

“Mom?” I whisper towards my mom.

She doesn’t even move. I sigh and press the “call nurse” button.

When the nurse comes in she looks frazzled.
“Hi hun, how are you feeling?” she asked with fake interest, “Probably not too well I’m guessing. When the police fished you out of the car you were hung over and had alcohol poisoning. What were you thinking driving drunk and driving off a bloody bridge! You almost died like the other girl you were with,” she told me with no emotion in her voice.

“How long was I asleep?” I croak, done with this nurse.

“A month, we were going to take you off life support tomorrow but you woke up surprisingly,” she says as if it were a normal comment. This nurse makes my blood boil.

“Okay, what’s your name and age hun?” I sigh before answering, “Alex Peter, seventeen or eighteen I don’t know the date.”

“It’s October, 7th, 2014,” she said as if it was written on her forehead.

“I’m eighteen; my birthday was two weeks ago,”

“Okay I will leave you to rest,” she drops all the news on me and just leaves as if she was fine with it all.

I turn and see my mother stirring in the cheap plastic hospital chair. What is she going to say to me? Her (seventeen) eighteen year old daughter getting totally wasted then her and her friend drive off of a bridge and only your daughter survives? I’m so dead.

“Alex?” my mother says in a morning voice. I can see by the purple under eye circles that she hasn't slept much.

“Yes mother?” she looks at me with pure astonishment painted on her face. I can tell she is amazed I woke up.

“What the actual hell were you thinking getting drunk? And driving while drunk! Were you actually insane?” she chuckles darkly, “And best yet, driving off the goddamn bridge! You were part of the reason your best friend Ellie died! You are a disgrace to the Peter family!” she spits pure venom at me.

“Mom, it’s not like that it’s just, a well, it’s hard to explain mom.”

“Where am I going to go? What am I going to do? I know I’m a legal adult now and I can get my own living space, but I have no money. Normally I would go to Ellie, but she’s gone now.

Gone.

Oh Ellie. I will never get to see her beautiful lips flash me a smile again. Or the way the late evening sun would reflect of her hair and make it look as if it was spun of gold. I would never get to hear her call me Lex instead of Alex. I won't get to call her Ellee any more. I won't get to hear her rant about people at school who are rude to her. I won't get to hear her complain about her internet boyfriend. She won't get to vent to me anymore. I won't have a best friend anymore; or a secret lover.

Normally I would just hitch a ride to her house and cry on her polka dot sheets. Her parents or brother probably threw away those sheets days after her death. What will her parents think about me now? Oh dear god help me I’m probably on their death list now. Her brother will probably come kill me here, at the hospital. He loved her so much. He had always emphasized to her how bad of an influence I was and how I was trouble. It’s all my fault. Sure I didn't suggest going and getting wasted but I did tell her to go hit up another party. I was the one who told her to wake up with me. I was the one who got her killed. What am I going to do? She (is) was my rock. My safe haven. My savior. She was there for me when I was cheated on. She was there for me when I wanted to jump off a bridge. That night she said something that sent shivers that curled around my spine and stopped my sobbing.

“Lex you can’t leave because without you there I can’t be me,” she replied shakily while staring into my eyes.

I don’t remember her holding my face in her hands but she was now. I also don’t recall why it was a good idea to share a passionate kiss with her. We were only fourteen. We were still testing our sexuality. We decided the kiss meant nothing and went on. But to me, her lips were like the galaxy, I wanted to explore deeper and deeper, but she left me hanging; cut me off. I regret not kissing her again. But dear god I did what I could. I gave her little hints that screamed “hey look at me” like little play shoves or touching her nonchalantly for just a second too long. I tried so damn hard.

But I stopped short when she got her first boyfriend. He was a few years older than her. What did I expect? She was a vulnerable beautiful girl. It didn't last long. She showed up at my door two weeks after they started “hanging out” and she was bawling. Of course I immediately let her in and make her some homemade hot chocolate. It had always comforted her when she was younger. Once she finally calmed down she told me
what he called her and what he did to her. I had promised from that day on no one would ever break her heart. I’m slightly happy knowing that I kept that promise until she died.

When we were fifteen our whole lives were about our bodies. We found out what clothes looked best with our body shapes, and what to wear and what not to wear; anything to get someone to steal an extra glance at us. We would know what to eat one day and what not to eat the next to lose those extra pounds. Those few extra pounds that in the mirror made us look like hideous monsters with flaps of yellow fat overflowing our bodies. We found out how to apply makeup to our contours to make our faces look skinny. We found out how to not indulge. We would always tell each other that the other needed to stop. But we never meant it, we inspired each other to continue to starve ourselves. We finally got out of our glorious bad habits when we were sixteen.

When we were sixteen everything was focused on our futures. We were perfecting our resumes, filling out fake job applications, and looking at colleges. I remember one day we were just done with it all; the work, the preparation, the fixation on the perfection of our future. We decided “Hey our parents have huge alcohol collections, let’s get wasted and forget about all this,” Of course it seemed like a wonderful idea at the time. We both just locked ourselves in my room and passed a bottle of unflavored vodka. We had finished a whole bottle in a mere 15 minutes. So I grabbed a new bottle and we started talking.

“So what do you even want to do later in life?” Ellie asked full of fake interest.

“Um I don’t know, just something that will pay well,” I tell not really wanting to go in depth.

“All I know is I’m going to be the brightest someday, you will see Elle, you will see,” I say, suddenly very sober.

We continue to pass the new bottle until she passes out and falls asleep in my lap. I move her matted blond hair to the side and look at her face. She’s so damn beautiful. No matter how deep I push the feelings down, they still jump into my throat and on my tongue anytime I see her. Sometime I will tell her how I feel. I look down in my lap to see her face contorted with pain. She without warning hops off my lap and runs into the bathroom and starts vomiting up all the vodka. I think of how bad that would burn and sting her throat while running to her. I hold back her long matted blonde hair and rub her back, while listening to the excruciating sounds of her expelling all the alcohol. After she drains her stomach of the rancid liquid she turns around and wipes her mouth on a tissue.

“I’m so sorry you had to see me like that,” she said, her voice hoarse from the retching.

“Yes of course, let’s go,” I pick her up and throw her on the bed.

“I’m good. Can I go to sleep?” she asks tiredly.

“Of course, let’s go,” I murmur a thank you before falling asleep. Once I’m sure she’s in a deep sleep I sit up and stare at her peaceful face.

“Ellie, I hate to say this, but I want you in the most unromantic way...,” I mutter before laying down and cuddling up to her.

I don’t know how long I can keep this up.

After turning seventeen we thought we were home free, assuming we could do whatever we want. We refused our parents curfew, vetoed going to sleep early on school nights, and didn’t even care about age limits for alcohol or cigarettes. We smoked and binged alcohol until we had bird legs and our arms were made of fragments of glass. Our tiny stomachs were small plastic bags that would shrink up when a hot meal fell into them. Our cheek bones protruded until we could open the endless bottles of alcohol with them. We had bought our fake id’s together, and got caught with them together. Once they were thrown away, when we tried to buy alcohol we would just slide them a twenty and hope they didn’t realize we were underage. It was worth it; at least it made her happy. We would hit up multiple parties every Friday/Saturday nights and drink until we forgot our names and our dignities. We had been driving home from a party last month, and then we heard about a store selling cheap alcohol to minors. So still drunk with a bad hangover ahead of us, we trekked to the store. And on the way there, on the bridge, is where my sweet Ellie had her life taken. By me, her (lover) best friend. It was all my fault. I was drunk and had a jagged memory of what’s right and wrong. It seems like I have no luck with anything. I’ve now lost my best friend, my money, my broken family, and somewhere to live. I’m clueless of how I’m going to stay alive. How will I chase away the darkness?
I’ve now been released from the machines that (failed to let me die) kept me alive. When the paramedics got me out of Ellie’s car and on the stretcher, my heart had stopped. Of course the paramedics worked their magic and now I’m alive again. Now my mom is signing me out and then we will go to the car, drive to our broken home in silence, I would get my stuff, then leave. It’s going to be my first time going out on my alone into the real world. Now that it’s late November, the air has a bite of cold in it. I’m hoping the wind littered with leaves will push me to a perfect life. Instead I stay there, in the driveway of my childhood home. I take an uneasy step onto the sidewalk and start my search for a life, a job, somewhere to live, and something to stop Ellie’s screaming in my head.
I don’t have many memories. At least not ones I can recall. Until about a few months ago memories were worthless to me. I forgot little details, speeding through life without care or complication. However, my circumstances changed, and Fortune turned her back on me. Life became a cold wind, whipping across my face and sending me scurrying back to the warm comfort that was the past. It sent me back to a simpler, kinder time filled not with fears but with hopes.

But alas, in the past I found nothing. Nothing but an endless tundra. And yet I carried on, with the belief that perhaps a memory or two would wander its way back to me. This is one of those memories. There is haze over this memory, and I cannot say for certain that it happened. But I feel it. So it gives me warmth.

It’s quite a peculiar feeling, being on both sides of a camera at the same time. To be within and without. A two-year old Ian sits in a clear plastic storage box, smiling foolishly at a camera snapping the photo that grounds my recollection. They say fools are the happiest people; I couldn’t agree more. There is warmth in that smile, and in the noonday light that streams in from the window and illuminates that little boy’s thin brown hair.

I sit in the clear box, filled with books, and make a seat for myself. It’s a large storage box, filled to the brim with books and a boy. I can feel the books shifting under my weight, in little twitches, attempting to find a snug place to fit. The little boy balances a book in his fingers, Chicka Chicka Boom Boom. My mother once read it to me. That was before I found myself slipping out of her loving embrace at age nine months, taking the book with me to wander off and turn the pages alone.

They are what you make of them, books. They are open to interpretation and while the words belong to the author, the message belongs to the reader. Within and without.

I found warmth in those books.

But at the same time I find myself caught in the viewing lens of the camera, crushed between two pieces of glass in the cold confinement of a monochromatic cell.

Viewing something through a lens is best described as sad. The sad longing of wishing to be somewhere, somewhere else, yet unable to exist in that space. No matter how hard one tries to reach for that place, break through and escape the prison of the viewing lens, it is impossible. It is impossible to shatter the glass into a million little pieces and become that person, in that place, and achieve that warmth. Within and without.

And as I continue to endure the struggles of the present day, the struggles of the cold, I reach for memories like this. I reach for their warmth.

Within and without.
I am that girl, the one who sits in the back of the classroom, foot tapping, pencil twirling, mind awhirl with every single thing except what she's being taught. A tune twists through my mind, echoing melodies that push my pulse quicker and quicker, like the start before a race when your heart is light, feet ready to drift away and forget everything they left behind them, if only for a few miles. School is like this for me, and as the clock ticks like a bomb, my toes lift readily from the carpet. The heat of the room twists my brain into knots, until finally, trills of an electronic school bell ring though the building. It bounces off brick walls, peels the paint, withers the desks, rattles the lockers, shrills in my ears, and I run from it. Through the hallways of watchful eyes and judgmental minds I race, my vision a tunnel that focuses on the door at the end of the corridor. My arms stretch out, anticipating the cool metal handle against my skin, the rush of the cold air. But I don’t make it to the metal doors that serve as barricades. I skid to a halt, nose pressed against the frozen glass of the doors, a hand on my shoulder. Shivers run down my spine and nervousness grows like a poisonous flower inside of me.

I try to stay out of sight and out of everyone’s mind. It’s the safe option, the easy way of surviving school. To drift through crowds and float over the sea like a lilting puff of smoke. To be a virtual presence, a name on a list of roll call, a miscellaneous paper, a sudden remark from the back of the classroom. The hand is still positioned on my shoulder as I rotate on my ankles, facing the person. The intimidating face of yet another important school supervisor glares at me like I am crap under his shoe, and he has just only seen me there. Anger pumps through me as I receive my due punishment for running down the halls at such a pace. I bite back a growl, my teeth clenching, spots shimmering in my brain as I consider walking away right now, away from this instructor's façade of control that he wears like a designer coat. But I am the girl who does nothing when she wants to change everything, so I let him escort me to the detention classroom. Every footstep on the pale tile is like a slap to my red cheeks.

I am that boy, the one always surrounded by his friends, so that you come to wonder whether I am even real. You hear my name, shouted, announced, called, and whispered. You know my name like I am your own brother, but you don't really know me at all. I reach the point where I no longer have friends, I have followers. They swarm around my desk before the bell, asking where I’m going after school, what I’m doing tonight. I put my head on my desk, stars dancing through my thoughts, heavy breaths of inquiries and questioning hands rest on my shoulders, joining the other burdens I hold there. The mob around me grows with concerning curiosity. My elbows press densely against the table, rickety and unstill. Claustrophobia overcomes me, and I leap out of the desk, my knees banging the wooden table and feet scraping the floor as I wobble to the ground. With my balance regaining, I hurl myself out the door, my sweaty hands leaving a sticky mark on the plastic handle.

Before I can get very far from the heated classroom, a large hand halts me and directs my feet back to the lesson. The teacher grips my shoulder firmly as I sit back down in my seat, red-faced with embarrassment. My friends hoot and holler at me from across the room, clapping me on the back as I sit back down. I hear a voice say, “Hey, if you’re gonna try and play hooky, you better bring the rest of us along,” and a few laughs join in. I smile lightly, ignoring the jabs at my outburst. I can't focus on keeping up my cool façade anymore, as I wait for the fatal pink slip that now drifts from the teacher’s hands and onto my desk. It weighs less than a feather, but it adds the heaviness of a dumbbell to my shoulders. It pushes me further into the plastic chair that holds me hostage and will again after school today. How lucky is the chair, to be graced with my presence for not only the regular school day, but yet another extra hour! I groan in displeasure, but focus back to the lesson, my friends already having moved on from my escape from class minutes ago.

I am that teacher, the one the kids enjoy ignoring. It is all a game to them, and no matter how hard I try to catch their attention for only a minute, I seem to fail. I find myself sitting behind my desk, the boundary between child and teacher, staring into vacant expressions and dull faces, realizing that life is not a pass or fail quiz. You cannot win attention. As a child, your worst enemy is a teacher, and every teacher knows it. But as an educator, it is your job to break through that stereotype, to connect with your students so they are willing to learn. As I look at the kids, sitting on desks, throwing paper, talking so loudly that their words begin to stir up...
electricity in the room, I know that I will never be accepted. I will never reach their minds and plant a seed and watch it grow. I am still standing on the bare dirt, trying to dig into the earth with no shovel. My eyes follow the second hand around the clock on the white walls, anticipation brimming on my forehead like sweat. The bell rings again, as it has many times and will even more. I watch my class leave, finding a trace of jealousy in my thoughts. How lucky they are to be free of school.

They are set loose at 3:05 every day. I am stuck within the concrete walls that seem to press inwards at the tick of every hour, which brings another group of ungrateful kids who would rather be anywhere but with me. I am stuck in the squeaking office chair, mess after mess of papers that my classes throw together at the last moment. I am stuck inside these metal doors with nowhere to go except to watch over the kids who misbehaved one too many times, the ones with oh so many excuses to why they are enjoying detention. The guilt is already pressing against my chest, and I gulp a breath as the first child meets me in detention. She is small and thin, ripped jeans in a style that I remember from my own childhood, dirty shoes that leave pale scuff marks against the dirty floor. Her hair layers over her eyes and her demeanor is so incredibly hunched and defeated that it could bring a large man to tears. She hands me her pink slip, and I shiver at her chill touch. Her aura sends frozen chill throughout the room, icing everything she touches. The girl immediately goes to sit in the very back of the room with the empty chairs no one has occupied all year.

The next student enters the room, and I recognize him from many football games. The victor soaked in sweat with paint running down his cheeks, sticky hair peeking out from his helmet; the one always found in the middle of the crowd, a grinning beacon of light. His walk is slow and steady, impossibly deliberate, as if every single step has a purpose, and one misstep a waste of time. He hands me his slip with a firm press into my palm as he grins at me, clearly hoping to edge off a few minutes of his time he is set to serve. I smile back and return to my work.

The boy sitting next to me is a face I know so well.
The girl sitting next to me is a stranger.
The boy is practically famous around school, and I know this without even having to join in any conversations.
The girl looks at me for longer than I find comfortable. She’s dressed like a hobo, and I can draw up a few memories of my friends and me laughing at her sort.
The boy looks away with a small cough, clearly unsettled by my observant stare. I decide to move away from him, so he isn’t put off. I pick up my books, looking down at my thin fingers, my hair in the corner of my eyesight as I move to a further desk.

I frown at her, now sitting a few desks away from me. Why did she move? I am not used to people having an aversion towards me; instead, I find that everyone seems to gravitate towards me. Unsettled by her actions, I decide to confront her. She is playing with a chipped pencil, her feet tracing patterns on the ground.

He is in front of me now. I debate whether or not I should look up at him. The flower inside of my stomach begins to grow, thriving on my nervousness. It twirls along the pit of my chest and blooms dark, menacing petals. As I stare offhandedly at my pencil, the lead halfway broken, I decide to finally kill the flower. To take the thorns by my hand and crush them, to snip the root of the flower from my inside is only a possibility I have dreamed about. As I raise my head to the boy’s looming face, I feel the plant pop like a shiny balloon, the remains drifting into smoke. I cough it away.

“Why did you move?” I ask. I shape my voice into a kind, simple question. I know how to manipulate the way people feel about me, and I use this talent on her. She pushes her stringy bangs away from her eyes, so you can see their original color, and not the muted brown that meets no gaze behind her hair. “I’m sorry. You looked bothered by me,” she says, tilting her head to the side, reminding me of a small, fragile puppy. I want to comfort her sorrows, yet I am not even aware of her tragedy.

His expression throws me for a loop as he seems to look into my heart, seeing parts of me I hide away for good reasons he doesn’t deserve to know. “It was just...you were...” he stutters, and I purposely bear down on his eyes, trying to match his look of utter confidence. I attempt to scare him off with my glare, but I know there is no hope for that strategy anymore. He swallows, and I expect him to finish his sentence, but instead, he walks away.

I return to my seat and check the time. 34 minutes left. I shuffle through my homework, contemplating whether I should actually complete it today. I come to the regular decision I make every day: better not. 32 minutes. The only option left
is to talk to the girl, but I am nervous. She reminds me of myself, of how I would be without my friends, how alone I would be without the support I have. It scares me. No—it terrifies me.

I drum my pencil on my desk, beating on my drawings of fantasy lands and pretty cartoon princesses, glad the boy is gone. I keep telling myself this, that I am glad. He’s gone. I don’t have to pretend to enjoy making pointless small talk with him. I don’t have to be conscious of his stare and his judgmental gaze examining me. But I know that I’m only pretending to think these things. After countless minutes and even more seconds pass, I dare to check the time. Fifteen minutes left of my jail sentence.

I sneak a look at the girl, guarding her drawings like someone is about to sneak up and rip them from her vice-like grasp. I decide not to make that attempt, being kind enough to realize that it would be a bad time to make a joke. When she notices me staring, I receive a grimace and the usual sideways look of resentment.

She is still looking at me, with her menacing eyes that make me shiver. I reach over the desk between us and take the first drawing off the stack of papers. She lets me, and I can feel her examine my reaction to the picture. It’s a pencil sketch of a utopia, something you would see in manga or anime novels. It’s amazing, but it needs more, so I tell her, “You should give it some color. Yellows to brighten the sun, greens to fill out the rolling hills, and reds to shine on the roses scattered throughout the scene.”

I slump into my chair at his words. Of course I wish I had colors, marvelous colors to bring my pictures to life! But surely he can see that someone like me can’t afford to waste her money on petty things like the rainbow. After a long pause, I realize he wants a response, so I quietly tell him, “I don’t have any colors.”

Suddenly, I want to give her the world. I want to buy her new clothes and a new book bag and prepare her a feast for millions! I want to take all my belongings and give them to her, because I feel unworthy of having these luxuries when this girl cannot afford a set of colors. But one boy cannot give a girl the world. I reach inside my book bag and pull out a basic set of colored pencils, which is the best I can give to help her. Making sure the flap is folded and all sixteen colors are intact, I hand the girl the utensils. It’s a gift, something to make her smile. I’m not sure if it’s my heart or hers that I see bloom when she opens the box.

I run my fingers across the tips of the pencils, my hand returning with shards of the rainbow patterned on me. For once, I let myself grin for no reason. My cheeks swell and my eyes begin to hurt. I love it.

She looks back up at me with a brilliant smile, grinning through the question forming on the tip of her tongue, and I begin to answer it without a prompt. I want to tell her why she should brighten her picture, why I’d like her to smile more. I can see how one glimmer of attention from another human being lights up her face.

He starts to speak, and I’m on the edge of my seat, expecting words of wisdom that will change my life. However, a different voice emerges as he opens his mouth, a loud obnoxious voice. Not just one, but many. He is pulled free of his chair by husky boys in letterman jackets and saggy pants and large hands that clap the boy on his back as they parade him out of detention. He looks back at me, a look of concern on his face, but I hold the pencils and avert my gaze from his sadistic mob of friends, returning to my picture.

Yellows to brighten the sun, greens to fill out the rolling hills, and reds to shine on the roses scattered throughout the scene. I take a pencil to the page, watching the light colors grow darker with each press of my hand. They seem to color themselves, as I focus on simply putting the pencils on the right part of the paper.

Yet another hand on my shoulder interrupts my task, and I look up at the teacher, realizing I still have the plastered grin on my cheeks like a band aid for my sadness. “You can go home now, kid,” she tells me, her eyes flickering from mine to the picture, which I discreetly cover with my sweater-clad arm. I nod at her, and taking one last fleeting look at the art, she returns to her desk.

I watch the girl color and sit on the edge of my oversized office chair, contemplating whether I should leave and force her out or not. But watching her with the boy who cared enough to start conversation, I realize that she is happy. Her shoulders are thrown back, and she is a burst of sunshine that would blind you if you stare, but I can see her crystal clear. No more layers of overbearing sadness hunch her back. No more shadows of secrets she tucks deep inside her shade her eyes. It amazes me what one simple act of kindness can do to a person. One box of colored pencils has completely transformed this girl into a different person, almost unrecognizable because of her luminous smile. It is at this moment, looking at the beautiful things two innocent children can do, when I realize why I became a teacher: because children are our future and the only ones who are simple enough to be able to make a change in our world.

I do not leave for another hour. The teacher stays and so do I. The other thing that stays, the other being in the room, is my smile.
The morning started like it always does. Wake up at seven, even though it’s summer. I make easy oatmeal. My dad left at half past 7 and left my energetic puppy in the living room; on the way out, he grabbed his lunch I made him while he brushed his teeth, kissed my scalp said thank you and left. My mom won’t wake up until about eight. Even if I stick the mutt in her room she won’t get up, she would just fall back asleep and cuddle the dog. My sister would just get mad at me and start yelling at me to leave her alone if I even attempted to enter her dungeon she calls a room. She’ll have to get up at some point since she made plans with her cheating-ashat-dick of a boyfriend at noon. I take my Ipad into my room and turn on YouTube. I eat oatmeal as I learn Connor Franta is gay.

“You, Ruby, were supposed to wake me up at eight,” my mom complains. “You do have an alarm clock ya know?” I joke back to avoid the complaint.

She changes the topic for me, “can you please get off of YouTube and take Star out?”

“Yeah one sec,” I agree because if I don’t she will pull the she’s-your-dog card. I pause Tyler Oakley’s Q-and-slay and rush out the door. I scramble for her chain and slip it over her head. I tug on the chain check to make sure it is still connected to the stake in the ground and head back inside.

I return to Tyler and resume the video. By the time I’m updated on everyone’s new videos, my family had come into my room to say that they’re leaving. I decide to make sure Star’s okay and go outside to check on her. She seems like she’s tired so I pour her some water and take the chain off as she tries to get inside. I grab a water bottle and a cold piece of pizza and an apple and go downstairs and watch Arrow on Netflix. I look towards the flat screen and see the disappointing stack of pencils, paper, and a reading book and remember that tomorrow is the first day of 8th grade.

While I watch the bad guy get dragged off by the superhero, I glance towards the school supplies that watches me. No matter how hard I try to get my mind away from school, the picture of hell won’t leave my head. The mention of school makes me want to vomit, not because it’s unsanitary, although it is, but because I hate school. I feel like the bad guy getting dragged around by the super hero.

While I know school is supposed to help me with life skills, I don’t know why they have to make it feel like I’m slowly becoming smaller and the room around me is shrinking faster than the rate of me shrinking. My heart starts to beat faster; my hands get sweaty; my arms get itchy; my hands start shaking; my body won’t do what I tell it to; my breath is shaky. I try to get up but feel dizzy as soon as I stand straight and fall back into the couch. I close my eyes and take deep breaths. Tears start streaming down my face. Clutching my eyes doesn’t help the river on my cheek. I get up again and walk outside.

I’m greeted by a gust of cooling wind and the boiling heat. My dog realizes something is wrong and jumps through the open door and looks at me through his puppy dog eyes. I concentrate on her and calm myself back down. Last time this happened my mom told me to call her if it happened again so I walk slowly, being careful not to get dizzy again, into the living room, grab my phone, still shaking, dial my mom’s work number.

“Tanner’s Bar and Grill, this is Tammy how-”

“Mom!” I say starting to bawl.

“Honey, what’s wrong?!” she asks very concerned.

“My-sniffle-anxiety-sniffle-attack.”

“Is it happening again?”

“Yes,” I say through muffled sobs.

“Just take deep breathes,” she says doing it herself. I squeeze my eyes shut and try to take steady breaths. She doesn’t understand, nobody does. Only people with anxiety know that it isn’t something that can be fixed by just deep breathes. Sure it’s not a technical disease, but most people take medication for it, just like a disease.

“Go for a walk with Star; go for a bike ride,” she says trying to help get my mind off of it.

“Mom, it’s school! I don’t want to go!” “It’s your first day you have to.”

“Please! Please! Please!” I beg.
“Ride your mo-ped up here and we can talk in person.”
“Okay. Yeah I’ll do that.”

My house is in front of a trail, a creek, a small playground, and a basketball court. I start to cry again, unable to contain myself. My neighbors can probably hear me, but I don’t care. I try to concentrate on Star again, she’s in my lap now. After a while, I get back to normal. I push Star off of me and get up. I walk to the bathroom wash away the tears and any sign of my attack.

I guess wearing a onesie isn't socially acceptable so I throw on a black-out shirt and pull on some ripped jeans. I grab my helmet off the table, and put on aviator sun glasses. I realize Jewel took my tennis shoes so I take her combat boots and open the garage. I snuck my mo-ped in the garage beside my mom’s car last night so I don’t have to worry about hitting her car since she’s at work. I know people make fun of me for riding it, but I don’t care. I know it sounds stupid but I feel free when I’m on it. Never having to worry about getting a ride, and also I love Taco Bell so I can get that whenever I want. I haven’t yet though I just got it a couple weeks ago so my dad doesn’t want me using it a lot yet, but he won't know. I turn my key in the ignition and push start it chugs to life and I’m off. My neighborhood is at the bottom of a hill. The road has a 45 miles per hour speed limit. My mo-ped only goes 40 so I wait for everyone to get past me so they don’t have to wait for me. I had almost forgotten about school when I see a monstrous puke-yellow school bus running it’s route getting ready for the year of torture. I don't see anyone else so when he turns into the neighborhood across from me I figuratively put the pedal to the metal, because the speed is controlled by the right handle. There’s a stop at the top of the next hill so I slowly come to a halt a few feet, plus a few more feet just in case I have some space between me and white SUV in front of me.

My mom is less than a mile away and there’s no traffic at this time of the day so getting there doesn’t take time. Once I park I enter the building to see my mom walking between the tables serving burgers to a young family. I pull her over and this time I can keep myself together. She tells me that I can ride to Wendy’s and get whatever I want. I just nod. She hands me a twenty.

I get outside, and once again, I feel the blistering heat. I remember I have my Ipod and headphones in my pocket, so I grab them and start playing Bloodstream by Ed Sheeran. I don’t go to Wendy’s though. I’m not hungry. So I just ride. I see a few cops they look at me but that’s all. One cop is about twenty feet in front of me in the lane to the right to me. He turns his left blinker on, indicating he’s coming into my lane. My heart jumps as I think I might get pulled over. He just turns left at the grocery store. I turn into a convenience store and turn back the way I came. Before I get back onto the road I turn on Thinking Out Loud in the same album as Bloodstream. Riding helps me forget about school, and think about driving. Stop. Check mirrors. Right blinker. Watch for cars. Turn. More gas. Check mirrors. Go through a small neighborhood. Over and over again.

I feel my skin getting hot so I find a parking spot and park and go into the grocery store. I buy some sunscreen with the money my mom gave me. I get onto mop-ed to sit down and realize I’m burning and I’ll have a tan. Then I see the sleeves and realize that I will have a farmers tan, which doesn’t look good with tank tops.

After riding for a more hours, I feel lucky my mo-ped gets over one hundred miles a gallon. It starts to get dark and I don’t feel like getting yelled at by my parents for driving all day so I rush home. I silently thank god when I see everyone’s still out. I put my mo-ped as close to the wall as possible and call it good. I take my helmet off and put it back next to my dad’s motorcycle, I make sure not to create any fingerprints in the black metal, he hates them.

I enter the house to find my dog laying by the door. Feeding my dog can sometimes be dangerous, like now, when she tries to trample you to get her food. So I leave room for her so she won’t tackle me. I get a cup out of the cabinet and fill it with water and pour it into her dish.

My hair is too tangled since I’ve been in the wind all day. I have to spray detangler that I haven’t used since about third grade. My scalp is still sore though, and my brush is filled with long dirty blond hair. Hair is also all over the sink and the floor, I’m surprised I’m not bald yet. I lay down on my bed not knowing what to do next.

I wake up the next morning with tears stinging my cheeks, I must’ve been crying in my sleep again. My eyes feel dry and irritated. Washing my face with a steaming towel seems to help so I press the towel against my burning face a while longer and let the tears fall where they may.
I open my eyes. Oh god, I think, what’s happened? Something is wrong. The blood rushes to my head; I am hanging upside down, and something is restraining me at my hips, and the something is digging into my skin. A velvety substance drips down from my lips into my nose and eyes; my tongue is rubbery against the roof of my mouth; an icy breeze disrupts my matted hair. I am suddenly blinded by a white spotlight that rolls through my car. That is where I am, I remember. But something is still wrong. My car it upside down and the windows are gone, so there is nothing between me and the icy flurries. My hands are tingling. I work them in and out of fists and lift my wrist to my face. I wipe the blood from my mouth, and I am surprised to feel a sharp protrusion rake across my face. I look at my hand, and in the dim light that my eyes have grown accustomed to, I see that a jagged bone extends from my wrist. I should feel the pain, shouldn’t I? I think to myself. But all I felt was numbness and weird tingling, and I grew concerned. Am I in shock? How many bones could be broken at this moment? When would I start feeling the pain? My heartbeat picked up and drummed in my head. I wheezed, spewing blood with each exhale and choking on it with each inhale. I craned my neck, wondering where the people were, or if people even knew I was here, wherever I was. I could not tell if I was on the asphalt or in a ditch or in a dream, but I did not want to be there anymore. Burning tears pooled in my eyes and fell from the corners and trailed tauntingly over my forehead into my hair. My head was heavy and pounding and my wrist was starting to throb and I was starting to panic and I needed so badly to get out of there, wherever there was, even if my only escape was out of the world completely, then so be it, I thought because I did not want to see what would happen next. I was not ready for the searing pain to hit me all at once. I was not ready for the surviving part, and I did not care that if I didn’t make it to that part I wouldn’t make it to the survivor part. I did not wake up that day ready to fight for my life. I did not wake up.
Laurel Foderberg  
Poetry: Detached  
Blue Valley Northwest High School  
Theodore Fabiano  

I am detached from my body like an unplugged power cord  
Which is ironic because all I want them to do is unplug that god damned cord  
I stare at the inside of my eyelids  
Which I guess is better than the white, tiled, repetitive, speckled, unevenly painted ceiling  
I can hear, though I find the beeping and whooshing and shuffling and pen clicking and crying and rustling  
quite distracting  
Which is pretty funny because it’s not like all those stupid white noises are distracting me from watching mold  
form on the ceiling or anything exciting  
I don’t feel much but I know that my ribs are probably sore and my tongue is probably swollen and my arm is  
probably throbbing and my scabs are probably itchy and my hair is probably tickling my nose and my  
mother’s tears are dripping on my icy, pale face like Chinese water torture  
So maybe it’s good that I don’t feel anything.  
I am so close to death I can taste the airborne ashes in the crematorium  
I can feel the slippery granite insides of my unmarked urn.  
I am overwhelmed by the questions breaking against my conscious like relentless ocean waves on a worn  
down cliff  
Why did you have to get in the car?  
Why did the last words you spoke to me have to be so unpleasant?  
Why did you have to be so stubborn?  
Wait, I’m the stubborn one?  
I’m the one lying here with my speechless, blue, cracked lips that can’t even draw in a breath on their own  
I’m the one lying here with a tube to keep me numb, a tube to keep my lungs full of air, and a tube coming  
from you know where to drain into a little bag hanging over the side of the bed  
I’m the one who they found sticking through a windshield like a splinter  
I’m the one who will never see daylight again  
I’m the one who is dying  
And you are sitting right next to this cold, blue, helpless, tubified, detached body that you know won’t survive  
And you still believe I will wake up.  
It’s been five months.  
Please, pull the god damned cord.
Somebody out there, Jeff?
What’s he doing?
Just...walking. Doesn’t look like he’s armed. Should we...?
Yeah, I’ll go get him. Bet he’s lonely.
Hey, you! You with the blue scarf! Over here! C’mon, we don’t bite. Jeff saw you from the window and we thought you looked like you could use little help. Geez, you sure are rough-looking, aren’t you? Why don’t you come in out of the cold? It’ll be dark soon—not that the sun comes out much anymore anyway, but you don’t know what might be slinking around out there. There’s a few of us living in the fire station over there; you can spend the night with us. Emily can patch up your face and I’ll get you some water. It’s as clean as you’ll find. Afraid we don’t have much to eat, though. Follow me. I’m Millie, by the way.

Thanks, I’m–
Here we are! Emily, Jeff, meet our new friend. He’s a little scruffy, but it’s what’s on the inside that counts.
He sure doesn’t have much meat on his bones. Poor thing.
God, he’s ugly. Where’d you find him, the bottom of a crater?
Be polite, you two. This boy’s our guest. Let’s show him we’re more civilized than those three-eyed knuckle-draggers down the road. I’m sure he’s been walking for a long while, and he looks half froze to death. Have a seat, honey. I know this place is a little run-down, but we’ve found it’s a pretty good place to hole up in. Big enough to entertain guests, and keeps the wind off our backs, at least. You stay right here and I’ll be back with that glass of water before you can say “ionizing radiation”.

Hurry up Millie, he looks parched.
He does, and I’m getting pretty hung-
Shut up, Jeff. What’d you say your name was, kid?
Uh, I’m–
Here you are, sweetheart! Fresh water. There’s a nice little spring nearby. Shouldn’t make you too sick.
Thanks.
How long has it been since we’ve had a guest, Emily?
Ages. The last one ran out, oh... about a month ago, and he was fat. Not scrawny like this one. Still, we should be grateful to have any company at all.

Yes, it’s a wonder we found him. Nobody ever comes out this way anymore.
Uh, I’m starting to feel...wait, what?
Getting sleepy? Close your eyes, honey. That was a good idea, Emily. Nobody can refuse a glass of water out here.

What did you put...? Hey! Stop touching me!
Now, throwing a fit like that’ll only make it wor-
Grab him!
WHAM.
Ow! Little bastard broke my nose!
Jeff, you ass, don’t let him get away!
CRASH.
Hey!
THUNK.
Oh, it’s okay, he’s down. Emily, you get his arms and help me get him on the table.
Mmph... get off me...
Shut up, kid. Millie, this time I want first dibs. I’m the one who does all the dirty work.
I’m the one who risks my neck to go out there and talk them into it. He wouldn’t be here at all without me.
Uhhhhh... you're not going to...

Jesus, he's still awake? Millie, did you put in the right dosage, like I said?
Yeah. He's just a stubborn one.
Please...

Look, it's nothing personal. We've got to take what we can get out here. It's a dog-eat-dog world, you know? Survival of the fittest. Besides, the state you're in, you wouldn't last much longer anyway. This way you're contributing to the greater good, at least.

Skinny as he is, he's not contributing that much. But it's something, I guess.
Go ffffffffff...
THUNK.

He's out. Jeff, quit sulking and bring me my tools. Millie, go grab the tarp. We don't want to waste anything.

You know, I never thought this would get easier, but after doing it a few times it's really not so bad. Yeah, and the taste is much better than I expected. Better than pork, I think.

God, I miss bacon. Don't remind me. Wait... you think we could get something like bacon out of this?

Eh, I'd say we missed our chance for that with the fat guy.

For God's sake, get your thumbs out of your asses and stop standing around. Get a fire going. We've got a lot of work to do tonight.

Right.
Right.
Alright kid, let's do this. Once again, nothing personal. You've gotta learn to be less trusting.
SLASH.
THUNK.
DRIP.
DRIP.

Oh, can I have the eyes this time?
DRIP.
There was a girl who felt as though the dark of night would overcome her happiness, her light spirit. She knew the world was a dark place, although the night brought her the fear of the dark. The uncertainty of what was right in front of you scared her. She felt as though it would take her over, swallow her whole. The young girl would find this fear, this horror, coming at her from every angle. Every night she felt as though it was the end of the world, at least the end of her world. The dark corners of her room began to appear to move, approaching her closer and closer every night. The mindset that only she could see them, that only they existed in her presence couldn’t be true, could it?

Every night she would hide under the covers of her blanket to find safety, a certain something was there to get her. But she had already used every excuse to leave. “What happened in my room? Did anything happen in my room?” she’d think to herself. Whenever she would tell her mother about this she would be shut down and be asked what she wanted.

Her mom was right. Nothing was coming to get her, she’d reassure herself. The dark was what happened when the other side of the world felt the warmth and bright light of the sun. “Maybe I’m just crazy.”

The young girl felt the night approaching and she decided to go to bed while the sun was still slowly setting. She got into her pajamas, grabbed her comfy blanket, and hopped into bed. She was smiling, as she looked around her room, inspecting each corner. But then, a crash. The little girl bolted right up. She got out of bed. The sun was slowly setting, and then it became visible.

From the corner of her room a dark, looming figure was approaching her. It was a dark blur that didn’t look like anything familiar from the real world, but she had seen it in her nightmares or what she believed was her reality. Then another crash emitted from the other corner. Another figure appeared. They were hard to distinguish as the sun kept setting. Her heart constantly continued to beat inside of her chest. This was real and there was no form of escape. She was stuck. The sun was still fading from view. It slowly had grown darker and darker. She pulled herself under the blankets shivering within the dark. She felt safer in the warmth of the blanket than in the open room. The young girl believed her mind was playing tricks on her. Then, a hand tried to grab the young girl. This had never happened before. The young child ran throughout the house as all the corners seemed to be moving with figures emerging from the dark. More and more figures appeared, more and more prepared to attack.

Scared, she ran in her parents’ room only to be greeted with a cliff that fell to a deep, dark abyss. Her memories of her family flashed in her mind as she ran in utter disbelief. She decided she had to go back in or they would get her, she had to fight. Running, she leapt throughout the house dodging every corner that appeared to attack her. The young girl had to find a weapon to protect herself. She made her way to the kitchen frantically searching for something to protect her. With no time to make a decision, she grabbed a big steak knife that her mother had cherished.

With the terror of the dark swallowing her thoughts, no glimpse of light was existent. Her feet made their way to the front yard. Luckily, there was no cliff awaiting her this time. The black sky was growing closer as figures that looked like a blur were coming to get her. She swung the knife back and forth in hope of protecting herself. The sun finally set to where nothing could be seen. She couldn’t take it anymore, the horror of this, the unknown whereabouts of her parents. The fear that something was coming to get her was overbearing.

The darkness of the house left no light except the whites of her eyes. Silence. She couldn’t function over the sound of her heart beating in her chest. Feeling her way along the walls, she tried to find a place of sanctuary. She found the bookshelf along the wall. She knew what to do. The young girl put the knife on the middle shelf. As her feet reached the carpet of what used to be her parents’ room she prepared for takeoff.

She jumped and fell until she sat upright. She murmured to herself, “It was only a dream.” She stretched out, yawned, and hopped out of bed. But when the young girl left her room something was glimmering in the corner of her eye. She turned her head. It was the same knife she had in her dreams, on the bookshelf.
Lillian Gardner

Poetry: My Shakespeare, Leave Me, Our Season, The Phenomenal Poet, We Celebrate You!

Pattonville Senior High School
Janet Baldwin, Teacher

My Shakespeare
The howling wind strangled me as I walked through the cold piercing water.
As my body became raw from the bitter cold climate.
While the rain embraced the vindictive wind with the same aspiration to cease my desire to be with my Love.
Internally, I knew my fate was death as I gasp for breath for my hopeful spirits warmed my soulless body.
Caring the token of our secret essence on a chain holds a cross.
Bearing her religion on my chest.
Mind racing across the darkened sky.
The clear nightly air turned into a barren abyss.
The shadowy air plunged into me and stole the breath from my chest blinding my vision.
Night strike quickly for making haste was its ambition.
Vulnerable and forsaken, barely alive for living half a life until I'm perceived by my other half.
A vague figure advanced toward me.
Her hair rippled around them in the wind.
Soft eyes gander at me as if they could unravel my soul.
Kneeling beside me, whispers immerse into my ear.
Suddenly the chant became clear.
For she said gently “sleep now for you shall remain in my heart, forever and always.
This love that was intended will never be abandoned.
Breathe in this admirable air for this is our end and it’s fairly near.
Together inhale our last breath.
As we part these lives, surely missed.
While taking in our final kiss.”

Leave Me
Must the pure always be the first to die?
When I’m the one who did the crime and lived a lie.
I feel the burn as time passes by.
My love looks me straight in the eyes.
Asking me to do the impossible.
Knowing it would rip my soul.
Ha! I laughed hysterically again and again at the absurd, yet, simple request.
My reply to her was asking what soul do I possess?
I thought it over and over again, concluding the soul I so called had, never existed!
My love shed tears of fire, which burned my hand as I caressed her face.
I must say I was unimpressed, it’s a ridiculous thing to think at the time.
But I found myself lost for words, admiring how beautiful she looks even as she cries.
Her touch so calming I sighed a sigh of pure bliss.
As her hand heats my chest, placed right over my heart.
But suddenly I gasp- as I hear something crack.
I look about the room but no glass has fallen.
Then I realized the ice around my heart has finally shattered.
At that moment I knew nothing but her love really mattered.
No words could be spoken to fill that glorious silence.
Thinking back then I would’ve held on to her little more longer.
If only I knew on this very cold and sad December.
My love would leave me forever.
Our Season
There are many seasons to describe us, but out of all of them, our season is fall.
Fall decides when the leaves fall from the trees.
   Just like the way I fell in love with you.
Standing in our season I am a friend among the grounded leaves.
   Still unsure if they resemble the tears I'll save till spring.
   Just so they could mingle with the rain unseen.
   You swooped in and stole my heart just like the wind.
I can hear it whistle to the trees, as the branches dance in return.
I can still see the colors turn a vibrant shade of red, orange, and yellow.
   I can feel our spirits entwine as we stand together.
The overpowering feeling of unconditional love is so inspiring.
   Which works wonders on my soul.
The thought of your smile would give me butterflies, feeling blessed to call you mine.
   Hoping that this love will last, wishing we had more time.
Meeting you was such a glorious day.
Magically, making my sorrow and pain fade away.
   I find my emotions are very hard to convey.
Saying you're my world is a bit cliché.
There is no stronger connection than looking in your eyes the very thing that took my breath away.
Although there are bare trees in our field, we will still stand tall.
   Even when the leaves wither, we will be one.
Lighting may strike but nothing will keep us apart, as long as we remember our season.

The Phenomenal Poet
Resourceful, Imaginative, Thoughtful, and Ambitious
   One woman, the first of many things.
Praised like a goddess and respected like a queen.
Transforming the amazing stories with the tip of her pen.
If I would salute an artist she’ll be at the top of my list.
Constructing the world’s story with a distinctive style.
   Blessed with a gift when she was a child.
Inspiring to the youth and involved with the community.
   Works that encourage acceptance and unity.
Numerous perspectives composed so beautifully.
   Talented beyond measure, her poems a true treasure.
   Unique lyrics of dancing and songs.
   Various skills all blended to one.
   A hero, a teacher, a well-rounded leader.
   Accomplished is not enough to define.
Her brilliant successes achieved over time.
   Urging the world to contribute their gifts.
Because everyone's story should be expressed.
   Distinctive, Optimistic, Vivid, and Exceptional.
   Rita Dove the Phenomenal Poet.

We Celebrate You!
Black History Month has finally come.
   Let’s celebrate the past.
   Great dreams that were achieved.
   By the people who hoped and believed.
   Brilliant talents trust upon us.
The signing, the dancing, the poems, the speech.
With other gifts granted each.
We Celebrate You!
We remember the past.
And welcome the future today.
An acknowledgement of the achievements and success made.
Just like the day you were born.
A birth of dreams, hopes, and more.
As intriguing and exciting this all may seem.
You might ask what does Black History Month really mean.
Well it’s a month to surely remember.
Those dates from January thru December.
It is the timeline of what is new.
And today is the day.
We Celebrate You!
We Celebrate You!
For the things to you have done.
And those brilliant achievements soon to come!
Michel Ge
Science Fiction/Fantasy: Foxes
Mary Institute & St. Louis County Day School
Lynn Mittler, Teacher

Sundays we hunted fox. The sky was dim and the horizon rusting by the time we returned to the cabin, and
every time Brother said, “The wards, Heneii,” even though we both wanted to sleep. In the cool stripped
doek of fall or the summer’s watercolor sundown I’d come outside and he’d come outside with me and we took our
blood and together we refreshed the Glyph of Protecting on the doorframe.

When I was much younger he told me the ghosts of the foxes would rise and come snuffling at the door if
the wards weren’t there, and when I grew older, old enough to understand the Sacramony, he told me what
would really happen.

My youngest memory is of a white stallion facing me from a distant ridge, atop it a hooded figure. I
couldn’t see the face but I knew it was looking at me. Seeing me. When I still had nightly terrors I would dream
of that figure, drifting straight forward into the cabin and then turning slowly toward me, Brother never there.
This was much more frightening than any ghost and it was real. That was why, Brother said, we hunted fox. To
practice. So that when the Sacramony came after us, we’d be ready.

We bartered for bread in the open markets and trapped small game, but after each fox kill, Brother would

It rains. Droplets dribble down the filter of leaves and pummel a weak rhythm. Bare branches lean in the
rain-wind, soaked to black. Leaves and twigs carpeting the woods blink and flinch with each pattering drop.
When the storm’s raged itself dry, the cotton clouds pull apart leaving a fraying of wisps that hang in the cold
blue sky. Sunlight happens, brightening everything

Patience, Brother taught me, that’s the art of hunting. On the right hand a Glyph of Serenity. On the left a
Glyph of Perception. From the bend in the road I see a glimmer of white and clattering horses and robes. Three
of them, rapiers slapping their thighs as they shudder up and down on their steeds.

Even now I can imagine the plan. Brother, who might have been born to a bear, with his stones; me with
my bow. He’d throw one with a Glyph of Silencing scrawled on it and knock out the leading Sacramonist and
even as he threw I would shoot down a second. The last would hear nothing. You wouldn’t think it but without
sound someone caught off guard is completely disoriented. He would stand there wildly swiveling while I drew
and fired.

But Brother isn’t here, like I’ve had a hand lopped off.

I fire randomly at one of them. The other two hear me perfectly. I see lips moving and one of them
dismounts and kneels and grips something dangling from his neck. I panic and undershoot, hitting him closer
to the stomach. He crumples. I’m drawing a third arrow when the screeching starts.

The last one, swaying on his horse, has his Sacrament gripped in his whitened knuckles and I see his pale-
mint eyes boring holes through my soul.

It’s a screech whittled sharp like a needle designed to pierce through one ear and out the other, drawing a
bloody dribble. I howl, my fingers fumbling for the arrow which I dislodge from the string bringing the rough
cut tip against my palm and I jerk from the pain and it goes in too deep and my hand is wet and red and
trembling. Glyph of Silencing. I can hold two Glyphs at max but Serenity’s already wiped out by the blood on
my right palm, giving me room for just one more. I draw it on the tree next to me. At this point I already feel a
line of fluid inching down my neck, chilled in the tentative breeze. The Sacramonist moves fast, hopping onto
his horse but instead of retreating he drives it at me. I try to grab the arrow but my right hand is cramped and
won’t work right so I flee like a rabbit into the trees, leaving the bow behind. His horse is no match for me. I
outrun him but when I stop to check for pursuit I can’t see him and I can’t see anything familiar. Only steep hills
and trees upright their leaves lit gold by a weary sun. I hide beneath the overhanging roots of a tree, covering
myself with leaves and shivering, shivering, double over onto my bleeding hand.

“Careful, Heneii,” Brother once told me, after I’d climbed a tree and fell when a dead branch snapped
beneath my foot. “You have Glyphs that will protect you, but none that will ever heal you.”
I've been to a church only once and that time they nearly burned it down trying to drive me out. It was before Brother went off and I was only curious. When I went in it was empty, tall stained glass filtering dusty light onto the creaking pews, perfectly still.

“Do you need something?” the head Sacramonist said behind me.

I turned and he must have seen my eyes. They were nothing like Brother’s at the time—his were deep and red, like cherries, and mine were closer to pink, as if I’d been up all night reading. But he headed the Sacramony and he’d never seen me here before and it was a small town and he wasn’t stupid.

Before I could break through a window and run, men were streaming into the place, backlighting each other with their torches.

That night I woke up to piss and came outside to find Brother standing there, hands at his sides, staring at the distant peaks.

“Brother?” I said.

He was shaking. When he turned his eyes glowed like coals.

I was never afraid of the white robe. What scared me most was that in my nightmares, Brother was gone. I assume I stopped having them when I stopped needing him.

I’m not a child anymore, lying paralyzed in bed. I’m a hunter.


I ghost through the forest, adrenaline permanently igniting every muscle of my body. The sky glows faded blue but the earth is black with shadows. I exist in a state of limbo, a man frozen in the moment after he jumps off a ledge, knowing only that he’s terrified and alive and clueless. I’ve never hunted without my bow before. I’ve never seen a fox up close. The forest rattling with long nostalgic sighs, I lock sight on a sheet of white as I crest a hill, and I leap for the kill.

The moment I touch it, something barrels into me from the side, and a white coldness explodes in my shoulder. I fall. The Sacramonist rolls onto me, panther-like in dark russet camouflage. His empty robe flaps from a limb above us. He forces down another knife towards my chest but I kick him in the stomach so hard that he’s momentarily airborne before keeling over backwards. I leap onto him, grab the wrist of his knife hand while he’s thrashing it trying to get me off. I twist, hard, forcing open his grip. The sudden motion makes the knife tumble off somewhere. He punches me in the stomach. I take the hit and with my free hand bash him in the nose repeatedly then rip the knife out from my shoulder and ram it toward his chest but he grabs it but I press down with all my weight and his arms snap and the knife sluices into his chest and he chokes and I stab and stab and stab. When I’m done I lean over him, my arms on either side of his heads, panting.

Eventually Brother left. “You’ll understand someday, Heneii,” he said. “You’ll go too.”

And when I asked him, “Where are you going?”, he said: “Where I belong.”

But I thought you belonged here. Which I didn’t say.

I don’t remember the day he left. I remember days before that, evenings by the sizzling yellow light of the lamp, stringing my bow Sunday mornings while he gathered his stones—days even before the cabin, huddling in caves while it rained outside, and once me standing there, the water dripping coldly around me, Brother saying: it’s okay, Heneii, it’s okay—I remember tacky bread in the mornings, and bathing in the creek, and him finding me shivering by the roadside the winter of my father’s death and my banishment.

The redder his eyes became, the less he talked and the more he stared unmoving at random things.

Someday, Heneii. You’ll go too.

It’s a rite of passage. The Sacramony hunts us because they know what we may become if we live long enough. They are terrified of the Transformed colonies in the mountains. Why, then, do they drive us away?

The Sacramonist is just an ordinary dead man. I stand over him, blood veiling the earth beneath my feet, blood running, watery, down my shoulder and across my arm. His eyes are wide open like a marble and in those marbles I see myself, a warped, orbed image, a backlit shade. The only thing that’s clear are my eyes. At once bright orange like a hearth fire and deep earthy amber, they shine like a fox’s.
Before sundown, the alchemist was already drunk. “I was the bandit,” he said. “I derailed the train to Viam Kae, do you remember? The one that killed fourteen?”

“Yes, I remember,” the barkeep said. He was sitting on a stool, meditating over the rainy night.

“I derailed it,” the alchemist said. “It was me.”

“Yes, alright.”

“I watched it go down,” the alchemist said. “It was metal plates crashing and everything shrieking. The cars went down one by one. Like dominoes,” he said. “Give me a refill.”

The barkeep selected a pitcher and poured a blue grease into his glass. The alchemist drank, pacified. He was dizzy, and speaking of his deed made him feel better, proud almost. He did not feel guilty—that was the thing. An action of that magnitude cannot be contained by a feeling, and so it is the action itself that takes its place, the action itself that stalks you, with a life of its own. It watches you sleep.

By midnight only two more had come, a permanently blushing, acne-faced girl whose presence was the only thing that gave the bar any substance, and another girl who came with her. “We have replaced one Tyrant with another,” the alchemist was saying. The red faced girl smiled at him kindly. He assumed she was interested. “Do you know how many Melyna has exiled from Viam Kae? Do you know?”

“No,” she said.

He pointed into the wet darkness. “Look,” he said. “Go and look. Every morning there are more on the roads. I tell you, one Tyrant has overthrown another. Drinkmaster!”

The barkeep appeared.

“Pour me another. A wine. I feel for a Renot but any black will do.”

“Of course.”

“And pour one for these two. One each. A red—“ he turned to them—“do you drink red?”

The girl who talked, with the acne, grinned painfully and looked at her companion, who copied her expression. She shrugged. “Occasionally?” she said.

“Two reds,” the alchemist said.

The barkeep moved quickly, with a way of reappearing elsewhere, which unsettled the alchemist. Soon there were three shiny glasses on the counter. The alchemist sniffed his and drank. “Do you know the Viam Kae library?”

She nodded. “We’ve gone there before for research.”

“You did not find anything, did you? No—I can tell you did not. Do you know why?”

“It was a pleasant—”

“I will tell you why,” the alchemist said. “It is unorganized. They call it the catacomb of books. It is a maze. It spirals deeper and deeper into the earth. One may get lost in it and die there. It is a cave.”

“I can see how one might think that.”

“Do you know why it is not organized? Because there is nobody in charge of it, and nobody has offered, except, as far as I am aware, myself. But now we have a Tyrant who is exiling people from Viam Kae.”

“It is a tragedy.”

“Who is your friend?” the alchemist said, leaning sideways to look past her. Her friend sat with her hands in her lap, her head angled down so that her dark hair veiled her peripherals. She had not spoken a word.

The talker nudged her friend in the elbow. She looked up—her eyes beneath the dark hair were green—and smiled thinly. “Olivia,” she said.

The alchemist drained his glass. “You are beautiful,” he said. She couldn’t stop smiling and her eyes were lowered. It was like a blush but there was no red in her cheeks. “Why is it that the beautiful ones are always shy?” the alchemist said. “Tell me, have you been to the library at Viam Kae?”

The talker smiled at him pointedly. “We both did research there,” she said.

“Oh, but I want to know if she has been there personally.”
Olivia’s smile was gone and she was looking at the floor.

“’I’m sorry,” the talker said. “It’s been great talking to you. We have to go study.” She got up and Olivia followed her and they stepped out beneath the awning onto the glistening walkway.

The alchemist watched them go, dazed. When they were gone he turned to the barkeep. “Do you see that?” he said. “Do you see how rude she is?”

“You are bad for my business,” the barkeep said.

“Do you want me to leave then? Is that it? Do I pester you?”

“Oh, no,” the barkeep said. “Don’t leave. Buy another drink.”

“These first,” the alchemist said. The girls had left their wine untouched and he took one, drank it down, and took the other, waiting a bit to recover from the first, and drank it down. Then he blinked and slapped a silver coin onto the table.

The barkeep shoveled ice with a handheld scooper, fine frosted cubes, and let them rattle into a glass. This was the alchemist’s favorite part. The barkeep drizzled alcohol over the ice, which looked like water, then took a pitcher and trickled in clear blue until it was two thirds full, and sprinkled in mint clovers. He swirled the drink to mix it.

“On second thought,” the barkeep said, “would you mind wiping the counters for me? The drink would be free.”

“How much is it?”

“Seventy.”

“Seventy? Are you selling melted gold?” He pushed the coin insistently.

“It’s special,” the barkeep said. He sidled over to the end of the counter, sandaled feet thwacking, and snatched up a rag. “Well?”

“Wipe your own counter.”

The barkeep shrugged. Wordlessly, he worked his way down the counter with wide, practiced sweeps, leaving a wet sheen as he went. The alchemist fingered through his purse and set one, two, three more silver coins beside the first, then touched the cold glass to his lips. It was sharply minty, with a medicinal aftertaste. His fingers ached from the cold and he set it down. The mint leaves had dampened, sticking together; his drinking had disturbed the ice, and it had lost its picturesqueness. He looked down the walkway: it was dark, very late, and only a few other shops were still lit.

“I do not understand why she was so rude,” the alchemist said. “Am I a pest?”

“No,” the barkeep said.

“But you said I was. You said I was bad for your business.”

“It was because you made them leave. But now that you’re buying more drinks, it all evens out.”

The alchemist squeezed a fistful of coins and spilled them onto the counter. “Another drink,” he said.

“I would like to confide in you,” the alchemist said. He was dizzy and propping his head up with one palm.

“Yes?”

“Do you remember the Viam Kae train that went down last month?”

“Yes,” the barkeep said. “You’ve already told me this.”

“I turned the tracks into sand,” he said. “It was me.”

“Really.”

“Yes,” the alchemist said loudly. “Did I not just tell you? I—me—derailed that train.”

“You understand I’ll have to tell somebody.”

“No,” the alchemist said. “They will put me in jail.”

“I have a moral obligation.”

The alchemist watched the barkeep wipe a stool, gauging whether the man was joking. “But we are friends,” he said. “Why would you send your friend to jail? Are we not friends anymore?”

“We were never friends.”

The alchemist’s silky, feral eyes followed the barkeep. He breathed heavily. “I want another drink,” he said. The barkeep hummed something, snatched up a bottle of the blue grease and climbed up onto a stool to reach the alchemist’s glass. “No,” the alchemist said, waving it away. “The Falluvian.”

“Are you sure?” The barkeep held up the blue bottle. “This is vintage.”
“Falluvian!” the alchemist roared. He thunked his glass on the counter. “How much?”
“One hundred twelve.”
He shook coins out of his purse, which flopped when he put it back. He studied the barkeep, who mixed
the drink, swirled it, and set it down.
The alchemist held the glass in front of his eyes, looking into his own bloated reflection.
“What are we,” he said. “If we are not friends, what are we?”
“You are my customer.”
“What is your name?”
“Taln.”
“Do you treat your customers well, Taln?”
“I try.”
“Then why are you trying to poison me?”
Taln searched the alchemist’s eyes. There was no sound but the alchemist breathing.
“I have a moral obligation,” Taln said.
“You hate me. Is that it?” The alchemist did not set the drink down.
“No,” Taln said. “It is not that I hate you.”
“I am a pest,” the alchemist said. “I am bad for your business.”
“You are a criminal,” Taln said. “You wrecked a train.”
The alchemist touched a fingertip to the top of the drink, barely breaking the surface tension. He lifted the
finger and held the drop clinging to it in front of an eye. His eyes were clouded but they saw the drop down to
its chemical composition.
“Why are you trying to kill me?” he said. “If you only want me in jail, why are you trying to kill me?” He
pressed his finger to a swath of table the barkeep had just wiped, smearing the drop in a moist arc. The
barkeep was chewing but he had nothing in his mouth. “Why do you hate me?” the alchemist said. “Is it not
easy to tell you the truth?”
The barkeep broke away. He began polishing his counter again. “You are unneeded,” he said. He spoke
conversationally, reasonably. “It is a dark age. If we are to bring down the Tyrants we have no need of you.”
“You do not mean it,” the alchemist said.
“We needed that train,” the barkeep said. “We needed the people on it. We do not need you.”
The alchemist did not speak.
“You know it is true, don’t you?” the barkeep said. The counter was very shiny. “You are unstable. We do
not need you. Nobody needs you. Even you do not need yourself. Do you?” he said, without looking.
“No.”
“You see? It would all be so much easier if you drank.”
The alchemist set the glass down.
“Where will you go after this?” the barkeep said. He had finished polishing and was going back over it
again. “You are homeless, like driftwood. I suppose a farmer might take you in for an extra field hand. But even
he would not need you.”
“You are like a snake,” the alchemist said.
“I am the snake, aren’t I?” the barkeep said, putting the towel away. He turned. “Look at me. Don’t I look
like the snake?”
The alchemist jerked the glass to his lips and lapped.
“Good,” he heard the barkeep say. It was all dark and the barkeep was standing over him, his face blurred.
“Good,” Taln purred. “You see how easy it is?” He was standing in an underwater corridor, warm and close. He
saw the black sigil of the Night Rats on the bare chests of several men as they chased him down a slick alley. He
was trying to move forward in the corridor, but it was all in slow motion. He was straining against the chalky,
stiff trapdoor hidden away beneath the Tyrant’s castle, swatting away the trickling dust of many untouched
centuries, opening it to the grimy face of Melyna as she crawled upwards, blade first. Then the Night Rats, her
Night Rats, had him and were beating his head against the stone. In the underwater corridor he tried to move
forward. He lifted one foot, pushed it forward, and set it down. The water was tugging him up. He sat barefoot
by the open trapdoor as Melyna padded silently off to the bedroom of the Tyrant. He sat curled in an alcove
in the Viam Kae library, and when he sat up he was kneeling in the darkness, pouring a glowing liquid over a set of
thick cold rails. He tried to take another step but he could not remain grounded. He gripped the floor by one
toe. We had a deal, did we not? You would be Queen, would you not? I would be Librarian, would I not? He lost hold and floated up and up and up.

The bar was the only shop lit along the walkway. Pools of water had collected on its awning and the barkeep stood there with a long pole, poking the laden tarp so that the water splashed heavily down and smashed into the ground. At half past two a lanky watchman came by, lantern swinging with his gait.

“You have yourself a corpse, dear sir!” he said brightly. “Was it you who produced it?”

“Yes, it was me,” the barkeep said.

The watchman shook his head sadly. He had an open face. “Afraid I have to lock you up,” he said. He waved his torch, and after a while more watchmen came, and knelt beside the body, and the lanky one led the barkeep away.

“May I be so rude as to inquire,” the watchman said, “about the nature of this crime?”

It was a cool, wet night. They walked in sync with one another.

“You may do so at your leisure,” the barkeep said. The watchman fell silent, confused, and the barkeep felt that he should explain, that he owed something to the lumbering fool. But at that moment he caught the rhythmic clicking, click-click-click-thump, click-click-click-thump, of a far-off train winding toward the station, the lights like narrowed pupils steadfast in the dark, and he was calm.
... BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP...

My Hello Kitty alarm clock lit up and beeped to the tune of “It’s a Small World After All”. Only in the mornings did I understand why everyone hated that song so much, presenting me with the hardest decision: should I emerge from the warm burrito of my covers and make the beeping stop? Maybe if I lay in bed long enough it would stop on its own (it never did)...

I knew that the moment “It’s a Small World After All” stopped playing real life would start. I wanted peace, but I didn’t want reality. In the mornings, it seemed like those were two incompatible things.

Suddenly, I felt a warm familiar hand on my back. The smell of powdered Ajax bleach flooded my nostrils. The restored silence covered me in relief. The dancing epileptic lights had vanished from my ceiling. The herald of peace was Modesta.

“Luisa Maria, it’s time for school, go get in the shower,” she said, in her familiar Mexican accent.

“No! I don’t want to, I’m not ready! Give me five more minutes!”

She pulled the covers off me.

“You’re ruining my life, Mode!”

Finally, I did as she told me, and returned to my room from the bathroom to find the golden cover already neatly placed on my bed, tucked into the corners and folded over the fluffy white pillows with the precision and exactitude that could make an engineer cry. On top of the bed there was a neat pile of still-warm-from-the-iron forest-green uniform clothes. I groaned. It was dress day. I hated dress day, the knee socks made my legs itch.

Downstairs in the morning room, a breakfast of Papaya, sliced with the same care and fastidiousness as my bed was made, awaited me. Modesta waited for me in the kitchen.

She never sat at the table with me. I never understood why…

I stormed into the kitchen.

“Mode, how many times do I have to tell you to stop giving me Papaya for breakfast! Papaya makes me fart! It’s embarrassing!”

My complaints were interrupted by the shrill ring of the intercom. I approached the door, leaving my plates out on the table like I did every morning. The sky was gray and ominous; Modesta held her hand out to me. Her rough brown skin comforted me. We climbed up the cobbled hill, past the fog-covered wishing well, to the gatekeeper’s lodge. There, a warm yellow bus waited for me. It was my first day of the third grade. Modesta’s eyes flooded in tears. She fought them back and pulled me in for a hug. Her starched down polyester uniform felt uncomfortable against my smooth white skin. In the back, the bus grumbled with impatience. I tore away from her embrace, and ran into the bus. I didn’t want my classmates to witness me sharing an intimate moment with my housekeeper.

Modesta, or as I had nicknamed her, Mode, came into our lives when I was five years old, and had only lived in Mexico for a few years. Unlike any of the other employees my parents kept, Mode was different. She lived with us during the work week and took the bus back to her village on the weekends. There was always a bright smile on her face, her crooked teeth resplendent against her skin. Her secret was baking soda and lemon.

I never understood why she was so happy. Her room in the basement wasn’t like mine on the top floor. Hers was cold, with the damp smell ancient ruins and underground tunnels always seem to have. Her TV had to be wrestled in and out of pretzel shapes for it to work and she didn’t even get the Disney channel. Yet despite her inferior room, my mother’s irrational demands and my routine temper tantrums, she remained happier than the other adults.

Upon my return from my first day of third grade, the gatekeeper opened the door for me, and I found no one waiting for me on the other side. Anger contorted itself into a ball and rolled up my throat. The world was so unfair. I hated my new teacher, I had no friends in my class, and the Papaya did in fact make me fart in class. The walk down the hill felt lonely and eternal. Where was Mode? Probably inside, preparing my after school
snack. I would tell her all about my day, she would brush my hair and give me a cool glass of *jugo de Jamaica*, and everything would be okay.

I got home to find my mom in the kitchen.

“Where is Mode? Can you tell her I want a quesadilla?”

In her eyes I saw a look I had only seen once before. Fire glazed over by a thin sheet of ice. The same look I saw the day my dad was in a car accident. She sat me down on her lap and said “Mode’s mom died from cancer today, she just caught the last bus home”

At first, the news only exacerbated the feelings of isolation and anger I had, but then, shame came creeping down my chest. I didn’t know Mode’s mom was sick. I never asked. I thought about it, and I realized I didn’t even know her last name. In three years, I never bothered to ask about her mom, her family, or her name.

On the morning of Mode’s mom’s funeral, I woke up to the same shrill alarm clock as a few days before. This time, no one was there to turn it off for me.

I asked my mother if I should wear black.

“No, Mode’s family can’t afford mourning clothes. It would be ostentatious for you to do so,” she said.

The walls of the world I was raised in had begun to collapse... I was about to see the outside world, the real world for the first time.

The getting there was brutal. It was a five hour car ride, mostly on a dirt road. The sun shone through the car window and gave me a sun burn. I felt secretly ashamed. I didn’t want to be at funeral; I wanted to be safe at home, watching TV. The car slowed down and I looked out the window. The ground reminded me of a vast desert. When I got out of the car, I was convinced we were lost. We had somehow driven to the Sinaloa without realizing it. In fact, the only thing that reassured me that we had not driven to the desert were the chickens grazing the dirt for crumbs. There was nothing in sight except for a few twisted, withering branches. We walked down a hill, and saw Mode waiting for us. It was the first time I had seen her wear something other than her uniform.

“Welcome to my house,” she said.

I was confused because I didn’t see the house. Then I realized we were already in the house. It was a collection of randomly placed walls with a blue plastic tarp that fought to keep the sun out. It failed miserably. The nicest thing in sight was the coffin. It peeked out of a dark room that seemed off limits. I didn’t belong here. I felt the stares of Mode’s relatives burn on my skin. I wasn’t like these people. I had no right to go in there. I was scared to look at the coffin, so I looked somewhere else. I recognized the Abercrombie sweatpants my older sister had recently grown out of on the legs of Mode’s niece. They were the same sweatpants I had rejected, because I did not deem them wearable on the grounds that they were a hand me down.

That’s when I realized that my conception of fairness was warped and distorted beyond recognition. Seeing that girl in what would have been my sweatpants if I hadn’t been so spoiled made me realize that that could have very easily been me. There was literally nothing that set us apart; we were just born into opposite circumstances. Yet at the same time, our perceptions were so different. I saw an old pair of sweatpants I would be embarrassed to be seen in, she saw a new pair of American pants, a luxury she may have never been exposed to. I saw a damp, smelly room with bad TV, Mode saw comfort and security.

I realized that day that unfairness isn’t getting put in the wrong class at your private school, It’s not being denied five extra minutes of sleep, it’s not even getting hand me downs when your sister gets new clothes every year. No, unfairness was having to work five hours away from home and never seeing your family. Unfairness was not feeling worthy enough to sit at a table with a spoiled eight year old. Unfairness was experiencing all of the above because of the chance situation you were born into.

Seeing Mode’s niece in what would have been my pants also made me realize that despite the unfairness in the world, despite all the differences, there is a little of everyone in everyone. She probably didn’t like mornings either. She might’ve had hard days at school too. I imagined she waited every Saturday morning for the return of her aunt. She probably liked it when Mode sang Chayanne’s “Un Siglo Sin Ti”. Despite all the external blessings chance had afforded me, I was just like everyone else in the world.

On the ride home, the sun beat less hard against my skin. The outside didn’t smell as repugnant as before. The corridos on the radio seemed less annoying. The prospect of waking up at six in the morning to the maddening tune of “It’s a Small World After All” the next Monday, no longer seemed as terrible.
Black. A black world where the universe just wants to be noticed. Where not everything is all roses and daisies. Where fields of wild flowers miles and miles down the hills weren’t even a thing. Falling through an empty void of an endless dream that’d later form into my reality. I always woke up right before I hit the ground. Right before I would splat into a million different pieces. Different pieces of me strewn across the floor. Or so I thought.

The dream of opening a fresh book, with fresh white papers, smooth to the touch. The smell of leather flooded my nose, I read the think bold words that were dark and mysterious, running my index finger across each printed amazement. My fingers then found their way down the engraved spine. Then I broke the book, right in the middle of that beautiful rough spine. My lips curved in a devious smile. The words were infuriated. All of the wondrous typing flew out of the now lifeless item, and circled me. Like the wind, they created a breeze, a breeze both frightening and lonely all wrapped in one. My black hair flew behind me with a strong whip. The wind grew greater, overpowering my being. In no time I flew with it. Into a dark world where no one was there but me, myself, and I. Beautiful antique furniture flew around me, and clocks ticked behind me. Sprawled on the walls were words that passed like a lifespan, precise and speedy. Then the ticking grew louder. I looked down, as my black dress inflated like a mushrooms top with my long legs and feet that were covered in shiny black Mary Janes, I saw cement. It was the first time I’d realize how hard cement looked and how hard it would feel falling thousands of feet above it. Then I was struck with the truth. I was falling to my very own death.

A death of a 16 year old girl who never got to be a teenager because she was too infatuated with the idea of music, writing and art. The one who was once called “D’Vinci” was falling through time and space back into the real world where the cement was hard and reality would slap you in the face even harder. I, Caroline Mathers, was about to die a very lovely death.

Not only was death a handful of seconds away, but so was waking up from this wretched relivable nightmare. I’d wake up and go my usual route to school, stopping at the corner store for some coffee, walking to my bricked in high school with the brick brain students and the brick brain teachers. To my surprise, I landed. Softly. I even clenched my eyes as if my life depended on it, waiting for this glorious moment where the lights would shine down on me and God would reach to me and say, “Come, my child. Live your new life with me!”.

When in fact that never happened. All I did was end up on Walnut street, in the same old town, going the same old route to my same old school.

So I went left instead of right, and right instead of left. I went the opposite direction. I’m ignoring the plethora of idiots today. Taking a long road towards a park where I, quite literally, stumbled upon a 17 year old boy with ruffled black hair, and cold eyes. He had music blaring, looking up at the sky, sitting on a grey metal bench. So, me being the adventurer I am, I walked up to this 17 year old boy with the bed-head and ice blue eyes, and said the words I regret even now, “Hello. I’m Caroline.”. He looked at me, staring at me. Not saying a single word. He smiled, and that’s when I fell once more through time and space just to repeat the same old thing. Waking up right before I hit the ground.

“Caroline! Come on honey, wake up!” My mother, a cold hearted woman, screamed at me from the bottom of our stairs that were at the end of this fabulous hallway in our glamorous house. I grunted. Of course, this wasn’t real. A boy that cute talking to me. The “Odd” girl at the school who, even though complicated, enjoyed the simplest things in life. The one with black eyes, short black hair, black lipstick, black nails, and black winged eyeliner that complimented her black outfit that overall made my skin look like glass. I was neither popular nor pretty. So a cute boy talking to a non-cute girl was, frankly, impossible. So I ignored it and entered the routine of my daily boring life of Caroline Mathers who was 16 years old. Young and pure.

I entered the red brick building that was accessed from the Yellow Brick Road. I saw plenty of imbeciles while going to my red locker, saying hello to the doltish teachers, and the principal who was too restive.

I walked into my first hour, Art. I was ignoring the hate filled glares and the curious stares of all the people in my class. Feeling anxious, I took my seat in the corner, not paying attention to anyone and everyone. I
proceeded to take out my sketchbook and doodled away. People are the cause of my anxiety, along with social events, social apps, and society in general, making me feel claustrophobic, as if I was the opposite balance for all of this. Thus I deleted everything. I basically don’t exist in this beautiful and amazing world of technology. I looked over at the board which was creative and bright, reading the words put on it in a classic mature manner “Black.” The teachers handwriting was almost hieroglyphics. I looked down at the beaten sketchbook, where my feelings were sketched and created. It was writing for the disabled— in this case: me.

I looked at the board once more. That’s when I saw him. His curled black hair, swooping into his cold eyes which were constantly watching my every move. I felt my tongue start to dance behind my thin pursed lips, as I cautiously pretended to ignore his presence.

A gust of wind. Even with the windows closed tight, a gust of wind blew through my hair. I could feel him all around me, staring and jotting down notes in his head. My ups, my downs, my lefts and my rights. He was the critique and I’m the dish. Creating an article just about my numerous and endless amounts of flaws. I closed my eyes. They were moving with the lids shut. I was looking but without them. I blinked, looking every which way in a hectic haste. I wasn’t in the classroom but at the bench I found him on. There he was, sitting with his blaring music. His eyes were fixated on me, the weird loner with the awkward sci-fi haircut and dark life.

“Black.” He whispered. The sound carrying through me like a persistent wind. He pulled out a pack of smokes, lifting the red cardboard lid and offered one to me. I hesitantly grabbed it, studying it like a wild buffoon. “Here.” He said, taking it and placing it in between my blacked out lips. He took out his white lighter and lit it. I looked at him for a minute and he looked at me. I took in all of his flaws, noting them as things he was blessed with having. Like the indents that were his dimples when he talked. The whiteness of his teeth when he opened his mouth to place the cigarette in between the set of pearls. The way he’d close his eyes and breath in, then out, all at once. Ignoring the cold, and loving the cold all at the same time. Then how he’d quickly open them again, looking at me without altering his direction.

I looked intently back at him, waiting for his soothing caramel voice to instruct me as to how I ruin my beautiful pink lungs. He didn’t, so I breathed in. Taking a drag of dangerousness. Then coughing. Coughing almost all of my stupidity out, just to create more. I burnt my lungs every time I breathed in, but it was a soothing pain that soon died out after the third or fourth drag. He looked at me closely, taking in all of my flaws again, hopefully this time noting them as wonderful things to be explored. I took the cancer stick out of my mouth and looked at it. A black circle formed around it, as if I was casting magic. I looked at it and wiped off my lipstick with the back of my hand. A black smear rubbed onto my skin and my cheek, I could feel its many layers peel off my normally pink lips onto the skin of my hand and my now flustered cheeks. I looked back at the cigarette. He leaned his broad back on the metal bench.

“Well..?” He said, taking a drag with closed eyelids.

“Well?” I said back with more attitude.

“I don’t even remember your name.” He said, not even bothering to properly blow out the smoke that lingered when he talked.

“Caroline. I don’t even know your name.” I said, feeling like a rebel has taken over me.

“It’s Cameron. Cam.” He said, looking at me with half open eyes.

“Cam.” I said, letting the three letters sink into my mind without hesitation. Another drag, looking at the black paint that covered the tangy yellow cigarette filter. What else was I to do? I already have confined myself from the world, and now I’m letting a cute juvenile, although innocent looking, lead me into his plan of sending me through hell and back.

I simply tilted my head back, feeling my black short hair fall onto my tiny shoulders. I smiled at the clouds and closed my eyes, taking one more drag but holding it. I let it go, watching the numerous particles break away from my now black ombre lips into the pure oxygen and brought the demon to my face.

“A ring,” He said, “It looks like you put a black ring on it.”

“Well..” I responded, knowing my response will either bring me down or raise me up, drown me or help me survive. I looked back at him, lowering my head and taking a deep, non-toxic breath. The perfect thing to say when you give a ring to your life partner consists of three letters, just like Cam does. Three letters that define your life being, or three letters that define your life’s end.

I, Caroline Mathers, am about to die a very lovely death.

“I do.”
The beeps of a vexatious alarm clock brought my dream to a halt, a dream I’m too lazy to remember. I sat up, fixing my long brown hair with a swipe. I looked around my cluttered apartment room. Band posters covered the walls, and video game discs and cases were spread out to various places; On top of the speakers, on top of the pink dresser decorated in contrasting and peculiar bumper stickers, even on top of the numerous amounts of clothes that made my room looks like a mess. I had a tiny little cube sitting on my orange nightstand, also covered in the plethora of stickers, that illuminated my messy face.

I slowly got up, turning on the speakers on the way to my bathroom, also crowded with different colors and random items. I looked on the toilet seat to see numerous pastel dipped books. On my counter piled amounts of makeup. I bit my pink and purple nails, looking at the time. 6:10. I had exactly 32 minutes to get ready and out to school. I took a shower, cold, and began to cleanse myself for another ignorant day of high school. I brushed my waste length hair and put on a dab of all my makeup, excluding lipstick. I tugged on a black sweater and black leggings, put on my black socks then hastily looked for the black Vans that had become my second mother.

I quickly ran down the stairs, knowing my mom will be gone until tonight, and put some of the leftover coffee in a mug, courtesy of my mother’s “kindness” (more of knowing I’m the closest thing left to family). I tugged on my shoes and ran to get my back pack.

I cursed under my breath and ran back up the stairs in my huge yet small house to my still clustered room. I don’t even think magic could clean that up. I pulled the smokes out of my dresser and turned off the music, once again, now sprinting, down the stairs. I grabbed my leather jacket and bag. I ran outside, locking the light brown door with the orange November decorations, and got into my white BMW. The inside was decorated with all my favorite things. Yet again, bumper stickers all over the seats and buttons hanging onto the seat belts lilac cloth. Numerous times have I been late, and numerous times I have cared less, but today was special. Today was Chasten’s birthday. I looked at the time. The numbers showed up pink when I turned on the car. 6:36. A blast of hot air blew in my face. Oh, car modifications, making my life so much less bland.

I told myself to buy gum on the way, and while in reverse, I backed out slowly from the driveway. I turned left twice, right once, and left again, stopping at the green and yellow gas station, buying gum, beef jerky, and a monster with hot Cheetos for Chasten. We’ve been dating since 8th grade, and now we’re at the close end of being sophomores together. A prolonged relationship with many ups and downs, even a few “breaks”, but we always ran to each other again and again. I popped a cig in my mouth, lighting it. I unrolled the clean windows. Smoking was just another habit, just like biting my nails. I get it from my ignor-anus of a dad. Me being the only child was another reason to just drown in my habits, knowing it’d never affect anyone was another load off my shoulders.

I rolled in to the breathtaking sight of Chasten, his shaggy brown hair in his blue eyes being held up by a gray beanie I got him for his 15th birthday. I parked next to him, his long legs stretching out in front of my tires. He was on my left, and I rolled down my window.

“Do you want to die?” I said, a teethy smile coming across my lips.
“Tis be happy indeed.” He said, looking up, “Especially since I dashed out of the house to where no one but my lovely girlfriend could say those amazing words to me.”

I smiled. Chasten had very few perks about him, which made all the other girls less oblivious to his presence. Until this year. He was always tall, but he grew out his hair this year, drawing more attention, then
proceeded to dye it black. Now, he’s titled the “Lady Killer” in our grade. He was at an amazing 5’8, and compared to my 5’2 he could be my brother. I brushed my long brown hair out of my face.

“Taking that as a compliment.” I said, pulling myself back over. I dug in my black tote for the plastic bag which contained his present.

“Is that the rattle of a plastic bag, I hear?”

“Oh shut up, Romeo.”

“Has my Juliet brought me something special?”

I laughed, “Yeah, a foot up your ass if you don’t stop talking all Shakespeare like.”

His smile just got more and more intense. “Of course, M’lady.”

“Oh my God, shhh!” I said, pushing him softly in his chest. I pulled out the plastic bag with his favorite consumables and gave it to him. “I know, my wrapping is exceptional. I’m planning on being a gift wrapper in the mall during Christmas.”

He took it, smiling. “Thank you, my lovely.”

He bent down, kissing me lightly.

“Well if it’s for my beloved prince, I would cross over the world and fall into the never ending void of the stupid assumption that the world was always and will forever be flat.”

“And I would cross the sacred grounds of Tenochtitlan for the beloved and beautiful native princess, Kathie.”

I laughed at his historically incorrect statement. “Hun, there would be no beautiful native princess named Kathie.”

“In my world there is. And she’s sitting right here in her porcelain throne, and here I am, a European prince, bowing down to her absolute beauty.”

“Cheesy.”

“Alluring.”

“Indeed.”

I got out of my BMW, kissing him one more time before jogging over to the doors and watching him cross the street to do student teaching. I looked back, and he looked at me, his head slightly tilted back, turned my way while still walking forward. I smiled, and he lipped the words we say to each other every day.

I love you.
Taylor Hays
Critical Essay: The Death Penalty
Pattonville Senior High School
Janet Baldwin, Teacher

Crime is an inevitable phenomenon. The different approach each state’s government takes to handle those who put society in danger is virtually never agreed upon. Whether the death penalty will be applied or not is the most controversial decision each state government has to make. If it is a moral act, if it deters crime, or if it is cost effective are all hugely disagreed upon arguments (“Death Penalty Pros and Cons”). The criminal justice system has flaws, and there is no way to one hundred percent ensure the accuracy of lawyer’s arguments, and the safety of execution. Until there is a clear and foolproof way to take on such punishment without risk, the death penalty should be considered in only specific circumstances. The death penalty should explicitly be given to offenders who are proven guilty of pre-meditated murder of the first degree. Death should only be a consequence of first-degree murder for legal, moral, and economic reasons.

Dating back to 17th century BC, the first law of the death penalty was written in ancient Babylonia. The document included twenty-five crimes that were punishable by death, including theft and adultery, but not including murder (“Historical Timeline”). Looking as far back as seventh century BC, the death penalty could pose as the discipline for just about any crime (“History of Death Penalty Laws”). Currently there are forty-one capital offenses that are punishable by death, thirty-nine of which are a form of willful murder. The other two are espionage and treason. Depending on the offender and the victim, there are different forms of murder that are punishable by death. These include murder by an escaped federal prisoner that was already sentenced to life in prison, murder of a law enforcement official, and any kind of first-degree murder (“41 Federal Capital Offenses”). To be found guilty of first-degree murder, the prosecutor must prove that the offender killed another person with intention to do so, and that the killing was thought out in advance. Today, only thirty-two states in America authorize the death penalty as a form of capital punishment.

When determining the punishment for a crime, murder is separated into different degrees. Manslaughter is the lowest degree of murder, divided into voluntary and involuntary. Involuntary manslaughter is the killing of another human without intent. Voluntary manslaughter is the killing of another human with purpose, but without planning, or any forethought. Voluntary manslaughter is often brought on by emotion in the moment causing somebody to kill somebody out of anger. Second-degree murder is a step up, being an intentional killing without pre-meditation, but it is not done in the heat of the moment. This degree of murder is not planned out to the detail, but there is intention of harming the victim. Second-degree murder is the middle ground between manslaughter, and the highest degree of killing. The thing that sets first and second degree murder apart is the forethought, and planning of the action. First-degree murder is when a person makes the fully conscious decision to kill another human being, and plans out the act (“Homicide: Murder and Manslaughter”). Somebody who makes the conscious decision to take another human being's life for no reason should face an adequate punishment. Those who kill by accident, or without forethought do not deserve the same punishment as someone who does. The way the US criminal justice system works today, is that anyone who is found guilty of first-degree murder, depending on the state in which they live, will be put on death row. Someone who willfully plans the murder of another human being should confront a punishment that fits such crime. Because the US Supreme Court determined that a punishment must be proportionate to the crime, the death penalty should only be considered for cases of willful murder. In the early centuries in other cultures, offenders would be executed by being burned alive as a form of a public showing; today’s executions take place in a private room. The purpose of making the act more private was out of respect to the criminal, and so that it is more constitutional and moral.

As of this century in the US, there are five legal means of execution, yet one stands most common. Death by lethal injection is the most widely accepted form of execution in America because it is the most painless. A series of different drugs are administered into the offender to sedate them, and then to stop the heart. If the proper drugs for lethal injection cannot be obtained, there are eight states that allow death by electrocution. With electrocution, the inmate is secured in a wooden chair, where two volts of electricity are administered into their body, causing the heart to stop. Death by hanging is now only accepted by three states in the US. Death by lethal gas is another rare form of execution that is only legal in two states. The gas causes
the inmate to suffocate, and soon after, die. The last form of execution is death by firing squad. For any inmate that requested this form of execution before it was abolished, it may still be allowed (“Death Penalty”). Firing squad, lethal gas, and hanging are the least common means of execution because it was been decided that the most constitutional way to execute a person is a merely painless death. Electrocut, in most states, is only offered on request, or if lethal injection were to be constituted as unconstitutional. If all punishments had to be proportionate to the crime, the eye for eye technique would make sense. In cases of murder, the question is whether or not they eye for an eye technique can be played. No matter how many lives a criminal takes, be it one, or ten, no punishment is severe enough to make up for it. The death penalty, in relation to cruel and unusual punishment, may not be administered to a person who was under the age of eighteen at the time the crime was committed, or to any person with mental retardation. There are limitations on capital punishment that avoid making it oppose the Constitution.

People argue that if it is believed to be immoral to kill those who are mentally handicapped, that it should be immoral to kill any human being (“Is the Death Penalty Immoral?”). These moral arguments, to this day, fail to convince state legislature to change the laws. If the death penalty is carried out in a safe, reasonable environment, there is no reason to believe that it is not effective in deterring crime. Anyone that is willing to take another person’s life for no adequate reason, does not deserve to live freely in society. The death penalty is effective because it keeps prisons clear of an excessive number of especially dangerous criminals. Keeping someone in prison for the rest of his or her life is just a burden on everybody that has a part in keeping the prisoner. Prison should be left open for short-term offenders or people that are guilty of less serious crimes. This is not the 18th century, executions are not taking place in the middle of a courtyard, and criminals are not being killed under a guillotine in front of hundreds of people. The death penalty is done in a respective way, to make society a better place, not to embarrass the criminal. When an inmate is on death row, they are treated with respect. In the last twenty-four hours of the life of a death row inmate, he or she is brought to a different building in most cases to be under surveillance until it is time for them to be executed. In the execution chamber, or the room the execution takes place, there is a phone that wires straight to the attorney general. If that phone rings at any time, the executioner must stop what he is doing and answer it. Most of the time, if that phone rings, it means that enough information or evidence has surfaced, and that the execution must be postponed. This is called a stayed execution which can mean the execution will be postponed for only one hour or even months (Death Row: The Final 24 Hours). Trials on death penalty cases can take up to two years or more. If the death penalty were one hundred percent foolproof, and accident proof, there would be more advocates of the punishment (“Death Penalty - Irrevocable Mistakes”). Botched executions can put a criminal in excruciating amounts of pain just to be killed eventually. Electrocut is an especially dangerous form of execution because it is dealing with high voltages of electricity. If there is hair or fabric blocking the flow of electricity into the body, there are instances in which the inmate has sparked and caught on fire. There have been advances in technology to make execution safer, but there is always the chance that something will go wrong. For someone to go through so much trouble and pain to just be executed eventually is immoral.

On the economic side of this argument, the price of the death penalty, versus the price of holding a prisoner for his or her life has staggering differences. Defending a criminal on death row costs about four times as much as it would to defend a case that did not include the death penalty (“Death Penalty Costs”). Though this cost only includes the cost of trial, it is not in favor of the death penalty. Depending on the state, the cost to administer the death penalty is going to differ. The availability of resources is going to affect how much money execution will cost. The death penalty is more expensive than not because a longer trial process is required. This ensures that the court does not accuse an innocent man or woman of a capital crime that ends up getting the person killed. If the death penalty is sorted out reasonably, the excessive cost can be worth it. If the money were not wasted on cases that have no evidence to prove anybody specific guilty, the money spent would be spent for a better reason. Many people believe that the excess money spent on trying a criminal for capital murder, the money could be better spent (“Death Penalty Trends”). By limiting the number of criminals tried for the death penalty, money would be saved, making it more economically effective.

The one thing that makes the death penalty ineffective is its inability to deter crime. In states without the death penalty, murder rates are consistently lower than those of states who do have the death penalty. It is thought that this is true because criminals that have the mindset of killing another human being are not going
to be stopped by the fear of punishment ("Deterrence"). The preferred method of punishment for murder in the US is life without parole plus restitution ("Death Penalty Trends"). Life without parole means that the inmate is kept in prison for life with no chance of early release on good behavior. Restitution is payment to the victims or families of victims from the offender. The death penalty should be limited in numbers because by taking something from the criminal and making them live through it is a more deterring punishment than taking away their life.

Though the death penalty does not deter crime, the point is to protect society from existing criminals. It is effective, but only if it is done with total certainty. Until the criminal justice system finds a way to ensure a suspect is guilty with no speck of doubt, execution is risky. It is an irrevocable mistake that is likely to be made. The death penalty is exceedingly more expensive than keeping a prisoner for life without parole. It can be seen as immoral to kill a human being, even if they are not innocent. All of these downsides considered, getting rid of the people that put our society in danger every day is a necessary evil, but until there is a foolproof way to do that, it should be considered less often.
Henry Heidger
Writing Portfolio: Winter Solstice
Poetry: Apple Orchard
De Smet Jesuit High School
Robert Hutchison, Teacher

Apple Orchard
The autumn air,
crisp as parchment, claims
my fingers, my ears, my nose.

In early morning, air
is a welcomed chill—
an inhalation and a release

from warmth.
The wall feels its way

along the orchard’s edge,
struggles into the distance.
My eyes struggle
to see it. In perspective,
everything disappears
at the same point. I can’t recall

how long I’ve stood here,
boot-prints rooting into the earth,
legs like dormant stalks.

The scent of apple reminds me
winter is almost here.
Awakened to a buzzing sound in mid-October, I see
one on my wall: a lethargic polka dot crawling slowly like
a man going mad—scavenging across deserts, hallucinating lilacs.

And then one more appears. Soon the rice paper walls are pockmarked with bees.

White plaster dusts the bed sheets. The diving temperature (mercury slipping down the glass tube, soothing the throat of summer like a lozenge) drives them in.

Cows come home at night, perceiving darkness, knowing winter. Animal cognizance tells the eye things it can't see. They fly in through electrical sockets, out of the pockets of cashmere sweaters, buzzing unknown goodbyes to nature.

They gather on the windowpanes thinking they’re still on the other side.

And then in dead November I find them not on the panes but on the sills, asleep
with wiry legs in the air.
Henry Heidger
Writing Portfolio: Winter Solstice
Poetry: Paper Comes from Birch Trees
De Smet Jesuit High School
Robert Hutchison, Teacher

There’s a house
in the moonshine valley.

The licks of paint are peeling
like paper birch.

Can’t tell what color it used to be.
The bones can still stand on two feet.

When I was young, my mother said
all paper comes from birch trees.

The beautiful lie
of imagination. A quick gift.

The branches are hand models
displaying wares, showing off
glass trinkets. Bottles hang in the trees:
hollow little ghosts, blue,
brown and green. They sing
in the wind like children sing.

The old woman is alone. She tells me
her husband is coming home
soon. He's alive enough to talk to.
She hangs bottles from branches

like little ornaments. They chime
out of earshot, out of mind.
There's no wind today,  
but gusts of laughter  
lift the big top like a sail.

The trapeze artist poses  
on a swing. He dazzles  
like a sequin catching light.

Girls bloom from the cannon,  
roar by roar. They spring  
like flowers from a vase.

All eyes gaze in expectation.  
Girls slip into the afternoon—  
wet arms, wet legs, a reef of torsos.

They are the circus swimmers.  
Pale arms reaching into blue,  
girls in pink caps glide.

It's a clockwork aquarium—  
water-smoothed bodies  
ripple like fractals.
Henry Heidger
Writing Portfolio: Winter Solstice
Poetry: Day like a Sad Jar
De Smet Jesuit High School
Robert Hutchison, Teacher

The light of morning does not
signal a shift from bed to carpet.
I study the folds of blanket and sheet—
ridges and valleys, shadows.
Look at the relief of my body, pressing
up through the bed sheets
like a cadaver.
   I cannot think
how many days have passed.
I imagine pale nurses. They stand
by the door. They whisper
and prepare their syringes.
They bring me sleep, darkness.
I remember only a week ago
the room was bright. There were flowers
on my windowsill.
   The sun
does not check in on me anymore.
The windows of this house are glass;
this house is a jar, a sad jar.
I want the nurses to help me
go to sleep. My mother whispered
to me when I stirred in the night
of childhood.
   She had it too,
my mother. She called it her demon.
The word bipolar has been banned
from my lips since I found her. In the bathtub,
I have to make a decision.
It is only a cast-iron jar of water,
but will I be able to escape
its pull? The water wants me.
Day is like a sad jar, sealed off
by a glass lid, a window. I can see out,
but never escape.
Logan’s left hand was wrapped tightly around my middle three fingers, almost cutting off my circulation, while his right was flailing left and right, up and down, back and forth each way. His face was tilted down as his eyes watched the floor sway all around as he rocked his head. If he had had the ability to stare at his feet for more than a couple seconds, he would have seen his feet and ankles shake in anticipation of his next toddle. In the fifteen minutes it had taken the two of us to make it from the auditorium to the locker room, most of the other counselors had helped their campers change and were already enjoying their pool time.

As we walked I noticed the large Camp Sunshine poster that hung in the entrance of the visitors center. The kids and counselors seemed to be having such an incredible time. The poster so clearly depicted the unforgettable experience I had expected to have as a volunteer counselor. However, during the first few hours of being a counselor, I was not able to get Logan to show a fraction of the excitement that the children in the picture displayed.

The complete silence teased me, bouncing off of every corner of the hallway. I was fully aware that Logan wasn’t able to respond to me with words and that responses of any form were few and far between, but I was sure that this chilling silence wasn’t bothering only me, even if Logan was unable to express it.

“Are you excited to go swimming, Logan?!” I chirped, shaking his hand ever so slightly to remind him that I was still there. I glared down at his matted blond hair as he continued to rock his head back and forth.

Logan offered me no response. I let out a sigh as I pushed through the big wooden door. As soon as it opened, an overwhelming steam poured out, carrying the strong scent of chlorine.

“I’m going to help you get your swimsuit on now, okay?” I boosted Logan up on the bench and unzipped the blue backpack his mom brought with him every morning. I pulled out his tiny, Hawaiian-flowered swim trunks as he continued to flail his arms and rock his head from side to side.

“Logan, I’m going to need you to sit still for me,” I instructed. I began to remove the ankle braces that his Cerebral Palsy required him to wear. I slid off his shorts and shirt. Then, almost as slowly as we walked, I wiggled him into his trunks. I, too, changed into my swimsuit, and we set out toward the pool, each step seeming slower than the last.

As soon as we left the locker room, the sound of crashing water and children’s shrieks zoomed past us. The humidity was almost unbearable. I looked down at Logan to see if he gave any signs of excitement like most of the campers did. For the first time all day, he stopped rolling his head back and forth and instead glared at the shallowest part of the water, still keeping his head down. I could feel his grasp tighten and his little palm become sweaty. I remembered reading in Logan’s chart that he had an intense fear of water.

I knelt down in front of him so we were at the same level. As I reached for his other hand, I tried to meet his eyes.

“It’s going to be okay,” I promised.

However, despite my effort to calm him down, Logan quickly went into hysterics. His frown reached all the way down to his chin as he wailed and stomped his feet.

“Logan, Logan, calm down, you’re going to be—”

I was cut off by screams and cries as Logan’s face turned bright red and his flailing became uncontrollable. After about a minute of violent bawling, he plopped right down on the ground, still ten feet from the slightest bit of water, and refused to move.

Defeated, I called over my unit head, Rebecca, and relayed the past few minutes.

“It’s okay,” she assured me, “no one has ever been able to get Logan to even touch the water.” She suggested that instead we take a walk around the recreation center until it was time for our next rotation.

I pushed back through the big wooden door, changed Logan back into his clothes, and we began to walk, one slow step after another, back towards the auditorium.

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Logan W. (Male)
Age: 9
I read over Logan's chart again and again, trying to figure out who this kid was and how I, young and inexperienced as I was, would be able to keep this child safe, let alone give him an enjoyable week. I had been looking forward to the week that I would get to volunteer at Camp Sunshine for months. However, now that it was here, all I could think about was the possibility that I wouldn't be able to handle this little boy and provide all the assistance he would require.

I focused in on one specific set of words from his chart: *Agenesis of the Corpus Callosum*. It sounded completely foreign to me.

“How will I be able to take care of a kid if I can’t even begin to comprehend all of the conditions he has?” I puzzled.

So, when I got home that day, I went straight to the computer to look into Logan’s disabilities. I read through article after article trying to find something that would help me comprehend the complicated effects of his condition. Unfortunately, there is no way to simplify a disease where one is missing part of their brain.

“There is no way I am going to be able to help this child! I have no idea how to communicate with him, let alone make him smile,” I muttered to myself.

I shoved the computer off my lap and trudged toward my bedroom as I quietly listed to myself all the strategies that they taught us counselors during our brief “training” session. After repeating the list to myself three or four times to ensure that I wouldn't forget anything, I packed a bag for my first day of volunteering and fell into bed. For what felt like hours, my eyes peered straight up at the ceiling, analyzing every inch of the darkness, before finally becoming too heavy to stay open.

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As we walked back to the auditorium the stench of chlorine still filled my nose. Everything I had feared about being Logan’s counselor had been true. Within the first hour that I was responsible for him, he had already had a major meltdown. We continued to wander between the locker room and the auditorium, but this time I did not try to break the silence, nor did I distress when it surrounded both me and Logan in an overwhelming chill.

After another twenty minutes of aimless walking as Logan continued to roll his head back and forth, the halls filled with counselors and their campers, laughing and skipping to their next activity. Falling into the crowd, Logan and I made our way toward the gymnasium for sports. Through the glass windows I could see children of all different ages and all different ability levels playing on scooters, dribbling basketballs, and playing catch with the counselors they had already grown to love.

Suddenly I realized that sports were another thing Logan didn’t have the ability or desire to do. He couldn’t hold a bat, kick a ball, or balance on a scooter. How was he ever going to enjoy gym? But, even though I was sure there was nothing I could do to provide Logan with the camp experience I had hoped to give him, I led him over to the bleachers and handed him a raggedy foam ball. To my surprise, Logan grasped the red, torn-up, piece of foam in his plump, tiny palms, and stared at it for a few seconds. His head stopped rocking and his eyes focused on the melon sized ball. Logan was truly intrigued, despite the ball’s clear imperfections.

My head shot up in order to see if anyone else had witnessed it. I felt a surge of energy burst through me as I peered all around the room hoping to lock eyes with just one other person with whom I could share this feeling. As I began to realize that everyone else was occupied with their own camper, I felt Logan’s hand reach for mine. His left hand was still wrapped around the ball as he hugged it to his chest. I kept my hand in the open position which he had left it in as he once again grasped the tattered ball in both of his little hands. As he set the foam ball in my hands I began to focus less on the tears and faults that I had used to label the ball previously, and allowed myself to see the vibrancy of its color which was radiating throughout the room. Similarly, I noticed my view of Logan begin to shift as well.

Logan hesitated for just a second before removing his own hands from the ball, and returned to his head-rocking and arm-flailing.

“Thank you, Logan!” I exclaimed, my smile stretching from ear to ear. As soon as I had the chance to look up from the ball, Logan had already begun to wander off. I leaped in front of him even though I knew he could not get very far.

“Want to run around?” I asked, kneeling down to his eye level.
Logan didn’t give much response, but for the first time, I didn’t let that discourage me. I jumped up and went to stand behind him, offering him both of my hands. He reached each of his hands up to grab both of my pointer fingers.

I leaned down and whispered in his ear, “Are you ready, bud?”

I took his lack of response or hesitation as a yes, and I hastily began to walk. Logan’s petite feet plunged forward with every one of my steps. What I was considering a brisk walk was his version of a full-on sprint. Each of our steps were perfectly in sync and made surprisingly loud noises, contrasting Logan’s small size. When we had reached the other end of the gymnasium, I looked down at Logan, unable to hide the pure excitement that was on my face, to see that his expression mirrored my own. His eyes were wider than I’d ever seen them, and his grin, which was usually straight and plain, had shifted into a glistening beam. His breathing was heavy and made a faint noise, which resembled a laugh.

Before I could say anything, he began charging forward once more, dragging me behind him. I could not help but giggle as this nine year old little boy yanked me across the gym as if I were the one who loved to walk slowly. After three or four more laps around the gym, it was once again time for us to move on to our next station.

We exited the gym, hand in hand. Logan returned to rocking his head back and forth and flailing his right hand. His steps were still slow and shaky and he still didn’t respond to me when I spoke to him, but I didn’t let this stop me from speaking.

“How about we try the pool one more time?” I asked.

We once again walked toward the locker room, changed into our suits and pushed through the door into the aquatic center. I could feel Logan’s hand tense up the same way I had before but this time when I told him everything would be alright, I actually believed it because this time I knew I could help him. One slow, hesitant step at a time, we stepped toward the water. Five feet from the edge of the pool, Logan, still flailing his right hand, tilted his head up at me. Even though he never met me with his eyes, I knew what he was trying to say.

“It’s okay, Logan,” I promised. “It’s going to be okay.”

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When I came home that day I fell onto the couch and grabbed my laptop before my mom had the chance to say anything to me. I pulled up the Camp Sunshine website and clicked on the volunteer tab. With my calendar in my lap, I already began writing in the dates for next Summer’s session.
Dad hang on, don’t let go, daaaaaad! This whole bundle of messed up crap started when my dad got a free vacation to Bahamas from work. We packed up and headed to the airport and the flight left the ground at 5:00am. When we got to Nassau, Paradise Island, we jumped on the shuttle to the hotel, only to arrive to a...Best Western. My dad checked in and the lady at the counter gave a friendly smile, “Second floor. Room twelve. Thank you and enjoy your visit.”

When we got to the room, I was surprised to view the Caribbean blue water and bright white sand beach. On the way in, my dad grabbed a brochure for the activities on the island. The front cover, in dark red bolded letters, read: Deep Sea Fishing.

“That looks fun,” I jumped onto the bed nearest the window and gazed across the ocean. I always fish at home, but the biggest fish I ever caught was a merely ten pounds.

“That sounds like fun skipper,” my dad actually appeared happy for once. We walked to the docks where the boat was and met the owner and started for the ocean. About an hour after our conversation, we were to the ten miles from the nearest beach and casted the lines. To say we had good luck would have been an understatement; we caught all sorts of fish: grouper, red snapper, and bonefish. We even saw a small hammer head shark. Then, the clouds got really dark and it started raining. The next thing, I knew we were in a thunder and lightning storm. The boat was rocking violently because of the waves. I looked out and there was a big wave bigger than the boat. The owner ran as fast as he could to the controls.

My dad’s frightened hand reached out to me, “Hold on as tight as possible!” The boat owner floored the engine, but it was too late. The wave swept us up and dunked us into the shark ravaged waters. I could hear the screams of a man yelling as he was drowning. My stomach dropped as my body began to surrender to the ocean. I looked out and there was a big wave bigger than the boat. The owner ran as fast as he could to the controls.

With all the water overtaking our vessel, a piece of metal flew in and knocked me out. When I woke up, I was shocked to see I was not in the water. I got my bearings straight and looked out and saw, land. I walked around and there was a little mountain with trees going all the way up.

I thought of three things: Dad, the boat, and survival.

I look around to see if I could see the boat. I couldn’t find it. Back home in Virginia we would go camping every now and then, but this is nothing alike. My stomach was growling with hunger; I looked at the water and saw some little fish. I felt my Kershaw Pocket knife in right pants pocket I always kept it sharp as Ninjas katana. Looked at my wrist to find my military grad watch. I wondered in the tree line a little bit and found a stick about four and a half feet I wiped out my knife and started and whittling away to make a spear. About an hour later it was really pointy I made four prongs in it like I’d seen on Survivor Man. I walked out in the water until it reached my knees I saw little fish until a big old fish came along. I cocked my arm back targeting the fish and swung my arm and released and it missed the fish. I went to retrieve the spear.

I decided that I might want to find a place to sleep. Walking down the beach I found a spot about fifty yard from where I landed on the island it, it was under a bunch of brush. One time when I watching Survivor Man he was on a little island and said you don’t want to sleep on the ground there’s, crabs, bugs, and a bunch of other stuff that can bite the shit out of you. I walked in the trees to find bamboo everywhere I didn’t think it grow in the tropics but whatever. I thought of cutting it with my knife I put it in the base of the bamboo but it didn’t budge. “Crap!” I said

I have to find a sharp rock, I scurried around to find one. Once I did I started hacking away ten minutes later I got cut down and I was dragging it to Fort Necessity. (The shelter is now called Fort Necessity). I tried to make a bed out of the bamboo. I was cutting down two more

When I was this huge crab walking around on the ground I grabbed my makeshift spear and ran over to it analyzed it for a second before spearing it. I aimed for the top of the crab, cocked my arm back and released. I
picked it and walked it back to Necessity. The crab was put by my not finished bed. I went back to hacking at the bamboo and an hour later I had four more cut and laid them out and aligned them to make a makeshift mattress.

I walked around gathering palm tree leaves. I had two arm full of leaves and wonders back the fort and on the way I was listening to my stomach scream I hadn’t eaten in nine hours. When I got back I spread the leaves over the bed and laid down to see how to felt and it was ok, it wasn’t my mattress at home. By this time it was getting dark and I was really tired, I laid down and went through a little checklist on what to do, food, water, and fire. I was asleep by the time I said fire. The next morning I could really hear my stomach growling I looked at the crab and thought “I’m gonna to eat you!”

I was walking up and down the beach to see if I could find stuff to make this hell hole a little better. I figured rescue might come in at least two more days. I was skimming over some plastic bottles when I looked down the beach and saw a big object I looked a little harder and saw “it’s the boat!” I screamed.

I took off running and when I got to it was trashed but I could still use something. I climbed up and went inside to the cabin to try and find stuff what I saw a radio! I ran over to it and tried to turn it on when. Nothing! I was so about to punch the wall when I look to my left and see the captain of the boat he was dead and I couldn’t stand to see him. I was trying to search for stuff as fast as possible. I opened a closet and found a lighter and a pack of cigarettes I took the lighter and searched some more and found a knife and a couple bottles of water. I ran out trying to avoid the captain. I walked back to the camp and sat down I took a small nap which was two hours. When I got up I stretched and wondered to find wood. About twenty yards in I found a fallen dead tree and I brought the knife with me and took off all the dead branches. I hauled them back to the fort and piled them on each other I took the lighter out and took a hand full of leaves and put the flames to the leaves and Walla fire.

I looked at the crab and smiled and thought dinner. I found a sticks and broke the crabs shell or whatever to get to the middle and saw all the juicy meat. I put it on a stick hovered it over the fire and waited till it looked done. It surprisingly got me full and a good night sleep. The next day I woke up with my back killing me I could barely move.” I got to get more padding!’ I said.

I wondered in the woods looking for stuff I could use. When I felt really dizzy I was also really thirsty I guess after three days I would need water. I figured there had to be a stream or something with fresh water. I thought of the boat and guessed the captain would get thirsty out on the water. About an hour of stumbling I got the and something caught my eye. There was something dangling on the side of the boat it was my dad’s dog tags barely hanging onto the side of the boat. I could think of all his Marine Corps buddies back home. I grabbed them and instantly thought of my dad letting go and vanishing. A small tear rolled down the side of my face, followed by a lot more. I put them around my neck and climbed up on the boat once in I looked around and in the same closet there was two bottles of water I must have missed but I opened one and chugged it in less than fifteen seconds and saved the other. I still saw the captain laying there and had bad thoughts. I thought about searching his body for a phone but I knew if there was on that it wouldn’t work, then I faintly heard the sound of an engine like a plane or something. I rushed out and saw a boat I jumped and down and waving my arms like a maniac. Then the plane vanishes my heart sank about as deep as the fish we caught.

Fourteen days since the freight boat came and I was just sitting in the bed depressed thinking I’m not going to leave this hell on earth. The island was like a hot girl beautiful to the eyes but evil as day so pissed at the world it gave me motivation to move. I started to get the fire back catching some crabs and searching for water. The quest for water became key I walked in the woods at least five hundred yards and found nothing the next thing I know I’m a mile in and still nothing I started walking back when I see a glint off something I looked close and it was water I stuck my face in the shallow stream I was super thirsty I had 4 bottles and filled them all up. I looked up at the mountain and was amazed at the beauty of it. I walked back to the fort and when I got there I was shocked there was 4 men with bright orange vest looking at my camp I looked at the and said “hello.”

“Holy crap it’s him,” said one of them.
I didn’t know what to say so I said, “Do you guys want some water?”

They just looked at me in disbelief that it was actually me. one asked “are you Nathan Hathock.” we’ve been looking for the three of you for three weeks.”

“Is there anyone else?”
“No just me sadly, the captain is still in the boat down the beach.”
“Okay thanks, now let’s get you out of here!”

Entered the hell hole and came out which was a relief. When I got home there was news vans covering the yard? I was invited on news channels and stuff like that. I had come out of that place and was thankful for it.
Our life is fairly peaceful here. The boys go to Belmont elementary, and their teachers say they are both nice, smart boys. Justin plays soccer, and Anthony dreams of being a quarterback. I stay home and look after the house; I clean, and I cook wholesome meals for the boys. We are, in a sense, completely content.

Their father’s name was also Justin. He was so successful, so loved, until he died. The hospital told me a bird pecked and pecked away at him until he passed away.

The only complaint I have regarding our life is that the boys sometimes do not perform to the family standard. The Miserias come from a long line of success; my father went to Oxford, his father went to Oxford, and his father before him went to Oxford. My father once said the only good Miseria is a perfect Miseria. Thus I started the boys ACT training when Justin was entering the 3rd grade and Anthony the 1st. It’s all just so competitive nowadays, so competitive. I only did what a good mother would have done.

Justin scored a 6 on his first ACT. I was concerned because that was not up to the family standard. I asked him why he had done so poorly. He told me he didn’t like taking tests, he told me he was hungry, cold, and tired. The ancestors told me he would become more sensible with time; they told me he would change.

Did I tell you that I beat them too? Sometimes I beat them softly, sometimes I beat them hard. Sometimes I beat them until my own hand blisters and bleeds from holding the switch. No matter how much I beat them, they do not change. No matter how much I beat them they are no smarter; their grades do not rise, and their scores do not improve.

They tell me what to do, the ancestors. Some days I am so busy listening to them that I forget to feed the boys. That’s always a pity because when they are hungry the boys test poorly. The ancestors tell me the Miserias come from a long line of success.

Everyone always wants to know about October the 28th, so I recall memories that do not seem that significant to me. October 28th was just a normal day.

The boys were in the back yard. That’s where they go to practice sports when they aren’t working on grades and scores. When I walked onto the patio they were not practicing sports. The boys were huddled under the dead spruce tree. Anthony’s head rested, eyes shut, on his brother’s back, while Justin squatted low to the ground, his knees bent and bottom touching the ground. I watched in silence as Justin sat motionless, his eyes scanning the ground in front of him. I watched as grubby fingers snatched at the grass, and I watched as my son smashed a beetle between his fingers, and then licked his fingers clean. Justin, now digesting the beetle, looked up to me with a smile on his face. “Eight minutes is up,” I declared. Justin stopped smiling. I beckoned Justin and he stood slowly. Without his brother to lean on, Anthony slid to the grass where he continued to sleep, undisturbed. As Justin walked past me into the house I noticed a solid, dark streak down the back of his shirt. Anthony always drooled when he slept. The cold fall air had frozen the saliva.

I designed the inside of our house white: white walls, white tile floors, white shutters. White is, after all, my favorite color. It’s so easy to point out the smallest imperfection on a white surface. Our house has a small, homely kitchen with an oven, refrigerator and white, laminate counters. There is one rectangular table in the kitchen with one stool on one side, and two on the other. Other than the kitchen there is just a living room, bathroom and bedroom. There is no TV; there are no rugs, no posters, no paintings, no decorations, no curtains and not a single blemish. My grandfather once said that if there is a flaw in your house, it isn’t home.

We walked through the kitchen and Justin glanced at the refrigerator hopefully. The boy thinks too much about food and not enough about his work. As we approached the living room door Justin slowed to a stop. He turned away in desperation but I grabbed him by the neck, and opened the door with one hand while I heaved him in with the other. I slithered through the doorway and shut it behind me. I dragged Justin up from where he lay on the floor. His nose was bleeding. Pushing him aside, I breathed in the smell of Ammonia and glanced around the living room. White walls surrounded the room, and without windows the room felt disconnected from the outside world. Days could stretch past, but the living room would not change. There was only one door into the room, the one we had just entered through. A flicking light glinted off of two desks, which stood side by side. Behind them was a larger desk that rested on an elevated block. I had configured the room in this way...
fashion so that someone sitting at the elevated desk could see over the shoulder of someone working at one of the two smaller desks.

Justin sat down at one of the smaller desks. I smiled at him and he lowered his head in silent sobbing. “Don’t cry sweetheart,” I whispered in his ear, “It’s October the 28th remember?” Justin continued to cry and I began to circle the desk slowly, jabbing my head outward in a birdlike motion. Justin put his head on his desk and covered his head with his arms. “The ancestors told me you would get better in time.” I hissed. “The miserias come from a long line of success.” I watched Justin’s back shake as he wept. I shivered in delight. “Mommy loves you,” I whispered, “but if you get a 28 mommy will love you more.” With these words I dropped a pACT booklet in front of him. “Student, please flip you practice book to page 152. You may begin,” I declared in a formal tone. Justin looked up at me with red eyes, but I did not show any sympathy. “You may begin,” I repeated. I placed a large timer in front of him and sat down in the large desk. For two hours I peered over my son’s shoulder. I watched every bubble filled, I watched him read through passages, and struggle through math problems. I also watched as blood dripped out of his nose. For every three drops of blood a tear drop would fall from his cheek and sink into the page. His little frame trembled, and his hand shook as he wrote. Good, I thought, he’s nervous; they always perform better when nervous. I bobbed my head and chirped with pleasure. Finally Justin trudged over to my desk. He held up his answer sheet. He smiled pitifully as tears dried on his cheeks. I did not smile back, but instead began grading. Justin scored a 5 on the pACT. He tried to explain how he did know what phosphorous was, and that he didn’t understand how a square root works. He blabbed on that he was only 8, and that he wasn’t ready to take college entrance exams. I told him there are no excuses in the Miseria household. I told him that I did not love him, for I truly did not love him. A child’s fingers are as easy to break as baby carrots. Justin scored a 5 so I broke 5 baby carrots. As I did I told him about our ancestors. I told him he was letting his father down. Through his tears Justin told me I was like a bird, and that I pecked and pecked away at him. He said I flew above watching his every move, and poking at his every mistake. I cocked my head sideways and stared at my son. I was suddenly calm, and the ancestors guided my movements.

Justin now sits at his desk. He cannot smile, or laugh, or play. He cannot think about food or sleep. Justin just stares, unblinking, at an open pACT booklet. The bird has pecked him a little too hard.

I scooped up Anthony out of the grass. I wiped drool off of his face with my thumb. Anthony looked up to me as I cradled him and asked me what I had done to Justin. I smiled sweetly and said: “It’s just so competitive these days, so competitive. I only did what a good mother would have done.”
My arms ached and my heart pounded as I grasped for the wall that would signify the end of yet another rather taxing swim set. We were well past a quarter of the way into the swim season and I was still adjusting to the physical demand of our daily practices. I lifted my head above the water’s surface, closed my eyes, and leaned back, opening my airway and allowing my lungs to once again fill themselves with a few precious ounces of sweet oxygen.

My dazed bliss was cut short as I snapped upright, confused to see Ben standing at the head of our lane. Ben had just the week before decided to join the high school swim team. He was a year younger than I was, but had started off in a faster lane. This week he had dropped down to my lane, but I quickly realized that, quite frankly, he was still probably a little too slow, even for my lane. However, that wasn’t what I found surprising. What startled me was that I was sure I had passed him during the last set. In fact, everybody in my lane had. And yet, here he was, having skipped a lap and still intending to lead us into the next set whenever the clock decided to roll around again.

Everyone in my lane quickly detected what was going on. Here was this new guy who thought he was much better than the rest of us when he really wasn’t. None of us particularly liked Ben and yet, nobody really said anything. Taking the responsibility into my own hands, I waded on over, prepared to give him an earful.

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I was a scrawny sixth grader when I first started swimming at my local YMCA. Nevertheless, by the time sixth grade ended, my teammates lauded me as one of the faster butterflyers in my age group. Practice routine was welded into my mind: the dank odor of chlorine, stretches, warm-ups, sets, cool downs—every Wednesday, Friday and Sunday—with dry land sessions appended to every Friday and Sunday practice.

Seventh grade began and we had a new kid join our age group. The kid, Jerry, claimed to come from California, where he used to swim on a club team. My lane mates and I, aware of the knack California possessed for producing top tier swimmers, gladly allowed him into our lane, the fast lane.

Jerry sped through the pool like a torpedo the moment he touched the water on our first day of practice, leaving the rest of us in his wake as we made an effort to shrug away our summer stagnation. He was filled to the brim with some sort of explosive energy which the rest of us clearly lacked. Jerry seemed ever to be poking at my feet, a tacit gesture that he desired to pass on by. Nonetheless, even the most unperceptive of us realized by the end of the practice that Jerry struggled on the longer sets. Perhaps, as we later agreed, he had deceived us. Perhaps Jerry was not the sleek swimmer he claimed to be; rather, he simply seemed to be particularly poor at pacing himself. Indeed, his spastic strokes and poor technique seemed to indicate that this was the case.

As that first seemingly endless swim practice dragged on, I noticed Jerry beginning to burn out. Occasionally he turned around before hitting the wall just so he could maintain a well-defined lead ahead of us. Irritated as I was, I kept my mouth shut. After all, I didn’t know him, and it didn’t matter what he did as long as I pushed myself.

Practice wound to a close, and we got dressed for the dry land session that would conclude our day. Coach waited outside the locker room for us in order to direct the newcomers to the gymnasium and asked me to go back into the locker room to round up the stragglers.

Upon entering, my eyes happened upon an odd scene: Alex, one of my lane buddies, scrubbing vigorously at his water bottle, a look of deep-seated fury upon his brow, and Jerry, face red, standing off to the side repeatedly claiming, “I didn’t pee in it! I didn’t pee in it! I was joking!”

That was all I needed to hear.

“Jerry peed in Alex’s bottle!” I shouted, eager to be the one to deliver the hilarity, as I burst back into the hallway where the rest of my teammates waited.

The group of tweens could not contain themselves as they crumpled with laughter. Moments later, upon emerging from the locker room door, Alex and Jerry were met with an uproar. Their countenances reversed.
The shouts filtered into chuckles directed toward the tomato red Alex, and jeers, which were aimed at the scowling Jerry.

“Wow, that’s gross.”
“Why would you do that?”
“Burn that bottle if you can, Alex.”
“Sickening.”

The rest of the night passed in much the same way, with snickers exchanged between pushup sets, looks of disapprobation sent Jerry’s way, and Jerry’s futile attempts to convince us that he was innocent. That night, Jerry could not find a partner to count his pushups or hold his feet down during his sit ups.

At the next practice, Alex showed up with a new water bottle. Jerry did not show up at all, nor did he at any other practice thereafter. Only then did I realize the extent of what I had done. With only a snapshot of the situation that did not concern me, I had taken a stance with Alex based solely on the fact that I liked Alex and disliked Jerry. And why didn’t I like Jerry? Was it because he was too obsessed with proving himself to be a worthy swimmer? In trying to milk a few laughs off of their situation, I had created the rumor that moved him to quit something he was truly passionate about. For lack of a better term, I was a bully. I was a bully and I was horrified.

***

As I waded towards Ben at the head of our lane, I realized that my caustic remarks would do nothing to loosen the hold of one who grasps his pride too closely to his heart. Just like with Jerry, my words would only alienate Ben from the team and force him to build another line of defense, distancing him further from the swimmer he wished to become. Only encouragement could help him break that false illusion of empty pride and recognize the type of satisfaction that hard work truly engenders. As I approached Ben, I felt my lane mates’ eyes trained on me, their ears waiting to hear what I would say.

“Hey, Ben! First week sucks, doesn’t it?” I managed to squeeze out, between gasps of breath.
“Sure does.” Ben was leaning on the wall, arms crossed, breathing heavily.
“Keep it up, man.”
“Thanks.”
She would take a brownie from the plate that was being passed around, and then hide it in her purse. She would flip over food packages to check the nutrition labels on the back. “Calories” was the only word she saw.

Her clothes became looser; extra space suddenly materialized within them. People would come up to her with worries, but she ignored every single one of them. I saw it all happen.

The worst part is that I told myself I didn’t.

Even when I got the news, I still didn’t believe it. She was in the hospital because she had lost too much weight, but of course, it wasn’t an eating disorder. “She hadn’t done it on purpose,” I told myself, as if that somehow made a difference.

She was just trying to eat healthier, right? She just needed to learn how to eat. I mean, accidents like this one happen all the time, right?

Right?

To this day I ask myself whether I would have finally come to terms with reality if I hadn’t seen her on that day at the hospital.

She looked sick. Her eyes were sunk into her skull, and below them, purple bruise-like marks stained her skin. Her cheeks were hollow like she was permanently sucking them in. I hadn’t realized how skinny she had gotten until that moment, as if the crimson wheelchair somehow made her legs look smaller, as if the hospital lights made her seem paler. Was it the hospital bed that made her bones more protruding? Had she lost even more weight since the last time I had seen her?

Her pajama pants hung so loosely from her legs that no one would have believed they actually belonged to her. Those legs, unable to fill the fabric, were the same ones that didn’t look strong enough to make her stand. They were probably as thick as my arms, and her arms half of that. When had they started looking like that?

I had too many questions in mind to even decide which one held priority, but of course, I asked none. My body, like hers, was in survival mode—trying with every single effort not to show weakness, clinging unto every tear that I had.

Even her blonde hair looked thinner.

The worst part was her weak smile, her failed attempt to let us know that everything was okay. Despite of it, I knew that the only thing that remained the same were her eyes, with that beautiful tint of blue they had always carried.

As she talked, I could not take my eyes off the wheelchair she was sitting in. I hated her red wheelchair just like I hate the lights in the dressing room of a clothing store, showing me manipulated versions of myself. With dimmed lights, the mirror of a dressing room always shows me what I want to see, giving me every reason to buy the dress. The crimson wheelchair did the exact opposite. It exposed her, showing me everything I didn’t want to see in her, and I hated it for it. I blamed everything on that stupid piece of metal because I couldn’t come to the conception of the situation being real. It made no sense that I hadn’t seen the change happen before my eyes when she sat next to me in class every single day. There was no reasonable explanation as to why I hadn’t seen it—why I hadn’t stopped it.

When I had heard she had fallen into an eating disorder, I started researching, trying to understand the complex mentality of it. One article had said that some people who suffer from anorexia often don’t know it. They don’t notice the major body changes until their mind is free, or in more unfortunate cases, until it is far too late. I wondered if it was possible for that symptom to become contagious. Had my eyes become numb? Had they become immune to noticing her changing? Was that the reason why I hadn’t seen it? That was just one more question that arose only to remain unanswered.

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I looked around—at the paintings taped to the door, at the painted tiles that decorated the ceiling, at the hospital bed—and when I was done my eyes followed that same pattern again. And again. Over and over. I would have looked at a blank wall for hours if it had meant I didn’t have to look at her.
Never having been good at small talk, I remained silent, feeling guilty about it too, even when in the back of my mind I knew I had no reason to.

I didn't feel connected to anything around me, as if I was observing everything from an outside perspective. I was just an observer, a narrator, an author, analyzing every single detail of the scene without being able to experience it in its entirety. The other girls talking became a background noise; I didn't feel like I had the ability to join the conversation. I saw my reflection on the computer screen in front of me, but I was sure that if I stood up and walked towards it I wouldn't be able to touch it. I could describe its dull smooth surface all day long, but I couldn't feel it. My mind was dealing with so many things at once that placing myself in reality had become an unimportant task. My senses seemed to be shut down because my brain was focused on trying to piece together every moment I had spent with Anne in the past few months. The comments about her thighs. Her sudden strict exercise routine. The way she looked as if her legs were going to give out when she ran.

Her hand woke me up. My hand had been resting on the arm rest, and she placed hers there too. Her fingers brushed mine only slightly, but that was all it took.

I was sure that if my hands had ever been that cold, I hadn't felt it because they would have already gone numb. Physically feeling something didn't clear my mind however, instead, my thoughts split into many different sides. Hug her or walk out of the room. Scream or cry. Say you love her or ask her why.

Of course, I did nothing. I just remained still.

I wish I could say I felt sad, but I didn’t. I wish I could say I felt something other than angry, but that would be lying. I was mad - annoyed at the world for not noticing it earlier, mad at her for doing that to herself, and furious at my own self for being so inhumanely selfish.

I couldn’t swallow the fact that one of the friends which I considered the closest to me was in the hospital with anorexia because that meant I hadn’t noticed it earlier. And that turned into a snowball. If I hadn't noticed it, then I wasn’t as close to her as I thought I was. If I wasn’t close with someone who I considered to be my best friend, was I close with anyone at all? And if my friendship with her wasn’t as steady and firm as I thought, was anything in my life really?

I needed that friendship. I needed her, and it was not only necessary for her to be around, but to be well. To be perfect, almost. One of the many things I thought of Anne was that she was reliable. Stable. She would always be there when I needed someone to kick my emotional self back into place and make me think like a grown up. I couldn't have her need me because I needed her.

But maybe Anne and I could need each other at the same time, and maybe no one is perfect, and maybe life is just one more thing that isn’t perfect, and timing isn’t either. And as much as I wanted it to be, it wouldn’t. Not in that moment, and to be honest, probably not ever. Could that be enough for me? Could I allow myself to savor every imperfection? Or would I forever feel the need to package my life into the neat rectangular box I had created for it?
By this time in my life, piano competitions were like brushing my teeth, expected, routine, and if you continued to do it, you got better at it—much better. I don’t want to say that I was world-weary at this point, but while all the other little “greenies” were bopping around the concert hall with their dog-eared music, I had in my ear buds listening to one of my favorite songs, “Fireflies” by Owl City. You might say that I was a cool cucumber in a hallway filled with nervous nellies.

Every now and then I would play my “air piano” like one of the guys would play his guitar, making sure that I had the insane runs all worked out not only in my head but also through my fingers. One mistake everybody makes is that they don’t play with the heart. They use their brain and play from rote memorization. Their songs sound tinny and mechanized. But me, I play where it really matters. My music comes from deep inside me. I go to a place that I can only access when my fingers hit the ivories. It’s like someone else takes over and I am just an observer. I play with a passion and it’s as if Beethoven is actually waltzing around my piano with his Elise.

“Kaitlyn Leigh, you’re up.” I had to pull all my crap together in two seconds. Easily done. This wasn’t my first rodeo. The piano gods were giving me a pep talk. You got this. You’ve been playing for six years; these noobs have been playing for a few months. And remember play with the heart, it makes the music sing and dance. Play like you’re sitting in the living room and no one’s watching.

Walking into the room was like walking down a cat walk. The whole time I was thinking don’t fall, I swear if you fall that’ll be the end of it. Thanks conscience, nice pep talk. I finally made my way to the piano. I pull out the bench with ease. Sit upright, hands locked and loaded. My hands were shaking, not from nerves, but with excitement. I had to pull myself back from tearing into my first piece.

The judge looks really familiar. Where have I seen him before? Think. Think. Oh my God. That’s, that’s -- it’s James Huffy, world renowned pianist. He’s the guest judge whose identity has been under wraps until this point. He’s the most uptight judge known to mankind. He’s known for picking apart a piece and focusing on the dynamics, tempo, and expression of the musical selection. I begin to question my pianist skills, but I couldn’t stop here. I had to erase these negative thoughts and concentrate on Beethoven. I inhale deeply and exhale. Count myself off in my head like somebody is directing me. My hands tremble once more but with overflowing passion. I begin.

I begin my musical selections with Sonata in F Minor—very fast and upbeat. Bouncy and bright, this style was played during the Renaissance period. It was over before I knew it and in the end I am breathing heavily, hands in the air and a smile on my face.

Fur Elise was an entirely different story. I catch my breath from Sonata and attempt to slow my breathing and my racing heart. Breathing in and out, I slowly and delicately rest my hands and fingers on the keys. Ok here we go; you’ve played this song over and over and over again. You know it like you know the lines in your piano teacher’s face. Just believe in yourself and let it flow off your fingers into the piano and let the spirits waltz around the judge. OK, let’s go.

My right hand begins to move over the keys in a slow and methodical way, just as they have thousands of times before. As my fingers glide up and down with expression I feel it. I can feel Beethoven and Elise just flowing around me like wind through my hair. I felt like Pocahontas when she’s standing up on the hill with the leaves and winding cascading around her. But as the song gets deeper and deeper, sadder and sadder. I can actually see their spirits now. Elise was becoming ill, she was on bed rest and Beethoven was watching over her and with his constant caretaking she begins to get better and the music becomes brighter. But this is only false hope because Elise cannot escape the grip of death. The music slows down and her ending is tragic and depressing. You could feel the weight on his shoulders. You could feel his emotions drop. You could feel his loss.

The piece ended and you could hear a pin drop in the concert hall. Silence enveloped me, I was still in the zone. I awoke from my reverie. My eyes were glued on my reflection, shown on the piano. I could see movement out of the corner of my eye. I dare not look over at him. Judges despise it when a contestant eyes them in hopes of increasing their score.
Suddenly I hear a...clap? My head jerks to the right and I stare right at him. He is standing and bringing his hands together in what seems like an appreciation for my piece. He is actually clapping? He looks at me with a smile on his face. I swear I never knew this man actually had a smile in his heart.

“That was beautiful my dear! Absolutely outstanding!”

“Thank you for listening,” I say politely, give him a slight nod in appreciation, and walk out with a grin from ear to ear.
I stay crouched on the cold, solid tile floor. I had finally snapped; I couldn’t take it anymore. Everything had come crashing down, the bullying, the abuse, and finally my own self harm. When I cut myself it was as if it was a relief. The blade glinting off the sun and resting on my wrist was my own form of self-control. I say when things happen. I say when the blade makes its mark. Nobody else, just me. I am finally in control.

The laughing and pointing was too much for me. I resorted to self-harm. My mother didn't know, she hardly paid any attention to me. She was always at the tavern down the street, doing god-knows-what. When she was home, she would either resort to verbal abuse or what I hated most, the physical abuse. Blood would drip down my nose and onto the floor, and if I didn’t clean it up immediately, more punches came.

Nobody understands what it's like to be me. They think my life is fun and games, when really it’s just a day filled with horrors and tormenting to come home to the comfort of my blades. But the horrifying part is when my father comes home. He is the reason my mom beats me, curses at me, and makes me bleed.

“Nevaeh, I asked you a question.”

I pop my head up from the top of my books. Evidently I had fallen asleep during Geo. I wiped the slobber that slipped from my mouth to my textbook, kind of shook my head, and said, “I'm sorry, Miss Stonehouse, will you repeat the question?”

“Instead of repeating the question, how about you go to the principal's office and let him know that you can’t stay awake during my class.”

“Christ,” I say under my breath.

“And watch that attitude.” I roll out of my chair and leave the classroom feeling annoyed and dismayed.

Across the hallway I saw my best friend, Harmony in the bathroom.

“Hey Nev, where are you heading off to?”

“I got sent to Mr. Hughes' office, because I fell asleep in Miss Stonehouse’s class again, and again.” And she just laughs hysterically.

“Hey, you wanna get out of here?” Harmony says with a devious smile.

“More than anything.” I wink back at her and I head to my locker to get my jacket. I'll put in an appearance at the office, but I have another plan in mind.

We ended up at Wendy’s, a couple blocks away from the school. and Harmony looks at me, like she's examining the way I'm kind of squirming in my seat.

"Nevaeh, are you ok? You look like you shit your pants, you're wiggling so much."

"No, my back is killing me. It hurts like hell." I said scrunching my face from the pain. "I have to piss, I'm gonna go to the bathroom." I head to the bathroom with a hand over my back to soothe the stinging sensation shooting up and down my back. I look at my back in the filthy bathroom mirror. Cut and bruises all different shades of green, yellow and purple. I reach to touch one when Harmony bursts through the door with a face full of shock and worry. Her eyes are overflowing with tears.

"Nevaeh, wh-wh-what h-h-happened?" she walks towards me with open arms and sympathy. And I just let it all out. I tell her everything about the abuse, bullying, and self-harm.

I don’t know exactly when the abuse started with my father. He used to come in and read me bedtime stories. I loved that – I really loved that. I had all of his attention and no one could come and take that away. I was his fairy princess. That’s what he used to call me. Until one night, he was a little closer than usual. His breath reeked of alcohol and he was in his work clothes. The stories would get shorter and shorter and the nights would get longer and longer. After that, days would become weeks and weeks into months, I was so far in that I didn’t even realize it anymore.

He touches me in all the wrong places. The way he enjoys it so much, makes me even more revolted. He trails his fingers up and down my abdomen with a smile across his face, pure joy. I plead him to stop with tears
descending down my flush cheeks, but he keeps me hostage. He verbally threatens to tell everyone that I am a -- I can’t even say the word without crying.

I woke up that morning feeling like trash. I think it was my body telling me that it had enough of all the wrongs. I needed to do something. I didn’t have anyone I could turn to. It was time I told somebody, I built up all my courage just to have it broken down again by the sluts at my school. They tease me about the cuts and scars slashed on my wrists, and the bruises slapped across my back and cascading down my arms. I walked around school all day with my head down, my arms bruised and beaten, my legs and abdomen fragile and easily shattered. Dragging along my lost ego.

I woke up the same the next day and the day after that. Harmony tried to talk to me but I just shut her out. I did the same when the teacher called on me multiple times, she finally told me to go to the counselor. I stumble down the vacant hallway and arrive at the counselor’s office. I give three quiet knocks and you see a skinny, prune, lipstick smearing old lady open the door and invite me in.

"Now Nevaeh, what's wrong?"

Complete silence.

"Nevaeh I can't help you if you give me the cold shoulder."

"Maybe I don't want help. Maybe I want to be left alone." I say in a harsh tone. And with that she gives me a pass and I leave.

Later that night, the house was quiet and still. My mouth was dying for something to drink. I stumble down the hall, still half asleep, when my dad comes home. You could smell the stench of whisky from a mile away. He halls his drunken body over to me and practically breathes on me,

"How about you and I go have some midnight fun in the bedroom?" I look away, his breath was melting my eyes.

"No, this has to end." I couldn't even call him dad without throwing up.

He give me a look, like he's hurt. Within seconds that changes to anger. He hoists me up over his shoulder, I beat and kick to try and escape but he doesn't budge. He throws me down on the bed, hard. He strips me like a Barbie, then his clothes are scattered across the floor. Before he could get into the bed I leap out as fast as I could and head straight for the kitchen. I could feel the house trembling, or was it just me? I knew he was following me, so I searched fast. Luckily in the third drawer there was the emergency hand gun.

"Gotcha! Hahahahaha." he grabs me forcefully from behind, and spins me around so I could face him.

"Why are you shaking my little princess? I'm not going to hurt you." He starts taking me back to the bedroom, within seconds we're back in the bed and he touches me and kisses my body like he's never hurt me before. I slowly pull the gun from under my pillow and I do what guns are supposed to do. Kill animals. So I shot him, right in the middle of his forehead. I peeled his body off mine and went to the kitchen to get the phone.

I dial 9-1-1.

"9-1-1 what's your emergency?"

"I just shot, my dad." I said with no emotion or expression on my face.

"Ok, what's your address?"

"14328 Howe Lane, in Fox Hill neighborhood."

"We'll send someone right away."

I get some clean pajamas on and wait for the police on my front porch, wrapped in my favorite blanket. Of course when they arrive, they ask many questions.

"Miss, tell me again why you shot him?" Officer Luke asked me.

"He was about to rape me again." I say looking at the ground.

"Again? There were times before this?" he says with a concerned look.

"Yes."

"Ok, thank you well take care of things from here." he nods his head and closes the car door.

I look out the police car window at the commotion inside my house. I don’t know what is going to happen from here, I think, wiping away tears, but I know now that I am free.
Flurries of white catch in the wind, spinning and twirling in an elegant dance of frosty cold before landing soundlessly on the cracked pavement. White, as far as the eye can see. It blanketed the grass and stuck to the dying bark of the trees flanking the road on either side, curving inward overhead like clawed hands. White in the sky, white on the ground, white everywhere in between. White, white, white.

Except there. A solitary splash of color where the road’s middle would be. The white was there too, yes. It gathered on the bright red coat, speckled the little black gloves, clung to the blonde ringlets of hair that splayed out like a halo. Sad blue eyes gazed up at the sky, searching for something. A siren sounded in the distance.

There is more color further up the road; too much color. The crushed metal, shattered glass, sharp tang of burnt rubber, broken tree. Crimson. Crimson everywhere. Dripping from the dashboard, pooling on the floor, leaking into the sea of white below. The siren got closer. A single tear escaped. The blue eyes closed. White.
“Mirror, mirror, on the wall, I should’ve known that I would fall.” The marble countertop was cool under my callused palms. I gazed intently at the drain, blurrily watching as my tears disappeared into the gaping darkness. I cannot bear to look at myself. I know what I will see.

“Mirror, mirror, made of glass, help me to erase my past.” Memories scratch and claw inside my skull, not wishing to escape, but merely demanding for their pain to be felt. I look to the window, where moonlight illuminates the raindrops that gather there. The light creeps across the floor, discarded heels casting twin shadows on the tiles.

“Mirror, mirror, pure and clear, tell me where to go from here.” My mind is a foreign place, and my trembling body betrays me. Gently, gently, I allow my fingertips to explore the tender places on my wrist. Marks were already taking shape, and pain radiates from the paths my fingers traced moments before. I choke back a sob, knowing what these markings signify. I cast an accusing glance at those five ugly, traitorous indentations, feeling for the matching ones at my throat.

“Mirror, mirror, oh clear abyss, how did it all come to this?” Is it my fault? Did I trust too much, love too much? Did I hold on to something that no longer existed? It didn’t used to be this way, and it never should have been. You promised. The sobs escape now, much too loud. I clap my hands over my mouth, sending up a prayer that I was not heard. I wait in silence, but am sure that even if my cries didn’t reach his ears, my heartbeat is undoubtedly deafening enough to shake the frames off the walls. What was that noise? I hold my breath. BAM! Two angry hands slammed loudly into the wooden door. I whirled around, scrambling backward until my bare legs met the counter. The doorknob began twisting violently against the lock.

“Baby, please! I didn’t mean it.” The frantic twisting continued. “Honey, open the door. Please open the door, baby. I love you! I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” I can’t breathe. It’s as if his hand is at my throat again. Hot tears spill uncontrollably down my cheeks now, but I am soundless.

“Baby,” his voice is no longer desperate or pleading, but cold and serious, “open the door. Now.” The door shakes as he rams his body into it, but holds strong. He throws himself against it, again and again. “Fuck you!” he shrieks, enraged, “You’re dead, do you hear me? You are dead!”

“Mirror, mirror, so clean and light, tell me, will I survive this night?” Just as sudden as they began, the screams come to a stop.

He speaks calmly, menacingly, “I love her more than you, anyway. She’s more fun. Not broken, like you.” He pauses; laughs. “You should’ve seen your stupid face when you walked in! I wasn’t expecting you home so early! Not like it matters.”

“Why doesn’t it matter?” I ask quietly.

He waits. I can almost feel his smugness through the door. “No matter what I do to you, we both know you’ll never leave me.”

I can hear his footsteps as he walks away. The screen door slams shut, and I listen as the sound of the truck fades into the distance. Forbidden tears still fill my eyes, so I lash out blindly at the mirror. It shatters into a thousand glittering pieces and falls to the floor. I sink into the jagged fragments that litter the ground and cast about moonlight like fallen stars. I peer into my broken reflection. A simple white dress hugs my body. Black lines mar my cheeks. Dark hair falls in massive curls over my olive shoulders. He once said I was beautiful.

“Mirror, mirror, in shards so broken, you know it’s true, the words he’s spoken.”
“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” quiet, yet unwavering, the little girl’s voice filtered through the sliding screen of the confessional. “Um, I’m afraid I don’t know what comes next, Father.”

Father Hartoch chuckled, his heart warmed by the innocence of one of God’s younger children. “Is this your first confession?”

“Yes, Father. I just didn’t know where to go, and I needed someone to talk to.”

The priest furrowed his bushy white eyebrows, confused. “So this isn’t really a confession then? If you’re merely seeking advice, perhaps you should—“

She cut him off, “I’ve seen a lot of things lately, Father. I was hoping God could cleanse my mind, like Nana used to say.”

“What have you seen?”

“It started small,” she said quietly, “everyone seemed so unhappy around me. They would argue; fight. My parents, my older brother, Thomas, even baby Ava fussed more than usual.”

Father Hartoch didn’t recognize these names. Perhaps they belonged to a different parish? He knew he shouldn’t, but his curiosity got the best of him. “What’s your name, child?”

“My name is Lucy. I’m seven.”

“Go on, Lucy.”

She cleared her throat and continued, “I heard the neighbors fight sometimes, too. Suddenly I started noticing it everywhere; the unhappiness. People try to hide it, but it was simple, really, if you knew what to look for.”

“Humans are complex beings—“ Father began.

“No,” Lucy said, “not just humans. Animals, too.” My dog, Charlie, he was always itchy. Squirrels would fight at the feeder, and birds would steal each other’s nests. All I wanted was to figure out how to make them all happy.”

The Father smiled at her kindness. If only the world had more people like little Lucy, whose red ringlets of hair could be seen through slats in the screen. He shook his head and ran a hand through his thinning hair, “You know, Lucy, I know our heavenly Father would love to see His daughter spreading such joy and kindness, but try not to put too much pressure on yourself. No one person can make everyone happy, not even our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.”

“I have though!” Lucy’s voice raised in excitement, “I have found a way!”

The Father chuckled, “And what way have you found?”

“I’m getting to that,” she giggled, “it was actually very clear to me.” Lucy paused, lost in thought. It was silent for several seconds before she went on, her voice sullen and low, “Do you remember my dog, Charlie? The itchy one?”

“Yes, I remember. He might have fleas. You may want to ask your mother to give him some medicine—“

“Charlie’s dead. Mama found him in the backyard. She said someone killed him. I loved that dog.”

Father tried to console the child, “I am so very sorry. Maybe he’s at peace from all the itching now?”

“I saw him before Daddy put him in the ground. There were long cuts on either side of his mouth, almost like a smile, Father. I think Charlie’s happy now, up there in dog heaven.”

The priest sighed tiredly, feeling his many years with the church settle upon his shoulders.

“What’s wrong, Father? I didn’t mean to upset you…” she trails off.

“It’s nothing, just tired, young one. Is there anything else?”

“Well, yes, actually. The day after Charlie died, Thomas came in the house holding a squirrel. Dad told him to put it back outside because he didn’t want the house to stink. I thought it was strange, Father, that Thomas had brought in a dead squirrel like that. But Thomas has always loved animals. Mama thought it was odd that the squirrel had the same markings around its mouth that Charlie had. Daddy said the neighbors must be putting sharp things in their trash so it won’t get torn up anymore.”
“I see.” Father said thoughtfully, “Yes, that makes sense.”

“The other squirrel is happy now. He has the feeder all to himself. Father, did you hear about the murders around here? And over in Swensburg?”

“Yes, a great tragedy. We’ve been lighting candles for the victims every Sunday. What of it?”

“I’ve seen them,” she said quietly.

Father leaned into the screen to hear her better, “You’ve seen them? What do you mean?”

“All of them. The young couple on River Road. The elderly man in the big white house. The black single woman with the fenced in yard and sunflowers along the sidewalk. The disabled boy who always sat in his wheelchair on the front steps of that yellow house down the street. I’ve seen them all, Father. With markings just like that squirrel. Just like Charlie. Permanent smiles cut into their faces. I don’t know what to do. They’re stuck in my head.”

The priest began to push himself out of his wooden chair. “Where’s your mother?”

“Outside, with the rest of my family. Why?”

“I’m concerned for you, Lucy. The fact that you’ve seen these people, you either have extremely unfortunate luck, or someone is killing every person you come into contact with.”

“Please,” she spoke desperately, “cleanse my mind first. Please.”

He settled back into his chair, but perched uneasily. What kind of sick creature could be exposing her to such terrors? “Okay, Lucy. Why don’t you tell me about your plan to spread happiness?”

“I like to spread smiles wherever I go!” she giggled happily, “To bring contentment and peace in a world full of anger and hostility.”

“But how?” he asked, “How do you do it?”

“Why, Father,” she replied factually, “I just told you.”

The priest stood abruptly, knocking the chair over and pressing himself against the confessional door, “What? What did you say?”

“The young couple? He was cheating on his alcoholic of a wife. She just couldn’t clean up her act. That old man? He hadn’t had a visitor in months. He also had a very bad back.”

“What—what are you saying?”

Lucy went on calmly, “That black woman? Her husband died in Iraq last fall. She never smiled anymore, well, until I came along. That kind of attitude was bad for her baby.”

“What about the boy in the wheelchair, Benny Cates? He was the happiest child—Oh God, those innocent people—”

“No!” Lucy shouted angrily, “Not always. He cried every time he saw children run by, ignoring them as they passed on their fully functioning legs. And they were not innocent, Father. No one is. They weren’t happy, but they pretended to be. They LIED. Their smiles were FAKE. Don’t you see? Now they’re smiling for real. And that will never go away. I did that, Father, I did that! I took the pain away!”

Father Hartoch whispered shakily under his breath as he fumbled for the doorknob, “Saint Michael, the archangel, defend us in battle, be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the devil—” He stumbled out the door and hurried around the corner, gripping tightly onto the rosary beads in his pocket.

He ran into them before he saw them. His polished black shoes landed with a splat in something liquidly and warm. “No,” he gasped, reeling backward in horror. “Ohh, no no no.” The old priest slid slowly to his knees and, through a veil of tears, took in the sight before him.

Blood. So much blood. It had splattered on the walls, contrasting with the white of the church like some sadistic painting. It pooled on the floor, flowing in streams in the cracks of the tiles. It gathered around them in halos of gore. They lay in a neat little row, as if patiently waiting in line. The fluorescent lights shone bright on their gruesome faces.

Their smiling, gruesome faces. Deep, deep cuts had been slashed in either corner of their mouths, curling upward heinously. They were all waiting outside, just like she had said. The father was first, blood soaking through his flannel. Then the mother, then the boy, Thomas. Father Hartoch let out a sob. There, at the end of the line, not even a year old, lay baby Ava. At their feet, in big, childish letters, was a signature; the finishing touch on her artwork. LUCIFER.

Father Hartoch put his head in his trembling hands, “Satan,” he gasped through his tears, “I rebuke you in Jesus’ Name—“

He felt a little hand on his shoulder. “Now Father—why so sad?”
I slide my thumb down my wrist and feel the smooth metal plate. Every second ticks closer to my moment. There was a comfort in it. The cool metal brings a calmness over my body, a reinsurance of my future. My loneliness begins to disappear and I feel time ticking faster and faster.

We’re all born with it, we are all born with the timer counting down and down. After the war and the decrease in mating in the late 22nd century, scientists discovered how to program every baby to be born with a plate on their wrist counting down until they meet their soul mate. Every child is different and each one is guaranteed to have a soul mate. Some meet their partner at age seven, others at seventy-seven.

Walking up to the building where I work, I examine myself in the reflection of the door. Olive skin and green eyes with red freckles sprinkled around my cheeks. Quiff combed neatly with gel and a freshly shaved face. A small scar down my left eyelid reminds me of my childhood memories. My small build and abnormally slender legs always leave me a bit self-conscious. I made sure I was in my best suit tailored especially for this day. Entering the meeting room I await skittishly.

Twenty seven seconds left; my heart drops to my stomach and I get dizzy. The sound of bosses drones into a ring circling around my head. My suit, black and straight, becomes dull and shameful, why this one on a day such as today? Ten seconds left. I notice that my palms have become increasingly sticky. I always thought I would be more prepared for this moment.

My coworkers know that today is my day and glance at me with support. My stomach curdles with each click of my watch. Five seconds left. Three seconds left. I look out the window and see a girl with fiery red hair escaping her bun walking down the street looking straight into my eyes. Zero seconds left. I expected a jump, cannons reveling with joy, a gunshot to the back of my head. Nothing happens and I realize I've been holding my breath. A door knob twists and I see his face.

"It's you?" I blurt out, causing my monotonous bosses to stop and turn to me, "My time stopped for you?" I say louder. The confusion is shared around the room and hits me.

He looks around, his honey blonde hair cut precisely around the edges of his ears. I notice that he is shaking as he points his finger back at his charcoal grey coat. His eyes drop to his wrist showing glints of his golden time.

"You mean me?" he chokes, his voice strong and deep.

I realize that I have stood up amidst the nerves and my dress coat feels smaller on my shaking body, "Yes, you, my time stopped and you walked in. You are my soul mate, you are my one and only you are.." I trail off as he shakes his head and I notice that his emerald eyes have become increasingly foggy and unclear.

My bosses send us out with looks of disgust, telling us to discuss this elsewhere and how I need to get it together. If I wasn't so lost in thought I would have chuckled over such a statement, but that didn't happen and I am stuck here with him. My heart reaches out and wraps itself around his tall lean body.

Outside the meeting room is a large hallway with silver tile and metallic walls filled with awards from previous years. The smell of aftershave and hair gel fills my brain and I just look at him. I begin to notice his idiosyncrasies: eyebrows messy but structured, down to high cheekbones, and a large nose that fills his face. He’s beautiful. A ping in my heart travels down my body and I know that the clock wasn’t wrong. It’s him; I love a man, not a woman.

He clears his throat and looks at me, eyebrow cocked, "Are you going to say anything?"

"My time stopped," I look down at his creased pants and shining shoes without a scratch in site, "and you walked in."

He guffaws and shakes his head, "This is a misunderstanding, you’re a guy, I’m a guy. My clock stopped four years ago. To a girl."

"No," my head is shaking, closing my eyes and breathing in, a weight pressing on my chest, "No. It can't work like that. The time stopped for you, it's you. And your time stopped too I don."

"Listen, man. My name is Dave Allen, you can have my business card or whatever, I'm sorry. Not everyone has a soul mate. The system doesn't work for everybody."
He hands me a business card with an empathetic smile and walks back into the room. The door meets the frame loudly behind him and sends tingles of reality up my spine.

Not everyone has a soul mate, I was never assigned one. The time on my wrist is a lie it could’ve been anybody who walked through that door because I had no one. I was made to live alone to die alone I was made to watch the neighbors kids’ grow and watch their own time tick.

I run and keep running until I’m out of the office leaving my briefcase and job behind. My pant legs are soaked with water from the Seattle drizzle. The building is surrounded by trees with bare branches and tears falling down their trunks. Flowers are covered with brown petals holding onto their stems.

Walking down the pavement all the thoughts I could never say spill, falling out of my mouth. The harsh winter breeze mixed with icy raindrops causes my face to redden, out of pain or embarrassment I don’t know. Each step in yesterday’s dress shoes and dress pants is another thought of never-ending self-loathing of the main question, why? Why? The empty businesses line down the street on my walk of thoughts as a small cake shop door opens wide and abruptly a girl roughly eighteen points to me, fiery red hair escaping its bun as she says, “It’s you.”
Keegan Justis  
Poetry: Homophobia  
Park Hill South High School  
Idean Bindel, Teacher  

In the front of the bookstore,  
I perused rows of paper-spined poets,  
poring over aisles of old headstones.

You looked to me—
to the back of my head—
and said,  
“Why pick out Bukowski over Whitman? Homophobe.” Oh, how those words you grumbled out in a cocksure sort of jest were received, against your intentions, without even a hint of your usual sarcasm.

In the back of the bookstore, I leafed through a couple of poems, holding my book as you held your tongue.

My fear met yours—
met the back of your head—
and led one or more of us to think. Oh, I'll go ahead and over-blow e-ve-ry word, for I'm quite unsure. Do I want you to receive even a hint
of my usual sarcasm?

Once outside of
that bookstore,
I’d have no more
of your silent omens
lining my smile
with old headstones.
The tattoo was but ink
on peach-skin parchment paper,
but it sure did
look like an anchor—
and it sure did
weigh that poor girl down.
Her limbs hung like unused vellum
on some absent scrivener's rack.

She hiccupped frowns
and dreamt up
permanence
since picking up
the bottle and the countenance
of a fool.

Trying to pay for school
with hours clocked in
at the diner downtown
and in Hell,
she found herself
some stories to tell,
one of which she wore
like the functioning half
of a broken timepiece
just below her left palm.

A man was dismissed
from her life
as he had entered it:
happily alone and
a long way from home—
much longer than the time
between this love and that one
and the next. Oh, how
we children deify sex
while finding ourselves
beguiled by emotions.

To smile, the motions
must be gone through
again.
The dyer's love potion
stained more than her skin,
for his needle-tipped pen,
that flesh painter's brush,
branded her blush,
veiling her dark, dark eyes,
making sighs of her barks and bites—

and he left her with too many
wrongs missing rights,

and her head rejects too many
pillows some nights,

but her fighting has robbed her
of the will to fight,

and she
just might.
St. Louis, Missouri. The World’s poster child for racial acceptance, clearly. My father is of Korean descent and my mother is of German. So, in my eyes, I am of Korean and German descent. As the start of school rolls around each year, papers are flung at families from all directions. Check here, sign here, now sign here, too. Amidst the mountains of paperwork, the question that always bothered me was “What is your ethnicity? Check all that apply.” For some reason, it’s quite a hassle to check both Caucasian and Asian. Each year, it feels like a mosquito buzzing in my ear, leaving me annoyed and with an itch I shouldn’t scratch. I could scratch it, but it would only cause more trouble and pain, prolonging my annoyance. So, some years I’m Korean and some years I’m not. It’s easier just to let it go and forget about it until next year.

As I felt my plane lurch downwards, Missouri was too far away to cross my mind. I peered out the window, excited for both the promise of walking around again after a 16 hour flight and the adventure that lay before me. It’s unnerving to not see land while feeling your plane descend. The Pacific Ocean gleamed below me and glimmered under the orange paint of sunset. The water churned and seemed calm from such a height, but I knew the fishing boats in the water were trembling in the waves’ energy. I felt more like I was on one of those boats, rocking in the oceans vivacity, rather than in a slowly sinking aircraft. Soon, the coast emerged triumphantly. The land sparkled like a stained glass window, the plethora of rice patties each catching the light in a slightly different way. Within minutes, we were coming in for our final descent. In immaculately kept flower beds, the words “Welcome to Narita” cried out from the ground, which we no longer soared above. We had arrived in Japan.

For two weeks, we explored the country, zipping from city to city on bullet trains, called the Shinkansen. The sleek metal creatures made tracks all over the island nation, carrying thousands of people across the country every day. I watched hundreds of people from all walks of life across. Some rushed by to reach another platform or calmly sat and waited for the impeccably punctual train to roll up. Having arrived 45 minutes early in fear of missing our voyage on the flawlessly engineered locomotive, my family and I fell into the latter group, so I allowed my eyes to wander and follow the actions of the unintentionally interesting masses until our train slid in.

“I like your dress,” I commented to a Caucasian woman standing next to me as we stood in line to board. She glanced at me, raising her eyebrows slightly before breaking into a wide grin.

“You have a really interesting accent,” I commented, and inquired further, “May I ask where you’re from?” The woman cocked her head skeptically, and I wished I could inhale the words again, then keep on breathing like nothing had happened.

“Germany.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be rude, but you speak English so well.” The glint in her eyes filled me with a metallic numbness. Anger didn’t swirl in her irises, though. Instead, her eyes scanned my face, looking at me the same way I would look at a lost puppy. I felt heat rise to my cheeks.

“The whole world speaks English. You have to in order to get around. Of course, it helps to know other languages, too. So I grew up in Germany, but I speak English and French fairly fluently, and a little bit of Japanese. It’s a necessity in the type of world we live in.”

The doors of the train opened and we filed in. I smiled at the woman and told her it was nice talking to her. She politely smiled and found her seat in a different car. I stored my suitcase and sunk down into the seat, closing my eyes and drifting off into a light sleep as the Shinkansen raced away.

A soft, honey voice gently shook me awake in smoothly articulated, clean Japanese syllables. Then, the digital woman paused and soon began again in English. I now understood that the speaker was announcing the next stop. After she finished her statement again, she started a third time in Korean. On digital signs at the front and back of the car, Korean symbols rolled past. I also recognized Chinese and Japanese characters, and of course English. Four languages were presented solely to help a wider variety of people. The German
woman’s words echoed through my mind. The whole world does speak English. What other languages do I speak?

In Japan, so many different ideas and languages blend together so seamlessly. Although dominantly Japanese, understandably, the people accept countless other cultures as well. Seeing the harmony between German, French, Japanese, Korean, Chinese, and countless other peoples was both inspiring and scary to me. I saw that in other parts of the world, I could be both Asian and Caucasian without being fought by a paperwork-dragon. But at the same time, the contrast between the global city of Tokyo and sheltered St. Louis, now clearly visible to me, pours ice into my mind and fear into my heart. America, the third most populous country in the world, houses countless ethnic groups, but the stark divisions and pressure to assimilate handcuff those who are in between cultures to Lady Liberty. Japan forced me to look around. Intricate webs spin through nations, creating a truly global environment. Ignoring the multitude of beautiful cultures that exist destroys part of the international web, building walls of ignorance in place of important gossamer threads.

Being passive about my background, although easiest, only adds to the construction of iron walls. I am proud of my heritage. I’m proud that my grandparents came to the United States poor and without knowing any English, but still managed to make a life for themselves and their children. I’m proud that even during World War Two when my great-grandparents and their children had to stop speaking German, they somehow kept so many of their traditions alive. Their history weaves itself into my genetics, and paints my existence with contrasting but complementary colors of culture.

Every year, I’m told, “Fill in this circle clearly and completely with a soft leaded pencil, pause your brain, mechanically move on, and don’t think too much.” Hypothetically, it’s an easy task. In reality, it’s an internal battle.

At the beginning of sophomore year, my mom clicked through the now digital information forms. What is my race? “Check all that apply,” the form courteously claimed. Unbeknownst to me, my mother wrestled with this courtesy, as the program refused to recognize more than one selection. She blew into my room and curtly informed me of the situation at hand.

“What do you want me to do?” she eventually sighed. “Should I call the school and have them change it?”

I paused. No, I wanted to say. It’s not that big a deal. But something had snapped. The world we live in simmers with tension and conflict between religious groups, ethnic groups, and political groups. Yet somehow, people all over the world still accept other cultures and identities. If cultures can be treated with respect in a world filled with hatred and war, why is it impossible for two races to exist in a single happy person? I remembered the German woman’s pitiful stare. I could almost hear her thinking “Silly American.” I heard the honey voice inside the train whisper in my ear. She warned me in five different but equally beautiful languages.

My mother’s bright blue eyes glimmered with frustration, but I felt only calm. Strengthened by a global perspective, I replied without trepidation: “Yes. It’s worth it.”
We entered the city just as the sun was dipping below the horizon. Its purple and gold hues glimmered across the minarets and spires that compose the City of David. I could hear imams vocalizing their religious fervor as they ushered their parishioners to evening prayer. I could hear rabbis yelling amicably to their congregants in Hebrew, and I could see Christians carrying crosses as they attempted to simulate the crucifixion experience of Christ. Everywhere across the city, the manifestations of religious devotion were apparent. But the signs of piety don’t just reside in the domes, glinting like celestial lights above the streets. Thousands of corpses underlie the city—thousands who have lived and died defending their God, one God, and the same God.

Five thousand years ago, God descended to mount Sinai and endowed the Jewish people with a Torah: two scrolls wrapped in animal hide and decorated with sacred scripture. And those scrolls commanded my ancestors to “destroy all the peoples that the Lord your God delivers to you, showing no pity.” (Deuteronomy 7:16) Three thousand years later, Judaism mutated and Christianity was born. Next thing we knew, Christians had stifled scientific innovation, leading crusades to capture Jerusalem and purging Europe of all non-Christians in episodes like the Inquisition. Somehow in the mix Muhammad became inspired and the Quran emerged in the Arab world, complete with instructions to “kill them wherever you find them, and turn them out from where they have turned you out. And Al-Fitnah [disbelief] is worse than killing.” (Quran 2:191-193)

The product of encounters among these religions is Jerusalem. But too many forget the number of Jews and Jihadists and Catholics and Christians and plain old Muslims that have made the city their grave. All wanted the city, and all died for it. If there is a God then it seems that His biggest mistakes were to give the Jews the Torah, impregnate Mary, or inspire Muhammad.

Of course many have done tremendous good in the name of God. But can these incidents of religious piety really compensate humanity for the thousands of lives lost and the hundreds of years of stifled innovation and the death and the suffering and the destruction?

Religion ostensibly gives meaning to life. Religion explains the existence of God and prescribes a one-size-fits-all instruction manual to gain His love and favor. The meaning of one’s life should be to make it a pious and “good” one, whatever that means. But this generic injection of purpose renders many followers easily exploited, and searching for revelations that aren’t meant for them.

It seems that the only people who have really found God are artists. Perhaps the Transcendentalists realized that a book couldn’t lead you to God. Thomas Cole found Him in a “sparrow’s note from heaven,” while Walt Whitman learned love and respect for the life force that infuses everyone and everything. All of the Transcendentalists saw the same thing: not a book, but natural beauty, and all of them could interpret it and extract meaning differently, and more naturally.

Last May, I went to see “Impressionist France” at the St. Louis Art Museum. It was 8:30 on a Friday night, and nobody wanted to come with me to see a bunch of paintings right after finals, so I just said goodbye and went. When there’s no one standing next to you, waiting for you to say something or oohhh and aahhh about how beautiful it is, it’s like the paintings rise up around you and you’re on top of the mountains with the hairy animals gazing over the French landscape. It’s a little bit lonely. But I think that’s the point. It’s supposed to be lonely. You have to go out alone and see the stars at night and hear the coyotes and the ocean without someone waiting for you to say something. The collective meaning doesn’t exist. The collective religious purpose is an illusion that doesn’t materialize for most. When you’re busy and running around and praying from a book and doing what everyone else is doing, you’re never going to decipher what you’re supposed to hear. Instead, you’ll hear it second hand and you’ll end up missing what you’re really meant to understand. You’ll see Jerusalem with its mosques and temples and churches, and you’ll see the man-made testaments to the glory of God. You’ll say, “There is God.” But God’s glory isn’t sitting there in a rock or a monument. If you need proof, go to Impressionist France on a Friday night, lie in the sand and listen to the ocean. Look at the stars.
At the corner of 65th Street and Wornall, almost a thousand students attend a school run-down, disrespected and neglected by the community around it. Found in the predominantly white, affluent neighborhood of Brookside, Southwest High School has become the poster child of Kansas City’s floundering public school district. It seems easy to write off the school as lost and incorrigible, but behind disappointment in this particular school lingers a larger problem in the United States today, one Rockhurst cannot ignore: poorer students are getting a worse education than their richer peers.

In fact, Kansas City is one of the most potent examples of this. For families with kids in the Kansas City Public Schools (KCPS), the median household income is $33,350 and the average ACT score is 16.1. On the other hand, for the Shawnee Mission School District, the median household income is $64,019 with an average ACT score of 23.6, according to school district reports. Across the area, from Liberty to Blue Valley, the trend continues: with more money, test scores rise.

Southwest in particular is emblematic of the issues facing schools with less affluent student bodies, a combination of apathy toward academics and the difficulties of poverty.

Yet, for quite some time, Southwest struggled with neither socioeconomics nor academics. Prior to the 1970s, it was the flagship of the successful KCPS and perennially sent students far and wide to elite universities. It was populated by established and respected Kansas City families like the Blochs and the Kempers. It even produced a Nobel Prize winner in chemist Richard Smalley.

Then, Southwest became “an infamous case study on the woes of trying to desegregate the schools,” said Mr. Philip Helt, who now teaches history and debate at Rockhurst but spent the last three years teaching at Southwest.

For KCPS, desegregation amounted to busing. In theory, this would bring the races together, force them to interact and lead to prosperous integration.

If this was to work, students had to be sent into a school with established paths to the top, wrote Tanner Colby, author of “Some of My Best Friends are Black: The Strange Story of Integration in America.”

By all accounts, when integration began, Southwest was a perfect school to accomplish this. It had connections to the Kansas City area, major universities and was widely considered one of the best schools in the city.

Unfortunately, starting in the early 1970s, a series of teacher strikes, when combined with a difficult integration plan, were seen as an opportunity to leave the district and turn to private alternatives. Thus, today, 27 percent of student in the areas around Southwest attend public schools or charters, while more than 90 percent of K-12 students attend public schools in all other parts of the district, the Kansas City Star reported in July.

While students were increasingly coming to Southwest from other neighborhoods, the race line of Kansas City, Troost Ave., was left intact, creating a predominantly black school in a predominantly white neighborhood. This destabilized the area around Southwest, took away the connection to the school and weakened the tax base, all of which were nation-wide problems with school desegregation, according to Colby.

As the school struggled to find the success it had lost, funding decreased and a culture of apathy was created among students who felt no connection to their school, no reason to succeed.

Yet, there were other problems as well. In attempts to fix the issues desegregation created, Southwest “fell victim to [district] mismanagement,” Mr. Helt said.

Over the years, it closed down, reopened as a charter, reintegrated into the KCPS system and has now entered into a partnership with the French immersion grade-school Academie Lafayette.

When Southwest reintegrated into KCPS in 2008, the district was reforming, bringing middle schools into high schools and closing Westport High School by sending all of its students to Southwest.
The school expected less than a thousand kids in the 2010 school year, but received 1700. This crippled the budget, created a shortage of books and supplies, brought rival gangs under one roof, led to arson and assault cases that would plague the school’s reputation and resulted in multiple principals resigning in a single year.

None of this was the fault of the students. District mismanagement had overlooked obvious issues, expected too much in too short a time and pushed for changes which could and would lead to unforeseeable consequences.

In subjecting students to countless experiments in education and desegregation, “the District disrespected those kids,” Mr. Helt said.

While the school was trying to adapt to the hectic changes, the basic principle on which it was reopened—to allow students to get college credit during high school through partnerships with area universities—fell through because, as Mr. Helt put it, “the adults couldn’t get along.”

The result has been a lackluster education for the disadvantaged in Kansas City. “The district didn’t want to stand behind Southwest and give it the necessary resources for us to succeed,” Mr. Helt said.

While other schools in the area like Center High School were getting swimming pools, Southwest was struggling to get funds for toilet paper and soap. There were no funds for extracurricular activities, no funds for intervention reading programs, no funds for college courses.

If the district didn’t seem to care, why should the students, Mr. Helt asked.

Yet, this culture goes beyond the classroom. The factors affecting students’ ability to learn are greater than where they go to school.

“I don’t think people who aren’t poor, who’ve never been poor, understand the grinding disability that poverty really is,” Rockhurst Principal Mr. Greg Harkness said. “You can’t study if you’re hungry; you can’t study if you’re not safe; you can’t study if you don’t have lights on at your house; you can’t study if you’re not clean.”

For many at Southwest and KCPS in general, this is life. “They’re not eating [because] there is no food,” Mr. Helt said. “They’re not sleeping because they’re taking care of little siblings. They don’t have access to a computer at home or internet to do work—things that we sometimes take for granted or assume.”

“The grinding poverty that appalls us—and should appall us—I think we forget sometimes that it’s in our own city,” Mr. Harkness said.

Ms. Lauren Bouas, a current teacher at Southwest, says that beyond the problems of basic needs not being met, there are more nuanced issues facing students both at Southwest and nationwide. Students having to move so often that there’s no stability, parents that work too much to be involved in their kids’ lives and poor nutrition. On top of this, Southwest has particularly high teacher and administrator turnover that negatively affects the school’s students.

“Every year students face the reality that their favorite teacher might not return and that really strips away the sense of community and tradition that I see at schools like [Rockhurst],” Ms. Bouas said.

Then, in the face of crippling poverty, the school becomes so much more for students. Qualification for free lunch can become the only meal a student has all day, the school nurse can be a primary health care provider and the school can become the basic means by which a student survives, according to Mr. Harkness.

For many students at Rockhurst, these difficulties have never been a part of their lives. “You were born with a library card in your hand. Your parents read to you when you went to bed. Your parents went to college. Your parents went to high school. You are going to school. That is what you do, and your parents are actively engaged in your education,” Mr. Harkness said.

All of this translates into an expectation of further education. 99 percent of Rockhurst graduates matriculate into college, but for KCPS, this number drops to 31.1 percent, according to district reports.

If a student is able to go to college from underperforming schools, almost 32 percent will require remediation to handle college courses and one in two disadvantaged kids will drop-out before graduation, according to Dr. John Jerrim at the Institute of Education at the University of London.

All of these conditions have created the notion that “if you can afford a private school, you send your student to a private school,” Mr. Helt commented.

But, as the examples of Liberty, Shawnee Mission and Blue Valley have shown, this doesn’t need to be true. To fix Southwest and KCPS in general is no small task, but Mr. Helt and Ms. Bouas agree the correct steps are being taken. The district is sending a message that they care about student success in and out of the classroom.
Every principal has brought in his or her own ideas on how best to “fix” Southwest. But, in reality, it’s simple things like locking unused classrooms and assembling a top-notch teaching core that have become integral to the school’s reform. As Ms. Bouas says, it’s better to get an Elantra and drive that every day for ten years than try to get a Lexus on day one.

While the school may have found that Lexus through a partnership with Academie Lafayette, it is far too early to tell what will come of the partnership and how the school will look next year with French-immersion students from the grade school joining the high school’s thousand regular students.

While Southwest may have found its path to success, there are hundreds of school like it, millions of students experiencing its reality and not all of them are receiving the attention they deserve.

So, the question must be asked: what can Rockhurst do to help?

At the moment, the school is considering that very same question. As Mr. Harkness said, the Jesuit ideal of the Magis calls on people to never be comfortable in success but always to be looking for a new avenue by which to improve the world.

While the school has had incredible success in its current role in providing an all-boys Catholic education, it became painfully obvious to the administration that they were drawing almost no students from the poorest parts of town.

“When Fr. [Bill] Sheahan started to do his survey for Hurtado Scholars, it was shocking how few students in this school come from Kansas City’s urban core,” Mr. Harkness said.

The amount of students coming from east of Troost or the West Side is incredibly small compared with the amount coming from the Ward Parkway corridor, Fr. Sheahan’s report said.

This seems to be the product of two different worlds in education. Kids coming from KCPS and other area public schools in the urban core rarely view Rockhurst as a plausibility, Ms. Bouas and Mr. Helt agreed.

Perhaps this is the fault of the school, some wonder. “I don’t think it’s talked about; I don’t think it’s advertised,” Mr. Helt added.

In fact, most of his issues with KCPS parents and transferring their kids to private or even charter schools was a lack of information. Often, they simply didn’t know the process.

In asking “How [does Rockhurst] go about recruiting low-income students,” Ms. Bouas points out the fundamental flaw in Rockhurst’s outreach: nobody, including teachers, at schools filled with intelligent but disadvantaged students, knows how to get them to Rockhurst.

Even Catholic grade schools in poorer neighborhoods are disconnected. Schools like Our Lady of Guadalupe, Our Lady of the Angels and Holy Cross service some of the poorest areas of the city but send very few students to Rockhurst, especially compared to other schools in the diocese like Visitation or St. Peters, both of which are found in more affluent neighborhoods.

Part of this is an educational barrier. “Kids graduating from inner-city school, because of the trials of poverty, were simply not ready for education at Rockhurst,” Mr. Harkness said. “An eighth grader reading at the second grade level simply cannot come [here].”

Still, this is not always the case with low-income kids. “We have some students who I think would thrive at Rockhurst,” Ms. Bouas said.

So, while academic rigor can be a huge challenge, it is not the only one keeping these kids from attending. “We also have to be aware of families for whom the tuition being $11,000 is the same as it being $11 million,” Mr. Harkness said.

Mr. Helt echoes this, condensing Rockhurst’s problem drawing KCPS students down to “money.”

For years, tuition was incredibly low. Half the faculty was Jesuit and, therefore, unpaid. It’s a tough model to continue, but the school has done their best to keep costs down, according to Mr. Harkness.

The result? Rockhurst remains in the lowest quartile of Jesuit schools for tuition and the highest quartile for enrollment—all this without the state funding some other Jesuit schools receive. Despite all these efforts, it still sometimes struggles to meet the needs of its students.

“We give out over $2 million in financial aid, but that’s not enough. We could give out $500,000 more if we had it,” Mr. Harkness said.

That $2 million is going to 40 percent of the Rockhurst student body, 58 of whom would qualify for free lunch at a public school because they otherwise could not afford it, Mr. Harkness said. This is compared to almost 89 percent of students KCPS reported as receiving free lunch last year. Relatively speaking, Rockhurst has poverty and does well in accommodating it, but it is not dealing with the poverty the city faces.
Realizing this, Mr. Harkness and the Board of Trustees asked, “How do we responsibly open our doors to people?”

The first answer to this question came on a four hour car ride home from St. Louis, during which Mr. Harkness and Fr. Sheahan discussed the difficulties facing the inner-city Catholic schools and ways to help.

“You don’t want to be this arrogant Rockhurst and swoop in and fix everything,” Mr. Harkness said.

Still, the dearth of Catholic kids from these predominantly immigrant neighborhoods was worrying, so there had to be a solution. For nearly 18 months, Fr. Sheahan looked into programs around the country, like the Reach Program from New York City’s Regis High School.

Students in this program begin receiving academic training before middle school in hopes of creating straight-admits to the highly selective Regis by the time they reach eighth grade.

Borrowing directly from Reach, the school laid groundwork for the Hurtado Scholars program.

The hope for Rockhurst was to “intervene soon enough and surround these young men with the vision that education is not unattainable,” Mr. Harkness said.

Drawing intelligent but disadvantaged students from Our Lady of the Angels, Our Lady of Guadalupe and Holy Cross, the program offers summer school, activities and bi-weekly tutoring sessions to 10 students per grade level. If, at the end of middle school, they can get into Rockhurst, their tuition is free.

“If you can get in and you can do the work then we’ll find a way, financially, for you to be here,” Mr. Harkness said.

The program also hopes to bring diversity to a school that is very homogenous in race, ethnicity and socioeconomics.

“Our mandate is to provide an education that strives to do justice as well, not to have people feel bad about their stage in life,” Mr. Harkness added.

While Hurtado Scholars has been successful and will see its first class enter Rockhurst next year, it only accounts for 10 kids per class.

But there are other ways Rockhurst is looking at expanding. The possibility of opening grade schools has been proposed, and some faculty members have promulgated the idea of having five of them scattered throughout the city, serving the entire Catholic community in hopes of creating more students capable of handling Rockhurst and creating a better connection with the school.

Certainly, grade schools would not only educate the young men of the Catholic community but also elucidate them to the reality of Rockhurst.

In the end, Rockhurst’s role in helping the Kansas City community’s education is going to boil down to its ability to attract students from low-income families and underperforming schools.

“We have the funds; sometimes it’s going and getting the kids. I have high hopes for some of Kansas City’s charter,” Mr. Harkness said, but acknowledges that sometimes the school is intimidating. “I think Rockhurst sees itself as a beacon on a hill, but I worry sometimes if the light from that beacon blinds people, or does it welcome then?”

But, it was Ms. Bouas who best summed what Rockhurst needs to keep in mind as it moves forward.

“There are a lot of ways that folks, who have the privilege associated with an education like yours, can continue to leverage that privilege in our community for the benefit of all people.”
Spencer Kunz

Poetry: Especially You
Platte County High School
Angie Perkins, Teacher

You are yourself, friend!
You differ from the others
Exempting, of course,
All your sisters and brothers
You’re a slightly chipped diamond
Smudged, and losing its hue
Because nobody’s special
Especially you

There’re a gazillion people out there, boys and girls
Believing the “World’s Their Oyster”
And they’ll find their pearl
But if your pearl is not found,
Don’t pout or feel blue
Let’s face it: nobody’s special
Especially you

The world’s a right marvelous place, don’t you know?
You can dream brilliant dreams
Of the places you’ll go
But your dreams will be squelched,
Like gum under a shoe
Because nobody’s special
Especially you

Ask yourself: Is my existence really one without limits?
Can I live out the dreams that my heart has within it?
Because you are yourself, friend –
That’s undoubtedly true,
But nobody’s special

Especially you.
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Mikayla Landers
Short Story: Changed Without an Explanation
Platte City Middle School
Devin Springer, Teacher

My eyes were bloodshot; blue and white hot coals, burning and itching with every flutter of my eyelids. Every breath I took scratched my lungs and throat with woodchips. I open my eyes even though they stung like all hell and I cough with so much force that I stumble off my bed and land on the floor. I look down and notice the growing cracks on the laminate floor and look all around my room, trying to figure out why I could only see dark gray. I start to panic and try to reach my bedroom door, but with a loud groan the whole wall that held the door collapses, leaving me to stumble back against the armchair on the opposite side of my room.

I realize that I’m in a fire and that’s why I felt like I was in a 325-degree oven. I shake my head back and forth and try to stay awake, but I can’t scream for help and can barely breathe. My eyes flutter but a see I a tall figure rushing into my room that looked awfully familiar to me, even in the wall of smoke. Dad, I thought. He scoops me up and rushes through the groaning and blazing orange hallways and manages to place a mask over my nose and mouth.

When we come outside, I immediately feel the difference in temperature and shiver from the cold, the wind biting my skin as I’m rushed to a nearby stretcher. I turn my gaze from my apartment look up at my dad, and am stunned when he’s already looking down on me. “I love you,” a tear drops on my cheek as he kisses my forehead, and sets me down on a stretcher. The only other thing I remember from the night of the fire was seeing him going back into the fragile building again- my mind not knowing at the time if he would return or not.

I do remember the next morning, however, waking up in a spotless white room, my lungs feeling like they were sunburned by a torch inside me. The pale yellow rays of sunlight that gleamed out the window to my left bounced in the room, leaving a shimmery glow on every object they touched, as if they were a piece of Heaven. I heard faint noises from somewhere, but concluded it couldn’t be the leaves rustling in the trees, as there was barely any wind for that. Then, in an instant, my emotions left me and my mind went blank; I was taken over, consumed by pain and sorrow.

I had turned my head to the left towards the window, hoping to become calmer by looking outside. But I wasn’t calm and the view outside was bleak. Not an ambulance or stretcher or medic or anything related to a hospital could be seen from the window. The image was silent, no sound coming from it- all I saw was a person. A woman to be exact, just casually walking, her footsteps fading out into the charcoal colored floor she was walking on. Her hair blew uncontrollably- not by the wind, by speeding blurs passing her. I blinked; the women and blurs were gone.

“Wh-” I had started to say, but jumped at the sound of quiet, dry coughs. I turned my head over to look the other way, doing so with an excessive amount of caution. A man, breathless, was lying in a bed identical to mine on the opposite side of the room struggling to inhale the right amount of air.

His hair looked as if it had not been combed in days. I could see the top of his right arm, but scattered patches of gauze mostly covered his scabbed skin. The left arm was gone; only the shoulder was wrapped in gauze. The skin around the bandage was tattooed in black tire marks, leaving dried blood clinging to his skin, almost begging for mercy to not fall off. I stared at the man for as long as my eyes could take before drifting off into my thoughts. What happened last night? I wasn’t able to remember anything of the night before, so I had just laid there, confused and in pain. I felt a great urge to talk to the man next to me, though I could not decipher why.

I looked back at the window. Probably just my imagination turning on me, I thought, trying to soothe myself. When my eyes gazed through the glass, the woman was there again, but she was too vividly clear and had to be a real being. The woman was still walking towards the highway, but I now saw a man chasing after her. He caught her shoulder and tried to pull the women to a halt, but as soon as his hand dropped on her, she sprinted. He had lost his grip and fell to the ground like an unwanted toy- the woman, to my surprise, continued running. But as soon as I readjusted my sight, she got hit. An enormous semi plowed her side, unable to control its wheels from avoiding the woman. The truck swerved too late to miss her, hitting the man as well. The front right tire took his left arm under it.
“AHH!” The man moaned and screamed, looking at the dead women, and I heard him. I heard him as if he were real. I heard him as if he were next to me. I had stared with icy eyes at the window, eyes wide with fear and a longing for more - it was too sudden to end, not enough to satisfy me. I had slowly turned over again, and the man was laying on his bed looking at me. I was stunned for a bit, and then thought he was dead. I started to panic and hyperventilate, but he stopped me.

“What’s wrong with you?” I jumped at his words, my heart pounding, “You’s a fool? You’s a messed up soul like me?” The man sputtered the words out, gasping for air.

“You… I… You looked dead,” I said, my voice shaking. He only stared at me, and I could tell anger was inside him. But his facial expression softened, and he appeared weak.

“I surprised I ain’t dead,” he moaned quietly, “I should’ve died being hit. But now the Lord want me to stay ‘n suffer? I dunno who messed up more - me ‘er Him.” He tried to lift his right arm but sputtered and gasped for breath. He looked at me and whispered something that I couldn’t pick up. I gave him a confused look and opened my mouth, but he beat me to it.

“Could you’s tell me what you’s seen?” He spoke a little louder now so I could hear him better. His eyes were filled with desperation and pain. My gaze fell on the spot where a left arm should be.

The man began to moan and curse, babbling about how it was her fault and how she was mental. Now I was staring at him, trying to find a stopping point in his words to speak.

“I saw you and the woman and the crash,” I interrupted, sitting up. “You tried to grab her but you fell and you both got hit. I looked at the window and it showed me the scene. I don’t know how, I’m as confused as you. But I’m feeling overwhelmed right now, and I think if I talk to you about it I can help you.” The man stifled tears and furiously swore, but then looked at me.

“So, I guess you’s can see the other side. The good Heaven one, with angel’s and good spirits,” he said, taking in deep breaths to calm him. “Well, for the Lord’s sake, talk to me. Tell me why’s she did it. If you’s can.” And so I did. We talked for the rest of the day non-stop, crying sometimes for ten minutes. We took a break from talking when lunch came, both of us eating quickly to talk more. When I had talked to the man that day, that’s when I realized what had happened to me. I didn’t know before what was going on with me and I was almost certain that I had something wrong with me. I became a Medium.

A week later I was able to leave from the hospital and my mother picked me up. She didn’t say much to me, avoiding anything that would touch our emotions.

“You’re coming to stay with me in Oregon. I need to show you something first.” She didn’t say anything else, and walked out of the hospital with a fast pace. She drove to the apartment complex which is surrounded by police and investigators and news teams that morning. The memories of the night of the fire flooded into my mind, the images of my dad and the ambulance coming back to me. I sat motionless until the car started again. I shook my head back and forth frantically, trying to think of what to do. I finally had just blurted out what I needed to know.

“Where’s dad? Where is he?” I started to babble with no control of what I had said. I started to cry hysterically and shake uncontrollably. My mother only looked at me with swollen red eyes that were about to drop salty tears.

“Not now,” she spoke softly, “I can’t.” I screeched in great anger at my mother, and she slapped me.

“What… what is wrong with you?” I could not hold back any of my emotions then. I had just been smacked by my mother. I stared at her, my eyes red like the color of the fire that burnt down my home. She had pulled over and started crying as well. She apologized and told me what happened to my father, how a wall had collapsed and that nothing could have been done to prevent it. We sat there on the side of the road for a while in a quiet motionless embracement. The only sound was that of vehicles rushing by that seemed to cool us down. A short while later, we finished driving to her house and I sat on the porch. I was still shuddering with tears that dripped down, leaving stains in my clothes. Two things I still can’t figure out is why I was chosen by God to be a Medium, and when I will tell people that I am.
Growing up I had always been aware of the hatred and anger some people felt towards others. The evil in the world was something I often heard about from my dad’s stern voice demanding that I always lock my doors and hold my purse close. He accepted the fact that people are people and evil, anger, and hatred are all things that come with being human. My mother, however, does not. Her pale blue eyes, freckles, and “mom hair” often fool people into thinking she is a soft-spoken woman accepting of the fact that people will be people. I, however, know this is definitely not the case. I had always been taught that you should be respectful and accepting of everyone, and coming from a family that are the annual church-goers, it was taught to me that you do not need God in order to live a peaceful life-that tolerance and love are something that should be expressed to everyone and by everyone.

My mom has always been big into bringing home wrinkled newspaper cut outs of random acts of kindness, and I thought these acts were how the world worked. The November of my junior year I found out, I was way off. My outspoken mom brought home one of her wrinkled clippings and, as always, watched over me as I read it. This time, however, it was different. The author wrote about a neo-Nazi rally taking place in front of the Jackson County Court House in downtown Kansas City. When I read this article, my eyes burned and my stomach jumped to my throat. The horrible people my parents had warned me about existed. I silently wondered why she was showing me this, but I knew my question would result in the usual response of “did you finish it?” The second half of the article was much more inspiring. It stated that a counter demonstration was to take place at Liberty Memorial in honor of victims of racism and hate crimes. Of course my mom decided that this would be the perfect time to educate me about people she claimed, did not actually live in the real world. She decided that Saturday we would go by the courthouse just to see what these people looked like, and then go to the memorial. Our little detour turned into an event that not only shaped the way I think today, but the relationship between my mom and me.

Driving down town, I was so anxious to see what the people who actually thought something was wrong with others because of their skin color or religious beliefs. The streets surrounding the courthouse were blocked off so we parked a few blocks away. I managed to tune my mom out on the short walk as she described our getaway plan if things got ugly. When we walked up the courthouse, a scene appeared before me that I had not even seen in movies. Policemen in shiny, white, never-been-used helmets lined the middle of the street separating the two sides, as if separating the good from the evil. Officers on horseback holding cans of tear gas stood off to the side in case backup was needed. One side of the street was lined with men and women dressed in black suits, worn by the military, with bands on their arms sporting a red swastika. As my mom and I stood on the side of the street adjacent, watching the neo-Nazis yell things that should never be repeated to the people on the other side, I felt my stomach swell into my throat. I can honestly say on that side of the street stood the most disgusting display of hatred I had ever seen. Words spewed from one man’s mouth into the microphone like acid stinging the skin of those who listened. I witnessed the victims of his words flinch, and tears quietly drip down the faces of those who looked like they needed support the most.

On the side across from the neo-Nazis, however, I witnessed love—a businessman in a clean, tailored suit stood side by side to a toothless homeless man, a gay couple celebrated their passion, and it was then that I swear, I could feel the love radiating off of the eclectic group of people. Blacks, Whites, Hispanics, old, and young stood side by side fighting for the people who could not be there to fight for themselves. I experienced an overwhelming mixture of passion, love, and anger looking at the two sides facing each other, as if they were waging a war of words.

Sometime later, after watching from the sideline and listening to the disgusting things that came from the mouths of those to ignorant to understand others different from themselves, I decided I could no longer stand by. Telling my mom this, she suggested we go to Liberty Memorial, but I told her that it was our duty to stand against the hatred-so we did. We walked to an opening in the long strings of bright yellow tape that seemingly contrasted the mood of the people in line and waited to be wanded by a police officer. I could barely hold out my arms I was shaking so bad in anticipation of what was on the other side. As soon as my mom and I crossed...
the line posters were shoved at us, mine saying ‘White Allies Against the Klan’ and hers ‘LGBTQ Community Against the Klan’. A Hispanic man soon walked up to me, shook my hand, and thanked me in broken English for my support. I could tell from the wrinkles and cracks in his hands that he worked hard for his family. In that moment, I felt a sense of pride that can never be repeated. I was making a difference. As small of a difference it was, I was making someone feel that they were worth it that I supported them. The anxious feelings immediately went away and I wanted nothing more than to get in there.

Holding up my rainbow, against the Klan poster I felt on top of the world. I knew that my mom was more hesitant than I was and she stood off behind talking to a woman who looked like she was an old beauty queen. Looking back at my mom I saw how beautiful the wrinkles by her mouth and eyes were, because they meant that she had spent her life smiling at people. I finally caught her eye and she gave me a small smile full of compassion. I could see the tears welling up around her blue eyes, and I knew she felt an overwhelming pride in me. She had always told me she was proud of my grades and the choices I had made, but this was different. I think she saw herself in me. My mom taught me that love and acceptance are things that everyone deserves. Thanks to my mom, I am now the raging feminist, do-gooder who wants to someday save the world, and I could not be more proud of this title because it means I am like my mom.
Brennen Lee
Short Story: Promises to Keep
Platte City Middle School
Kelly Miller, Teacher

My back slammed into the locker, knocking the wind out of me. My vision blurred, from either tears or
anger and at that point I didn’t know or care anymore. Laughter filled my head, a common sound at this point.
Except it wasn’t a pleasant, happy if you will, laughter. This laughter cut into you, like knives slicing through
flesh, it cut deep, leaving no room for joy. I slid down to the floor, and pushed everything out of my head. I sat
there, face shoved into my hands, and waited. And waited. Finally they left, and I could go home.

I walked home in silence, having missed the bus. I liked to walk home anyway, away with my own
thoughts, and away from them. I kept my head down as I walked, shuffling my feet, to my house a mile and a
half away. As I turn onto my street, I thought back upon my terrible thing some might call life. My parents
passed away when I was around the age of six, leaving me to stay with my older brother who was graduated
high school. He never did go to college, it wasn’t a requirement meaning he wasn’t going to do it, he hated
work.

I get to my apartment home, which was all my brother could afford working on minimum wage, and open
the door. I walk into the crusted floor, filthy counter tops, place we call the kitchen. I plo

I thought back to what happened at school, which was now a daily routine. Ben made it his goal in life to
torment the living daylights out of me. Next time, I thought, next time I will fight back. I was sick of him and
the rest of that cursed school. I was deep in thought and hadn’t noticed David had gotten home from his work
and was now standing behind me.

“Chemistry homework eh'? Didn’t you study chemistry in 8th grade?”
“Yeah, but we are going more in depth with more experiments and reactions,” I reply. I had snapped out
of my trance. I hadn’t realized that I had been staring at the table for the past five minutes.

“I see, well you should probably work on that, instead of woolgathering,” he gave me a wink.

The next morning I wake up, take a shower, throw on some clothes, and eat a bowl of cereal. I walked to
school every day so I could avoid the bus and the people who acted like they owned them. As I headed up the
street and turned the corner, a bus came roaring up the street and I

Every once and a while there would be a day where me and Ben’s bus intersec
t, and Ben uses the opportunity
to torment me. I see the window open and something fly out. The next thing I know a McDonalds cup hits me
in the back of the head.

“Ha! Retard!” I hear a holler from the bus as it rumbled past. I use my collar as a shield against the impact
of the words, pulling it up over my ears. After the bus passes, I walk a little slower to school knowing what I
will encounter. My eyes continually scan the small groups of students as I get closer to school. I’m looking for
the face behind the voice–Ben.

“Hey idiot,” he sneered, with his yellowish teeth and crooked nose. I don’t know why this guy has it in for
me, I wasn’t in his grade, he’s a junior. I look straight ahead at my locker and act as if I don’t hear him.
Obviously this doesn’t set well with this brute.

“Hey! I was talking to you!” he grabs my head and slams it into the locker. Another goose bump to add to
the hordes of them on my head. I grimace in pain but keep ignoring him. He notices my ignorance, surrenders
and walks away. I go through the day with my head down, trying to stay as wallpaper, out of peoples way. And
then I get to my fifth hour, the only class where Ben and I both had together, Algebra 2. And of course he made
it a living hell for me. He walked in and plopped in the seat right next to me, in the back of the room. I noticed
he didn’t have any stuff with him, figures, since he didn’t at all care about school.

“So you were ignoring me this morning huh? You know it’s rude to ignore people,” he snapped at me,
being as abrasive as usual.
“Like you know about politeness,” I mutter into my sleeve, glancing at the teacher writing something on the board.

“What did you just say?” he snapped once again, obviously in a more sour mood than usual.

“I don’t know, maybe you should clean out your ear wax clot you got going on there,” I say not even glancing over.

“That’s it,” he yells. He jumps to his feet and throws my chair, and me onto the floor. Every single head in the classroom turned around, including the teachers, Mr. Austin.

“Excuse me but is there a problem?” he asked, somewhat timidly.

“Um, no Mr. Austin, he had just fallen out of his chair,” he stated, obviously not convincing since the whole class started to chortle.

“Is this true?” he asked me.

“Uh yes sir,” I say putting the rest of my books in my bag. He growled, almost animal like, and lunged at me, trying to grab my shoulders, that’s when it happened. It’s like it knew exactly what to do, my right fist swung around and connected with his jaw. I wasn’t the strongest kid but every so often I would go down to the gym to lift weights, so it had power in it. He was immediately on the floor bleeding from his mouth and nose.

“Oh crap, what did I do?” I didn’t stay around, I ran. I get home and start to pack a bag. I had been thinking about this and decided if anything bad, or worse happened I would run away. I had an uncle in a neighboring town, out of this school district. I made a small dinner for myself and kept packing. I packed clothes and a little food, as well as other essentials.

David got home around 8:30, I’m still there. He goes straight to sleep, must have had a long day. I start to get everything together and start towards the door. And think. What the heck am I doing? Exactly what he wants me to do. I will not let him win. Not this time, not any time, not ever. I don’t know where this strength comes from, but I recall a poem that I read in eighth grade by the great Robert Frost and know that he and I must have been going through some of the same trials. Something about promises...oh yeah, here it is, dust it off, it’s coming back now...I have promises to keep. I drop the bag. And miles to go before I sleep. I head back to my room, not running away. And miles to go before I sleep. I fall back onto my bed, heave a big sigh, close my eyes, and just keep going.
He tapped his foot. Jonathan had never liked the sound of test-taking, the scratch of pencils, the vigorous rustling of pages, the deafening white noise in his mind. Today was no exception. He stared at the page. He couldn’t answer the question. His eyes felt heavy, and he could feel his head falling forward, as if strings were slowly pulling him down.

Glancing around the unfamiliar auditorium, Jonathan couldn’t find anyone else who seemed to be struggling. It was easy for him to look around, as he sat near the top of the auditorium, and each row closer to the front was a step lower than the previous one. Behind a desk at the very front of the auditorium, an elderly lady with steely gray hair and a severe bun sat eyeing the high schoolers. Turning his gaze to the left, Jonathan noticed a girl with a mass of frizzy red hair flipping through the test and frantically scribbling something down, before eying the clock at the front of the room. She dropped her pencil. As the redhead reached to pick it up, she caught him staring and quickly shielded her test, whilst frowning disdainfully. Jonathan peered to his right.

Oxford shirt, slacks, horn-rimmed glasses—the guy rolled his shoulders and yawned, lazily scrawling down an answer. Tapping his foot again, Jonathan turned back to his test and tugged at his bangs. His brown curls unfurled, before springing back, as he let go. He tugged at them again, then released. Tug, release. Tug, release. He stopped. He grabbed his pencil and jotted down an answer. He knew the next few questions, but after a while, he came up against another wall. He gripped his pencil tightly and gritted his teeth. It’s just that there’s only so much time one can spend studying, while juggling two part-time jobs.

The girl in front of him stood, her dark hair swishing, as she made her way down to the front of the lecture hall. Jonathan looked at the clock. Thirty minutes remained. He cursed under his breath. Twenty-two of his questions were still blank. He really needed to do well on this test. Getting a good score meant possibly receiving a full ride scholarship at a state college; a bad score, crushingly high student loans and attending a second-rate community college. Tapping his foot, he glanced towards the open test a row below him. It was completely exposed. The girl with the swishing dark hair had written in big loopy letters that he could clearly see, and she was almost completely done, with only two questions remaining. He looked back at his test and frowned, before gazing again at the test a row below him. Shaking his head, he looked back at his test, then the clock, and once again at the girl’s test splayed open before him. He averted his eyes, his foot tapping furiously against the floor.

At the front of the room, the girl with the long dark hair began to blow her nose. She wore a navy blue sundress, and her hair was neatly pulled away from her face by a couple bobby pins. Jonathan breathed in deeply. He could smell the paper and a faint trace of rubber from the vigorous erasings of the increasingly frazzled redhead to his left. He drummed his fingers. He tapped his foot. He tugged his hair. His eyes were slowly being drawn to the test full of answers, and no matter how much he struggled to avert his gaze, it was inevitably lured back to the test one row below him. As if of its own accord, his hand began to move as his gaze locked upon the answers spread out before him.
Selena Lee  
**Personal Essay/Memoir: My Debut as a Hairdresser**  
John Burroughs School  
Eleanor DesPrez, Teacher

It was a weekend afternoon towards the beginning of the school year, when the air outside had already been drained of the sultry heat that invades late August, leaving only a cool warmth still untouched by the icy tendrils of winter. Behind me, sunlight streamed in from the window overlooking the garden. Completely ignorant of the sunny weather outside, I stood surrounded by the comfort of home, contemplating my prospective job options. I was absolutely confident in my ability to pursue any and every career path available. As an up and coming three-year-old, however, I believed there were only three things in the world worth becoming: a ballerina, a hairdresser, and a professional cooker. Still mulling over my options, I glanced to my right towards my pastel colored kitchen, complete with a pink microwave and oven. I had already cooked a banquet of plastic food the previous day, and I didn’t particularly feel like gracefully pirouetting through the air. Resolved to improve my hairdressing skill set, I dragged over my booster seat and set it in the center of the breakfast area, with my prized kitchen to my right and the window overlooking the garden situated behind me once again.

My brother strolled into the kitchen, and, standing on his tiptoes, he peered over the countertop to see the cause of all the racket. Having already grabbed a pair of purple plastic scissors, I nimbly hopped into my booster seat. Dylan, still curious, asked what I was doing, to which I quickly responded, “I’m gonna cut my hair.” I gave him a toothy grin. I already knew I was going to be able to give myself the perfect haircut.

Dylan twisted the hem of his shirt before saying, “I don’t think you should do that. Mom’s gonna be really angry.”

I laughed. I was absolutely certain that when my mom saw my new haircut, she would want one too. It wasn’t like cutting hair was particularly hard or anything. Dylan walked around the kitchen counter and stopped. Eyes widening, he said, “I really don’t think you should be doing that…” Laughing again, I shrugged. Purple scissors firmly in my right hand, I grabbed my hair with my left. It was quiet both inside and outside the house, almost as if the whole world were holding its breath, watching and waiting for my debut as a hairdressing genius. Snip. A dark brown clump fell upon the cool tile beneath my booster seat. My toes tingled as an overwhelming sense of exhilaration rushed through my body. I continued to snip happily away, reveling in a feeling of distinct adult-ness. I was able to cut my hair all by myself.

A sharp clatter followed by a shrill, “Selena! What have you done?!” interrupted my bubble of content snipping. Snapping my head up, my eyes were drawn to my mom’s face. Her eyes were wide, and her face seemed to have a stronger tinge of red than normal. I glanced wildly at my brother. I couldn’t comprehend my mom’s tone of voice. Instead of the rich hum of pleasure I was expecting, her voice sliced through the air, sharp and piercing. Hot tears overwhelmed my eyesight and spilled onto my cheeks.

Dylan, who had been watching the whole time, raised his shoulders till they touched his ears, tilting his head, as he said, “I told you.”
I awoke to the sound of a muffled scream. As my vision cleared, I looked around the room. White cushions covered the walls and a rusty metal door that kept me in my cage. A monitor watched over the room in the corner, almost like a baby monitor. I tried to move but I was stuck. I was strapped into what looked like a medieval torture device. My hands and legs were strapped down to the chair and even with all my might I couldn’t move at all. I paused as I heard the large metal door unlock and a tall skinny man entered. This was no ordinary man. He stood 6’4”, towering over everything that he passed, his eyes were a light grey, so grey that it was almost soothing (if I hadn’t of been strapped down to an operating table). There was something oddly interesting about him.

“Ah,” he slurred soothingly, “You’re awake, I’ve been meaning to talk to you.”

“About what?” I asked.

“You see, you’re here for help.”

“Help with what?” I asked frantically.

“Your mental illness of course,” he said like we were discussing the weather. “You were diagnosed with schizophrenia, see your mind is not fully intact. Your brain has tricked you into thinking crazy thoughts and ideas, many of them are about deceased loved ones. Others are about how there are evil, evil things in this very room. But no need to worry, we have it all under control.”

“That doesn’t make any sense! I’m perfectly fine! I don’t need help with anything and I’ve never had those thoughts before.”

“Oh, but I think you do,” he said as he motioned over to the screen and turned it on. As the dinosaur aged machine warmed up, the static cleared and I saw what appeared to be me, I of all people was here in this very room kicking and screaming like a toddler that didn’t get the toy he wanted at Wal-Mart. The screen explained in specific detail every kick and punch at imaginary demons that only I could see. After two minutes of this self torture that my mind had brought upon myself, the door flew open and two mountain-men barged in and pinned me down like professional wrestlers. As I struggled to break free, the same doctor that was here is this room, strolled in and stabbed a syringe into the soft, thin tissue of my neck. Whatever was in that needle sure did the trick. I slowly calmed down as the medicine coursed through my veins and fought away the demons in my head.

“See,” he hissed, “You’ve had these problems for years. All this time you’ve been in your own world of thoughts and ideas that only you can see. Loved ones have come into see how you’ve been doing but you never answered any of them.”

“How? Let me call my family right now!” I demanded.

“Your family is gone. You grandmother died 2 years ago from old age. She was also a patient here at Winchester Mental Hospital. She had a severe case of dementia. She didn’t even recognize you when we brought her here. As for the rest of your family, they died in a car crash after a drunk driver hit them head on.”

With tears rolling down my eyes, I demanded to be set free.

“You can’t leave. It’s time for your first lobotomy,” he said as he revealed the chisel and hammer he had behind his back, “Now I’ll just place this right under your eye and everything should be back to normal. No more demons.”

I struggled as hard as I could. Then I realized this table isn’t nailed down to the floor. I swung back and forth using all of my momentum to try to tip the table over. As metal and skull hit the tile floor with a CLANK!!! I gathered my senses as I felt a warm tingle fall down my forehead. I have to get out of here, I thought, I can’t die like this. The doctor was startled at what his patient had just done, so startled that he dropped his chisel right next to my hand. I grabbed it frantically with my right hand and slid it up my wrist. I sawed away at the thin leather until it snapped. I dropped the chisel and unstrapped the other piece of leather that restricted my left hand. I was free! Almost. My legs were still connected to the table and the doctor was coming closer. I had to do something quick. As he lunged forward towards my location, I picked up the chisel again and frantically
brought it up to where it stabbed the doctor into his cornea. That’s ironic, I thought, then quickly dropped the idea. As he lay there screaming in pain, I unstrapped the last restraints.

I slowly got up, still stiff from God knows how many hours I was on that operating table. I grabbed his flashlight off his utility belt, then sprinted out of the room, still able to hear the screams of the man. I know you’re thinking about, why I didn’t just put him out of his misery right then and there? But in my defense, when you’re in an insane asylum and just got free from a crazed killer, you don’t have time for self reasoning. I looked down the dark hall. Nothing there. I look at the wall right in front of me and it had a map of the building. “You are here” pointing to the third floor west block. The front gates are on the east side.

As I ran down the hall, I heard the doctor yell angrily into his walkie-talkie to shut the power off immediately. Ten seconds later all the lights go off. I reached for my flashlight and flip it on. I have to get out of here quick. I sprinted to the fire escape. The doors were locked. I took the chisel and wedged it in between the wall and the door. After a minute of sawing, the lock finally broke. I scurried up the stairs. Floor two. As I looked at the door, in the window, a big, burly man stood guard. As he saw my face, his own filled with anger and rage. I sprinted down the last case of stairs and I heard the door fly open, almost with enough force to make it fly off its hinges. This man was a force to be reckoned with. The man burled down the stairs as I got to the final door. This door was locked too. Before I could tell what was going on, the man picked me up by the back of the neck like I was a ragdoll. I kicked the behemoth right in the groin, causing him to double over and spill his lunch right over my asylum issued shoes. I drove the chisel into the stomach of the monster. Blood dripped from the improvised weapon like water off a roof. OK, maybe I did have a problem, if I could do that without a second thought. I ripped the keys off of the guards belt. He could of just used this to unlock the door. Idiot. I franticly unlocked the door and swung it wide open. There they are! The gates! 50 yards till I’m home free. If I had a home. Oops.

Rain poured down on the metal gates like a cow peeing on a flat rock. I made a B-line for the door, completely ignoring the gift shop and front desk. Nothing says “souvenir” like mental illness. I pushed the doors open and bolted for freedom. The gates were wide open, allowing patients to come and go as they please. Lucky me.

“Oh no you don’t maggot,” I heard as my knees buckled and I fell to the ground. I turned around to see the doctor standing over me. “Thought you could get away, huh? Think again. Never in all my years of working here have I met a patient as disobedient as you. You should be ashamed. Now let’s get back to that lobotomy,” he said as he snatched the chisel from my hand and placed it under my eyelids,

“Eye for an eye as the saying goes.”

Nothing and I mean nothing feels worse than having your eye ripped out and bringing veins and blood vessels along for the ride. In excruciating pain, I kicked him in the stomach bringing him to my level. Now it was a one on one fight to the death. Rolling around in the mud, I picked myself up and jumped on top of the doctor. Being fueled on pure adrenaline, I drove my fists into his face. Every punched filled me with rage. I finally stopped after what seemed like hours and he stopped breathing. I heard sirens wailing in the wind like a dog crying in pain. As the cries got closer, my heart started to race and sweat drenched my head. I knew it was sweat and not rain because everything got dimmer and it became hard to breath. I had to run. I couldn’t be locked up in a padded room for years and be in the headlines of the newspaper and have my name under cause of death in the obituaries for those two men.

“Stop!” was the last thing I heard before shots were fired, white lights blinded everything in sight and demons were here no longer.
Kill Your Double

I just saw my reflection blink, so fast I almost missed it. Wait. Hold on. Eyes open. Yes– there it is again, like a cat, slow and purposeful. What the...?

I lean in closer to the glassy lake surface that distinguishes fact from fiction, me from myself. I find myself reaching out to touch– her eyes flash, our fingers brush– and just like that, I am undone. Her nails are teeth digging into my wrist and pulling me hard into the abyss, into the darkest depths of our strangely similar souls. Finally, she stops– turns, and smiles at me, and I swear infernos inhabit her pupils, or else I've gone mad.

Perhaps I'm dead? After all, logically, down here I shouldn't be able to breathe. But as she turns to leave, I swear I can feel her wet dark hair brush up against my shoulder. Surely someone up there hears me scream. My throat turns raw as she moves farther from reach, and then she's at the surface. They're dragging her out as I'm slipping further and further down. What are you doing? Can't you see she's a fraud?

No. There’s no difference between us that they can see. Her replacement and my life are now complete.

The Replacements

There are strangers in my house. They call themselves my parents, and they look and sound and act just like my parents, and they know all about my parents, but I'm not fooled– I know they're imposters.

Unfortunately, I'm the only one who does. The story goes like this:

One day, I was with my mom and dad– my REAL mom and dad, mind you– and we were driving to the zoo. Only, we never got there. I woke up in a place with white floors and white ceilings and white bed sheets and a whole lot of buzzing machines, and I asked the lady sitting next to me where my mom and dad were, and she raised her eyebrows and said, “Sweetie, we’re right here.” And I said no, you LOOK like my mom, but you’re not my mom. I know my mom when I see her. Just then, the doctor came in, and I asked him to go find my parents, please, and he got real quiet and asked the fake mom and dad sitting next to me to come out into the hall.

I think maybe my real parents died in the car going to the zoo, because when the doctor came back, he made a big show and said, “Look, T.J., I brought your mom and dad to see you.” Only they weren't my real parents– they were the same imposters as before, but no one else seemed to notice. They took me home a few days later to a house that looks just like mine and a dog that looks just like mine and a bed that looks just like mine, but none of it is mine. And I played along. I went to school and played with friends who looked just like mine, listened to teachers who sounded just like mine, and went home and talked about my day with my new mom and dad. I didn’t mind a whole lot. It wasn’t a bad place to be. But I needed to go home and find out what happened to my real life, and why no one would tell me the truth. So one night, after the house was settled with the heavy silence that only comes when parents are asleep, I took my bag and left to go home. It was exciting, but at the same time, I felt a little guilty. The mom and dad from the hospital weren’t bad parents, after all– they just weren’t mine.

The Consequences of Social Codes

Every society operates by two sets of rules: written laws and unwritten codes of conduct designed to enforce societal values. These standards, in attempting to reflect popular opinion, criminally favor the group whose qualities are deemed superior for capricious reasons of questionable merit. Yet as Nobel prize-winning author, Toni Morrison illustrated in her first novel, The Bluest Eye, these behavioral rules, combined with the primal need for acceptance and approval by one’s peers, create devastating consequences for those who differ in some way from societal ideals as they pass through stages of envy, insecurity, and finally disillusion.

Because social protocols are learned gradually, children tend to be more perceptive of the fallacies of these rules while simultaneously being powerless to alter them or even express their impressions of inequality. They find themselves trapped, cognizant that prejudice exists without understanding why or recognizing underlying causes extending far beyond themselves. The young black girl narrator of The Bluest Eye, Claudia,
describes destroying the blue-eyed baby dolls she had received for Christmas in an attempt to understand everyone else’s captivation with them: “I had only one desire... to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me” (20). Claudia had correctly inferred society’s formula for attractiveness, but due to inexperienced youth, she incorrectly believed that the essence of beauty was formulaic—tangible, in some way—rather than another unspoken code developed through centuries of white oppression and resulting prejudices. The protagonist of the story, Pecola, an unappealing twelve-year-old black girl, demonstrates a similar thought process as she sits for hours “trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike” (45). For generations, society conditioned its members to expect themselves and others to look, act, and be the “right” way. Those who do not meet these often unattainable standards, even today, are told to change their ways or be left behind. Over time, children simply accept their assigned worth as truth. “You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly....Then you realized that it came from conviction” (39). The children continue, however, to search for a reason for their exclusion from favor: something they can alter in themselves to gain approval and acceptance. They erroneously begin “equating physical beauty with virtue,” growing contemptuous of themselves for their apparent lack of it. They lust to obtain the white man’s racist ideals. Pecola insightfully determined that blue eyes were a factor of great favor: “If those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different” (46). Prejudice runs much deeper than eye color, of course, but for a child searching for love and belonging, a simple yet impossible answer may offer false solace.

Pecola and others like her suffer great injustices, inheriting a fate that is signed, sealed, and delivered without question by those in power. The distaste that black children see “lurking in the eyes of all white people” spurs hatred in the hearts of the oppressed, and yet as Cholly Breedlove’s story illustrates, hating these oppressors is futile. Tragically, their hatred turns within, their self-loathing making it impossible to find acceptance. In the scene in which white men force Cholly Breedlove, a young black man, to have intercourse with Darlene, his love for his sweetheart suddenly transforms into hatred of her. Never did he consider hating the white men, because he understood “hating them would have consumed him” (151). The men—big, white, and armed—held all the power, and any anger Cholly directed their way would only hurt him in the end. So he hated Darlene instead—a simultaneously absurd and completely logical response to the situation.

Sadly, on a broader scale, this “exquisitely learned self-hatred” results in the classification of blacks as either “colored people” or “n____,” as illustrated by Geraldine. In efforts to inch closer to the white societal ideal, Geraldine creates a perfect family life. Yet behind this pristine façade exists a woman—so damaged that she unwittingly drives her son to violence, and so deeply prejudiced against those whom society deems “ugly”—that desperately aims to forget that she is one of them. Seeing Pecola in her house, Geraldine thinks “she had seen this little girl all of her life.... They had stared at her with great uncomprehending eyes. Eyes that questioned nothing and asked everything” (91-92). The change of pronouns in Geraldine’s thoughts, from the specific “she” to the general “they,” indicate that to her, as to society at large, those low-class, ugly people are all the same. Like the shopkeeper who refused to look at Pecola or touch her hand, Geraldine sees nothing to see. Even within an oppressed class, some may be oppressed further than others. Even Claudia benefitted from the fact that Pecola, her friend, was uglier than she: “We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness... We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength” (205). With the oppressed willingly taking the oppressor’s role, the cycle is complete.

This identity struggle of the powerless works in favor of the powerful, and their resulting conviction of superiority contributes to the implied inferiority of the “ugly” ones. Conversely, black children struggle to reconcile their own thoughts with white society teachings until their envy and insecurity give way to disillusion. Watching a man break open a watermelon for his family, Cholly Breedlove wonders if God resembles the man; since he had always been taught that God was an old, white man, he concluded that the man he was watching must resemble the devil. Years later, Claudia and Frieda consider their conversation with Maureen Peal, in which she boldly declared that she was cute and they were black and ugly. All evidence, in their minds, supports the statement, and implies that Claudia and Frieda are something lesser. This “either-or” mentality—that one must be cute or ugly, God or the devil, creates a sharp divide between those who meet society’s standards and the other, lesser populations. Though the favoring of white children is more subtle early in life, the distinction grows pronounced with time, breeding conflict. White children earn the instant admiration of others, and so sense their own superiority and act accordingly: “With the confidence born of a conviction of
superiority, they performed well” (169). This poisoned confidence becomes entitlement, breeding the vicious hatred that is so often its companion. From the white men who forced Cholly Breedlove to have intercourse with Darlene while they watched for amusement, to the storekeeper who refused to look at Pecola while he served her because there was “nothing to see,” to the teachers who called on her “only when everyone was required to respond,” members of the favored race quickly taught the most impressionable and vulnerable people that not everyone is created equal.

The destruction that must result from experiencing this systemized oppression appears at different times and for different lengths of time depending on the person. Cholly Breedlove drowns it in drink, while some, like Mrs. Breedlove, live in self-denial. For Claudia and her sister, disillusionment replaces their previous envy and insecurity when they learn that Pecola is pregnant with her father’s baby. In hearing neighbors discuss the situation, they realize that no one feels sorry for Pecola or her baby. Claudia observes that she needs “someone to want the black baby to live– just to counteract the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples, and Maureen Peals” (190). Her awareness of the uniqueness of her sorrow marks a turning point in her maturation. Later, in a conversation between Pecola and Claudia, the reader learns that Pecola has magically been granted the blue eyes she prayed for. Yet she worries that her eyes are not blue enough (though for what they might not be blue enough, she cannot say). The realization that the idea of beauty has no substance, and blue eyes cannot fix the world, represents the ultimate devastation. The author observes that romantic love and physical beauty constitute “the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought.” They create, in Claudia and in others, polite, disillusioned cynicists who rearrange the lies they’ve been fed to create a semblance of truth.

Paradoxically, while the codes by which society operates criminally favor one group over another, the human desire for acceptance is universal. The struggle to join the favored class when circumstance dictates otherwise causes devastating consequences for those who differ from these ideals, especially among the most vulnerable members of society. As Morrison’s text evolves, revealing the layers of institutionalized racism in America, the careful reader is changed, beginning to understand the tragic ramifications of carelessly perpetuated prejudices.

**Rainbow**

Sometimes, the defining moments of life declare themselves openly; a bold, italicized statement in a field of 12-point font. Other times, the world shifts by degrees, the water slowly growing hotter until the frog floats on the water– dead. She never returned to school after the day the water in the pot began to boil. Each week brought a different reason to stay home until, 30 days later, the truth revealed itself in the form of a drugstore test and two red eyes. Just like that, the water began bubbling out of control. Though her attacker still roamed free outside the pot; seeing no alternatives, the frog leaped.

Every day at 3:14 p.m., the entire neighborhood heard his feet pounding in the aisle. He reached the doors before the wheels of the bus stopped turning, before the driver could turn around and snap at him for the hundredth time to sit back down or so help him. Every day at 3:14, his heart and his feet raced down the steps and out onto the pavement leading home to a faded chartreuse ranch house shrouded by trees. Every day, like clockwork– tick, tock, puff, pound, as his glasses slid down his cold, sweaty nose over and over again only to be pushed up by an agitated hand– and every day we laughed.

On the good days, his sister’s face at the door stilled the pounding in his chest. They had both survived another day. On the bad days, his hands trembled as he unlocked the door and his heart went into overdrive, only returning to normal as he registered his sister watching TV or reading or doing anything, really– even crying requires breath– and he allowed himself to remember that oxygen did, in fact, exist. For a few hours afterward everything was calm and heavy with the silent sadness that neither one addressed. How could he tell her that after so many months, he still remembered the day he came home to find her asleep with a pill bottle next to her pillow, her skin the color of the powder blue dress she had donned for her burial? How could she tell him that on bad days, she sometimes wore the dress as she moved around the house, just in case? The night that followed the act, when life and death vied for control of the corpse already half gone, and the devastation on his sister’s face when she realized which side had won– these were sacred family secrets, to be neither acknowledged nor forgotten. So every day at 3:14 he ran home, and every day we laughed.

On this day, the hurried knocking on his own front door went unanswered. Half-frozen fingers frantically searched his pockets for the key he always took just in case. Fumbling with his pockets, with the key, with the
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lock, with the handle on that awful door that would never quite open and should have been replaced years ago anyway. Could have, should have. His mom should have let him be home-schooled. He’d asked before and she had, of course, refused, but he could have persisted. He could have worn her down until the ‘no’ became a ‘yes.’ Could have, should have. Fumbling again to put the key away and throw off his backpack, not caring where it landed...

“Jess? You there?” She was asleep. She had to be asleep, finally drowsy enough to slip off without the medication that never seemed to work anyway. Who knew how long she’d been awake? “Jess?”

Through the hall, the living room, the kitchen (he noticed the few knives they possessed were still clean). Up the stairs, panting, stumbling, scraping hands, crawling like an animal to the top of the landing, to his sister’s room. “Jess?”

There, on the bed. He ripped the covers back. “Jess!” His sister’s dark hair spilled out around her, revealing the orange pill bottle tucked next to her pillow where her brown teddy bear used to sit.

His eyes screwed tight against the scene. This isn’t real. They are four and eight, fighting over some disputed Halloween candy. Five and nine, and the girl is teaching her brother how to jump off the swing set. She gets grounded after he breaks his arm. 12 and 16, he confides in her alone about the bubbly feeling that arises in his stomach when a certain boy in biology talks to him. She listens and smiles sadly. They are anywhere, any time in the history of their lives but here—his high school graduation, her wedding. This isn’t real.

When he opens his eyes, she is still there, wearing a white dress and a blank expression. The boy guessed right, in a way. After months of trying, his sister finally found a way to fall asleep.

He missed the bus the next day. Instead of hallways, he passed through a blur of sirens and tears and black—everything black and behind it all, the white of his sister’s dress that she would wear forever. A week later, he returned to school. At 3:14 that afternoon, the bus arrived at his stop and the boy disembarked, but something was different. After a minute, we saw it: he’d stopped running.

The Gift

The thing they don’t tell you about having depression is how it has a way of making the little things so hard. You get into this spiral of thoughts and all of a sudden your room is so much safer than the world outside, and it takes monumental effort just to get out of bed, let alone out of the house, and all of a sudden your fingers start fumbling and you realize you can’t leave the house after all, because your shoes aren’t tied and you can’t tie it yourself and there’s no way you can go out in public with untied shoes. I can’t tell you how many times my inability to tie my shoes has kept me inside. And I realize, objectively, that that makes no sense—I mean, I’ve known how to tie my shoes since I was three—but that’s how it was.

Then one night, right before Christmas, a week after I last left the house, my twin brother Javi bounded into my room without knocking. “Let’s go somewhere,” he said. He lifted my keys off of my desk and swung them around his finger, looking at me expectantly. I lowered my head to study the worn-out gray carpet beneath my bare feet.

“I can’t.”

“Why not?” he asked. I shrugged and sighed, hoping he would leave. Instead, he plopped down on my bed beside me. It was a waiting game, sitting there in silence, seeing who would crack first. Per usual, it was me.

“I can’t go out because... I can’t tie my shoes again.”

I figured he’d laugh—he wouldn’t get it, how could he? But he just nodded seriously and said, “Then don’t.”

“What do you mean, don’t?” I demanded. “It’s not like I can just not wear shoes for the rest of my life—you can’t go anywhere without shoes. Says so on signs in every establishment everywhere: no shirt, no shoes, no service. They care more about shoes than they do about pants, which, by the way, is a serious flaw in the system.”

“An outright injustice,” Javi agreed, “and I’d love to tackle it some other time. Seriously. We can organize a group to go to McDonald’s in our underwear and see how they like it. But in the meantime, I have another idea.” He sprang off the bed and walked out the door, and for a minute, I thought he had finally given up. But then he came back smirking, with a shoebox tucked under his arm. He handed it to me. I looked at the box and then back at him, wondering how it was possible for me to be related to someone this stupid. “Open it,” he instructed. Like I’d never seen a box before.
“Look, Javi, I appreciate the gift. I really do. But shoes are kind of the problem right now, so I really don’t think a new pair will do me much good.”

He rolled his eyes. “Open the damn box, Sam.”

So I pulled the lid off. Inside was a pair of shoes, size 10, in a God-awful shade of green, but they had… “No laces,” I said, suddenly understanding.

“No laces,” he agreed. “No Velcro, no nothing. Just stick your feet in these and off we go– simple as that.” His smirk disappeared. “Look man, I know it’s been tough, but you can’t stay in here forever. You have to get back on the horse, or on the street as the case may be, and if it takes a pair of stupid slip-ons to do that, then so be it. Just hurry up and grab a coat, will you? I’m starving!”

But I didn’t feel like moving just yet. I took my time putting on the shoes, one foot at a time, and feeling them crush the carpet under my feet and grinning like a maniac because I can do this, I think. And then Javi snapped at me for dawdling so I grabbed my keys and drove us to McDonald’s for milkshakes. It was such a little thing, you know? Just a pair of shoes. But they helped me feel like me again when I didn’t think I could. Those shoes, ugly as they were, were the best gift I ever got.

Where the World Goes Wrong
"Masks and Mirrors"

As the clock tolls two, the truth comes out;
eyelids droop and guards come down,
And iron gates give way to reveal the best-kept secrets of the crown–
All honored guests are not as they appear.
Silk sashes hide stains of wine and blood and masks make cruel intentions seem good,
And the greatest offenders, it is revealed, could charm even cold-blooded snakes–
they’re the brightest and the shiniest in the world.
In the close company of night, we bare our souls in a way
we wouldn’t dream possible during the day,
And we find to our surprise that it relieves the weight
that threatens to crush us where we stand.
So why do we stop? Of what are we afraid? Perhaps nothing, save vulnerability.
Honesty’s hard when there’s so much to lose; to the left and the right, all eyes are on you,
Or maybe they’re not, but you’ll never know– truth be told, you don’t really want to.
So for our own protection, we hide
behind practiced smiles and elaborate lies.
We go broke on concealer to hide trails of tears–
tombstones of weak moments that betray our worst fears–
But don’t worry, no one saw you. They were
Looking in mirrors.
The chinks in your armor, they’ve always been there,
and as old holes get patched, new ones will appear.
But the truth is, we’re too old and tired to care– for better, and for worse.
So join us in the ballroom;
Step in time into the fray.
The madness grows dark as secrets as the sky fades from black to gray.
Some say the intrigue will suffice to drive a person insane, but
A room full of scared strangers makes for a devil’s masquerade.

"Smoke"

The future they saw was made of flying cars
and life on Mars and intergalactic harmony.
In the future they saw, disease was gone,
the good guys won, and the world was at peace.
The future they saw held a spark of hope
for the world they could create,
But in our eyes, the future they saw
instead went up in flames.

We hacked the smoke out of our lungs
And it instead filled up our eyes.
There was no more hoping to create—
just hoping to survive
As flames and desperation
Made buildings, books, and bodies all hollow inside.
Violence and lies sprang like weeds from the dust;
It was every man for himself.
Funny how much you learn about people
When everything’s going to hell.

But the thing that surprised me most to learn
is that some old rules still apply.
When your time arrives, it’s futile to run
And even less useful to hide.
As I’m pondering this, footsteps ring above my head
And I know my time has arrived.
I’d try to fight or fly or scream,
But there’s smoke filling up my eyes.

"Strawberry Girl"

He never much cared for the taste of strawberries, until the summer when
they filled her mouth and she filled his mind and suddenly, he couldn’t get enough.
She moved like a breeze and laughed like thunder; her ethereal hands promised
endless summers spent stealing fruit and laughing as the juice stained their lips
and sealed their kisses, and he believed her. So he embraced her thirstily,
consuming her as an alcoholic would guzzle strawberry wine.

He grew intoxicated feeding off her passionate soul,
not realizing that he was draining her. In his frenzied state, he neglected to see that
the Strawberry Girl was her own force of nature,
and by the time the sirens went off, he was done for.
Her eyes changed from copper to chestnut to black as the sun dipped behind dark clouds, and when autumn
came,
the rain fell on graveyards of strawberry plants guarded by weeds
on once-fertile land stripped bare by hopeful greed;
and the Strawberry Girl was washed away with the shift of the seasons.
Two summers later, he found himself locking lips
with a girl who tasted nothing like strawberries. Still, he thought, maybe,
if he closed his eyes... yes.
Her hair long and silky, her skin flushed and warm, she felt just like the girl
who’d swept him off his feet—he only had to will the transformation complete,
extcept...

Where the Strawberry Girl was fiery and discerning, the new one was simply naïve—
either that, or she was unwilling to see that the Strawberry Girl’s spectral hands
still enshrouded her new love’s heart.

All this time later, the Strawberry Girl could still tease
bright red blood from his puncture wounds, just as he had once squeezed
the very air she breathed from her lungs.
All this time later, he would even swear her ghostly eyes watched him as he bled.
But he’d decided that moving on was the thing to do, so he bought the new girl a present of strawberry lip gloss;
she wore it because it reminded her of him, and he kissed her when she wore it because the taste reminded him of them,
and the Strawberry Girl’s toxic seeds rooted ever deeper into his heart.
Trishna Limaye
Short Story: The Concept of Perfection
Marquette Senior High School
Nicole Scherder, Teacher

There was an incessant ringing going on behind Evelyn, and though she knew it must be the phone, she absolutely refused, on principle (heaven knows what principle), to venture away from the mirror until her eyeliner was on point. Through some superstition her mother had passed on to her, Evelyn believed perfection was only possible in one try, no breaks, no pauses, and definitely no distractions. As such, every one of her actions had to be completed immediately after being started, or risk being completely scrapped.

The phone rang yet again, the fifth time by Evelyn's count, and she finally stepped away from the mirror, perfectly accentuated crystal blue eyes staring back at her. Satisfied, she picked up the phone with one of her beautifully manicured hands and graced the persistent caller with her voice.
"Hello, this is Evelyn speaking"
"Evie!! Girl, I've been calling you forever. What the hell were you doing?!
Evelyn crinkled her nose just slightly, enough to display her distaste at the manner in which she has been addressed. Unfortunately, the only passerby who could've noticed the look was an ant who was entirely too preoccupied with carrying away part of Evelyn's breakfast-the caller remained unaware and ploughed on.
"Well, doesn't matter. You finally picked up the damn phone!"
"Hello Abby, do you think you could ever call me Evelyn?"
"Oh don't be such a stiff ass. Evie's an awesome nickname," Abby's voice called out jovially. "Anyways, I called cause I wanted to see if you'd come to the mall with me."
"I would love to. I'll meet you there in about half an hour?"
"Righto!"

Evelyn hung up quickly, not wanting to spend another moment on the phone. While she loved her friend dearly, facing (or hearing, rather) her overly bold personality was just too much for a proper lady such as herself, but as Abby was Evelyn's oldest friend, she really didn't have much of a choice in matter anymore. Quickly, gracefully, Evelyn scooped up her purse, tightened her pin-straight golden brown hair into a stiff high ponytail, and headed towards the door, pausing only to wash her hands after crushing the ant under her fingertip - she couldn't very well have a kitchen full of ants after all.

Arriving at the mall twenty minutes later (it would've been a shorter trip if she had dared go above the speed limit), Evelyn made her way to the little coffee stand inside of the mall-the place she Abby always met. After receiving her non-fat soy latte and leaning up against the wall, Evelyn checked her phone to see that she had arrived exactly when she said she would, as per usual, and Abby was still nowhere to be seen.

Soon enough, when her latte had gone cold in her hand, Abby arrived, late, as per usual, and eagerly made her way over to her friend, picking up her usual black coffee.
"Man, I haven't seen you in forever! How have you been?"
"Oh y'know, I've been up to all kinds of exciting things. I did manage to wreck my car again -don't ask- so now I'm stuck riding my bike. Hope to hell the weather doesn't get bad, cause riding a bike in storms is a bitch." Evelyn made a slight noise of sympathy in the back of her throat, but really couldn't begin to sympathize at all.

"Seriously though, I'm glad you could come 'cause my boss is having this party thing tonight, and I have zero dresses that fit that kinda scene. Figured you could help with that," Abby said, downing her coffee and tossing it into the nearest trash can. Evelyn, having finished her latte as well, followed Abby's lead, placing her cup in the recycling bin.
"You only have today to buy a dress and get ready?" Evelyn asked with an amused tilt to her lips at her friend's typical behavior.
Suffice to say, the shopping trip wasn't quite that easy, though they did share a laugh, and an argument or two, over their starkly different ideas of the perfect dress, but were eventually able to settle on a modest fit and flare dress—the style suiting Evelyn and the scarlet color suiting Abby.

"Abby, you must come to my apartment to allow me to get you ready for tonight." Evelyn always said everything in that demeanor; there was never any room for argument.

"Alrighty," Abby said as agreeably as usual, sticking her hand in the pocket of her black skinny jeans. "I'll just follow you home."

Another 20 minutes later (even with her friend following her, Evelyn wouldn't break the speed limit), they arrived in her apartment, and Evelyn parked her Bugatti in the complex's garage, while Abby parked outside, her motorcycle a small stain on the pristine background. Nevertheless, Abby still looked like she belonged there in a strange sort of manner—she called it her gift: the ability to fit in anywhere no matter what. Evelyn could only ever fit here.

Upon entering her apartment, Abby let out a low whistle.

"Damn, this has gotten even more expensive looking since the last time I was here." Pleased at what she assumed was her friend's way of complimenting her, Evelyn let out one her rare half smiles.

"Thank you. Now, let's get started."

Evelyn promptly led her friend to the bathroom to change into the dress, then made sure to set all her makeup out on the kitchen counter, close to a chair she had set up for Abby to sit in. Soon enough, Evelyn was working her magic on Abby, clicking her tongue disapprovingly at the state of her knotted raven hair and raccoon eyes, ignoring Abby's protests at her changing her entire look. After having her hand slapped away from the makeup for a third time, Abby closed her fist in her other hand and the two sat in a companionable, if slightly strained, silence until Evelyn started painting Abby's fingernails.

"Look, I appreciate the thought and all, but I've already let you make me your doll; I'd rather have my nails be black, not this weird tan color," Abby said bitingly, finally having had enough.

"Don't be ridiculous; this looks much better."

"Evie, I'm serious, just let me paint my nails black."

"My name is Evelyn, and I absolutely cannot let you. You will ruin the whole thing." There it was again, Evelyn's preemptive end to an argument, but this time, for the first time, Abby kept going.

"My nails are going to ruin it all?!" Abby cried in exasperation.

"Yes, every little detail matters, and honestly you're quite adept at ruining those details."

"Are you kidding me right now?!" Abby exclaimed. "That's just bullshit your mom's fed you. No one else gives a damn about my fingernails!"

"You are allowed to speak without cursing Abby. And please, leave my mother out of this and calm down so I can finish your nails."

"Oh why should I? Your mom's still got such a hold on you even though she's been dead for three years! Do you know how hard I've had to try to get you to come with me and do things beside scrub your stupid little apartment clean six times a day?!" At this point both girls were standing, and Abby had that sort of gleam in her gray eyes that a person gets when they're saying something they've wanted to say for quite some time. Evelyn of course, remained unruffled.

"I didn't think I'd have to say it twice, but you really must calm down." At her patronizing tone, something inside of Abby seemed to simply explode, and her voice rose to a level Evelyn had never heard before, and she could hardly stand Abby's normal volume.

"I didn't think I'd have to say it twice, but you really must calm down." At her patronizing tone, something inside of Abby seemed to simply explode, and her voice rose to a level Evelyn had never heard before, and she could hardly stand Abby's normal volume.

"No! No I absolutely refuse to calm down! At least I feel something and I'm not some emotionless robot!!" It was getting harder for Evelyn to tolerate the screeching. "But you! You're a fucking ghost. Like shit, I thought you were bad before your mom died, but now you're just pathetic. You're so totally obsessed with your mom's idea of perfection that you're just numb! That's not perfect, that's the opposite of perfect. Evie, for fuck's sake, you're not perfect! You will never be perfect! Especially if you pretend you don't feel! Goddammit Evie, do you even feel?!"

In a motion that could only be described as one of the only impulsive actions she had ever committed in her life, Evelyn's hand rose to meet Abby's cheek, carrying the weight of the emotions she had kept under lock and key for the past twenty four years. Abby, obviously stunned, couldn't regain her balance in time and crashed, skull first onto the sharp edge of the kitchen counter, then fell violently onto the floor, a dark red liquid pooling around her head, staining the sparkling kitchen floor.
"My name is Evelyn. Abby," here she sighed slightly, as if relishing her friend's company now that it was silent company. "Abby, you've ruined my kitchen."
I believe that
by now
I was supposed to have an epiphany of some sort
Some sort of grand understanding
about myself and the one time I saw that cat
or whatever

I seem to be out of epiphanies
or at least out of the ability to fake them
I’ve faked them a lot recently
and I do mean a lot
because how else am I supposed to write the perfect
college essay?

I am supposed to have a deep character
and a tragic back story
but I’m stuck at the kiddie splash pool
with my worst memory being the time I ate grass

Which, before you ask, I did already use
as an essay

Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad
if I felt like I had one something worth saying
and that was all I had to write about
but if I have to write on thirty different topics
then you can be damned sure I’m giving you thirty shitty essays
instead of one fantastic one

I’m relatively certain you don’t care for that anyway
I don’t think it’s the quality of writing that impresses you
or even the stupid stories
It’s the fact that we took the time out of our day to write something
as shitastic as this
and then had the balls to send it to you
as if it would get us in

The crazier the essay
the more the brownie points
cause it means we’ve got something that’ll get us through college
or we’re just really lazy
but that’s the gamble that you must take

I am sending this not out of desperation
or some kind “fuck everyone” attitude
I’m fully aware that this will probably land me right on the rejected pile
but I find I don’t care
It’s not that I don’t want to get into your school
believe me, I do
but it’s three in the morning
and I have a chemistry chapter I was supposed to read days ago
and first years’ debate cases to edit so they don’t suck at the tournaments
and homework for a Spanish class I’m trying desperately to not fail
but I’m still taking the time out of my schedule to ensure my future
by faking epiphanies
for shitastic essays
Summer

The tree looks like a bird waiting to take flight, green feathers adorning its branched wings. Sarah has not seen the tree since the day it was put in the ground, just two weeks after Johnny was. She tries to walk quickly past it, past parasitic memories that have burrowed their way into her brain. Unwillingly, her eyes catch the glint of an empty dedication engraved in metal at the base of the trunk and the breath catches in her throat and refuses to escape.

In memory of—

She forces her eyes away, away to the blazing sun as if hoping to burn a different reality into her retinas. Bright rays reflect off leaves that look like they have been painted with a smooth coat of green and shellacked. Protect the image. Sarah can hear her father’s booming voice reverberate through the tiny clearing.

“Protect the image and protect the family.”

She knows it’s a bad idea, but she can’t help but reach out a trembling hand to caress the peeling bark, pushing down the rational voice in her head that is waving neon danger signs and screaming for her to run away.

Sarah is tired of rationality.

She has tried her whole life to be the good daughter, the good sister, the good friend. She’s tired of trying, of failing. With jerky steps, Sarah forces one foot in front of the other, like the jumbled lines they used to follow in preschool. Find a buddy, hold hands and don’t let the other get lost.

Sarah’s nails dig painful red crescents into her palms. Don’t let the other get lost, don’t let the other get lost, don’t— her toe slams into unyielding oak. After an indrawn breath and a harsh oath, Sarah laughs bitterly, the sharp sound swallowed by the humidity hanging in the air like a suffocating blanket.

“Who knew?” She shouts to the silent wood. “Who knew you could still hurt me without even being here!”

A sob tries to force its way out but Sarah swallows it whole.

Fall

Dry leaves hang off the branches, tethered to the wood by the hint of life that still persists in the sinewy stems.

Sarah can hear the crunch of their dead brethren underfoot as she makes her way towards the tree that has grown three inches since her last visit. Sinking down at its base, she searches the motionless wood for something, anything that can give her the answers she seeks.

“Can you hear me, Johnny?” Sarah whispers, lips nearly kissing the rough bark. “Do you still remember me?”

The only reply is an iridescent green beetle making its way through the haphazard maze formed on the trunk’s surface. A seven-year-old memory, as if pushed by the light breeze ruffling the leaves overhead, blows into her mind.

She sees the snapshot of two children lying under the shade of a tall maple; her, trying desperately to avoid getting grass stains on her new white dress (she was supposed to save it for church) and Johnny, glasses sliding down his slightly flat, bunny slope nose. Johnny points excitedly to something shiny crawling on the tree, nudging her.

“What is it?” Sarah wrinkles her nose. She can’t imagine getting close enough to find out.

“It’s a Figeater Beetle, also known as a June bug.” Johnny says softly. His eyes are big and bright behind thick lenses as he stares, almost desperately, at the bug.
Sarah rolls her eyes. She’s never really understood Johnny’s fascination with all things creepy crawly. Mama and Daddy were arguing about it in the kitchen the other day, her father’s authoritative, Mr. Councilman voice filtering up through the vents.

“All he does is stay holed up in his room with his microscope and his bugs! He has no interest in anything remotely athletic and his only friends seem to be girls.” Her father’s voice had dropped to a tight whisper, forced through clenched teeth. “It’s unhealthy and unnatural.”

Johnny is still eyeing the bug, his trembling hand clenching and unclenching unconsciously. Even while preoccupied with her dress, Sarah can see that this bug is special to him, different from the ones that she shrieks at when Johnny shoves them at her excitedly as he spits out a hundred different facts.

“The June bug is my favorite.” He says suddenly. His voice is rushed as if he can feel a clock ticking down the seconds he has left to speak. “I don’t know why, but it’s just really...cool.”

Sarah notices that he doesn’t seem satisfied with the word he settled on, but lets it go. They sit in silence for a few minutes before Johnny clears his throat to speak once more.

“When it’s scared or under attack it blends into the tree and nobody even knows it's there.” His paper-thin eyelids briefly close. “But when there’s nobody around it can come out and dance in the sun, dance until it’s not scared anymore. The light shines off its back and throws a million rainbows into the air and it—” His breath catches.

“What?” Sarah whispers, staring at his profile, at the skinny face with its odd nose and star beam eyes. The force of his desperation to make her see, make her understand, holds her gaze hostage.

“It can just be itself.” His eyes turn then to Sarah, so filled with hope and longing that she can hardly breathe with their intensity.

“It can be beautiful.”

Winter

The tree looks like death, its bare bones framing the gray sky.

Fitting, Sarah thinks. Despite the ugliness that pervades the tree, something keeps pulling her back to the space tinged with grief; this is the third time she’s paid a visit this month. Her boots crunch through the frozen grass and stop right before the solid oak. Soles sinking into slush marbled with what looks like dog piss, she places a palm against the rough grooves and knots.

Her frozen fingers curl into a stiff fist.

Knock knock.

Who’s there?
I killed.
I killed who?
Yourself, apparently.

Sarah laughs hard, hands braced against the hard trunk as her belly heaves. She laughs until the sound chokes in her trachea and her lungs scream for oxygen and the noise coming from her mouth sounds suspiciously like a sob.

The tears come then, hot and stinging. She brushes them away angrily, but more spill over dark eyelashes and onto gloved hands that frantically try to wipe away the eruption of a belated mourning.

With her eyes clouded by the salty mixture, she stumbles blindly over a tree root creeping along the frozen ground. She hits the hard earth with painful thud and slams a fist against the frigid wood of the tree.

“Why?” She screams, feeling the rough bark bite into her knuckles. “Why did you leave me?”

Sarah throws punch after punch at the unmoving tree, her anger merging with tears to create an almost unnatural sound. She keeps hitting until the skin on her hands is torn up and bloody and her voice gives out with a final cry.

Sarah collapses at the base of the tree; her chest aches with every breath but she won’t dwell on if it’s from the frigid air or the grief she finally let exist.

Her hair is wild and dark mascara is bleeding down her cheeks. She can practically hear a horrified Johnny telling her she looks like a hot mess.

A soft smile flits across her face only to fade away as she curls her body around the tree and gently strokes a bumpy root with her index finger.
“It was supposed to be you and me, always.” Sarah whispers in the voice of someone who has had not their heart, but themselves, broken in half. “Now what am I supposed to do?”

Her well of tears has been depleted and the frozen air steals the moisture from her eyes. It hurts to keep them open, but Sarah keeps staring ahead anyways.

“I would have loved you no matter who you loved.” She murmurs disjointedly.

The memories play then, as if on a film reel. Johnny, helping her make Kleenex dresses for her Barbie dolls, cradling a rare species of caterpillar, grinning broadly with the one missing tooth that made him look like a nerdy pirate.

Johnny, coming home with a black eye courtesy of some football players who were taught in the pews to hate the love they didn’t understand. He had been greeted by another slap from their father, who demanded that his son act like a man.

Another random recollection comes, this one of Johnny sprinting aimlessly across an open field with such speed and exhilaration that Sarah feared his glasses would fly back and stab the light out of the stars in his eyes.

“I’ll make like a June bug and fly away.” He would shout.

She never expected him to follow through, let alone at the Route 63 overpass.

The pain hits her then, so sudden and fierce that she thinks her parents will have to bury another child this year. Her heart feels like it is in flames. Gasping, she rolls onto her back and desperately gulps in December’s biting air. The burning begins to subside and is replaced with a growing anger.

“Are you happy, Johnny?” She yells, her voice echoing into the silence. “Have I been punished enough?”

Her hands are shaking in tempo with the tremors in her voice. She tries to get up but her limbs refuse to obey the signals from her brain. Sighing, Sarah flops her head back down on the hard earth, wincing at the impact.

The silence in the little space around the tree is so loud she swears it sounds like bells. She begins to feel the prickling of a new emotion she doesn’t quite want to confront, a quote from Voltaire tiptoeing into her thoughts.

Every man is guilty of the good he did not do.

And that’s the crux of the matter, isn’t it? The reason she has to change her sheets every night because of the tears and the sweat from each horrible dream is not what she did do, but what she didn’t. She thinks back to those last few weeks. A baby tears slips free as she remembers Johnny's stricken face after he tried to confide something important and she told him to not make things difficult for their parents, for her.

After months of blaming Johnny for giving up, for being too weak to keep trying, Sarah is faced with the ugly truth. She should have tried harder too.

“I’m sorry,” She whispers, turning her face towards a dull sun muted by clouds.

A perfect snowflake spirals down through the sterile sky to land on Sarah’s black coat. She has the strange urge to protect it, to preserve its icy fractals for all eternity. The thought leaves as quickly as it came and she continues to lie immobile on the dead, frost-covered grass.

The snowflake melts.

Spring

Tiny green shoots are struggling their way through the thick soil around the tall oak tree.

They are most likely weeds but Sarah cannot help but smile at their perseverance. She notices that the ground has been recently tended to and is startled by the possibility that one of her parents may have made the visit to Johnny’s tree.

She’s taken to calling it that now; Johnny’s tree.

The newly-green grass has pulled away from winter’s embrace and Sarah finds a clean patch to settle down on, placing the picnic basket equidistant from her and the tree. Taking out some apple slices and peanut butter, she coats the fruit and crunches on it absentmindedly.

“Things are a little better at home,” Sarah says conversationally. “Mom stopped crying all the time, but now all she does is clean.”

The large portrait of Johnny in the middle school football uniform he wore for two weeks has been wiped down so many times a spidery crack has started to emerge on the surface. Sarah frowns at the reminder of
how stubbornly her parents still hold onto a lie, but then lets out a sigh filled with resignation and a trace of hope.

It may have been naive for her to believe that Johnny’s death would be some sort of miraculous catalyst for acceptance, but there’s still time.

Sarah bites into an apple slice and savors the tangy yet nutty taste. A brisk breeze traveling down from the treetops blows strands of auburn hair into sticky peanut butter. Groaning, she attempts to extricate her hair while preventing any further mishaps with the peanut butter and apple confection she currently holds in her hand, but eventually gives up and leaves the food at the base of the tree.

For the June bugs, she thinks.

The ever reliable seasons have guided her through a year crammed full of whispers and tears. It’s gotten a little better in the past few months. Her guidance counselor has stopped having "personal discussions" with her and classmates no longer look at her with terrified fascination, as if she’ll follow her brother into the path of a trailer truck at any minute.

The regret, however, still persists. Sarah carries it around with her daily and will do so for the rest of her life. It’s a reminder that Johnny no longer has one and that she still has time to help another gay teen keep his.

There is a perfect balance between sun and cloud in the sky and their effect casts an innocuous light on the tree. Sarah can finally admit that it might almost be a worthy way to remember a boy whom too many forgot until too late. Even the metal plaque drilled into the ground at the tree’s base looks almost pleasant.

With just a few minutes left before she must return to a still-quiet house, Sarah runs a finger over the rectangular brass, tracing Johnny’s name and the inscription that she demanded be chosen.

She smiles.

_In memory of Jonathan Adam Phillips. 1996-2012. May he forever dance in the sun._
The psychology of the lie is one that many great figures in science have carefully decoded but have yet to understand. Though countless research exists detailing psychoanalysis of the deceptive identity, attempting to unravel the motivations for dishonesty can be an exhausting feat—even more so when the mind is trying to deceive itself.

With some, this dishonesty may come from a place of want, or perhaps one of fear. For senior Zachary Jimenez, the lies fed from both.

“Your sexuality is something that you’re constantly being reminded of, so I thought about it every single day. When you’re in the closet, it is one of the worst feelings in the world,” Jimenez said. “You lie to yourself; you lie to your family. You make up all this stuff to try and fool yourself.”

For 18 years of his life, Jimenez carefully constructed a persona that could not be characterized as ‘straight’, but definitely gave no hint that the Columbia native was attracted to the same gender. In middle school, when others were just beginning to discover and explore their newfound sexuality, Jimenez was desperately trying to avoid his own.

“It wasn’t really me pretending I was straight. It was more of me just ignoring it,” Jimenez said. “When people would talk about relationships with girls, I would just try to get off the subject because it made me uncomfortable because I knew inside what I felt.”

The lie that grew into the narrative of Jimenez’s life firmly corked his bottled emotions, preventing the teenager from interacting with others with the depth of self-acceptance. Jimenez said he felt as if he was wearing a mask that everyone else liked but him, which only furthered the divide between his true identity, his outward projection and his relationships with peers.

“I never connected with people much when I was in the closet, because I didn’t really love myself,” Jimenez said. “When you don’t love yourself, you can’t love other people.”

Dr. Clancy Martin is a professor of philosophy at the University of Missouri Kansas City who specializes in moral psychology, particularly in the area of self-deception. According to him, Jimenez’s turmoil with regards to forming personal connections is a common reaction that arises from the inadvertent barriers born from self-dishonesty.

“There’s a poet and philosopher by the name of Adrienne Rich, and she said, ‘The liar leads a life of unutterable loneliness,’” Martin said. “There’s a sense of sharedness from trying to tell the truth about ourselves to other people, and we get just the opposite of that when we use our self-deceptions to manipulate their perception of us.”

However, there are some forms of self-dishonesty that may not necessarily have the same emotional and social implications. Martin said lying covers a wide spectrum, with the characteristics of each end manifesting in different ways.

“Just as there are many types of ways of lying to someone, there are many different ways of deceiving yourself,” Martin said. “Procrastinating, distracting yourself, reinterpreting something so you look at it in a different light.”

Freshman Grace Kirk has had plenty of experience with the first. For months now, she said she has been slightly lacking in her commitment to piano, often rationalizing not practicing as often.

“Sometimes when I don’t play I say it doesn’t matter,” Kirk said. “When I’m going to a football game or something with my friend, I’ll think I can just do it tomorrow, or the next day.”

Martin said these small rationalizations are a more common form of self-deception than outright denials, and that they are not in context particularly damaging to an individual’s psyche.

“Strategic self-deception, when you’re doing it and you know that you’re doing it, I think that kind is actually rare. I think the most common kind is when you sort of know you’re lying to yourself but you also half-know,” Martin said. “I think there are relatively harmless lies to yourself and very damaging lies to yourself, and in that instance, you kind of have to look at what the value of the truth is.”
However, Jimenez said he was not unaware of the steps he was taking to conceal his sexual identity, as he was sharply conscious of the lies he was telling both himself and the people around him.

“I was very aware of suppressing those feelings and putting up those barriers,” Jimenez said. “I knew what I was doing.”

Martin said that in cases where an individual is struggling with their own sexual orientation, bald-face lies tend to be less standard than a combination of inner and outer justification of what they are feeling.

“I think those extreme cases are less common and tend to be more damaging,” Martin said. “I think the vast majority of cases lie somewhere in the middle, they probably tend to be less harmful but they also are kind of insidious and have a tendency to build up and become very damaging.”

Kirk said oftentimes when she tells herself one of these “neutral” lies, she is drawing from feelings of yearning, from trying to make reality fit a desire. With her piano, she has developed a dislike for playing, which affects how frequently she practices.

“Usually when I look at my piano I just dread sitting down and playing, so when I say it doesn't matter if I play piano or not, I feel like I want that to be true,” Kirk said.

Similarly, Jimenez said his younger self often tried to coerce his sexual orientation into being what it was not, which prolonged the duration of his many years concealing who he truly was.

“I wanted be like everyone else, being in a relationship with a girl, I thought that was what I wanted because I thought that was normal,” Jimenez said. “Sometimes I could just fake it. I would think that it would just go away as long as I just kept believing that I wasn't gay, that someday it would be true.”

This is a common motivator for self-deception, Martin said. According him, humans often try to manipulate life to adhere to a certain goal in a quasi “wish fulfillment” situation.

“We say reality isn’t behaving the way we want it to behave so we’re just going to make it do this,” Martin said. “We lie to ourselves about how reality is. It’s particularly easy to do when it comes to our emotional state and beliefs.”

Martin that the human tendency to self-deceive is both unavoidable and beneficial, even though this reasoning might seem counter-intuitive. However, he also cautioned that emotional distress can often result from the clash of two differing convictions.

“If all of our beliefs were in perfect coherence with each other and we sincerely believed all of those beliefs to be true, we couldn't function. The world is just too complicated and human relationships are just too complicated,” Martin said. “Of course, when we're in situations where too contradictory beliefs are brought into direct conflict, we can experience anxiety that goes with this.”

Known as cognitive dissonance, this distress is revealed when an individual experiences some kind of discomfort from holding conflicting opinions. Martin said the first step towards resolving this is examining your own beliefs and thinking about what you genuinely believe to be true, but used his own past struggles with alcoholism as an example of how difficult this task can be.

“I know it's always a bad idea for me to take a drink,” Martin said. “Now I haven't taken a drink in a long time, but I don't know if I sat down with a drink in front of me, if I would necessarily decide not to drink it even though I know it's bad.”

This first step towards reconciling cognitive dissonance is one that many teens have had to face, Jimenez said. As a gay high schooler who has been an intimate witness to the effects of such lies, he said the self-dishonesty that many in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer community experience eventually reaches a tipping point where it-or they-cannot continue.

“People come to a crossroads where you accept it or you don’t, because eventually it’s too much,” Jimenez said. “You either find happiness you've always been looking for, or you just give up altogether.”

For Jimenez, this realization occurred only a few months ago, after long years of denial. He said there was no buildup or planning involved; he went to sleep as someone entrenched in the closet and got out of bed the next morning as an out gay man.

“It was a dream I had a week before my 18th birthday that I fell in love with this guy, that I was happy in a relationship that wasn’t with a girl,” Jimenez said. “I woke up from this dream knowing that that was what I always really wanted, and I was almost in tears because I was so happy.”

While thousands of teens remain silent to both themselves and others about their sexuality, Jimenez said that accepting the truth is a difficult and emotional process, but is also one that leads to a better
existence. For him, letting go of the lies was an enormous relief that helped him reclaim his own perceptions of himself.

“It started a new life for me, it completely changed how I saw myself,” Jimenez said. “I didn't hate myself anymore. If you hate yourself for most of your entire life and then all of the sudden you don’t, and you’re not ashamed and you’re happy…it’s the best feeling ever.”

Martin said as a general principle, honesty is always the best policy. Though lifting those barriers and inviting vulnerability may seem like a daunting task, Martin believes the end result is always worthwhile.

“I also think it's really important that we all have a goal to be more honest of ourselves,” Martin said. “At the end of the day even though you might not want to always be truthful, I think that the tough job of being honest with yourself and others as a general rule leads you to a better and happier life.”

This article was originally published in The Rock
In debate, there are certain unspoken rules regarding one’s behavior during a round: shake hands before and after, wear appropriate clothing, and if you happen to be a female debating a male, be nice.

This is not your typical socially required politeness; what I am referring to is an almost sickening level of sweetness and deference that protects against any accusations of rudeness.

At debate camp this summer, I faced my roommate, Jane*, in the semifinal round of the tournament. Besides being one of the best debaters I’ve encountered, Jane is unapologetically brash and commanding, which carries through in her debates.

During the cross examination period of our round, she slammed me with question after question, cutting me off at every other syllable and generally doing her job as a debater. After the round was over, we shook hands, and I congratulated her on being the talented firecracker that she was.

Her next round was against one of our male friends. From the start of the round, I could tell that something was different. Jane’s tone was more dulcet and jovial, and she made sure to sit with her legs modestly crossed, a complacent smile pasted on her face.

When cross examination arrived, I watched with an emotion somewhere between disgust and resignation as Jane began to ask questions in a cooing manner appropriate for a parent attempting to get a coddled child to eat their vegetables.

One of the best debaters I’ve encountered had transformed from an unapologetic interrogator to a kindergarten teacher-like figure who unfailingly said “please” and “thank you” every five seconds; the only difference between her opponents was that the second was wearing a suit and tie.

It was not until later that I would be able to identify this as a sexist microaggression.

According to Derald Sue, professor of psychology at Columbia University, microaggressions are “…brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative insults and slights” (1).

These are powerful yet inconspicuous details that define sexism in the 21st century. Denials of the imbalance in gender rights all fail to acknowledge an invisible discrimination that cannot be as clearly outlined as the gender pay gap, though inequities on that front are certainly plentiful (2).

This is a doctor asking my friend, who had been shadowing him for a month, if she wanted to be a nurse. This is a mother I once heard whisper under her breath that a girl in a mini-skirt should show some class, even after laughing at a boy who had just stripped off his shirt and flexed his muscles at one of my school assemblies.

This is my seventh grade female guidance counselor suggesting I take the Family and Consumer Sciences class because “girls should learn to cook early so they can provide for their husband and children.”

Every day, young girls are taught that the only way they can be accepted is by staying safely within the confines of glass boxes. When someone tells me to go make them a sandwich, it is because obviously they were just joking and sexism is over, right?

No.

Sexism is still very much alive. Its heart beats with every girl who is cat-called in the street for simply existing. It takes a breath at each instance a woman is made to feel ashamed of her sexuality.

It laughs when we pretend it does not exist.

There is no reason whatsoever why idiotic expectations of how a woman must behave should continue to dictate my actions and how I am perceived by others. It is easy to unintentionally overlook this kind of sexism, as it has become so ingrained in our society.

Due to this, many people have the misguided opinion that sexism in America is no longer a problem because, for instance, females can now vote. They plead with us to just think about the women in other countries who have it worse and be grateful for what we have.

The fact that I can receive an equal education and be the CEO of a company is appreciated, but the reality that many still see a short skirt and a few drinks as an excuse for sexual assault is reprehensible.
When you look the grand scheme of society, it’s clear that gender stereotypes constantly invade our perceptions of human beings, and form the breeding ground for microaggressions. When a woman is told that she is the weaker sex, whether directly or through subtle conditioning, she begins to believe it herself. When she is at a party, she’ll make sure to bring her own bottle. She won’t feel safe going back to her car at night without a male friend.

One of the first things she’ll buy before leaving for college are a rape whistle and mace.

The sad reality is that she has good reason to do this. According to the Center for Disease Control, 1 in 5 women will be sexually assaulted in their lifetime, a result of how microaggressions have quietly labeled us as targets (3). When a person is constantly thought of as vulnerable and as a victim, they become one.

This is just a single ramification among thousands perpetuated by gender stereotypes, a sobering example of how dangerous microaggressions can be. When placing different standards on human beings based on gender is so commonplace that we don’t even realize it is happening, society as a whole runs the risk of accepting the unacceptable as “normal”.

Even I have thought things in the past I am not proud of, have judged other women based on clothing or behavior that I considered “slutty.” Looking back, I realized that I would not have had the same reaction towards a man who dressed or acted in a similar manner. Nobody is immune from the pervasive nature of double standards, and nobody can be completely free of prejudice.

So what can we do? You might think that the broad and complex nature of sexism makes any individual action you may try to take null and void, but that is simply untrue. The first step towards making any real change is realizing that a problem exists.

We can begin by examining the way we react to certain situations, and attempting to be better. I challenge you to take a look at your day-to-day life and try to recognize the casual sexism that you perpetuate and receive in a vicious cycle of ignorance. The process can be painful, and it may churn up feelings of anger and hurt.

That’s fine. Sometimes it takes hurt to create hope.

From where I stand as a proud member of Generation Z, I do have hope. I have hope that as Americans, as human beings, we can work together to redefine what it means to be a woman and what it means to be a man. I have hope that we can usher a new era where a young girl isn’t told that she would make a great mother, but rather that she would make a great president.

It is time for us to break free of societal constructs and recognize and eliminate microaggressions designed to condition us to accept everyday discrimination.

Remember those ‘make me a sandwich’ jokes? Instead of just rolling your eyes at what you might perceive as a few silly words, try to seize the opportunity to change the narrative. Collectively, we have the power to flip the joke so the punchline does not target women, but sexism itself.

All the ingredients we need are right in front of us, so let us tell a different joke where we go to the kitchen, make ourselves a new sandwich and take a bite.

*Name changed to protect identity
An altered version of this essay was published in The Rock

References:

Olivia Long

Critical Essay: Eaten Up by the Sea
John Burroughs School
Shannon Koropchak, Teacher

"I started Early – Took my Dog –
And visited the Sea –
The Mermaids in the Basement
Came out to look at me –

And Frigates – in the Upper Floor
Extended Hempen Hands –
Presuming Me to be a Mouse –
Aground – upon the Sands –

But no Man moved Me – till the Tide
Went past my simple Shoe –
And past my Apron – and my Belt
And past my Boddice – too –

And made as He would eat me up –
As wholly as a Dew
Opon a Dandelion's Sleeve –
And then – I started – too –

And He – He followed – close behind –
I felt His Silver Heel
Opon my Ancle – Then My Shoes
Would overflow with Pearl –

Until We met the Solid Town –
No One He seemed to know –
And bowing – with a Mighty look –
At me – The Sea withdrew –"

~ Emily Dickinson

In Dickinson’s poem I started Early – Took my Dog, a woman visits the sea for the first time and stands in its waters. Once the water rises too high, she retreats back to the shore. By depicting the sea’s predatory interaction with the woman, Dickinson warns women of the loss of self-identity that can result from misleading perceptions and passivity in relationships.

Initially, the poem’s narrator perceives the sea as safe and innocuous. When she describes the sea, Dickinson writes: “The Mermaids in the Basement / Came out to look at me - / And Frigates – in the Upper Floor Extended Hempen Hands” (3-6). Here, Dickinson is comparing the sea to a home, since a “basement” and an “upper floor” are both structures found in a house. This analogy evokes a feeling of security, since homes are often seen as places where one can take refuge, shielded from the outside world. Home also elicits a sense of comfort, as it is a place where one can be who he or she truly is. Furthermore, in the same stanza, the image of the frigates extending their hands suggests that they are welcoming the narrator into the dominion of the sea. Since the sea is personified as a man, the relationship between the sea and the narrator represents a romantic relationship between a man and a woman. When viewed in this light, Dickinson conveys the message that in a relationship, the woman may feel safe and welcome.

However, by perceiving a relationship to be inviting and safe, the woman can become dangerously passive. In the third stanza, as the narrator approaches the sea, the tide “Went past my simple Shoe – / And past my
Apron – and my Belt / And past my Boddice – too” (10-12). In this description of the sea, there is no indication that the narrator is moving. This implies that the narrator is passively observing the water overtake her. In reference to the narrator’s previous descriptions of the sea, it is clear that she views the sea as harmless leading up to this point. Thus, it is plausible that she is blinded by her perceptions of the sea and consequently remains passive, failing to recognize the threat until the sea has risen to her bodice. Despite the sea’s threatening advances on the woman, she continues to depict the sea as innocuous. After a near-death experience, the narrator depicts the ocean as “bowing with a mighty look” (23). Since civilized men bow, the narrator views the ocean as polite and harmless. However, this perception is the antithesis of the true situation, since the ocean is dangerous, as demonstrated by the rising waters. Thus, Dickinson is subtly arguing that the woman’s inaccurate perceptions of the relationship can result in dire consequences.

One such consequence of misleading perceptions and the resultant passivity is the loss of control over one’s own body. In the scene of rising water levels, the narrator refers to areas of her body with articles of clothing. This evokes a sense of detachment from her own body because her clothing is not, in the literal sense, part of her body. Since clothing is a material possession, the narrator’s perceives her body as an object being used by the sea. The tide engulfing her can be interpreted as a sexual experience between man and woman. Each article of clothing that Dickinson lists covers a sexualized part of the female body. The “simple Shoe” of the narrator refers to her feet, a body part that is commonly fetishized. The apron lies across the lap of the woman and is thus associated with the woman’s groin area. The belt is associated with the hips, while the “boddice” is in reference to the woman’s breasts, since a bodice covers the woman’s upper body. Thus, the rising of the sea past these garments can be seen as the man sexually advancing on the woman by stripping her of her clothing. However, since the narrator is implied to be passive, as previously discussed, it is difficult to imagine this experience as completely consensual. Although passivity could also imply that the narrator is enjoying the sexual encounter, there is evidence in the next stanza that the experience is not consensual. Dickinson writes: “And then – I started – too – / And He – He followed – close behind” (16-17). The word “started” suggests that the narrator feels startled or alarmed in this moment. Furthermore, the repetition of the word “He” conveys a sense of anxiety. The frequent breaks in the narrator’s words suggest that she is stammering, implying that she feels nervous and panicked. Since the woman clearly feels uncomfortable, the encounter should be interpreted more as a rape than as consensual sex. Because the woman is no longer in control of her body during a rape, Dickinson implies that the woman can similarly lose self-autonomy when passive in a relationship.

Not only can a woman lose control of her body, but she can also lose her intellectual identity. When the water levels continue to rise, the sea “made as He would eat me up – / As wholly as a Dew / Opon a Dandelion’s Sleeve” (13-15). Eating something up suggests that nothing is left behind. Here, the act of eating up refers to the drowning of the narrator. When one is drowned, both his or her body and mind are consumed by the sea, since one’s entire body becomes submerged underwater. Thus, the eating up of the woman by the sea can be interpreted as the complete loss of self-autonomy of her body and thoughts. In the same stanza, the word “dew” implies insignificance, since droplets of dew contain very small quantities of water. The negligibility is especially stark when the dew is contrasted with the image of the sea. Thus, the narrator feels belittled by the sea. When dew is eaten up by the sea, it is assimilated into the sea, forming a part of the larger body of water. Thus, this image can be interpreted as a woman losing her individuality and self-identity. Therefore, Dickinson conveys the message that in a relationship, there is the threat of losing oneself and becoming a mere reflection of one’s partner.

In her poem I started Early – Took my Dog, Dickinson implies that unrealistic perceptions of relationships are perilous. Specifically, a woman consumed by overly idealistic views of a romantic relationship will lose her self-identity to the man.
It wasn’t always this way. They say it was a blessing to be chosen. They don’t know the half of it. Sometimes I wonder if I have slipped under the radar, or if He is simply keeping his friends close, and his enemies closer. I never dreamed the severity of His Plan.

“Where is my coffee? Oh, mein kampf, what does it take to get decent help around here?” This barking order breaks into my thoughts.

“Sir, your morning coffee is just a tad to your left.”

“Then you’d best move it, Dearie.”

I scramble to move the mug but pass over a document I had never seen. It is one of the ones He never lets me near. It wasn’t until then that I knew, that He knew.

With a crash heard all over Germany, the mug shattered along with my world and the dark liquid oozed over the papers.

With a rage that harnessed the full force of God Himself, He was upon me. “I grace you with my presence, and this is how you repay me?”

Almost instantly, His expression went from one of a lion on a hunt to that of a predator who knows his prey is dead and is just playing. “I assume you read my Plan, Dearie?” Not waiting for an answer he continues.

“Well, what do you think?”

Barely audible, I reply, “It’s a lovely plan, sir.”

“I can’t hear you, Dearie.”

“It’s a lovely plan, sir.”

“It is, isn’t it?” Pausing, just barely, He said, “Am I correct in assuming that you are Jewish, Dearie?”

Without waiting for a response he continues, “I’ve been looking for a tester, and it seems I’ve found one. I have a secret to show you, Dearie.”

Mr. Adolf Hitler grips me by the arm and leads me to a balcony. A sleeping dragon for now, this concentration camp would soon be teeming with Jewish men, women, and children. The cold death chambers occupying this camp prove that His plan was much more than just that. It was a promise. Now, though, it lays empty: a sleeping dragon.

“Take a good look. You’ll be spending a lot of time here.” With that I am forced into a cold concrete chamber, and a switch is flipped.

“Wait, why am I here?”

“Have a nice rest, Dearie.”

The room fills with noxious gas, and my world goes black.
Harrison Macon

Poetry: Weight Watchers (or Food For Thought)
John Burroughs School
Shannon Koropchak

There’s so much that we now know
That we didn’t fifty years ago...
Butter has too much cholesterol,
Don’t smoke any cigarettes at all.
Three miles a day which you should run,
Lie ‘bout “runner’s high” and say it’s fun.
Don’t eat white bread
Or soon you’re dead.
Yes, just whole grain—no—whole wheat,
Only ever eat white meat.
Watch your carbs—get on Atkins!
Never mind! Eat pasta (just use napkins).
Take fish oil supplements,
Not handfuls of mints.
They have too much sugar—
Use Sweet N’ Low—No, it gives you cancer.
Be sure to eat anything with a root,
Side note: avocado is a super fruit.
This just in: don’t eat gluten—
Pretend to know what it is.
Go on a diet like weight watchers—
Watch your water, wait—
No watch your water weight, wait—
Watch your weight but no weight watchers!
All these things that we now know
That we didn’t fifty years ago.
With all these diets, you think we’re better?
Guess what— America’s fatter than ever.
Sophia Marusic

Poetry: Snow Angels
John Burroughs School
Jeanne Gillanders, Teacher

"...rescuers on the Siachen Glacier are in the process of finding the 150 soldiers under 80 ft. of snow after the avalanche hit a Pakistani army base."

Not at all like the snow angels we used to make in the light dustings over the grass. Snowflakes falling on our chests, crushing the soft breath out of our lungs, and ice coating our eyes and mouths. And something makes me want to grab your hand for the first time, but the winter and the rocks keep us too far apart.

And all I can do is shiver.

Flurries

a flurry is not a miracle—
have you ever seen a snowflake save a life
before it burns?

but a flurry is now,
cruising down the freeway,
doused in the darkest shade of dawn,
and suddenly you roll into a stop,
we are a traffic of two.

you turn off the car,
sitting in that sleepless silence
until you point,
watch the snow in the street light,
suspended, hovering in this blink:
crumbs of iced, unwished stars
a congregation of light-winged moths
(fluttering before hurtling into the pavement)
it’s a moment before I realize I’m holding my breath.

it’s like hyperdrive in sci-fi movies
or falling asleep in pieces
or watching storms seep into the sea
are we underwater?

and then we’re moving again,
the scratchy radio coughing chords,
speeding into that snow curtain pinned up in the orange glow.
as we swim through it,
the horizon looks like cool honey.

snow swell

it's a blizzard and he is counting
snowflakes as she trudges
across the parking lot

    one
two
three    ten fifteen
twenty-three   thirty-seven
slush.

everything is the same color of dusk
in this snow light:
grey  soft  cool
lips on skin
lips  blue  hard
diamond mines
    a diamond: she,
the sun holds its
breath        a heather  ghost
    rush.

see her
gleaming owl eyes, think:
shadow, a cosmos,
stained glass and Sundays.
remember angels.
    a cold confession?
    blush.

the sky is breathing
this twilight
this holy chapel of disquiet
this holy ghost    snowy angel
fiftyfoursixtytwoseventy one hundred stars
    hush.
Sophia Marusic

Poetry: Monday
John Burroughs School
Jeanne Gillanders, Teacher

Monday

It is Monday, the true holy day. God appears in the coffee of a bus driver before dawn, but old eyes can lose sight of faith. In the fresh rays of a raw sun, he slips away in the steam, leaving exhaust fumes and a navy workman’s jacket with cracked elbows.

A young woman enters her too small apartment wearing too small shoes. She flips the switch, breathing, let there be light. But she does not breathe, let there be groceries, let there be money for the bills, let there be rest. It is light that she breathes for, the first gift of a god she was trained to love and learned to doubt. The rest will follow, she murmurs. It is Monday, and there is light.

It is Monday and a homeless Jesus sits on the curb with a shopping cart full of thrown away clothes and a stray cat. He mumbles something of a creed, the words garbled in the ghosts of his teeth, and condemns a teenage girl in fishnet. A shop owner comes out of his store, telling him that he stinks, that he is frightening away customers, that he needs to leave. Wheeling his cart, he sings that there is salvation for sinners. Then he sleeps on a bench in the park until a policeman turns him away. It does not matter that he is Jesus.

A scientist looks at an ear on the back of the mouse. People ears don’t grow on mice, the mouse says in his mother’s voice, creation is the Lord’s work. You leave it alone. But this mouse is named J-37 and he was born at the hands of a forsaken man. The scientist notes something in his book and, lying down, turns out the lights. It is Monday, and God has seen that light is good; separating it from darkness. But, the scientist wonders, what about the shadows?

It is Monday and a father stands in a hospital hallway, his tie rumpled and jacket forgotten in a forlorn corner. His son lies in the next room, in a tentative limbo between here and no more. He stutters to the floor and gasps for the tears that have not yet come. For the first time in years, he thinks of God and prays for light.
Day 2400  *angel-headed hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night*

“How does our fuel supply look?” Samuel strides up briskly, his hands tense at his sides, as if he is prepared for a wild west duel. He does not look at me, he does not look at James, but above us and out, into the black vastness of space. His fingers caress the back of my chair, and I lean forward quickly,

“A twenty—“

“—three percent surplus,” James interrupts hastily, as if he is protective of the very words that tumble from my tongue. He gazes at Samuel with resentful admiration, “It was a brilliant risk to slingshot off that moon, Sam, but I gotta say it paid off.” Samuel says nothing, his stony stare fixated on some point in the distance that I cannot perceive. His hands still linger along the edge of my chair, and he very deliberately drums his fingers, his nails brushing the tip of my braid.

“Iron,” he says finally.

“What?”

His eyes snap down to me for the first time. “Iron, Celeste.” he repeats, “We need more iron.”

“Well of course—“ James starts to cut in, but I interject,

“What do you mean?”

“The nutrition reports.” Samuel explains tersely, “we need more iron. Something about developing anemia.”

“Oh,” I answer simply. James doesn't say anything.

“We need meat. None of this…this,” He picks up James's unfinished soy bar and crushes it in his meaty fist before throwing it against the wall. I will have to sweep it up later, but for now I remain silent and shrunken, the sound of Samuel’s grinding incisors filling the bridge.

Gradually, our gazes drift to the window, each of us riveted by some unknown location in the inky blackness.

Day 2421  *Moloch! Moloch! Nightmare of Moloch! Moloch the loveless! Mental Moloch! Moloch the heavy judge of men!*

“How do you ever want to wake them up?” I’m sitting next to James in the Phase Two Compartment. His thigh is almost touching mine. Or maybe my thigh is almost touching his. I never feel so acutely alive than when I am surrounded by the nearly dead. James says nothing, his gaze unfocused over the cryogenic crypt. “I mean,” I continue bluntly, “There’s only three of us left. We could wake up at least one other girl—“

“Did you sleep with him?” His voice is measured, soft, cool.

My breath hitches in my chest, “What?”


“James!”

“Celeste…” Somewhere, a vent has turned on and a whirring noise fills the chamber. James’s voice drops another notch in volume, “I told you I loved you.” His voice is barely audible now, gravely and hoarse. The slight unevenness about his eyes becomes more pronounced as they droop.

After a moment’s hesitation, I monotonously repeat the words drilled into us during training, “There’s no love here, only predetermined compatibility,” but he’s already storming out of the room.

I sit at the bench a few minutes longer, letting the sound of slowed hearts fill my skull. When I close my eyes, I can almost picture the ocean.
Day 2437 who fell on their knees in hopeless cathedrals praying for each other’s salvation and light and breasts, until the soul illuminated its hair for a second,

We eat breakfast in silence. There is a harmony in the scrape of teeth on spoons, in the clatter of dishes, and in the fleshy sound of chewing. Everything is full of white, hard light.

“1,563 days until.” James says, not looking up. No one asks “until what.” No one meets eyes. No one stops the furious action of forks against plates. I wipe my mouth with my napkin. It comes away streaked with blood. Only then do I unclench my jaw, to realize that I’ve been gnawing the inside of my cheek.

Day 2452 Dreams! adorations! illuminations! religions! the whole boatload of sensitive bullshit!

Breath comes in short painful gasps. The Wheel was designed to keep us in peak physical condition, but I suspect its true purpose pertains to harnessing the rodent mentality. A test subject. An experiment. My feet pound against it, finding purchase in the soft tread of the rubber. I move my legs faster, exulting in the cold burn. It almost feels like back home—

My foot skids across the track and I stumble. The safety restraints catch my flailing limbs, my nose landing barely above the still spinning surface. For a moment, I let myself dangle, let my lungs hitch, and my heart stutter. For a moment, I let that glorious mixture of sweat and tears trickle from my cheeks and pool at my chin, only to make black splotches on the dark tread of the track. With my vision blurred, it almost looks like space.

I throw up all over The Wheel.

Day 2461 who ate fire in paint hotels or drank turpentine in Paradise Alley, death, or purgatoried their torsos night after night

Samuel’s hands on my waist.
Samuel’s hands at the small of my back.
Samuel’s hands encompassing my own.
I let him have the pieces of me that I have forgotten. His fingers are like spiders, trapping the weakest prey. I can hear James’s voice saying:

“Celeste…”
“1,539 days until.”
“Celeste I told you I loved you.”
“Celeste I told you I loved you 1,539 days until I told you Celeste 1,539 days until I loved you Celeste until I told you 1,539 days until Celeste I loved you until I told you 1,539 days. Celeste…”

“Celeste…” Samuel whispers into my ear, his rough hand now brushing softly against my cheek. His hand falters as he comes in contact with a rogue tear, but he does not acknowledge it.

We untangle and lie next to each other in the dark. Neither of us care enough to feign sleep.

Day 2462 who drove cross-country seventy-two hours to find out if I had a vision or you had a vision or he had a vision to find out Eternity,

There’s a pink pill with a smiley face engraved into it next to my multivitamin at breakfast. I turn it over between my fingers, letting the chalky residue powder my palms. An antidepressant. I try to catch Samuel’s eye, but he is suddenly absorbed in his powdered orange juice. I put it in my mouth, but my throat grows into a nest of cobwebs, sinewy spider silk preventing me from swallowing. Coughing, I spew it from my tongue.

“Goddammit, I told you we need more red meat.” He stands up abruptly, holding his face and catching the blood in his hands. Kicking his chair over, he stalks off to his compartment. His orange juice remains in powder form, blotted with a single drop of blood. I add some water and swirl it around, but don’t drink it. It’s a deep, red orange color, like sunsets. I used to watch the sunset nearly every day back home. I drop the pill in and watch it dissolve bit by bit.

James does not come to breakfast.

Day 2465 They saw it all! the wild eyes! the holy yells! They bade farewell! They jumped off the roof! to solitude! waving! carrying flowers! Down to the river! into the street!
“Have you seen James at all?”

Samuel, who is poring over some complicated chart and filling it with red arrows and tiny yellow circles, looks up at me with some amusement. “He’s been feeling a bit down. Had a bit of a fit.” He draws a thick blue line and the marker sounds as if it is tearing the paper apart. “Understandable. We’re too far from home, but also too far from where we’re going.”

I drum my hands against my thighs and parrot his words back to him, “A bit of a fit.”

“Don’t worry,” Samuel says, stretching his forearms against the table, “I just hooked him up to the drip, he’s with the Phase Two-ers. Get him chemically rebalanced, rested up, in a couple days he’ll be back to normal.”

“Yeah, I suppose.”

“Go ahead, get some rest.” He studies my face, “You look awful.”

I remain there, silent, my knees clacking together. I want to ask him if he feels it too. I want to ask him if that’s why we haven’t spoken in days.

Samuel grimaces, as if he can hear my thoughts, but returns his attention to the papers in front of him, “Your nose is bleeding.”

Day 2485

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked

There are spiders weaving webs through my throat, through my eyes. It’s the spindly legs that keep me from blinking. Always sharp, stab stab stab stabbing in the dark. And the whispering.

I reach up to touch my face. My nose is bleeding. I don’t remember that starting.

Day 2500

where fifty more shocks will never return your soul to its body again from its pilgrimage to a cross in the void

The ship travels farther and farther away.

Drifting: it is like a star unraveling. When they understand, when they find it, when they know what I’ve done, they will have to squint to see me.

I will be that spot far off in space. The star unnamed. Our Blessed Mother of the Asteroid Belt, Our Lady of the Dark Matter, Immaculate Madonna of Hydrogen Nebula.

I will be home.
Cccrrreeeaaakk.....Went the old rugged brown door as I pushed it open into my father’s garage at about 2:00 pm. My father Dr. Williams, as most people call him was an inventor of all sorts of contraptions. Most of his inventions were failures and embarrassed me time after time. I Bernet Williams had been made fun of in the school by many kids including Tony Syber for my father’s inventions and for the lack in grammar and punctuation for my own age. Tony had black hair, was the tallest kid in his class, and always wore a rugged pair of jeans and a blue light weight jacket. He was the Biff Tannen of my life from Back to the Future.

Out of the topic of what probably is an 80s science fiction movie, I was walking around the garage and all of a sudden…THUD!!! “What the heck did I hit?” I asked myself out loud as I got up to see an object under a brown tarp. I pulled the tarp off of the object to reveal what looked like a horse sleigh. “What the heck is this?” I wondered to myself. “What would my father need a sleigh for; it’s the middle of July.” I decided to examined the sleigh a little and found a few digital clocks wired together with a switch and a flashing green bulb. I examined more of the sleigh and found a humongous green blanket in the back and a tarp that pulled over the entire sleigh. Then I decided to sit in the sleigh to get a feel for directing one. It was then that I didn’t realize that my life would change forever. Right when I stepped into the machine, my shirt got caught on one of the levers in the machine and pulled it back. Then the horse sleigh sputtered to life like a crazy contraption along with the clocks and green light bulb like a police cruiser in pursuit of crime. Then a tubular hole in what looked like an empty void of space opened up below me. “What the...?” was all I was able to say in the brief seconds before the machine fell through the empty void. As the sleigh went through the unoccupied black as coal world, I saw what looked like stars rushing past me and what also looked like tunnels going to each star. Then a terrible thought came into mind as I closed my eyes. I didn’t want to watch the terrible fate happen to me right in front of my own two eyes. I didn’t want to accept the terrible fate would be my end, Death, the end of my existence forever. I could see the light. Was it the lights of heaven, or was it something else entirely. I didn’t know until I opened my eyes.

When I opened my eyes, I saw nothing but a forest of oak trees all around me except there was a big giant billboard right in front of my face. “Where am I?” I wondered to myself. I got out of the crazy contraption and walked to the front of a billboard while smelled the scent of an oak tree. The billboard read, “This is the future sight of Windletowns new estates, Twindell and Viridian.” “Wait, I live in Twindell.” I said as I continued to read the billboard. There was small text down at the bottom of the billboard. Completion date: 1977. “WHAT!!! 1977!!!” I said out loud. “That means that this contraption is a time machine!” I continued to say. “No one should know that I have a time machine, someone might steal it and take my only ride back home, and then I would be trapped living in the past.” I said. I looked north and south and straight north was Windletown, which looked like it was about a mile away. I decided to check the town out, but first I looked for something I could use to cover the machine so no one would take it away. I took the humongous green blanket that I saw earlier in the time machine and covered it with the blanket. Then I pulled of some branches from nearby trees and covered the machine with them. “I hope this is good enough to fool people, I guess I should make like a tree and leave.” I said to myself while I made my way to the side of the new paved road and ventured into my towns past. As I paced down towards town, I saw that the sun was about a quarter of the way in the sky towards the east which would translate to about 9:38 or 9:40 am. I also wondered what year I was in. “If I can figure out how long it would take to complete the estates, then I can figure out what year I’m in.” I said. “Now I believe that the forest was two square mile. So clearing two square miles of forest would take about...” BAM!!! A man threw a newly printed newspaper out of his truck which landed right into my face. “Or I can look at this newspaper that man just threw.” I said out loud in the lonely country. I looked at the date on the newspaper and it read. Tuesday May 6, 1969. “So the time machine sent me here. Why?” I wondered to myself as I reached the town. Once I took a look at the town, I could see I was in the past. The prices for objects were ridiculously low. Gasoline was only 35 cents per gallon. Food, drinks, movie tickets, kitchen ware, and other appliances were dirt cheap compared to $2.00 per gallon gasoline in 2004 and other objects. While I walked around, I over herd two men talking in what looked like a new 1968 Chevy pickup with a fresh dark blue coat of...
paint. “I heard that the school graduation starts in about 5 minutes.” said the man in the driver seat. “I hope my son knows I’m proud of him for working so hard for the past four years with his little side projects.” said the man in the passenger seat. “Graduation... wait, my father probably wanted to see his graduation.” I thought to myself. Then I sprinted to the school like a roadrunner as fast as in can. While I was running down to the school, my father, was sitting in a chair daydreaming about his future during the ceremony.

***

“Graduation... finally the day is here, the day I officially become an inventor.” said Thomas Williams. Soon to be inventor of the time machine his son arrived in. Thomas had thick wavy brown hair, had wild green eyes, and had a spark for inventions like the express train and how each thing worked together. “Yea good luck, you’re going to need it with all of your failures you will face.” said Bill Syber, Thomas’s high school bully Bill could see anger in Thomas’s eyes. “I’ll show you Bill, I will invent something that will change the world someday! Maybe I’ll travel through time one day!” Thomas said with an angry tone. “Yea that will be the day.” Bill said in response to Thomas’s daydreaming anger. Thomas was so busy thinking his future and trying to impress Bill, he almost zoned out right at the end of the ceremony. After Thomas said goodbye to some of his close friends that were moving out of town, Thomas went to the nearby café around 12:17 pm to grab a bite and hurried home to start his new career as an inventor. “I’ll show everyone that I can be an inventor.” Thomas thought to himself.

***

I remember making it to the school around 11:56 am to see the end of graduation. I decided watched the rest of the ceremony behind a bush so no one would see me and question me. While I watched the graduation, I noticed the school looked different. “The school actually looks great. and everything else around it looks in great shape.” I said as I continued to watch the ceremony. After the ceremony ended about 2 or 3 minutes after 12:00 pm, I decided to follow my father around and eventually fifteen minutes later, he went into the café. As I stood outside I wondered to myself. “Should I go back to the future now or stay a little longer and check out anything else?” I decided to go back to the time machine when BAM!!! I ran into someone. “Sorry about that.” I said to them. “It’s alright; I was in a hurry to go home.” they said. Then I realized I ran into my father’s past self. Right when I noticed, I remember saying this. “I think you look like you could be an inventor someday.”

“How did you know that I would devote my life to inventing?” he asked me. I just said. “You look like you’re an inventor to me and your carrying that notebook that say’s Invention Ideas. I think you should keep working on your inventions and try not to give up and I’m sure you will succeed in your new life.” as I walked south back towards the time machine. “He is the nicest man I have ever met.” said Thomas. “I will succeed in inventing, I will be the best!” he continued and then hurried home. “It’s still here under the blanket.” I said as I uncovered the time machine and sat into the machine. I saw a switch and a numeric key pad. I flipped the switch and the clocks turned on. I used the numeric pad and typed in 01234567 to see what would happen and it translated to JAN 23,4567 on the digital clocks. “So the numeric key pad allows me to type in a date to travel to.” I said as I typed in 07162004 which came out to be July 16, 2004 and then pulled the lever I accidently pulled earlier and saw the machine falling into the same empty void of space.

“I’m back.” I said as I stepped out of the time machine into the old garage. I took a look at the clock and saw that no time has passed since I left. It was still 2:10 pm. Then I took a look at my father’s inventions and thought of them differently now. “These inventions aren’t failures, their examples of how to improve them” I said as I covered the time machine trying to make it look like I was never here. Right as I covered the machine, I heard the familiar Cccrrreeeaaakkkk…. of the old rugged brown door to find that someone was opening the door. That someone was...

To Be Concluded
Around a year ago, my dad...changed. It wasn’t a large change, but it wasn’t normal either. His mood changed, ever so slightly as the months went on, as if he slowly kept becoming depressed. I couldn’t ever figure out why either but he started to sleep walk too. Which in most cases wouldn’t be that weird...but people don’t usually disappear and come back saying he slept walked into the woods. It has happened frequently the past couple of weeks, and I intend to find out what the hell is going on.

Today is Friday, the night that I follow dad. I’m going to need help though, so I invited my friend Austin over tonight. Austin was a scrawny pale kid who had an ego bigger than he should for his size. So let’s just say he got into a lot of fights he never wins. But he is a state track runner, so he’ll help with this type of job. He rode home on the bus with me and that’s when I told him what was up. “Alright bro, what’s the plan for tonight? You got the chicks on speed dial or they callin us?” he says with a smirk.

“No stupid...no girls tonight. It’s not like you have any chance with one anyway,” I say smirking back. He punches me in the rib doubling me over then we both start laughing.

Once we get to my house we head out to the back to the tree house the two of us built when we were 11. Well it isn’t much of a tree house; it’s just a row of wooden planks that we nailed to a dead oak tree. We both climb up the rope which over time has become frail. We sit in opposite corners of our little platform and that’s when I lay the plan on him. “Whoa whoa whoa buddy, I never volunteered to help you chase your crazy dad into this huge ass thing of woods! No offense about the crazy thing,” he says fiddling with his thumbs.

I take a deep breath and cradle my forehead with the nook between my thumb and index finger, “None taken...but you’ve gotta help me. What if I give you a gun, yeah?”

He puts his fist on his chin trying to replicate The Thinker pose. But I already knew this would work, Austin can’t resist the opportunity to wield a firearm. He basically lived in a deer stand, sometimes during hunting season he would sneak off by himself and “forget” about the game limit. “Eh, alright but only if I get a gun,” he remarks with a smile spread across his face.

“Just do me a favor and don’t get anyone killed alright, I kinda like not having a criminal record,” I say staring at him.

We both break into a smile and we climb down the rope and start to make our way back to the house.

At dinner I pick at my food, I haven’t felt the slightest hungry since we got home. My stomach is churning with anticipation, but no one seems to notice. I don’t know why though, all I’m doing is following dad. It’s not like he could be faking the sleep walking story and be dealing drugs or something. The only reason we are bringing guns is because we live in Colorado, and our forest has mountain lions. I’m sure that dad is just having some bad sleep walking issues...and all he needs is some counseling. I glance up from my food and notice something different about dad, something I never noticed before now. We had always had the same shade of light blue eyes. But as I look into his eyes, his irises are a deep shade of silver. A shiver runs up my spine, but then he shifts his head and then they are the same shade of blue as my own. I rub my eyes and look again and they are still blue. It must’ve been the light...it has to be.

Ever since dinner I’ve been a little more on edge about this whole stake out plan. But I decided not to tell Austin about the changing of the eyes, still debating myself if what I saw was real. “So how do you expect us to get guns? Is it going to be like one of those things where you say oh yeah about that and then I punch you in the face?” he says staring into the darkness of the night sky.

“No, I grabbed the gun safe key from my dad’s work drawer this morning while everyone was asleep. But all you get is a glock and a bowie knife. No M14 or 22 gauge Remington,”

“How many rounds?” he says, curiosity in his eyes.

“2 clips.”

“Well then what do you get mister big shot?” he grins at me already having an idea as to what I will say. I grin, “I get the .44 magnum, the nice polished one in the case in the basement.”

“Ugh...you always get the good stuff. Hey why are we taking guns again?” he asks casually.
“You know...mountain lions and crap, plus who knows what is happening with my dad,” I say thinking back to the “change” in my dad’s eyes.

“I never thought I would want to run into a mountain lion or something this much in my life,” he says with a laugh.

We spend the next few hours watching recorded Saturday Night Lives and eating Doritos. When we were in the middle of last week’s episode with Chris Pratt, we heard the door to the backyard slam shut. The both of us look at each other, nod, then grab the guns and set out. We had already gotten the guns about an hour ago. It wasn’t very complicated really, the case was always unlocked and I already had the key to the safe. We had grabbed a spare clip for Austin, and then I had five rounds in my back pocket. Silently we traversed through the house to the back door and looked out of the window to see dad disappear into the tree line. I grabbed the handle of the door, swung it open and we jogged out after him into the night.

We reached the path we had made years ago for me to jog through when I used to do track. But we had lost dad, once we reached the tree line we were too late and couldn’t figure out which way he went. Austin pulled out his phone and turned the flashlight on and got ahead of me on the trail. “So Aus, you’re an expert hunter...how do we find him?”

“Really? Dude I track animals not 40 year old men...that’s my mom’s job,” he says laughing at his own joke.

“These are your woods anyways; shouldn’t you know you’re away around here better than me?”

I think about this and try to remember the landscape along the trail. Then that’s when I remember the clearing that should be up ahead. “Okay, I got it...keep walking until I tell you to stop you got me?” I say with a glint in my eyes.

“Yeah yeah tough guy I got you.”

After about ten minutes or so of walking, we finally reach the nook in between the two oak trees. We head up through the trees and the overgrown weeds shoving branches out of our faces. If Austin has been talking I haven’t really been paying attention, I’ve been listening to the forest. It’s so peaceful out here and now I remember why I loved to run out here in the first place. Was so amazing out here, the n I finally focus on what Austin was saying. “Like seriously bro this better be worth it cause these mosquitoes are eating the crap out of my arms right now,” he says laughing at his own joke.

“Stop being a baby and keep walking before I whip you with a stick,” I laugh at the thought of that.

Finally we reach the clearing and my heart drops and I instantly break into a cold sweat. It looks just like it always had, circular with about seven towering oaks throughout the center. But now along every lower branch there were bodies of dead women hanging by their feet. All of them mutilated in a different way, all of them with the same horrified look in their eyes. I look down around me and see various spots of dried blood smeared along the ground. I feel the cool drops slither along my back reaching my waist. I look at Austin; He has a look of pure terror in his eyes probably no different than mine. “Wha...What is this?” a panicked tone in his shaky voice.

“We have to get out of here now.”

Just as the words leave my mouth there is a sudden rustle in the leaves to the upper left of the clearing. I grab Austin who is planted in place and throw him behind a decaying log and hop down next to him. We both peer above the log just in time to see my father emerge into the clearing dragging a woman with her mouth duct taped shut across the grass by her ponytail. I’m horrified tears welling up in my eyes already knowing what is to come. This is something I could’ve ever imagined. I look at Austin who also has tears in his eyes a panicked look in his eyes.

I turn back to watch the horrific events, it is nearly impossible to keep my eyes focused on the event. My father throws the girl down in front of him she slightly stirs flailing her legs that I can now make out are also duct taped. I turn my attention now as I see my father pull a gleaming steel cleaver from his belt; he turns back to the girl. Petrified I watch covering my mouth to help me from screaming. He yanks the girl’s head up by the ponytail hard and holds it there in front of his face. I look away in time but still hear the sound of the blade strike her. I grab for Austin to pull him down behind the log but only find air in the spot he was kneeling in.

“Die you fucking demon, go back to hell!” I hear being screamed as gunshots fill the air.

I peer over the log to see Austin unloading his magazine on my father who seems to be unaffected by the bullets plunging into his skin. Suddenly his gun flies out of his hand and smashes into pieces and into the oak to his left. His eyes fill with fear, and that’s when I notice my father’s eyes are no longer blue but that deep shade
of silver I had seen at the dinner table. It seems as though time stops and then Austin’s body is sent flying through the air and impaled with a dense tree branch. Blood drips from the branch down in front of me. “No! No no no no!” I scream.

I bring my attention back to the thing that has replaced my father who just stands there...smiling at me. I give Austin’s body one last look, then I take I take off through the woods. The dense foliage cuts my face, but that is the least of my worries at the time.

My ankle catches a root in the ground and I hear a loud cracking sound through the air.

I let out a cry of pain but hobble back to my feet and limp my way through the forest with hot tears stinging the cuts on my face. A piercing scream rings through the air that sounds nothing like anything I have ever heard in my life. It fills me with fear and I speed up wincing with each step. Then finally I see light through the trees, about 100 yards away.

I stumbled out of the trees and tumble into the grass, knocking the wind out of me. I laid there for a minute and felt blood trickle down my calf and drip onto the blades of grass beneath me. I sit up and look around and see a barn about 1000 meters from me. I get to my feet and began limping, looking over my shoulder every other second, with fear in my heart. I finally made it to the barn doors and began tugging at the handle. The doors swung open with a loud screech, but all that I could see inside was darkness. The scream pierces the air, making me cringe, but after my ears stop ringing I finally register how close the noise actually was.

Just as I look over my shoulder again I see the dead women’s body soar through the trees and land just about a 100 meters outside of the tree line. I hobble into the barn and hide behind a hay bale. I watch my father emerge from the woods and picks up the women over his shoulder and keeps moving towards me. Finally, once he makes it within a hundred yards, I go back down behind the bale and press my back against the back of the bale. I wait in silence for around a minute until I’m blinded by the lights attached to the ceiling.

I sit there with my eyes squeezed shut hoping he will just leave. After around three minutes of groaning and the rattling of chains, the lights shut off and the doors slam shut. I let out a sigh of relief and sit up and look over the bale, all I can see is darkness again. I stand up to make my way to the doors and run into something, I remember that this is around the area of McMullan’s slaughter house, and think this may be the place they store the meat. I reach in my pocket to grab my phone and start scrolling through my apps. “Why the hell would they keep meat in this hot ass barn?” I say to myself as I open the flashlight app.

I finally get the light shone on the object and get feel a pit in my stomach. All around me are bodies upon bodies mutilated in various ways hang around me I even see the lady that was murdered earlier tonight. I can barely move, and then I reach up my hand to turn the body in front of me. What I see makes my heart stop, I see the soft face of my father with a gash across his face and down his neck. A tear streaks down my face and onto the floor, when a hand grabs my shoulder. I turn to see the demon that has impersonated my father for who knows how long, I stare into its eyes and see nothing but darkness, and begin to lose all the things around me until I’m engulfed in darkness.
“I love you,” She takes his face in her hands, her voice so soft it is almost a whisper. It was not the first time she had said it, but it was special all the same, as every moment with her was. She was beautiful, he thought, the moonlight softening what had been sharp inside her, the night air cleansing the parts of her soul her mind had spoiled, until she was only pure. Her brown eyes, usually so sad, were shining with something other than tears, and in them he saw himself. He knows that he had done this. Out on this porch, on this night, he had made her happy.

“I love you too.” His voice is husky with love and want. They are such different emotions, yet somehow, in moments like this, so similar. Then she is kissing him, and he kisses her back, their hearts beating against one another, bodies close together. Their love connects them, and they are one.

After some time they break away, both breathing hard, he smiles and looks at her, and freezes; the innocence and happiness in her gaze had broken, replaced by something meaner and quicker. Slowly she holds up his hand and he knows; she has finally found his past. A feeling of dread settles over him as she looks at his wrist, then back at him, then at his wrist again. Slowly she lets out a breath.

“You never told me.”

He doesn’t know what to say; of course he never told her. She was the one whose parents put too much pressure on; he was the one with the sensitive mom who cried when he did. She was the one whose parents fought and he was the one whose parents couldn’t fight no matter how hard they tried. Sure, he had problems, but his weren’t the constant, nagging ones that you couldn’t escape from, his problems were from the past. She was always the one that needed taking care of; he was always the shoulder to cry on. She felt guilty of this, he knew, and that guilt just made her more insecure and broken. And he loved her all the same, maybe even more; and he helped her always. He was never the one that needed helping, or at least, not anymore.

“I… He clears his throat and tries again, feeling slightly sick. “I didn’t know how.” There is only silence, the worst type, as she stares at the ugly puckered scars running down the insides of his wrists.

“Why?” All the stars in the sky could not light up her face now the way they had only minutes ago.

“Why did you do it?”

She shakes her head and cuts him off. “No, not that why; I mean why did you do it?”

“My dad died. Two years ago.” The words come pouring out. “I was stupid, I shouldn’t have done it. I’m sorry.”

She looks up at him finally, and sets his wrist down gently. The fear is gone, thank goodness, but the sadness is back. “I don’t want you to try again.”

“I won’t.”

“I don’t want you to go.” There are tears in her eyes; her breath is quick in her chest. It hurts to see her like this and to know that it’s because of him. He tries to pull her to him, but she pushes herself away. “No, first promise me you won’t.”

“I won’t.” He promises.

“Promise,”

“I promise,” he says, and she finally allows herself to be held by him.

A long minute passes, him thinking about what she could be thinking of. Finally she asks, “Have you ever thought about trying again?”

“No.” He says it with conviction. “Never,”

“I’m glad.”

He looks down at her, suddenly scared. “Have you?”

There is a pause “I’ve thought about it.”

“But—” Images flash through his head; her looking over her shoulder to smile at him; her reading, the little wrinkle between her eyebrows creasing; her in that sleeveless pink dress on prom night; them getting matching
tattoos: “Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love is strong as death” from the book of Solomon. “You—”

“But I’ve long decided I won’t”

Relief floods through him and he relaxes his hold on her ever so slightly, “Thank god.”

“I mean,” As she talks she plays with a loose thread on his t-shirt. “I’m not done living, I’ve just started. And whatever shit I have to go through, I go through for a reason, and that’s so that I can one day be happy, and one day I can say that I know the truth in life, and the pain I went through will be the reason I know that.” She twists around and looks at him, “I don’t think I will ever be done.”

“No.” He looks out past her, into the stars, as if trying to see through time to the place in life she is speaking of, but he can’t. Maybe it’s better that way, maybe it’s better that people can’t see what will happen tomorrow, or the next day. What would living be if you could do that?

Yes, he thinks. It’s always better.

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It was his first day at Washington high school when he saw her. He had stopped seeing his counselor by now, stopped the mind numbing drugs and medications. His mom still watched him like a hawk; he couldn’t blame her after what he put her through, but he would have liked to be able to close the door to his room. He first saw her at her locker as he passed it in the hall. He could never help but remember how she looked in that moment. She was wearing designer leggings and a hoodie that advertised some popular brand-name that she probably didn’t even like. A strand of dark brown hair had escaped from her messy bun and had fallen in front of her face. Her make-up was flawless, made to look like she hadn’t bothered with it at all. And he hadn’t realized it at the moment, because he had never seen her before, but there was something about her in that moment, something about the way she looked that portrayed the way she felt on the inside. Some sort of calm you didn’t see very often in her. She was concentrating on the lock and the lock only, not battling some inner demon with a smile on her face, not studying at lunch with that sad, sad look that he didn’t think she even knew she wore. She was not laughing, not crying. And then she looked right at him. And he looked away.

He paid attention to her that day, sneaking glances in class and looking for her in the hallway. By the time he got home, he was in love with her. How could he not be? She was beautiful, but different, with her dark brown ringlets and deep eyes. Her olive skin was dotted with chocolate freckles; her legs long and sexy. She was the type of girl too perfect for any one group or clique. She was too smart, too pretty, too everything. Too good for him, at least, with his plain black hair and gray eyes. Her quiet demeanor fascinated him; all he wanted was to get to know her more, to be able to see through her outer shell and read her thoughts. He wanted to make her laugh, to give her someone to confide in, to be her soul-mate.

And he had done all that. She wasn’t the type of person he had thought she would be. He realized this a few weeks into their relationship. She was sad, first and foremost. She struggled with depression but refused to take medication. She was stubborn like that, and he loved her for it. He realized she was not perfect, not even the wall she put up between herself and the world was; he could see her light shining through its cracks. She was a star, burning, burning, burning herself out. He’d tried to save her. He had been saving her.

But now she was gone.

He sits still as his mind runs. It trips and falls on a day, about a week ago; but to him, it feels like a lifetime. He can feel the sting of the memory as he sits, a howling of his heart as it wants for something that is no longer there; a girl, who is no longer with him...

It was moments like that, ordinary yet special ones that hurt the most.

“And now we will hear from Katrina’s special friend Whit” The pastor’s voice brings him back to life. He starts, then realizing where he is, stands slowly, feeling as if in a dream, and walks up onto the podium.

The coffin is right there. He wants to reach out and touch it, but refrains, partly because of his audience, and partly because he knew he would be disappointed by the cold, heartless kiss of the wood, because what he really wants is to touch her, to feel her one last time, to hold her, to kiss her, even to see her smile one last time. But he can’t, so he simply stands there and faces the group of mourners, adjusting his black suit and tie. He takes out a piece of paper from his pocket, and starts to read.

Halfway through, he realizes he is crying. He doesn’t feel any different, just numb, like he has been since he heard. He keeps reading. The words mean nothing to him.

Kat would be horrified, he thinks. She loved words; she thought they were beautiful. He’d never understood her fascination with them, with everything associated with them. Novels, short stories, flash
fictions, fan fictions, and poetry; poetry was her favorite. He thinks about her as he reads, and the tears fall more freely. And for the first time since he first got the news, he could feel something; his heart was hurting, sharp pains ripping up and down it, tearing it apart. His heart is breaking. He wants to double in on himself and cry out, but he refrains, for her sake.

Soon, he thinks, soon it will be over.

He finishes in a rush, just trying to get the words out of the way, out of his throat where they strangle him. He staggers offstage, images of her stuck in his head like a song so beautiful it makes you want to cry. She’d loved music, too; her favorites were the sad songs.

He stumbles away, away from it all, because suddenly he can’t stand another second of it, of this waiting, of this living. A few people call out to him, but none follow.

“Let the poor kid go. Can’t you see he wants to be alone?” He hears an old lady, a grandmother of hers or something remark. He keeps walking. His feet crush the dirt under his feet, his breath taints the pureness of the air, his pain burns the goodness out of it all. Her voice carves itself into his head, cutting deeper and deeper as he stumbles away, out of the park, across the road, through the brush. “I’m not done living, I’ve just started. And whatever shit I have to go through, I go through for a reason, and that’s so that I can one day be happy, and one day I can say that I know the truth in life, and the pain I went through will be the reason I know that.”

“I don’t think I will ever be done.”

He stops; the words in his head were like poison, running through his head, his veins, straight to his heart. It was so unfair, what had happened. How could she die in something so useless, so minor? It was a car accident. She wasn’t supposed to die in an accident, she was supposed to live. He was the one who had wanted to die; he was the weak one, the one who didn’t deserve life. She had wanted to live, and she was the one dead. He’s at the edge of a cliff now; staring down; he can see a stream the color of mud, so small, so far away. The stream is framed by jagged rocks and one dead tree, gnarled and ugly and alone.

He looks up, and there is the sun. He’s caught in its rays, the brightness and pureness of its light. She was a star, burning, burning, burning herself out.

With a cry he breaks away. Hand shaking, he draws out a blade from his pocket; a pocketknife, used for opening packages and cutting tape; such a simple object, used for such simple tasks.

There is the sun, and there are the trees, and this ground, so hard and strong under his feet. A sense of calm envelops him as he closes his eyes and presses the end of the blade to his neck. Nothing could save him; nothing could bring him back to this terrestrial scheme. He takes a breath, his last— but beneath his eyelids, a picture flashes at him. His mom. He winces inwardly, trying to block her out, but they come faster now, the flashes, like he imagines the train would right before it hits you. He saw his mom, looking down at a shorter him, asking him what he wanted for lunch; calling out the window for him to have a good day at school; crying as he woke up in the hospital that day, the day he realized he couldn’t leave. At first he’d been devastated— he had to stay. Then he’d been terrified, because what came next? But in the end, he had been wrong; he could leave. It was only a flick of his wrist away...

With shaking hand, he lowers the knife. As if in a dream, his arm extends, fingers twitching. He watches as it falls. He can’t even hear it hit the rocks, or maybe it hit the water, maybe it’s still sinking. There’s no way to know, is there? He just stands there, listening. The sun shines down on him as he sits on in the dirt, on the dirt that could have just as easily been his grave. He is still one of blood and bone, of human capacities and human hopes, of human life and ability. Of spirit, and of heart. And under that sun, he burned brightly as ever, with a heart new as a spring flower and potential as wide as the time that lay before him.

It could have been minutes, it could have been hours, it could have been a lifetime, but sometime later, he stands on shaky legs. He walks towards the others. His feet crush the dirt; his breath taints the air, his pain burns inside himself.

He is alive.
Devon Morris
Poetry: Stars
Central High School
Kyla Ward, Teacher

I hate hate.
If there was a contradiction club, I'd have VIP access,
Not from lack of practice.
My solution for the pollution of this anger substitution,
Belongs to my Xbox, in bed, ruining my physical constitution.
Because, like Fox News, it numbs my mind long enough to not care.
But video games can’t take you far.
They can’t reach for stars.
‘Cause stars don’t have time
To reach out to those who won’t reach back.
God put me on this world for a reason,
But that reason wasn’t to leave a legacy of laziness.
So I forged on.

New hobbies, New interests, New people.
Finding myself
Avoiding mirrors and sheeple.
Because if my image was tainted by the social norm
Then life would become a beauty pageant
On who can be the most boring.
And family members would get in line
To get on the ride to modify my life with their ideals
If I can see from beginning to end and end to beginning,
But nothing in between, after everything I’ve seen,
I can’t believe, my life
Is yours to determine.

Perfection, Perfection, Perfection
Location, Location, Location
Direction, Direction, Directions
I don’t want to take,
‘Cause my mind,
which is me,
Has become a dormant volcano
Being violently awaken
Too wreak havoc on not only those around it
but itself.
For I now hate who I have not become.

Fire and ash fill my veins;
molten tears run down my face for an eternity
Incompetence becomes the sound of my heart beat.
Left in discord for my desire of direction
I dare to deepen my affection
Through independent thought.
Only to suffer the whiplash of failure
And the volley of arrows
That blot out passion with disappointment.
   My patience with who I’m not
Is a hurricane made of atom bombs
   And once it collides, earth will cry
As the mushroom cloud spells
   “Help”
I’ve only ever desired to live my life in my image
To be forged by clones of loved ones
   Disappointment masked with
“I love you for who you are”
Hate was inevitable

Bring me perfection made by humanity.
   For anyone who does
May cast the first stone at me
   Perfection is like a bad joke
Stretched by generations; bastardized by those
   Who think they know.
Those who think that life is a simple recipe,
but is more of unstable chemical compound.
   To those people I say
You cannot bring me down any longer.
   I will touch those stars
Crushing them into stardust dreams.
   I will swallow them
And from my mouth I will release galaxies.
   You must never be told, you cannot.
For those of you who believe.
   For those of you who can.
For those of you who can make stars
Want to reach higher than themselves.
   Reach up past the hate,
   And achieve.
My skirt stuck to my legs as I stood, listening to the strong voice of the British soldier in our hometown of Boston. The rain was pounding against our backs but no one seemed to notice such a minor fact. Another act had been passed by Parliament in the year of 1764, the colonies would now have to follow the Revenue Acts and a tax would be placed on certain types of wine, coffee, and a few other things, but most importantly, there was a tax on sugar to pay for the debt left behind from the French and Indian War. I turned away from the soldier before I could hear any other bad news.

“Come on Matthew, let’s go home,” I said, turning to my twin brother.

“Mary, can’t we just stay until the end of this speech?” He asked me.

I thought for a moment then said, “You can, I’m going home. The last thing we need is more bad news and what if a fight breaks out after the speech is over?”

“What if there’s not a fight and we miss something good?” He asked.

“Well you stay, but I’m not making up an excuse when Mama asks why you’re late.”

“Oh, alright let’s go.” Matthew started to weave his way out of the crowd and I followed.

Water splashed on my ankles, streaming the smearing the dirt and grime on my legs while I walked home. I began to wonder what we would do; we didn’t have enough money for the new taxes. Parliament would have us living on the streets before long.

“Just think,” Matthew began, “this is the last bag of sugar we’ll buy that doesn’t have a tax on it.”

“What will we tell Mama? She’s worried enough already, with Mark sick,” I said.

“I don’t know. Mark has been improving, maybe he will be better by the time Mama finds out,” Matthew said with false hope. Neither one of us said what we were really thinking, that pneumonia doesn’t just go away. Mark would have to deal with the after effects for the rest of his life.

We heard coughing as we walked through the front door. Matthew started a fire in the fireplace and I put some leftover soup over it to cook. Then, I went to where Mark was laying in his bed. My mom looked tired; worry lines hugged her eyes as she stripped my bed of blankets. A bundle of blankets that was Mark, occupied his and Matthew’s bed. Mark’s skin seemed to hang off his bones, his blue lips quivered despite the layers of blankets surrounding him.

Outside the window the rum importers were rioting, they kept repeating the same line: “NO TAXATION WITHOUT REPRESENTATION” while the redcoats tried to calm them down.

“Luke is coming for dinner tonight,” Mama said.

“He is?” Matthew stood in the doorway.

“Yes, he’ll be here around five. So, we need to clean the house as best as we can,” Mama handed me the sheets from her and Papa’s bed and the ones from my bed. Matthew looked at Mark then followed me to help with the laundry.

“Maybe Luke will have heard about the new taxes by five and he can tell Mama and Papa so we don’t have to,” Matthew said in a hushed voice once we were outside, the rain had finally stopped.

I dumped a bucket of water from the well in to the wash basin, “I hope so, because I can’t bear to be the one to tell them about the tax.”

“During the speech I heard someone say that King George was prompted by George Greenville to pass the act. He said that the molasses tax from 1733 that was about to expire, King George lowered the molasses tax to just three pence a pound.”

“Are you sure? I think that he would try to get as much money as possible out of his people,” I said.

“I don’t know,” Matthew shook his head.

We hung the sheets up to dry. Then, the rest of the day consisted of me cleaning the house while Matthew chopped wood for the fire until it started to rain again. As rain fell I put Matthew to work on the bread while I cooked the chicken, a rare treat. Papa came home from his blacksmith shop tired and hungry, he had been working extra hours to help pay for the taxes.


“We are in here,” Papa called as I put the finishing touches on the table.
“Hey,” Luke said tiring to look cheerful through his sadness. I ran over and gave my oldest brother a hug. He leaned down and whispered in my ear, “Have you heard yet?”

I nodded, “I have but Mama and Papa haven’t.”

Luke straightened and walked to the table, tired from his day of teaching. Everyone sat down and Papa said a prayer. Then we began to eat, we were all tiring to look and act happy but Mark’s empty seemed to put a weight on everyone’s shoulders.

“The doctor came today,” Mama said. “He thinks that Mark should be completely back to normal by the end of March.”

Sadly, it was only February.

“There’s a tax on sugar as of today,” Luke wasn’t known for his tactfulness.

“What?” Papa stood, seething with anger.

“I’ve gotten in touch with a friend of mine who is smuggling sugar in tomorrow. He knew something like this would happen so he already has a whole ship of taxed things, including sugar. He said he would love to share it with me and my family so tomorrow send Mary my way to collect the sugar.” Luke said.

“Why Mary, why not me?” Matthew asked scooting a little closer to me.

“Mary is a 14-year-old girl. The soldiers will not suspect that a fourteen year old girl is hiding smuggled sugar under her skirt.”

Papa wanted to protest but he couldn’t argue with the truth. The rest of the night went by with us planning what we would do. I would go to Luke’s house early tomorrow morning, retrieve the sugar and go home.

That night I couldn’t sleep. Between Mark’s coughing, Matthew’s snoring, and my worries I just lay in bed and thought about everything that could possibly go wrong.

The next day I ran to Luke’s house at six. As I burst through the door he handed me the sugar and helped me hide it in a pocket between two of my skirts.

“I don’t think that they will suspect a thing.” He said when we were done. “Remember, don’t stop to talk to anyone, go straight home. If anyone stops you to question you, tell them you were visiting your older brother.” He looked me in the eye, “Be careful.”

I smiled, “I will be careful, I promise.”

As I walked back home I saw a Redcoat searching someone’s house, tearing it apart, taking whatever he wanted. I sped up a little, sensing eyes on me. I am just an innocent girl going home, I told myself as I walked home, briskly. I finally made it home safely and put the sugar where it would usually go; hiding it would only look suspicious to any prying eyes.

“Thank goodness you’re safe,” Matthew said. “Come and see.”

I followed him to our room where Mark was sitting up, drinking his hot tea. Maybe things would turn out okay after all.
My entire body is aching. My palms are sweaty, and I don’t think my legs can take much more of this climbing. I feel like letting go and falling but I knew I couldn’t. No, I couldn’t give up now though, I am so close now.

I lift my right hand over the edge of the steep cliff. My fingernails dig deep into the dirt and I find firm support. Using the last of my strength, I pull the rest of my body over the top of the rock face.

I just lie there, for few moments in the blistering cold snow. But, I know my quest is not quite over yet. I’m near the closing of my journey, but that doesn’t count for anything if I don’t make it to the end.

After a minute of rest, I stumble to my feet. I look forward and the cliff opens up like a giant creature’s mouth waiting to swallow me whole. Jutting rocks that point in every direction, serve as teeth for this great creature.

“| I guess this is it,” | I mutter to myself, as I take my first steps into what seems like endless darkness. |
<table>
<thead>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I walk around for what seems like an hour. I can barely see inside the dimly-lit cave and I have to keep one hand on the rock wall in order to make sure I was going in the right direction.</td>
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<tr>
<td>My hand drags along the cold rocky surface until, suddenly, the wall drops off. I am in a large opening now, a pocket somewhere deep. The room is pitch black, like the narrow passage that led before.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I put one foot in front of me and step into the immense room. As soon as I take my first step, the room lights up like the night sky. Torches lined up against the walls light up one by one clockwise around the room.</td>
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<tr>
<td>After my eyes adjust to the newly lit up room, I am finally able to look at my surroundings. The room is a circular shape and the rough rock walls come together at the top in the shape of a dome. The room’s completely barren, save for a pedestal directly across from me.</td>
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<tr>
<td>On top of the pedestal is a small chest wide open, and inside I can see the bright glimmer of gold.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The treasure is finally mine. The journey was long and arduous but I knew that it would be worth it. Just looking at the treasure from this distance, I can tell of its unprecedented beauty.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I take a few steps towards the pedestal until the entire room starts shaking violently. My mind first turns to earthquake but it couldn’t be, it seemed the shaking was coming from the ceiling.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I lose my footing and fall to my knees. The room stops shaking for a moment and I hear a loud crack. I look up to see the ceiling now splitting apart right in the center. The crack that has now adorned the center of the ceiling grows larger and larger until finally I see the head of a large black creature poke through.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The monster slithers the rest of its snake-like body through until it hits the floor in the center of the room. Its bright green eyes lock eyes with mine and the creature raises itself into an upright position.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Its head now almost touches the top of the ceiling, the rest of its black scaly body lying in a coil upon the floor. Without breaking eye contact, it lowers its ugly head until it is right in front of my body. It bares its sharp yellow teeth at me and opens up its mouth.</td>
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<tr>
<td>“I believe you and I have unfinished business,” it hisses.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I don’t say a word. Instead, I draw my sword. I knew trying to talk to it would be pointless; it wouldn’t listen anyway. We are long past the talking stage at this point.</td>
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<tr>
<td>It speaks again: “Why, normally you aren’t this aggressive to start off.” It turns its massive head around and looks at the beautiful gold light coming out of the chest on the pedestal.</td>
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<tr>
<td>“You see, I’m afraid I can’t let you get that treasure. I mean, then my job would be worthless. I can’t stop you if you’ve won, can I?”</td>
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<tr>
<td>I still hold my tongue. I am not going to let it stop me now. It has held me back for too long on this journey; I am not going to let it beat me again when I am so close to the end.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| “Well, if you aren’t going to talk then, why don’t you use that sword and fight me? I know you can use it, so fight,” it says tauntingly.
I don’t do a single thing. I know that I have one chance to stop this beast, and I know that I can’t let that opportunity slip. I need to concentrate.

It bares its fangs as it smiles. “I always knew you couldn’t fight me, so why don’t you just run along home and admit that today, you have lost.”

“No,” I finally say, “Not today.”

I charge forward, sword in hand as it sits there stunned. I climb atop its body and make my way to its head. I hold onto its head as it struggles, trying to throw me off. I take my sword and stab it right between its two eyes.

The green eyes widen. “No, it can’t be,” it says in a hushed disbelief.

It hisses loud in pain, and I dig my sword deeper into its skull. It falls to the ground with a large thud.

The monstrous creature lies there dead, finally slain. I sigh in relief, knowing the monster that has plagued me for such a long time, is finally gone.

I now look towards the chest on the pedestal at the end of the room. I take my first steps knowing that the treasure is finally mine. The golden light leaking out of the chest is beautiful. My quivering hand reaches toward the chest slowly.

Before I can even touch the chest it makes a sound. A small, annoying noise echoes across the room. It’s ringing.

I reach for it, but the ringing gets louder. RING! I try again and it makes the same sound. RING!

RRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRNGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGG!

“Well, class, that’s the dismissal bell; remember your homework. Do all the even problems on page two thirty-six.”

I am violently jerked back to reality and I look around the circular classroom. The teacher goes to his desk while all the students are packing up to leave. I catch myself staring at the girl who sits across the room from me. Her golden curly hair appears to be glowing because of the overhead light. She soon notices my staring. She smiles brightly at me and I smile back.

I jam my things into my backpack, and I sling it around my shoulders. I stand up and walk across the classroom to the girl.

“Hi, Peter!” she says enthusiastically, when she notices me walking up to her.

“Hi, Katy,” I say back to her.

She is still packing up her books.

“Daydreaming again?” she asks, teasingly.

“Whoa- How did you know?” I say, a little embarrassed.

“You get this glazed look in your eyes when you daydream; it’s actually really obvious and it’s kind of funny to look at. I mean, in a good way, that is,” she says.

“Oh, alright,” I murmur, fully embarrassed now and staring at the floor.

“Well, what was it about? What were you daydreaming about that was somehow far more interesting than math?” she asks sarcastically.

“Umm... Well, I was like a knight and I fought this giant snake creature and I won. It was actually pretty cool,” I stammer out, still slightly embarrassed.

“God, you are such a dweeb,” she says, smiling.

I push my glasses up higher on my face and I look up at her. I am mesmerized by her beautiful chestnut-colored eyes and her golden hair shines in the light. I know that I need to ask her now. I can’t let myself hold me back again.

After a moment, she says, “Well, I need to get to my next class, but I’ll see you later, Peter,” she says as she starts for the door.

I feel myself getting nervous. I’m losing the chance to do it: It’s now or never. She’s leaving, and I need to do it now.

But, what if she says no? Doubt floods my mind, while I feel the black creature sitting in my stomach, holding me back from asking her. I’m losing the opportunity.

No, I can’t let this chance slip.

“Hey, Katy,” I catch up to her outside the classroom door.

She turns around to look at me.

“Hey, what’s up?” she asks.
“Umm... Look, I was wondering if you would like to go out with me, sometime, maybe?” I fumble the words out nervously.

“Like on a date?” her eyes light up.

I shake my head very rapidly, about to explode from my own nervousness.

“I’d love to,” she smiles widely.
Photographs. A moment captured in time for generations to remember. They hold a fake smile, a genuine one. They keep surprise or laughter. Each picture has a story waiting to be told, a memory just beneath the surface, a chance to remember those who have passed. Some are preserved in albums or frames. Others are stuffed in boxes in the attic, waiting to be unearthed. All are keepsakes to be treasured.

Inside a small house, a red coffee mug sits on a table, filled with miniature American flags. A patterned blue vase and a stack of books sit nearby. Grandpa sinks into the soft leather of his favorite chair with his pipe, the children gather ‘round, laughing like children do. Grandma turns on her radio from the Great Depression and retreats to the kitchen with Mom to bake and gossip. The bitter, lingering smell of coffee drifts through the house and out the open window as the oldest child reaches up, up for their grandparent’s photo album. The others gather around Grandpa on the floor, sitting Indian style, as the oldest carries the album to the table and begins leafing through the plastic covered pages. The house is cozy and warm, loving and welcoming, every soul inside anticipating the return of a soldier to their family.

A cherry colored wooden picture frame stands solitary on a small table at the front of the church, in front of the altar. Flowers surround it, everything from white roses to lilies. The picture shows a young man, dark hair buzzed short, in an Army uniform. Beside the table is a closed casket with an American flag draped over it. The local church in his small hometown is filled to the brim with friends and family. The building is silent, except for the unashamed sobbing of his mother and his wife. His father tries his best to comfort his wife and keep his composure at the same time, but a few tears slip out from his eyes all the same.

Mike Peters had grown up in a small town in southern Georgia where everyone knew his name. He had been a high school baseball star and had a bright future practically laid out for him after he graduated college, but he’d had other plans. Days before he enlisted, Mike proposed to his high school sweetheart. They married two days before Mike was deployed.

While overseas, Mike was shot three times while trying to control a rioting crowd. He was treated quickly. Weak but recovering, Mike had a reaction to a painkiller in the night and died the next morning. His wife received the horrible news a week later, when he didn’t return from the end of his tour.

Now, at his funeral, she sits in the front row with his family. As his best friend reads a eulogy, she looks at his picture on the altar, proud and handsome, and smiles through her tears.

"Gramma, what's this?" a little girl with her dark hair in pigtails, her blue eyes like the stars, bright and innocent, asks holding up a Polaroid, black-and-white and dusty. The little girl gets up from her spot in front of a box of pictures on the floor to sit next to her grandmother on the sofa.

"This, Emily, is the day I first met your grandfather," Emily's grandma responds. She looks fondly down at the picture in her granddaughter’s small hand. It shows a young couple, their backs facing the camera, bundled up against a winter chill long forgotten, holding hands. "I was at the old ice rink with my big sister when I was in high school. I wasn't very good at skating and I bumped into your grandpa. He was very sweet about it. He helped me up and then helped me practice until I was gliding around better than he was. My sister took this picture when I looked the other way. The rest is history."

She smiles at her granddaughter again. Emily looks up at her grandma with wide, bright eyes, the world full of love and magical possibilities.

A young woman in a wedding dress, long blonde hair tied up in a perfect knot, waits with her father in the back of the church. Through a crack in the door she can hear the excited murmurs of the guests, see her groom standing in the stained-glass light of the altar. Her palms are so sweaty she's afraid she'll drop her bouquet.
"You look beautiful, El," her father speaks, easing her nerves only slightly. She smiles at her father, but it is forced and fake. Her father, the one man who had and will always be a part of her life, stands beside her, giving her strength. "Ella, before I give you away, I have something I want to give you."

"Dad."

Her father hands her a picture, slightly bent, but in otherwise good shape. It has a dark haired baby girl and her father. She's no more than a couple months old, still drinking from a bottle. The little girl sits on her father's lap as he watches TV, holding the bottle in her tiny hands.

"Oh, Daddy. Where did you find this?" the bride asks, looking tearfully at the picture then her father.

"Mom found it when she was looking for baby pictures of you," her dad admits.

His daughter hands the picture back to him. "Keep it safe, will you?"

A young mom walks down a dark-wood paneled hallway, lit by a soft morning light coming from the windows at either end, lined with pictures in white painted frames. They were mainly of her and her little daughter Cassie, who happens to look exactly like her mother used to, all short dark hair and big dark eyes. The mother stops in front of a picture and picks up her two year old.

"Look at this one, Cass," she says, pointing at two side-by-side pictures with a little girl looking up at the camera with a stubborn expression on her face. The girls are identical, the only distinction being their clothes, one in a floral print green dress and cardigan, the other in a white-and-grass-stained skirt and T-shirt.

"Who that, Mommy?" asks Cassie, frowning at the two images and pointing at one.

"That's me when I was your age, Cassie." Cassie's mother points at the girl in the dress. "And that's you last week." She points at the other one. Cassie crosses her arms and looks, wide-eyed, at the two pictures.

"I don't believe you," she decides. Her mom just laughs and sets her back down, walking through her own childhood through the pictures on the wall.

Thunder rumbles and cracks in the distance, growing louder each time, as Katie Roberts climbs the old, weathered tree in her backyard. Lightning flashes, illuminating the swirling clouds above and the teenage girl obstinately climbing. She's almost to her destination now. A loud peal of thunder cracks and Katie jumps almost losing her grip and falling prematurely.

Katie passes a few more branches before settling in near the top of the tree, sheltered from the rain by leaves. She sits for a moment watching the rain and the lightning, before pulling a beat-up picture from her pocket. Looking down at the two children in it, she wipes away a tear. The children are her twin brother, Adam, and herself. Katie's blue eyes were wide and innocent, like a deer's. Now they're narrow and shrewd, having seen what the world is truly like.

Adam and Katie had always been close when they were little and grew to be practically inseparable by the time they became teenagers; they were the other's best friend. But when Adam was diagnosed with late stage cancer without much chance of survival, their friendship was tested.

Still, he fought hard, and his twin sister was by his side for all the tests, surgeries and treatments, through the good days and the unbearable ones. Eventually the cancer seemed to be winning and made them both miserable. Adam didn't really want to give up for the sake of his sister, but his heart made the choice for him.

Katie held Adam's hand as he took his last breath. She cried at his funeral. She refused to cry anymore. She had hardened, no longer the bright-eyed, pig-tailed little girl she used to be so long ago. This wasn't a fairytale, she couldn't run away to the woods until she was saved; there was no Prince Charming to save her now.

Katie kissed her brother's face in the picture. She collected her thoughts, whispered "I'm sorry," spread her arms and flew.

Pictures preserve memories. Sometimes they help a person cope with fate, other times they destroy what little hope a person has left in the world. They're often handed down from generation, until names are forgotten and they become faceless memories. Often a person's story continues long after their picture is taken, but not all that they do is remembered; through good and bad, pictures help us remember.
I looked upon my dad with the reverential awe only a child can give her parents. My dad brought the intrigues of the outside world to my cozy toddler life of naps and playtime. From him, I learned about pickup trucks, dinosaurs, and paper boats. Our two worlds converged during a drawing session where I sat in his lap and asked him to draw objects and animals he had told me about. After he set down his marker, I traced over the pictures with my little fingers. My light brown eyes met his dark ones.

“Thank you, Daddy. Thank you,” I repeated breathlessly over and over. Then I grabbed the drawings and ran to my room. I carefully taped them to my closet wall. Each morning, I visited my private shrine and gazed wide eyed at the gaping dinosaurs and speeding trucks. The drawings stirred my imagination and filled me with love. I resolved to one day join my dad in that magical world where one could drive a rugged vehicle all the way to the realm of the dinosaurs.

As I grew older, the little details surrounding the drawing session between my dad and me changed: I dropped my dinosaur obsession by age seven and by age fourteen, I spent more time reading books than ogling the latest cars in the newspaper. On his part, my dad began making lengthy business trips for his company. His absences from my life began innocently enough with a few weekend stays in Spain and Nebraska. However, beginning my sophomore year of high school, the possibility of joining my dad in his world seemed to diminish with each trip his job took him.

***

I was fifteen when my dad came home from his second business trip of the year. I dropped the book I was reading and ran to him.

“Dad, Dad!” I rushed up and gave him a hug. I was dying to fill him in with the new details about me since his two week absence. My smile stretched so wide that my entire body seemed to glow with happiness. “Guess what? Yesterday I—”

My dad tiredly brushed past me.

“Not now. Later.”

He disappeared down the hallway with his suitcase. Except, ‘later’ never happened: after dinner I crept up to my dad’s study and peeked inside. He was sitting at his desk and fervently typing up a report for work. A plant schematic shone softly on another monitor. It dawned on my fifteen year old self that my dad’s world no longer had any room for me. I backed away and the bounce faded from my step.

***

My dad’s work-related absences hurt more than I wanted to admit. On my seventeenth birthday, he was five hundred miles away in Nebraska inspecting a biofuel facility. To make up for his absence, my mom baked my favorite cake and topped it with rows of burning candles, as if the light would mask the uncomfortable silence.

“Blow and make a wish,” she cheerfully instructed. I mechanically filled my lungs with air and exhaled. I didn’t make a wish, but amidst the smoke from the candles my eyes stared fixedly at the empty chair where my dad should have been sitting.

***

By chance, I came across my dad’s drawings while cleaning up the basement. The papers were a little faded, but the marker lines still stood out in vibrant blues and reds. Transfixed, I took the drawings to my room. My mom walked by and noticed the expression on my face.

“Sweetie, is there something you want to talk about?”

I quickly crumpled the papers and shoved them behind me. “No.” After briefly meeting my mom’s eyes, I bitterly admitted, “For a chemical engineer, Dad sure does a lot of travelling.”

My mom wrapped her arms around me. “It’s just his work, honey. He’s doing what he thinks is best for the family. Don’t take it personally.”

“I won’t,” I heard myself say. But I understood what her words were really saying: You have no right to be angry at your dad. After she left, I smoothed out the drawings. I looked over them like an archaeologist
scrutinizes long lost relics. My finger traced over the marker line giving a pickup truck its contour. I told myself that I felt nothing.

“I don’t need you,” I told the pictures, imagining my dad would hear those words as well. Then I carefully folded the papers and recycled them.

***

A few weeks later, my dad came home after another business trip. His shoulders sagged and he shuffled more than I remembered. Streaks of silver ran through his thinning black hair. I didn’t run to him this time. Instead, I warily hung back as he entered the house through the front door.

“Hi,” I began hesitantly.

He merely grunted in response and after a pause asked, “How was school?”

I suddenly felt light and brightened up. “Good, just today I—”

However, my dad stopped listening at ‘good’ and began walking up the stairs to put away his suitcase.

Something inside me broke and I followed him. You don’t care about me. I thought viciously. I get it now…I hate you. No one has ever made me so angry!

“Dad,” I opened my mouth, ready to spit all my pain and anger on his retreating figure. However, the path my dad took had led me through the family room and the kitchen. I took in the solid cherry wood cabinets, leather couches, golden yellow walls, and 56” HD TV. He has provided. That’s what his work allows him to do, I thought sadly. The venomous words died on my lips but my anger remained.

I whirled back to the stairs but my dad was gone. I was alone. I closed my eyes as tears pooled in them. I was drowning in my anger and I wanted to go back to happier times with my dad... then I remembered that I recycled those drawings. The cherry wood cabinets and leather couches offered no consolation.

Too late I realized those pictures hidden away long ago in the closet were a little girl’s personal consecration of her relationship with her dad.

I was taken aback by my anger so I sat cross legged with a sketch pad to cool off. I started to draw trucks and lizards but I quickly stopped. I desperately needed ‘I don’t need you’ to come true. I rationalized that I needed to be free of the burdening anger in order to cleanly break from my dad. As practice, I wrote a goodbye letter that I would never show to him. My eyes are now open. I see now that we’ve gone our separate ways. Maybe one day you’ll miss me as much as I’ve missed you. Slowly, the anger retreated into a cold shell of indifference.

***

I found myself sitting next to my dad in the car as he drove me home from an out of town orchestra audition. Silence snugly encased us. Through the car window I listlessly observed gray skies bearing down on soggy farmland. I realized I had an opportunity to finally talk to him. “Dad, you and I have been growing apart,” I began with purpose.

My dad glanced at me, mildly perturbed. He responded slowly, “It seems that Mom has covered your emotional needs so I’ll focus on giving you job tips.” As if taking a cue from his own words, he proceeded to lecture me about work life.

I wanted to scream. I braced myself to cut the remaining strands of our relationship and to put insurmountable distance between us. Once again, tears welled in my eyes. The girl in the car’s side mirror gazed back at me, eyes wide and lips tightened into a thin line. She looked so young—too young to end a familial bond forever. Just then my dad paused in his lecture. I took one last leap back towards him.

“But Dad, I’m only seventeen. Your advice about adult responsibilities can’t help me now—not when I haven’t even gone to college! You can’t provide any emotional comfort because you don’t know me.” I took a deep breath. “You don’t want to know me!”

My dad paused. His mild perturbation lapsed into a troubled frown. He finally cast me a long look, “I do want to know you.” He cleared his throat, “If it’s alright with you, we can start now.”

I was stunned into silence. The thought No, it’s too late to reconnect bubbled up inside me. Then, a second thought cut through the turmoil of the former: Try. I let out a breath and said, “Ok.”

Like two strangers meeting at public transit, our conversation was awkward at first. Gradually, the music of a past childhood filled the cabin. A smile crept to my lips as I talked. I was lighter, freer, and finally unburdened by the knowledge that deep down, both my dad and I had never wanted to give up on each other. From then on, we wobbled back towards each other. And for once, we inhabited the same world.
It was never supposed to happen like this. Our confidence in the perfect love story slowly rise as we become aware of what others have or say they have. The envy we feel is deeply concealed by the expectations that tend to overpower us. We were never created or intended to resent what some people expose as their fantastic love stories; we were intended to love in our own way and to create our own fairytale to live in.

This concept of finding the perfect one became so important to me. I wanted to love and to be loved, as every person should. From the exact second I met with his dull brown eyes, there was this undeniable, unavoidable draw towards him that I knew could only be defined as love at first sight. The hardest part of it all was thinking the threatening thought that he didn't feel the same connection. I continued to stare and wonder what he was thinking up until he was standing inches away from me. He spoke the simplest word, but somehow, I found my heart beating faster when he spoke. "Hi" he said. His voice was deep, and it was the kind of voice that left you with only one thing to do and that was desire to hear more.

At the time, I truly believed he was the one. The one you read about; the one that coincidentally crosses your path and you immediately fall for them, sometimes without even knowing their name. I can vividly and painfully remember that day. The hour we talked quickly evolved into months. As of yesterday, it's been a year since then. Now I'm here, alone and thoroughly mad at the world.

They always said if it feels too good to be true, then it probably is.
A lone shrill shriek pierces the night air and I think to myself this is only normal that every so often, usually once or twice a week, someone forgets about their mask and leaves it off to long or they get eaten by Skangs. Everyone knows by now that you’re stupid if you let the Skangs get you. Skangs look like medium dogs and most of them probably were once upon a time. But by now all the built up waste combined with the chemicals in the air that kill us plus all kinds of insects carrying diseases have changed them into hairless sagging skinned mutants, with glowing eyes, three spiked tendrils for tongues, and a loose flap of skin around their necks that flairs up and is covered in needles that shoot out. But with all those mutations their brains have shrunken to twice as small as they once were so that’s why you would have to be stupid to get caught by one.

As for the chemicals, the people that survived the initial bombs and outbreaks will never tell me what happened with that. The shriek fades off and is replaced by a scream of what I would assume is the death of another person, one less person to compete for survival with. I shrug my blanket off and go over to pull back the curtain. Glancing out I see a man getting mauled by a small pack of Skangs while a woman is screaming and crying nearby. I would assume she’s going to get caught too soon.

“Oh well,” I say to myself. “Better get back to bed, got a long trip in the morning.”

I pick up my blankets again and trudge back over to the flea infested mattress. I plop down, roll over, and start to fall back to sleep.

“I’ll never get caught like them,” I say to myself. Then I fall asleep.

My arm vibrates and I jolt up. The yellow light on my watch is flashing and the numbers are flashing 7:00. I yawn and stretch out my arms then get up and start packing away my belongings in my duffel bag and backpack. Quickly and carefully I go through my mental checklist to make sure I have my M&P compact pistol with 2 clips, AR-15 with 6 clips, small box full of smaller sacks filled with different kinds of edible food seeds, a copy of the Fellowship of the Ring, a tarp, marine raider combat knife, pack of six jars of peanut butter and six jars of honey, my two blankets and sleeping bag, five boxes of matches, and my flashlight with four packs of batteries. I sling my backpack and AR-15 over my shoulder, stick my M&P in my waist band, grab my duffel bag and walk out into the hallway of the bombed out hotel. Then I descend the stairs and walk out of the hotel.

All the Skangs have dispersed by now except for a few who got there late and are picking at the remains. The biggest hisses and puffs up its spikes, crouches, and prepares to pounce. I start to circle it and it does the same. I sling my AR-15 off my shoulder aware that the other two are still watching and leaving the body to watch. I glance at the other two and the alpha takes the chance to pounce. This is what I was expecting so I drop and roll to the side, come up on one knee, bring up my gun, and aim down the sights in a matter of seconds.

It only takes two shots. My first shot hits it in the knee cap and it collapses to the ground. Knowing that I can’t just leave it like that I walk over and whisper “I’m sorry.” The second shot goes right between its eyes. Then I turn to the other two who are both whimpering. I start walking down the road again, every so often glancing back to see if I’m being followed. When I’m satisfied I’m not I don’t look back any more.

Around 1:00 I see movement in the woods to right of the road so I sling my rifle off my shoulder. I aim down the sights and can’t believe my eyes, it’s a deer. A deer is so rare I haven’t seen one in about two years. Quietly, I go to one knee and aim for the heart for what seems like hours. Bang, bang, bang, three shots in rapid succession rip right through the heart. I can’t help grinning and chuckling a little, maybe tonight I’ll finally have enough to eat.

After about four hours I’ve managed to field dress the deer, make a small camp surrounded by sound traps, and find a nearby grocery store that wasn’t picked clean yet. When I’m there I manage to pick up some assorted spices and air tight storage bags. Then I sprint back to camp and chop up the meat into steaks, sprinkle spices all over it, and set all of it on a splint over a roaring fire. I unpack all my things and lay my tarp and sleeping bag down right next to the fire. Next it’s finally time to eat.

I grab my knife out of my backpack and carve a large chunk of juicy, sweet, slightly bloody meat off the side of the deer. I bite into it and an explosion of flavor enters my mouth. I eat until I can’t eat any more then
walk over and lay down on my sleeping bag. Then I start to feel drowsy and drift off to sleep. That’s when I notice what looks like a shadowy figure moving towards me. But before I can think about it I fall asleep.

Around two hours later I wake up and go over to some bushes to go pee. Then I hear leaves crunch behind me as someone steps on them. I spin around and a dark hood comes down over my head. Screaming, I punch, kick, and flail but my attackers grip doesn’t loosen. Then my attacker puts their hands over my mouth and nose until I finally black out.

Sometime later I wake up tied to a tree in the middle of a clearing. The man who attacked me is sleeping nearby and wearing a mask. I feel into my back pocket and grab my knife which means he mustn’t have thought to search me. Silently I cut my bonds and walk over to the man. I lean down and put my knife to his throat. Just as I do that though he jots up and grabs my wrist and twists making me drop the knife.

I slam my other fist up into his face and hear a satisfying crack as he reels back and lets go. Quickly I turn and see my stuff piled up next to his and I also see my pistol sticking out at the top of the pile. I lunge for it, grab it, pivot on my heel, and fire. Distantly I hear two shots being fired. I see his gun raised then look down to see the bright red blossom of blood swell up right in the center of his chest.

“You missed,” I tell him.

“No I didn’t,” he says as he falls back dying on the ground.

I look down and see a river of blood flowing from the right area of my chest.

“Oh,” I say as I black out again.

When I wake up again I can tell I’ve lost way to much blood to live through this. I turn my head towards the other guy and see that he is dead. Then I turn my gaze skyward and see the first few rays of morning light shining through the sky turning the clouds red and orange. What a beautiful last sight I think.

“Well I guess tha-,” and that’s the last thing I’m able to say.
Anastasia McCoy was walking down Main Street. To a casual observer she just looked like a teenage girl in a rush. To someone who was looking a little closer they could see that she was walking a little faster than someone in a rush and she kept looking behind her as if something was following her.

However nobody was looking closer which was fortunate because if they stopped to ask Anastasia what was the matter, she would have a lot of explaining to do. But nobody stopped her.

This is why she thought she was almost fine, until she ran into her friend James. Now when we normally say run into, we mean they meet each other. In this case I mean literally.

Anastasia and James both fell down. Anastasia’s bag and the stack of books James was carrying went flying.

“Geez McCoy! I didn’t know you were that obsessed with me!” James said with a laugh.

“Oh shut up James,” she said irritably, picking up her bag.

“Okay so not in the mood for jokes,” James said. “So where are you going?”

“Home,” she said then cringed. James was her best friend and knew she lived in the opposite direction.

Okay I’m going to the café to work on my essay for English.”

“We have an essay due for English?” James asked, looking surprised.

“Yes,” she said. “And I really need to work on it and I need to finish my thesis and yeah.”

“Well,” said James. “I’m excellent at those and I can help you.”

“No really it’s okay, you don’t need to come,” Anastasia protested.

“No it’s fine,” James smiled.

They settled in and James went to get her a drink. She looked at her watch. She needed to find some way to ditch James.

James came back with two cups of steaming coffee and sat down. He looked at her quizzically.

“What?” she asked warily.

“Aren’t you going to ask me for help?”

“I, uh, well, you see, um, I forgot it at home,” she said sheepishly. “I should really go get it. Bye!” She started to leave but James held her back.

“Sit down,” he said. He looked at her seriously. “Okay what’s up Ana? You would never do homework on Saturday, for starters. And if you did, you wouldn’t leave your essay at home. You’re not forgetful! You tried to lie to me by saying you were going home. Are you trying to get rid of me? Did I do something wrong? Are you mad at me?”

He looked really hurt but Anastasia couldn’t tell him the truth.

“Look, I just am really stressed I have a lot on my plate and I need to go pick up something at a store on Hunter’s street,” she said.

“ON WHAT STREET?” James shouted. “You’re just joking right?”

“No,” Anastasia said. “And I’m sorry but I have to go alone.”

“NO WAY!” James shouted. “Anastasia, Hunter’s Street is dangerous. To let you go off alone would be stupid and reckless! Besides what could you possibly want from a store on Hunter’s street?”

“Why?” she fired back, really mad now. “Because you’re such a good bodyguard? I can fight just as well as you! In fact half the time I have had to stand up to bullies for you!”

James looked really hurt now. “Answer the question! What could you want from a store on Hunter’s Street?”

“Nothing, I just need some medicine for my allergies!” She said hoping it didn’t sound too feeble.

“Why don’t you just go to the drugstore across the street?” James demanded.

“Because I can’t” Anastasia fired back. “My doctor ordered them there!”

“If you go I will call your mom, dad and the police,” he said quietly.

She took a risk. “Fine,” she shouted and took off running.
Anastasia wasn’t sure if James would actually call the police or not but she couldn’t bring him with her. It was just too dangerous. And she wasn’t worried about James catching up to her. He had terrible asthma and hated running.

Anastasia arrived on Hunter’s Street. It was a rundown street with lots of run down stores where people would hide out on. There were two shops open. One was a drugstore that hardly anyone went to, and the other was a liquor store. Her mother had told her to always stay away from this place because as James had said, it was dangerous. She walked along hoping that no one would notice her but she knew it was pretty pointless. Not many teenagers just stroll around, alone, Hunter’s Street.

However Anastasia stopped worrying about if people were watching her and about what she was about to face. She pulled out the letter and reread it again. 

**Dear Anastasia,**

I know you don’t know who I am, or what this letter means but I beg of you, don’t immediately dismiss what this letter says. Please at least consider it.

I know you’re different. I know sometimes you see things that just don’t make sense. Things you just can’t make sense of. So do we. We are the same as you. And we can explain why to you. If you want to know what you are meet us at the rundown Lucy’s Diner, on Hunter Street at 3:45 [sharp!] on Tuesday the 22nd October. DO NOT LET ANYONE KNOW WHERE YOU ARE GOING! DO NOT LET ANYONE COME WITH YOU OR FOLLOW YOU!!!!

You do not have to come but if you want to live your life in oblivion that’s your choice. I do hope you join us. You might be our last chance. Still it’s up to you.

Sincerely,

Someone like you

She had spent hours deciding whether she should go. Part of her said this was a trick and she should not go but another part said that she should. Because she did see weird things. She would sometimes see something that looked like a human fly by, or water that was floating, or feel the ground trembling. But when she brought it up to other people they looked at her like she was crazy and asked if she was okay. Once her grandmother suggested sending her to a doctor.

She had eventually decided to go with her phone ready to type 911 if needed and she brought a couple objects that could be used as a weapon. It was time to go in. She took a deep breath and walked in.

She walked into a pitch black room.

“Shut the door,” said a girl’s voice.

Anastasia did and pulled out her phone just in case.

As soon as she did the lights turned on and she saw she was standing in a room with 7 teenagers.

“You came,” said the girl who had spoken before. She was pretty, with brown hair that framed her face and she had deep blue eyes. “My name is Lila.”

She held out her hand and Anastasia stared at it and clutched her phone tighter.

“You can put that away,” said a boy with blond hair and blue eyes. “We’re not going to hurt you. I’m Marc.”

Another girl stood up. She had dark brown skin and light brown eyes. “I’m Tiffany.”

A boy almost identical to her, stood up, “I’m Tristan. We’re twins.”

A girl with a flaming red hair stood up, her green eyes sparkling, “Lily Hunter.”

A grumpy looking boy with light brown skin and the darkest of the dark eyes looked at her said, “notice how you are the only one saying their last name. Obviously no one else trusts her but you do because you’re so naïve.” He spat the last word like it was poison.

“Of course we trust her,” Lily answers. “Otherwise she wouldn’t even be here. That’s Max,” she added nodded to the boy.

“Very unpleasant to meet you,” he said. Lily rolled her eyes.

“Ignore him. He’s always like that. Honestly he wouldn’t know good manners if they slapped him in the face.”

The last person was facing the wall and slowly turned around. He had brown hair and blue eyes. “Henry, the pleasure’s all yours I’m sure,” he said in a cocky voice with a slight English accent. “But then again you’re new and unpredictable so I guess the pleasure could be mine.”

“Henry, that makes no sense,” Lily said.
“Why must we make sense now a day?” He began.
“Oh great,” Tiffany muttered.
“What is wrong with free expression of speech? Why must be understood?”
“As interesting as that is, I’m afraid that we actually need to talk to Anastasia,” Lila said. It was clear that she was the group leader.

Anastasia was feeling completely overwhelmed. All these people introduced themselves and acted like this was normal.

“So,” Lila began. “You can see strange things, and don’t bother trying to deny it. That’s because you’re an Ashton. An Ashton that has magical powers and can see other people do magic. It’s rare and you have to have an ancestor who was an Ashton. There was a whole group of Ashtons in the Northwest if France but the Kingsleys invaded us and wiped out most of the population. We’ve been trying to recruit a bunch of teenagers to go back to Amaston. Any questions?”

“Yes,” Anastasia said disbelieving. “You want me to believe that I have magical powers? And what the heck is a Kingsley or Amaston? And for all your information all my ancestors were completely normal! And how do you know about me? My name, my address? Have you been following me?” With each question Anastasia’s voice rose and rose.

“Okay first thing first, powers, we can’t prove that to you right now,” Tristan said stepping in. Anastasia made a sound of disbelief.

“But we can in a couple of minutes. Second a Kingsley is someone who is hunting Ashtons down, I’ll explain that more later,” Tristan said. “Amaston was the Northwest of France were the Ashtons lived. About your ancestors, you never talked to them how would you know they were completely normal? And as how we know about you, as Lila said we’re trying to recruit teenagers. We had someone out here when we spotted you. We investigated you to make sure you were actually one of us.”

“How do you know I’m an Ash...ashtine” Anastasia asked.
“ Ashton, love,” said Henry. Anastasia shot him a glare.

“All Ashtons have a scar in the shape of a diamond on their right wrist,” Tiffany answered. “Look.”

They all showed her their wrists and there they were. All seven of them had the scar. And she had it on her right wrist too.

“Is it really true?” she asked quietly.
“Yep,” said Marc.
“So what now?” she asked.

Tiffany stepped forward. “You’ll come with us to a headquarter in Denver and you’ll help us find new recruits. Also we will train you to fight Kingsleys. Then you can help us for the Ultimate Quest.”

“And we can’t explain what that is right now,” Tristan added seeing her confused look.

“But what will I tell my family and James?” Anastasia asked. “You’re asking me to give up my whole life!”

“Or not,” said Henry.
“ What?”
“ Well there are two options. You could not join us or we pull some strings.”

“What do you mean?” Ana asked skeptically.

“Well we could have your mom’s work transfer to Denver and then say the headquarters is a school you got into, which isn’t a lie because it is a school and you would still be learning math and stuff just a couple of other things. How would that sound?”

“Amazing,” Anastasia said, the relief plain in her voice. “But what about James?”

This time Max stepped forward. It was the first time he had contributed to the conversation and Anastasia had almost forgotten he was there. But when he started talking, he didn’t have such a grumpy expression on his face. “Anastasia, we all had to give up stuff to be an Ashton and for 2/3 of us, it was our families. You can keep you family. All you lose is a friend, you’re the luckiest here. And I’m not saying it won’t be hard but honestly Anastasia, I don’t think James is too happy with you right now.” He said it seriously and Ana knew he was right.

“So?” Asked Lily. “Will you join us?
“ I will, I’ll come to Denver and help train and learn help you with the Quest.”
Piper Page  

Poetry: Letters to Someone  
Ann Hawkins Gentry Middle School  
Jake Giessman, Teacher  

Dear Someone,  

I cannot be saved  
I have dug a hole too deep  
I cannot be saved  

Did it even hurt?  
When you decided this tragedy?  
Did you think of all the broken edges?  
What were you imagining?  

Some might think I'm overdramatic  
But My Dear Romeo, this is no joke  
I am not laughing yet  
On this air,  
I think I'll choke  

You couldn't be saved  
So why should I be?  
I'm all the more worse  
But that, you never could see  

I watched as you fell  
Head over heels  
For a world that didn't want you  
In their world that is sealed  

I have a heartache from breathing  
I have a headache from living  
And my arms and legs have a limb-ache from moving  

In the end,  
I want to be the last one standing  
But my conscious is so gosh darn commanding,  

But that didn't happen, my Romeo ranger  
I watched as you pulled the trigger  
To end the all the anger  

You thought that that would end all the pain  
Were you thinking of your Juliet as you ripped out your veins?  

My Dear Romeo,  
Now all I see is blue  
From the tears of the ocean,  
To the tears born new
My Dear Romeo,
Now all see is red,
From the roses you gave me
To the last bloody words you said

My Dear Romeo,
Now all I see is green
From the green of your eyes
To the last things you’ve seen

And My Dear someone,
Who shall remain in Heaven
For we will not meet again
I’ll hold you spirit in my mind as a remembrance

This is the last you will hear from me
My Romeo love
I cannot not be saved, don’t watch from above

I love you, My Someone,
So goodbye forever
Your Juliet is leaving
She was a rightful sinner
From your Juliet-someone

**Envy You**
(original song lyrics)

Sly smile in the corner of your face
Caught your evil eye—threw it back in case
Your dangerous walk down the hallway
Looking like a million bucks,
But you don’t have much
You say your life sucks

Pre-Chorus:
Give it up, give it a rest
You’re just another girl
In this world (x2)

Chorus:
Envy you, envy you
It’s all in what you see
What you’re perceived to be
Envy you, we all envy you
You’re who we aimed to be
Don’t you see? Don’t you see?

Turn the lights on,
Throw the mask too
Hiding behind a fake façade
Now what are you gonna do?
You can easily fool
But I see right through you
When you didn’t get what you wanted,
What are you gonna do?

Pre-chorus 2:
Give it up, give it a rest
When you didn’t get what you wanted,
Maybe it’s for the best (x2)

Chorus
Bridge:
Let the green eyed monster
Come out of the dark
Jealousy is taking over now
There’s no turning back

Everyone loves you for who they think you are,
But do you even care?
Is this who you really are?

Torturing, don’t you see?
Don’t you see?
It’s what you do to me (x2)

Can’t you see? Can’t you see?
Can’t you see?
It’s what you do to me
Torturing, torturing
Torturing, is what you do to me

Chorus:
Envy you, envy you
It’s all in what you see—what you’re perceived to be
Envy you, we all envy you—you’re who we aimed to be
Don’t you see? Don’t you see? (X3)

Read All About It

Don’t want to read all about it in the New York Times.
Don’t want to drown my head in sorrows,
I’ve done that too many times.
Don’t want to hear their names on the evening news,
there are supposed to be applause in life,
All you get are loud boos.

I see you face in the magazine, the morning newspaper
And in a rush I want to throw it away
You get worse and worse by the hour

I see the television light up and there’s a glow of you
Your mug-shot so smug
But we all see right through you

Once a princess, once a prince
And now you’re the dragon
Taking lives, taking hearts and putting others in your wagon

I don’t see how this life appeals
To someone so bright as you
You used to hate the center stage
But now you’re sweeping through

Not once in a million years
Did I ever think that I’d see that name
Up on my TV screen

And now my eyes won’t close
Till you rid my fears
I hear your plead in my ears

Don’t want to read all about it
No I just can’t read all about it
Don’t want to read all about it
It hurts to read all about you
I just can’t see you on the news

I still see your name headlining the Washington Post
I see it big, bolded, black ink on the newsstand close
With you, they list the names of the most convicted felons
I notice that one boy from High School that was oh so jealous
About the life he couldn’t live
So he took it instead
Oh I guess it drove him mad
I guess it got to his head

I just can’t seem to understand why the world lets this happen
It’s like society’s gone crazy, and now it all seems tragic

I just can’t read all about you.
I don’t want hear all about you on the news.

A Lost Cause

A heart was in shambles,
As it crumbled to the floor.
Like a lost idea, potentially of worth,
The heart could have been so much more.

She runs away without a single pause,
For we know her now
As a lost cause.
Crinkled piece of paper,
Oh why did you think so less of yourself?
Your raw edges with your defined face
Each dent like piece of silver, your hidden wealth.

A breathy gasp escaped from your lips
So pale white at your fingertips
The lesser blue sky didn’t help as much,
And your heart like a lion’s shows as such

As deep brown eyes,
As a bear in fear
Oh, how could you not see, my dear?

As defined facial features
As a wolf, sincere
Not so lonely, angry, you’re attention veers

She runs away without a single pause
For we know her now
As a lost cause

Forget, not forgive
She’ll try not to remember
That time you threatened her
On a cold night’s eve in December

The frost on her lips and the snow on her face
Made her look so fragile, like a bundle of lace

But you could not break her, right then and there
She was fierce, although utterly scared

She’ll try not to remember
That one time when
You threatened her
On that cold night in December.

She ran away without a single pause
For we know her now
As a lost cause.

Blank stare, on a plain white, blank face.
She’s a solid black hole in a vast white space.

She said, “Remember me as I shall forget you”,
As she headed off into a world brand new.

Pure little face, with a heart of gold.
Melted by the heat of her anger
And her fiery soul

She was a precious memory
Waiting to evaporate,
Into gray-blue skies
From the world she would separate.

She runs away without a single pause
For we know her now
As a lost cause.
Christine Politte
Short Story: Outside the Box
University City Senior High School
Caroline Hackmeyer, Teacher

The Box

Every now and then I get another one. I smile and shake the hands that need shaking and say the thanks that need saying and pose for the pictures that need taking. And then I take it home to my closet and stand on my toes to reach the very top shelf, way in the back, to get down the box.

I lift the lid and my vision is flooded with red and green and gold and blue. So much blue, the color of first place, of best, of triumph. Ribbons and medals nestle together, trophies from the science fairs and spelling bees that made up my youth. And under those, the certificates: perfect attendance, honor roll, hardest worker, best student, you participated! Always number one, A++, 4.0. Always perfect, so perfect.

But when you hear perfect, excellent, outstanding enough times, it starts to fade into background noise and all you see is paper. Paper and cloth.

Sometimes it seems like my life is there in that box, the blue and white file box with bent-up corners, bottom sagging from the sheer weight of its contents. A whole box brimming with my “achievements”, the things I’m supposed to be proud of.

I gaze for a moment at the fruits of these 17 years. The way the silver of the French medal catches the dim light from the incandescent bulb overhead. The intricate blue ruffles on the spelling bee ribbon from sixth grade. A “Certificate of Excellence” from some day three years ago. Which day? And why? I honestly don’t care anymore.

A thousand prizes, honors, awards. A thousand smiles, a thousand handshakes, a thousand thank yous, a thousand pictures.

Look at the girl in this picture, they all say, that talented, gifted girl. She’s going places.

But they never look closely enough. They never see that the smile is just upturned lips. They never look into her eyes and see that they’re lacking the gleam of victory, triumph, happiness. No one really looks. So no one ever sees that they’re just numb.

Magic

I shuffle up the aisle, the only sound the whisper of my sneakers brushing the soft red carpet. Silence hangs over everything like a heavy blanket. My fingers brush the edges of the simple wooden benches—pews, that’s the word.

I can’t help craning my neck at the ornate archways above, more beautiful than their function requires. Who would ever think to decorate a ceiling?

People who are in the habit of looking up, I suppose.

The place is dim, except for the shafts of colored light emanating from the stained-glass windows along the walls. The vivid images seem to glow as the light hits them, and I can almost feel these long-dead people watching me, their gaze piercing the facade I’ve worn for so long. I suppress a shiver.

My feet carry me to the very front, the pew closest to the altar. That’s an altar, right, that boxy raised part with the Bible on it?

I lower myself into the pew. The seat is harder than I thought it’d be. How many times have I sat in one of these before? Four, five?

I know there’s some sort of elaborate kneeling ritual, but there’s no way I’ll get it right. So I just close my eyes and clasp my hands together, the way I’ve seen people do. I feel silly. But I have to try. I hear magic happens here.

And I could really use some right now.

It feels wrong to break the silence, so I keep my voice down to the barest whisper.

“Hey, God, if you’re out there, I need your help. Please.” I struggle to find the right words. “I know I don’t deserve anything from you. But I’m desperate. I’m lost. I do exactly what they want. Work all day, study all night. Ace every test, win every award. I do everything right. But you know what? I just feel empty. I’m a robot. No passion, no personality. My only real talent is standardized testing. I can’t go on like this. I just can’t.”
I let out a shuddering breath, feeling the first of many tears roll down my cheek. “You’re my only hope, God. Or whoever you are. I need some advice, some guidance. Something. I’ve never asked you for anything. Just give me this much, I’m begging you.”

By now, the tears are streaming down my cheeks. I just let them fall. I keep my eyes closed, searching for a sign. Something. Anything. Any minute now...

But an emptiness is gnawing at the pit of my stomach, growing larger and larger, and finally I can’t ignore it any longer. I was wrong. What a fool, thinking someone would come save me if I just hoped hard enough. There’s no magic here. Truth is, I’m alone. So very alone.

I sit in silence, numb to the core. Time passes, but I don’t know how much. Another hour, maybe two?

But then I feel something stir deep inside me, and a thought starts worming its way up through the melancholy. Finally, it breaks the surface.

Now what?

I roll those two little words over in my mind, not quite sure what to make of them. I’ve given up, remember, brain? I don’t care anymore.

But they’re still there, those two little words. Insistent. And the more I think about them, the more I can feel the numbness subsiding, the ice cracking just a bit. Is this the sign I was waiting for?

And then it hits me. It might be a sign, but not from God. Because you know what this is?

It’s hope.

Somewhere deep inside me, mixed with all that sorrow and anger and emptiness, there was hope. There still is.

Maybe I’m stronger than I thought.

I’m still treading water. Lost, confused, alone. But I’m still here, still breathing. And maybe, just maybe, I’ll be able to get myself through this.

What now? That’s a good question. I think it’s time to go home, do some serious thinking. Time to get out of this place.

I slide out of the pew—and almost crash to the floor. My foot must have gone numb at some point. Ugh. Still, I stand as tall as I can.

I make my way back down the aisle, faster this time, sneakers whispering across the carpet, fingers brushing each pew. I turn around one last time, take in the windows, the altar, the rows of empty benches.

For the first time in recent memory, I feel a smile forming on my lips. Maybe magic does happen here after all. Just not the way I thought it would.

I pull open the heavy door and, with all the courage I can muster, make my way out into the growing dusk.

Boxed In

My life has been spent in a series of boxes.

I was born inside a box, perhaps ten feet on a side, where my mother lay on a bed with doctors and nurses around her. This in turn was part of a much larger box, built of thousands of tan and brown bricks with “Hospital” in blazing red out front. While my mother rested, my sleeping place was little more than a padded crate with bars on the sides.

A few days later, my parents loaded me into their shiny blue wheeled box, which carried us home to our own personal dwelling, two stories and red with shiny windows and colored flowers blooming out front. Almost like they were trying to hide the fact that it, too, was a box. But it was.

I got my own box, pink and cheery, packed with books and stuffed animals. When I looked out the window, all I could see were rows upon rows of boxes like ours, decorated differently but still eerily the same.

When I was five years old, I was picked up by a long, yellow rectangle with wheels and taken to the box where children are taught. For twelve years, I have learned all about living in this society of right angles and confined spaces. Someday, they say, if I work hard enough, I’ll have my own box with wheels and eventually my own permanent box where I can raise my own box-children! And when I die, everyone will cry as I am lowered into the ground, laid to rest inside a box made especially for me.

So when our teacher tells us to start thinking outside the box, I write a paper about the Earth, the lovely, spherical Earth, with its curves and inconsistencies and a beauty all its own.

It’s returned with a big red F scrawled across the front. And when I go up to the imposing wooden box where the teacher sits and grades our papers, she sighs and reluctantly removes her attention from her
computer-box. “Young lady,” she says disdainfully, glaring down at me over the rims of her tortoiseshell glasses, “What is this rubbish about planets? So unbelievably dull. Did you even listen when I explained the assignment?” she sneered. “I told you—you need to think outside the box.”

I blink in disbelief. Once, twice. I stare at her for a moment, this angular lady with her square chin and rectangular glasses. I look down and see the F on my paper, all perfect right angles. A blocky letter in a blocky world.

I throw down my paper and laugh. “No, Mrs. Jones,” I say on my way out the door. “I think you do.”

Cliff

She stands on the edge of the cliff in the dying light, looking at her world stretched out below. The river, long and wide, snakes over the land between the towering foothills. From here she cannot hear its roar, but she can imagine the deafening sound as the white water crashes over the rocks. Patches of yellow light, soft and inviting, mark the cities. That one there, on the river’s edge, that’s where she’s from. Her family is probably sitting comfortably around the dinner table right now, chatting, just finished with their meal. Perhaps even her favorite, macaroni and cheese still bubbling from the oven, breadcrumbs perfectly browned on top. She can almost taste it from here, and she smiles at the thought.

Although she can’t see it clearly, she can picture the school just a few blocks from her house, the three-story building of tan brick and concrete with big windows and a red, red roof. The place where she spent thirteen years being the person she was told to be.

And across town, next to the old supermarket, is the university where her dad works and her brother is studying to be a scientist. She is meant to go there too. They’re saving a spot for her. She can do her four years, get a degree in psychology or engineering or physics. Meet someone there, fall in love, move into that little red-brick house down the street from her parents, the one with the white-picket fence, and have her 2.3 kids.

The perfect life has been boxed and giftwrapped for her, right in that one little valley.

But something makes her turn around and look down the other side of the cliff, to places she’s heard of but never been. The rosy pinks and electric oranges of the sunset are fading now, and all she can see are shadows and the faint lights of unfamiliar towns.

She can see a foreign river stretching off into the distance. Does it roar like hers? Where does it go? Who are the people in those cities? Would they welcome a stranger, or shun her? And on the horizon she can see another mountain, a dark mass rising up in the ever-dimming light. What’s on the other side?

Her curiosity burns to find out.

She hesitates, looks back for a moment. There, in that valley, are her family, her friends, her school. Her life. And what’s on the other side of this mountain? Where would her wandering take her? Who would she meet? What if she got sick, or hurt, or robbed? What if, by taking this leap, she fell with no one to catch her? Ah, she thinks, but what if I fly?

She stands on the edge of the cliff in the dying light, looking at a new world stretched out below. Heart pounding, she looks forward. Then back. Then forward again.

At last, she takes a deep breath. Picks up one foot, then the other. The first of many steps into the unknown.

Inside, her heart is soaring.
Amudha Porchezhian

Poetry: Blueprint; Spiral; Journey of the Moldau
Parkway Central High School
Jason Lovera, Teacher

Blueprint

My eyes scorning, ponder
Pierce the canvas
Shatter the stained windows
To let in new light
Stretch my sight across the horizon
Anxious for something to see

Past the tar of the gridded streets
Beyond the barren leafless trees
Or even the dazzling fire
That burned the branches
Just two months ago
Or the fresh green promise
Months before that

Searching to resist
The limits of memories
Searching on my toes
Searching with my face pressed to the ground
Elbows skinned

White canvas turns whiter
Under the covers of my palette
Nothing more than different shades of black
I resign to endlessly invent
Into comforting familiar shapes
While inside my veins, there drowns

A hunger to paint with colors
I have never seen before

Spiral

I wake to find tiny cuts and bruises
scattered across my body
infiltrate my skin
I check my skin for shards of glass
rocks beneath the mattress
that could explain
I cannot explain the cuts myself
even in sleep my comfort
wears too thin
I wear the tiny wounds without
delirious to open them
take a look within
I find within my haunted dreams
the fragile glass fragmented
marks me again
I wake again to ceaseless wounds
splintering to the dance
the dizzying spin

**Journey of the Moldau**

at its Source, the piece
begins to flow
cellos form the subtle undercurrent
violas rush the stream above
the violins float as gondolas
atop the steady rise and fall, the beat
of the River
trees at the edge of the bank
lean in toward the bow strokes
deep green tendrils trailing the water
dee as the serenity, hard to accept
enough to hold a thousand
riverside daydreams
from beautiful Music weaves beautiful
Silence
twisting and turning
the stream picks up momentum
tumbling and rushing to Forte
rhythms churning in little rapids
splashing the listening ear
with playful childishness
of Water
slowly, the coils come apart
to softer Piano sounds
a lone bass line breathes uncertainty
the river gone still
bubbles of anticipation beneath
break the surface
flowing again, akin
to the trailing melodies
at the Source
the River snakes and bends, revealing
colors costumes extravagance
the violins’ grand festival
lower strings guide wild heartbeats
swept up in the midst of sights, still part
of the Current
fading celebration
nudged away by the open ocean
blinding sunset beckons from sky's edge
freshwater hesitates from meeting salt
  in one shy Fermata
until the orchestra joins together
  two strong chords
  to release the river into the sea
where the Music of the journey gives in to
    Applause
Critical Essay: *The Social Justice Dragon: Internet Mentality and the Detriment of a Good Cause*

**Excelsior Springs High School**

**Katie Galvin, Teacher**

In the 21st century, the Internet is our fastest and most-accessed source of information. And with the creation of the Internet culture came the advent of memes: ideas, behaviors, or styles that spread from person to person within a culture. Common Internet memes range from mundane macro-images featuring common clichés (such as Overly Attached Girlfriend, Philosoraptor, etc.), to entire movements that have a large impact on the world around us (Occupy Wall Street, Anonymous, etc.). One meme that has particularly polarized the Internet is a 100-year-old movement in America known as feminism - the advocacy for gender equality. Chat rooms and forums are constantly divided by this topic. Is it a serious, realistic issue in America, that women are still being oppressed to this day economically and socially? Or are the claims of sexism being blown out of proportion? On the Internet, room for truth is usually sparse or random. Because of this, people constantly find themselves accepting “facts” that only agree with their initial beliefs, leading to polarization - and the feminist movement on the social blogging site Tumblr is notorious for this. Teenage and young adult users, typically female (but some are men) are latching onto a strict set of beliefs that not only demonizes men, but anyone willing to disagree openly with said users. This increasing adherence to such a radical version of an otherwise necessary movement will ultimately polarize traditionalists and progressivists instead of solving any issues.

I can find many instances in which radical feminism has hurt its own cause, but one really stands out to me in particular concerning Matt Taylor of the European Space Agency (ESA). Recently, humankind achieved the feat of landing a spacecraft on a hurtling comet 300 million miles away, over a 10 year period. Pretty impressive… until someone pointed out that a single scientist, Mr. Taylor himself, had donned a shirt covered in comic-book cartoons of women who were, reasonably enough for comic books, not quite dressed all the way. This, of course, resulted in a major flak storm resulting in Matt having to apologize publicly for wearing a t-shirt - the same shirt that his female friend had made for him (Goldberg). Of course, society was quick enough to point out the flaws in the outcry of radical feminists’ arguments. But what of the effects on the “real” feminist movement? Situations like these are counterintuitive to what real feminists want - total protected equality of all genders. That doesn’t mean you have to force a public apology out of a man who was wearing a shirt you found displeasing. Some people find gauges displeasing, but you don’t often hear a peep about that, right? It really has to do with gender. Radical feminists seem to have to actively search for instances of social injustice, but instead mistake it for things that would go against general, innocuous opinion. And in the end, it hurts everyone - it hurts the “evil doer’s” freedom of expression, it hurts the real feminists’ movement, and it basically hurts everyone else’s heads.

Not only does radical feminism hurt the actual feminism movement, it also disrupts society as a whole. Simply Googling “Tumblr feminism” brings up a plethora of blogs that either praise the extreme feminist atmosphere in the United States or damn them for shunning those that do not even slightly agree with them. In fact, the first blog I found, “Check Your Privilege, Feminists,” is dedicated to pointing out the arguments that feminist bloggers make. For example, a particular reblog is centered around a tweet about an article detailing the outlandish oppression females are being forced into (the belligerents responsible? ISIS). One blogger’s response?

How is that relevant?
The US is still a patriarchy even if it’s not IRAQ.
Oooh, scary Muslims, ooh, evil Arabs who hate women.
The blog’s response?
See this is why the whole feminist claim of “intersectionality” is total bullshit. You feminists will criticize American men all you want but you refuse to acknowledge how horrifically women are actually treated in other countries out of some fear that it will be considered *racist* or *something*-phobic. That’s not intersectional. That’s willful ignorance of reality.

Deeper research into this blog essentially uproots many feminist “arguments” - which mostly appear to lack facts, and are based on emotion rather than thought. check-your-privilege-feminists is not alone, either. There are many other blogs out there dedicated to defending the true meaning of feminism (and not all of
them are necessarily Republican), as well as questioning the rationale of “political correctness.” As one Tumblr blogger perfectly describes the situation: the entirety of Tumblr has to walk on eggshells for fear of awaking the social justice dragon

Ultimately, the main reason why I criticize radical feminism is simply because it lacks any and all ability to make a difference. Let’s go back to “Shirtgate” once more. Yes, radical feminists got an apology out of their oppressor. But at what cost? The answer: much more than the payload. The negative media coverage and Internet backlash the radical feminists received grossly outweighed the unnecessary apology they obtained from Mr. Taylor. The efforts RFs go through to prove a fraction of a point is essentially detrimental to their cause, because it makes them look petty and, to be frank, stupid. A USA Today headline reads, “1 small shirt for a man, 1 giant leap backward for women” (Reynolds). Ultimately, radical feminists go through exceedingly great lengths to accomplish one little, insignificant feat that eventually comes back to bite them in the end, and its collateral damage hurts the “real” feminists’ credibility. One might argue that it’s not just the shirt that’s the issue, it’s the subliminal standards that it promotes. Valid, except you need to take in not just what you think, but how other people might perceive the shirt. I, as a man, did not find it sexual. As a matter of fact, I actually had to concentrate to see the comic book women, largely due to the odd design of the shirt (to the designer’s credit, it is a patterned design, but I digress). Maybe I’m not the only one who saw the shirt that way. Or, maybe other guys saw the shirt and thought, “Cool, comic books.” Using your own feelings and viewpoints to drive an argument is not helpful. You need to put yourself in others’ shoes and reasonably estimate how they would look at and register something that may, in your eyes, be politically incorrect.

The world still needs feminism. It shouldn’t - in a perfect world, we wouldn’t have these issues and I wouldn’t be writing this essay late at night - but it does. There are some nations out there that sadly don’t offer women the same rights and advantages as a human being should deserve. But radical feminism does absolutely nothing to help this social progress. It stagnates the growth of our culture, mars our historical eyesight, and even goes as far as crippling the credibility of the feminist movements around the world. Right now, many of us have a poor view on the women’s rights movement today. Some deem it as irrelevant to America, which is still not quite close to the truth. There’s always going to be a divide between men and women, yes. But as humans, we have the ability to shrink it. Actions speak louder than words, and that ancient cliché is extremely important to remember when it comes to gender equality, or any social, political, or economic issue.
Silk the color of hummingbirds' wings
    Ruffles like whispered secrets
    But the silhouette!
    I look like a goose's honk.
    Maybe I’ll try this one instead.

    Texture of a candlelit bath,
    Neckline, a crescent moon,
    But the beading is worse
    Than a rattler’s hiss.
    Hold on, I’ve found something new.

    Oh, good heavens!
    That dress is
    Bruised bananas left
    To stew in a hot car.
    Simply
    Unacceptable.

    This little number ripples
    Like a ballerina’s flourish
    The color of fresh, chilled fruit.
    Cut like a dreamy afternoon snooze...
    But not quite right.
    I’ll try again.

    In that gown
    I am a police siren.
    Off it goes.

    Fabric folds like a saxophone solo,
    Pattern, a baby’s coo.
    Color more vibrant than the heart of a lover.
    But it’s still just not right.

    Hon, I’ve got nothing to wear.
It has been 65 days since my best friend, John, died at the age of 17.
It was the third Friday in April, and my family sat in the living room eating dark red cherries and playing
Monopoly. This sort of thing was a rarity and was suggested the day before by my little sister, who thought we
needed to spend more time together.
I was enjoying the laughter, the symphony of crickets pouring from our open window, and a break from
the copious amount of homework that comes with being close to the end of junior year.
We never answer our home phone, but when “Margaret Whitefield,” appeared on our television screen to
indicate the call was from John’s mother, my mom stood and walked into the kitchen to grab the phone.
I smiled to myself because John and I had been imagining what life would be like if our mothers became
best friends. While they had lunch in John’s kitchen, John and I would be in the basement watching movies or
playing video games. Or, better yet, our mothers would take us on college road trips. We would stop at the
World’s Largest Ball of Cheese, and take pictures with famous people we would meet in coffee shops.
When she returned to the living room, my mother pressed her lips together as if that was the only thing
that would stop the appearance of tears.
“Allison,” my mother said, “let’s go to your room.”
Her voice wavered, as if someone were adjusting the volume with each word she spoke.
The walk up our carpeted stairs had never seemed so long, but when my mother sat down beside me on
my purple bedspread, I remember wishing the trip was longer.
She didn’t know how to break the news to me, so she just took a deep breath and said it.
“John died today.”
I didn’t understand at first. I looked at her as if she were speaking another language. John? John Who? My
John is alive. I had been texting him earlier that day. You cannot receive a text from a dead person. My mother
is insane.
But she continues talking.
“He was with some friends... and they ran a red light...”
After each phrase, she takes a deep breath. She is about to cry. She can’t cry, because tears make things
like this real. If she cries, John is dead. John is dead. John is dead.
“The other two boys were hurt really bad... but John died right there,” she said, sniffing. I felt angry that
she was crying. John was my best friend. Why should she cry? Then, I realized that her tears were for me too.
Her brown eyes confronted mine with sympathy, but with something that felt final.
“I’m so sorry.”
When she said this, it broke me. It broke me like I was a glass jar that had been full of the ocean, because I
sobbed more salty tears than I could have imagined were in me.
My mother let me cry on her shoulder, and she cried too, even though her face didn’t distort like mine, and
when she took breaths, it didn’t sound like the final gasp of something that was dying, and she didn’t cry with
abandon like I did, because that day, her daughter lost her best friend. But that day, my entire life changed.
The last month of junior year was a blur. I didn’t go to prom, or any other end-of-the-year event for that
matter. But how could I? I didn’t understand why people kept asking me to party when the only person I would
want to go with was dead.
“You need to get out of the house,” my mom said. That really made angry. Hadn’t she just told me that he
was gone? Hadn’t she sobbed with me in my room until the night turned into the morning, and I had nothing
left inside of me? She was there when my heart shattered into pieces. Now, she wanted me to leave my purple
tear-stained bedspread and be with people who would fake sadness as they spoke about how some boy they
didn’t know very well was gone.
No. The only place I wanted to go was wherever John was.
Instead, all I have done all summer is read about people dying, which somehow makes me feel better. I read about the French Revolution. I read dystopian books about war. I even read books where the main character dies, which are my favorite, because they prove that death spares no one.

Now, my mother is making me attend the journalism camp that I received a scholarship for in late March, which seems like ages ago.

When I found out I could attend, I was excited about this camp, with its guest speakers and college dorm rooms and dozens of sessions to choose from. But now, being surrounded by people several hours a day, avoiding the advertised social events every weekend and dodging questions that my prying roommate will ask me sound like they will add to my torturous existence.

I have already begged my mom to let me be left alone before I return to school and begin my senior year, but she thinks this will somehow help me.

So here I am, making my bed in the dorm room that will be mine for the next 5 weeks. The room is a square, with two beds near the corners of the wall and a window in the middle. I hear a key wriggle in the door behind me, and wait for the appearance of my roommate, whose bed has already been made, and whose things have been put neatly away.

“Oh hey,” says a strawberry blond, wearing a tank-top and short shorts, “you must be my roommate! I’m Candy.”

I hardly have to turn around to take a look at her before knowing I don’t like her. The way she speaks with aggravating enthusiasm. Her name, which is supposedly sweet, but almost certainly has something sour to it.

“Hey, I’m Allison.”

I smile at her, and she makes small talk. What grade are you in? Newspaper or yearbook? What position on your staff?

Candy, whose real name is Candice, is a graphic designer for her yearbook. I won’t be seeing her around since I’m a writer for my newspaper.

After a few minutes, she says she wants to go see her friends.

“I can introduce you to them!” she says. “Do you want to come?”

“No thanks, it was a long drive.”

I unpack and lay on my new mattress, reading about a girl who saves her best friend from death.

The next day, we have a general session to explain how everything will work. Then we split up into the more specific sessions we signed up for. I love taking notes, because my mind has something to focus on other than sadness. Soon, it is lunchtime, and I easily find a rectangular table in the corner, and set my food tray down so that I face a wall instead of the laughter of my carefree classmates.

I eat while enveloping myself in a book, a skill I’ve been developing since I learned how to read.

Halfway through my meal, someone sits down across from me, but I don’t notice.

“Hi, I’m Howard.”

I look up, trying not to appear startled even though my bladder feels a little fuller. Just seconds ago, I was thousands of miles away from here.

I nod at him, hoping he realizes that I have no desire to talk to him.

“Allison,” I say.

I gaze downward at my book to begin reading again, but I cannot hold my eyes there for long. Howard is still looking at me.

He is studying me, in the way that I study other people. In the way no one ever thinks to look at me. Howard has skin the color of caramel. When I look up at him, bright green eyes are staring back.

I open my mouth to say something, but nothing comes out.

Why is he looking at me?

I am African-American too, but my eyes are one shade lighter than coal. My skin has more dark spots than I can keep track of. My teeth are so crooked that it’s a good thing I haven’t had a reason to smile in the past few months.

Is he just going to keep looking at me?

“Are you a writer or a photographer?” Howard says.

“Writer,” I say a bit too fast, eager for a break in our staring contest. “You?”

“Photographer.”

I nod.
“Cool.”

My muscles stiffen, and my stomach tightens. It’s awkward, how we’re staring at each other, but I sit there and look at him, studying him the way he studies me. I memorize him. The exact color of his eyes, the shape of his nose, the thickness of his lips.

Then I am satisfied, and continue to read.

Howard and I have eaten lunch together every day since we partnered on a news story that we had to cover for our main session.

He has gotten more words out of me than I have spoken in over 3 months. He has made me laugh. But I feel guilty every time I experience an emotion that is not sadness or anger. Why should the sun shine on me, but not on John, who is too far under the ground to feel the cool dew in the morning or the blazing summer air?

Today, Howard asks me if I am going to the end-of-first-projects party tomorrow. These parties are a lot like school dances, but there are sections to just sit and snack so that you don’t have to dance the whole night. Not that I’ve ever been to them. Candy is one of the students who plans social events, and she tells me about them.

“No,” I tell Howard, trying to hide how pleased I am that he asked.

“I should have known. I never see you there,” he says.

Suddenly, Howard’s sweet, smiling face turns into John’s intense one, his eyes staring right into me. John is the only other person who ever cared enough, it seems, to give me a second glance. To want to know me for the sake of knowing me. To analyze and study me, not for a test, but for a friendship. Again, I feel guilty. I remember the cold, rainy morning, the second Saturday in April, when John, with his chocolate skin and brown eyes to match, leaned in to kiss me.

But I could not kiss him back. John was something out of this world. He did not belong on Earth, with his soft heart, and creative mind. And he should not have been kissing an unexceptional girl who blended into a crowd like creamer blended into coffee.

I think that’s why I knew, the moment I sat down on my purple comforter with my mother, that John was gone. He never belonged here anyway.

Howard is different than John, but he is still the certain kind of amazing that makes me feel as if I do not belong.

“I don’t like dances,” I tell Howard. “I never did. I’m sorry, but I’m not going.”

He frowns but doesn’t protest. I study the way his lips pinch together in the corner of his mouth and the way the light flickers from his eyes when he is disappointed. Then I excuse myself and go to the restroom. There’s no one inside, so I walk into the middle stall, pull the seat top down, and sit, grateful for privacy.

I think: what if I would have kissed John that day? Would he have come to play Monopoly with my family on the third Friday in April? Would he still be alive? I am certain of the answer, and the guilt wrings my stomach like a towel. I sob.

John is dead. John is dead. John is dead.

When Candy enters our room that night, she can tell that I’m not asleep, even though my eyes are closed and the only light comes from the lamp on the dresser.

“Allison, why do you just lay around here like that? Never doing anything unless you have to be?”

I answer her in silence.

She can’t possibly be sure I am awake.

But she keeps talking.

“Tomorrow, there’s that party that we’ve been working really hard to plan,” Candy says, “and you’re not even going!”

I open my eyes.

“How do you know I’m not going?” I say.

She looks straight at me. “Well, are you?”

“No.”

“Of course you’re not. Cause you don’t ever go to the parties.”

“I don’t like to party. I never did.”
“But that’s the thing, Allison, I would understand if you were introverted or something, but I’ve seen introverts, and they still like to learn and go and look at things. You just wanna lay here as if you’re waiting to die. You’re not introverted. You’re angry or depressed or something.”

Wow. Maybe I’m both.

So Candice makes three. Three people who have given me a second glance. Three people who have analyzed me perfectly. And so I tell her.

“My best friend, John, died a few months ago, at the age of 17.”

I say it so matter-of-factly that it almost doesn’t hurt.

I expect Candice to cringe in regret and say “I didn’t realize...I’m so sorry!”

Instead, she says “so that means you stop living your life?”

“What?”

“John dies at the age of 17, and so do you, Allison?”

I just stare at her. She sighs and lowers herself so that she sits on her bed.

“My older sister died two years ago, and I thought I couldn’t go on. I didn’t want to. I felt like everyone else had moved on just a few months after she died. Like everyone was okay, and I wasn’t. And so I thought it was my responsibility to mourn her. I stopped thinking about everything else that was important to me, I just sat around and thought about her, and how she could’ve really been someone, and about all those people who kill people and are still alive.” Candice’s voice cracks because she’s about to cry. I stare at her. Maybe she felt how I feel. She continues.

“But was I doing her any good? Just sitting there and wasting my life? Was that honoring her?”

She seems to be genuinely asking, as she looks down and shakes her head. She finally decides.

“No. It was the opposite of what she wanted. And so I decided to get my life together and do better. To volunteer with kids, and get my grades up, and kind of dedicate it to her, if that makes sense.”

She looks up at me to see if I understand her. I do. I nod, guilt wrenching my stomach once again. “Was I doing her any good?” she had said, “just sitting there and wasting my life?”

The first thing I do to start living is go to my first party in over 100 days.

Amidst the balloons and dark lighting of the huge gym, I find Howard talking to two other people by the snacks. He introduces me to them, but we don’t make small talk for long before they leave to go dance.

“So do you want to go outside?” Howard says, nodding toward an open door, which students wander in and out of.

“We’re under a million stars. He invites me to sit on a bench overlooking the school’s track, and we talk.

“What made you come?” he asks.

I am about to tell him that Candice convinced me and move onto another subject.

Instead, I decide to tell him everything. I tell him how John died, and how I died along with him, but didn’t realize it. How I felt guilty that Howard made me laugh. How I almost kissed John, and how I didn’t because he was too incredible. And how Howard is incredible too, and I feel guilty that I want to kiss him.

Oops, I didn’t mean to say that last part. But then he is leaning toward me, and we collide effortlessly, like creamer blending into coffee.

Seconds later, when I open my eyes, it’s still dark. At first, I think it’s dark outside, and I just need to adjust to the lighting, but then I feel my purple bedspread under my hands, and I realize that it had all been a dream. That John is still dead, but I don’t have Candice or Howard.

I want to cry, but not of disappointment or anger.

I want to cry because for the first time in 66 days, instead of 100 like I thought, I really lived. And because I can still live today. I cry because I miss John, but I cry because I have missed myself, and I’m finally back. I cry because John could have done amazing things, but I cry because I still can. I cry because John is dead, John is dead, John is dead, but I cry because I’m alive, I’m alive, I’m alive.
Emma Rowley

Dramatic Script: The Unknown Man

John Burroughs School

John Pierson, Teacher

Setting:

Two women, Anne and Marie, sit in a living room. Marie appears to be in her early 40’s, while Anne is a bit younger in her early 30’s. Both women are well dressed in expensive looking clothing. However, Marie is slightly disheveled and looks tired, while Anne’s appearance is much more pristine. The room is a comfortable size and the furniture consists of a small couch and a chair facing each other, with a small table off to the side housing coffee and cream. All of the furniture appears to be expensive and well kept. There is a beautiful painting on the wall.

Scene:

MARIÉ: Coffee?

ANNE: Yes, a small cup. Not too much. (Laughing a bit) My nerves are already shot. (Marie stands and walks to the small table in the corner pouring a cup of coffee from the pot)

MARIÉ: Yes, yes. I know what you mean. I didn’t sleep at bit last night. Some people say grieving exhausts them, but it does quite the opposite to me. I feel constantly like I need something to do. (Sighs) Unfortunate, don’t you think, considering my position?

ANNE: Ah yes, well you'll find other employment soon enough. You seem to be very capable.

MARIÉ: Well thank you, that is very kind. Concerns about that will have to come much later though. There is still so much to do. I am quite stressed; I want to make sure this all goes accordingly. It is the least he deserves.

ANNE: Yes well, I think we may have differing views as to what my father deserves. Regardless, I was up all night trying to make the arrangements for this funeral. It really is a lot more work than you would think. Sending the notices, finding a priest, getting the flowers. There’s a whole to do list. (Marie walks back and sits on the couch with Anne)

MARIÉ: Will you be staying then? To plan it all?

ANNE: Yes I expect I will, if only for a few days. Then I really must get home.

MARIÉ: I can’t imagine it’s any more relaxing there, with everything going on. From what I have heard it has been quite a stressful few months for you.

ANNE: Well yes it has been a bit stressful, but it’s a different kind of stress. You know? Anxious but a bit giddy. Not always pleasant but it does have more of a happy air to it. I guess that is to be expected though. A wedding is quite a different event than a funeral.

MARIÉ: (looking a bit confused) Yes, I would expect that it is.

ANNE: You’re not married then?

MARIÉ: No I never have, and I assume that at my present age, I never will.

ANNE: That’s a shame. A real shame. Of course, you have been something of a career woman haven’t you? Very focused on your work with my father. Or should I say your work for my father? Ha-ha, well it’s all the same. You too were very close from what I have heard.

MARIÉ: Yes, I guess you could say that. Sugar or cream?

ANNE: Yes, yes that would be wonderful. I never have been one for black coffee. (Anne thrusts her cup at Marie as Marie stands and begins to walk back to the small table)

MARIÉ: He was right you know. You really are nothing like him.

ANNE: (Bitterly) Ha. Well, I’ll take that as a compliment.

MARIÉ: I just mean that he always took his coffee black. Wouldn’t drink it any other way. (Marie turns her back to put some sugar and cream into the cup, accidentally knocking over the cream) My god! This really has not been my week.

ANNE: (Almost talking over Marie as she exclaims) Yes well, I don’t exactly remember how he took his coffee. (Marie bends and begins to clean up the cream with a rag. Anne makes no move to get up and help. Instead, she stands to closer examine the painting on the wall) What’s this?

MARIÉ: Oh umm that? Well, it was your father’s new painting...
ANNE: I had been under the impression he was done painting?
MARIE: Well professionally yes... but one can’t simply quit a passion like that midway through their life.
ANNE: (musingly as though she is not really paying attention) No, I suppose not (more focused) How many others does he have?
MARIE: (Seeming reluctant to answer) Not many. Just a few. (Handing A her coffee and ushering her back to the couch)
ANNE: A few? As in 2, or 3, or more?
MARIE: Oh well umm, I’m not exactly sure. They’re sort of just scattered around the house.
ANNE: And they are all as beautiful as this one?
MARIE: Oh well umm, I’m not exactly sure. They’re sort of just scattered around the house.
ANNE: (Sarcastically) Yes, that does sound very nice.
MARIE: You don’t think so?
ANNE: Well, the world is certainly a more beautiful place when you no longer have a wife and a daughter to deal with now isn’t it?
MARIE: I am certain that is not the way he felt. He missed you both. I am sure of it.
ANNE: It is hard to be sure of anything now a days, but it’s no matter now. That is the past, and he is gone. Now back to the paintings. (Abruptly, rising to again examine the work on the wall) May I see the others?
MARIE: I would rather you not. He did not want them getting out.
ANNE: Well, the world will be seeing them soon enough, so we might as well break them out now. It is just foolish to hide such amazing works behind closed doors, don’t you think?
MARIE: It would rather you not. He did not want them getting out.
ANNE: Well, the world will be seeing them soon enough, so we might as well break them out now. It is just foolish to hide such amazing works behind closed doors, don’t you think?
MARIE: I am very sorry, but the paintings will not be leaving the house, and they certainly will not be going to the galleries.
ANNE: And why not?
MARIE: It would not be what your father wanted.
ANNE: Oh as though that matters. My father is long gone now. I’ll split the profits, if that’s what you are worried about. After 20 years with that man you deserve something for your troubles.
MARIE: They were not years of trouble, I loved your father like he was my own, and he loved me like a daughter, seeing as his own abandoned him. I don’t want the profits, money is not an issue.
ANNE: Well, I seem to have misunderstood your situation then. Are you not a single aging woman whose sole employment is going to be 6 feet underground in a matter of days?
MARIE: That is a horrid thing to say.
ANNE: (Turning on her heel from the painting, getting worked up) Well, at least you’re free now. Was it terrifying when he would come home late in the night and just start breaking things? Would the shattering wake you up?
MARIE: Your father quit drinking the moment you and your mother left him. He tried to fix it. I swear.
ANNE: Bullshit! That is total and complete bullshit! That man wouldn’t have stopped drinking if God himself asked.

MARIE: (Growing colder) I guess it would be hard for you to know since you hadn’t seen him for nearly 20 years.

ANNE: Well, you have my mother to blame for that.

MARIE: Ha, maybe for the first few years, but now you are an adult, you have no one to blame but yourself. I however, am not blaming anyone. It is not my place to blame. I did not spend my final moments wondering where my only daughter was.

ANNE: Well I’m here now, sorting it all out. I’ve come to get what I deserve. And anyways I would like you to know, that you’re opinions regarding the paintings are no matter.

MARIE: And why is that?

ANNE: He was my father, and you were just his assistant. Not to be rude, but those paintings are as good as mine now. I just need the official will. Of course, I will make sure you get a decent sum of their sale and the sale of the house. I want to make sure you can live comfortably. (Accusatory) After all, the job market isn’t great right now, especially for someone with, your set of skills.

MARIE: (Indignant) My skills?

ANNE: Well, let’s be honest with ourselves here, you don’t have many uses in a corporate environment. Don’t get me wrong, you were a great assistant for my father’s purposes, but in truth you were really just a well-paid maid.

MARIE: The job market really isn’t much of a concern to me.

ANNE: And why is that?

MARIE: (Smiling) You really haven’t seen the will yet, have you?

ANNE: No. I have not; I was going to go to the lawyers later. But, I am his only heir, so I can only assume what it says. (A long pause)

MARIE: He left it all to me.

ANNE: He... he... what?

MARIE: He left it all to me, the house, everything. That’s why I am not concerned with finding a job. He left all of it to me. Now... we should get back to discussing the funeral arrangements I think.

ANNE: You’re certain? You’ve seen the will?

MARIE: Yes. I am certain. He hadn’t seen you for years. Why would he leave you anything? To be frank, I wouldn’t have either. You abandoned him. You never even tried to return, and now you’re back, but for what? There’s nothing to return to, nothing here for you, certainly no paintings. Now, don’t look at me like that. Don’t expect me to pity you. He owed you nothing. I would like you to leave now.

ANNE: (Standing) Of course he did. Of course he owed me something! Maybe he hadn’t seen me for years, but I dealt with him for the first 15 years of my life. I had to deal with all of his worst, and I deserve something for that. (Quieter) I was child; do you know what that does to a child? You never saw him like that, drunk out of his mind, stumbling around, smashing anything he could find. You never dealt with that man.

MARIE: (Unforgiving and cold) No, I did not and for that I am sorry, but I can’t change the will.

ANNE: I don’t deserve any of it? You genuinely don’t believe I don’t deserve any compensation? The man ruined my childhood, and I get nothing! I would wake up every night to doors slamming. My mother screaming. I would hold a stuffed animal to each ear and just beg for it to end. You have no idea what it was like.

MARIE: It appears I don’t. Obviously, your father and you were not on the best of terms, so I understand that this might be painful. If it would help you I am more than willing to take charge of the funeral arrangements?

ANNE: Can’t I have the painting? Just the one? Please... it really is beautiful.

MARIE: No. He made me swear before his death none of his most recent works would leave this house. He was ashamed of them. He would be ashamed that even you were looking at one right now. I meant to move it to the attic.

ANNE: I won’t sell it. Please, I swear. I just want something beautiful to remember him by. Maybe it will help me pretend?
MARIE: Yes, well, I might be inclined to believe that. Unfortunately your financial situation as of late is not as secret as I think you had wished it.
ANNE: My financial situation?
MARIE: Please save us both some time. Playing the fool will get us nowhere here.
ANNE: (Exhausted) The news is spreading is it? I was hoping I would have at least a bit more time to pretend.
MARIE: Yes. (Remaining cold still) A shame really I had always thought your fiancé had much promise. Even your father liked his work, and you know he was a formidable critic. But, accidents happen my dear, nothing to be done. I hear the house is going now too? Oh and I had heard such amazing plans for your wedding! It really is a shame. Ah, but life must go on... I guess you'll need to be finding a job. I assume you don't have any talents useful in the corporate sector? (A is crying by now, quietly but it is apparent) Now, now my dear, you'll work just fine as a maid I promise. After all, if I can do it anyone can.
ANNE: (Wiping her eyes) I'm going to grab another cup of coffee, then I'll be on my way I guess.
MARIE: Be a dear and grab me one too? (Coldly)
ANNE: (stands and walks over to the little table back turned to the audience makes a cup of coffee taking a long time to do so) Cream or sugar?
MARIE: No. I like it black. Your father got me in the habit.
ANNE: (She pauses then turns, returning to the couch with two coffees in hand) I was foolish to come here, but rash decisions have become a bit of my forte as of late.
MARIE: Yes, well tragedy will do that to you.
ANNE: I wanted to love him, you know? No one wants to hate their father. All the kids envied me, because every teacher at school could go on for days about his work. They were always such crowd pleasers.
MARIE: Yes, I'm not sure your father much liked that though. That was part of why he quit. The fame. I think it was a bit tiring for him.
ANNE: Do you think that's why he started?
MARIE: Honey, I don't know that even he could say why he started. No one sets out to start such things.
ANNE: I suppose you're right. My mother hated him you know. I think even before all that. She didn't have much choice but to marry him though. Real money won't marry a waitress.
MARIE: No it certainly will not.
ANNE: Did he ever tell you I wasn't his?
MARIE: Yes. He said he wished you were.
ANNE: And you really never saw him drunk? Not once. Not even a little bit?
MARIE: No, but I can't imagine it. He was always so gentle. (Silence for a moment)
MARIE: I would come every morning and he would be singing in the kitchen. Not a real song, but something he made up, something new every day. (Anne smiles a bit) He had a bird you know. It only just died a few weeks ago. I think that might have been what finally did it for him. He really had no one left but me. I think he wanted me gone a bit though. Thought that living like this, an assistant to a retired artist was a bit of a waste. I paint to you know? Not anywhere near as well as him or your fiancé honestly. I meant what I said about his work. But, anyway, your father helped me. He taught me everything I know. An incredible man, a truly incredible man.
ANNE: I wish I'd known him. (Crying a bit again)
MARIE: (Nodding) Yes, I really wish you had too.
ANNE: I should be going. I would like to help with the funeral arrangements still thought. If you'll have me? But I will need your help. I want it to be something he would love. (Anne stands and begins to walk to the door.)
MARIE: Anne. Anne, wait. Take it. Please take it. Sell it, keep it. I don't care. Just please take it. He would want you to have it.
ANNE: I can't. I can't do that, he wanted it to stay.
MARIE: I know him Anne; he would have wanted you to have it. I swear. Besides it’s mine now, if you won’t take it from him, then take it from me. It’s a gift.
ANNE: (Walking back over to face the painting, crying) I'm sorry. I'm so, so, sorry.
“You’re not big enough.”
“He’s twice the size of you.”
“You will never make it.”

These are about the only things I hear when I walk onto the mat. I am a lightweight weighing only 78 pounds, but I have to wrestle up to 90 pounds because of my age. There is no one near my weight so the only thing I can do is try and get bigger.

I’m really not all that short for my weight class but I have absolutely no muscle. I’ve wrestled guys shorter than me but there arms were the size of my head. I’ve hung in with some of the best in the state but when it comes down to it they just out muscle me. I’ve been to state but lose in close matches because of the muscle difference.

Believe me I’ve tried everything to get bigger. Muscle Milk and any and all protein powder I can find, but nothing seems to be working. After doing all this I still only put on three pounds of muscle, if that, not including all the meat and carbs I eat. I’ve been on so many muscle gaining programs you wouldn’t believe it. I’ve been to over 50 training and fitness camps, still nothing.

After everything all that I still put on four pounds if I’m lucky. After every time I tell my dad I need something else I get the same answer. “Why the hell did I pay for it?”

Dad was the top wrestler in the nation at the University of Nebraska at the 125 weight class. Then he went on to wrestle for team USA. His first few years he was just an alternate. But then he got strong in a hurry quickly after this he jumped to the USA 155 pound weight class. Not knowing how my dad got this strong so fast and every time I ask not getting an answer from him. All I know is he was a three-time Olympic gold medalist and made over two million dollars. He met my mom when she was at Nebraska training to be a reporter and had to interview him about wrestling. Then my brother came along who grew to six foot, 185 pounds. Then later on had me, all five foot 78 pounds of me. My brother and I were only two years apart and he was the varsity 185 pounder as a sophomore while I was a tiny little 90 pounder.

If I stay this small next year there won’t be a weight class even close to my weight. I’m starting with the trainer that I’ve been begging my parents about ever since my brother went to him and put on 80 pounds of pure muscle and grew 6 inches, in a year. They say I’m not tall enough to lift seriously yet, but that’s the only thing I can think of to get me bigger.

I start today, it was the basic stuff, nothing special really just a normal guy. But just looking at this guy made me want to work. The names printed in fine ink on his arms just below the veins bulging out. I know I wanted to stay with this guy from the minute I met him. I stir my protein powder in my water drink it and then go to work.

This guy looks familiar but I can’t tell who it is. “Have I seen you before? You look familiar.” I ask.
“Maybe around, but probably someone like me, it’s a big town.”

My brother told me to never ask for his name, because he gets personal. He said just call him sir. But I couldn’t resist. “What is your name?”
“Just call me Sir.”
“Why? Don’t I have the right to know your name?”
“Just call me sir because I don’t want to get personal, I’ll get you your results and I’ll get my money and then this will I’ll be over.”
“Okay? Sorry sir.”
“Now let’s get to work.”

Today we just did where I am and where I need to be. I weigh in at 79 pounds and I need to be at 90 pounds. My max squat is 100 and “sir” says 135. My max clean was 80, “sir” says 110. My max bench, which is what I really need up is 75 “sir” says 115. If Mr. “sir” can do this for me I don’t care about his name.

Districts are today and I have been moved to the 95 pound class because there’s no one at the 90 pound class. I’ve got myself a pretty easy way in still, because they take the top six from the district and there are only
six people total in my district. So I go in there and take it nice and easy and pull off fourth place. Now there is an off week before regionals where they take the top four and then another off week and then state, if I am good enough. The talent is there. All I have to do is stick with Mr. Sir and get the state title.

Today is the first day I really go after it, we do the thing he call the rotation of hell. Believe me it is exactly how it sounds. I take the protein powder, then have to run two miles under thirteen minutes, then I had to work on core and abs. After this the arms, putting out a hundred pushups for a warm up. Then cleaning almost near my max with 105. Then the bench where I still was far from my max, racking in only 85. Then the squats coming in right under, at 130.

“I’m adding an extra 15 on where you need to be.” Sir says.
“Except the bench right?” I reply.
“Especially the bench.”
“But you saw me out there today I was nothing on the bench.”
“What I saw from you today was drive and determination and that’s all I need. The results will come.”
“Yea, and what if I can’t get it.”
“You will, come with me.”
“How do I do it.”
“Look what I saw from you today was very unexpected. Look I have this stuff and it’s for grownups but it will make you have more adrenaline. Are you afraid of needles?”

I am scared now, but I want the results. “N-no.” I manage to finally get it out of my mouth.
“My name is Arthur.” He said as he left leaving the needle.
So I figured out his first name, big wop there’s probably at least 10,000 Arthur’s in the world.
I came home and immediately my Dad wanted to know what happened. He just got off the phone with someone, and the weird thing was as soon as I walked in he rushed to say by.

“So how did it go today.” My Dad said.
“Sucked.”
“What did you do?”
“Rotations of hell.”
“Aw, I see, nothing will work you harder than that.”
“Yep. Goodnight.” I say as I walk up the stairs to go to bed.
“Night.” He replies.

My Mom was working late yet again at the department. It was only 8:30, but I was a little tired and really anxious to observe the needle. I had so many questions, “Did he ever give this to my brother?” “Why did he have a needle in his bag, has he been planning to give me the needle for a while now?”

I tell myself I will inject myself just a little before the next session. So the next session comes around which is two days before regionals, I shoot up just a little and instantly I feel the power of my veins bulging and instantly I feel the flash of adrenaline. It was an easy day today nothing more than trying to max out.

“Have you used what I left you?” Arthur ask.
“T did a little before I came to see if I like it.”
“Well let me know afterwards if you liked it.”

Now we go to work. We start out with squats easily getting 150, maxing 160. Then cleans struggling but getting my max at 125. Now the bench, I lay on the bench for a while, breathing hearing Arthurs voice in the background, “All you need is one.” He hits me up with 130 on the bar.

“Great day of work today, Charles.” He said.
“Thank you, sorry I just couldn’t get it off my chest.”
“It’s okay, come with me.”

He takes me into the weighing room. “Check your weight.” He tells me.
They have all these high tech scanners and all this other junk that detects body fat and how much muscle you’ve put on. I step on thinking maybe 80, 85 if I’m lucky, 92.3 pounds little body fat, I grew two whole inches and put on 20 pounds of all muscle.

“Thank you.” I tell him when I step off the scale.
“Your’e welcome, how did you like that stuff?”
“It was different, but it really got me going.”
“Good.”

Today is regionals and it is a big day because if I can’t clinch a top four spot them I’m out and all that hard work I put in means nothing. I shoot up but only for weigh ins so I appear strong and big. First match easy, won eight to one. Second match was the quarter finals managed to pick it up, I win six to four. Now the semis and if I win this I’m guaranteed a spot in the finals and at state. I shake hands and the match begins, nothing happens in the first period and it’s his choice, he picks bottom, he gets a two point reversal and we roll on to the next period. I pick bottom and last second I get two point reversal, overtime. I finally get a takedown with two seconds left. In the finals match I didn’t even care and I lost two to one.

Now it’s state and there’s a lot against me, but I’m in my zone. Today I win all my matches and make it to the finals the next day. Finals day and I see Arthur in the corner.

I go over to him. “Hey, what are you doing here.”
“I’m here to watch you, did you shoot up?”
“No, I only do that to look big.”
“You’re going to need it.”
“Okay” I say with a nod.

I’ve been staring at the needle now for 20 minutes and still have yet to make a decision. I finally decide to inject myself. As soon as the needle pierces my skin, I know I have made the correct decision because instantly I feel it working. Getting ready to walk out of the tunnel, my curiosity takes over me. I get out my phone and search the name Andrew Sharp. Some basic stuff comes up about his wrestling profile and stuff like that but then I keep scrolling to find the reason his medals were taken away, then later find out about his brother Arthur.

Then I look myself in the mirror as a drug official comes to check me out. I look at myself thinking, I am just like my Dad.
As my brother and I wander down the market streets with snowflakes swirling softly down, each waft of warm, baking bread sends a deep rumble through my belly. Though, neither of us acknowledges our aching stomachs; the pangs have been our companions for much too long.

Abruptly, the ground and sky change places. I scrape my hands and face against the cobblestone footpath formerly beneath my feet. I only see the boy’s back as he darts away, but I know he shoved me. Quickly, I grab my brother’s leg and refuse to let go. As he raises his freckled fist, I spot rage burning behind his eyes.

“Daniel, they’re not worth it. Remember what happened last time,” I caution him. “I’m not that hurt anyways.” Over a month ago, he fought some boys and left them a bloody, bruised mess. Since he’s tall and burly, like our father, the fight quickly turned in his favor, but it failed to escape the notice of the nearby policeman, and of course, Daniel received the brunt of the blame.

As he helps me up, he quietly questions, “Sibeal, are you sure?” Despite his rough manners, he’s always gentle with me.

I nod vigorously and brush the gravel off my tattered, and now dusty, dress. “Let’s just go home,” I murmur.

Passing the various shops of New York on the way home, I can’t help but notice the signs hanging in their windows. ‘NO IRISH NEED APPLY.’ Anger seethes within me, sign after sign. Papa needs a job. Mama has a factory job, but we still barely scrape by. Some days, leaving Ireland seems like a huge mistake, but we had no other choice.

Even before the famine, we were by no means well off. Our potatoes were means of living, and when it didn’t produce, well, those aren’t my happiest memories of home. Roughly three years ago, fungus destroyed the potato crops and the following years, crop failure. I hear Papa and Mama call it the Great Famine, but to me, it’s just the reason we left everything familiar and comfortable.

We all feel the pain of homesickness, but we must ignore it. Yet, I long for the open fields with strong winds whipping through the grasses, the fjord near our home with the crumbling castle atop the highest point. At night, Daniel and I would creep out of the house and sneak into that castle. He told me the most horrifying stories of nasty sprites and imps playing nasty tricks on humans that dared to enter the castle. Well, we dared, and something never failed to happen. Though, I suspect it was truly Daniel and not faeries. He rarely plays tricks any more. I miss them and the winds sweeping through the grassy hills from the ocean. Oh, the smell! I woke every morn with that clean salty breeze in my nose, but here, my nose is perpetually clogged with the smell of decay and squalor.

I can’t keep thinking of home; my path lies to our cramped apartment through this labyrinth of streets. After arriving, Daniel opens the thin door. I move inward with reluctance. It’s only a touch warming than outside; nevertheless, I suppose I’d rather be here than standing, gathering snowflakes atop my head like the buildings around me.

“How was your walk?” Papa inquires without looking up from his newspaper. Somehow, he looks completely natural sitting with little Colleen, my young sister, resting in his lap, cuddled in our thickest blanket. I shoot a hurried glance at Daniel.

“It was fine,” I reply, trying to feign normalcy.

However, Papa knows me too well. He raises his head up out of his newspaper with furrowed brows. A note of concern enters his voice. “What happened? Sibeal, where did those scrapes come from?”

“A boy shoved her by the bakery,” Daniel admits.

Papa gingerly rises, without waking Colleen, and lays her on one of our two beds. He walks over to me and pulls me into his great, big bear hug. My head presses against his red flannel shirt and giant, cozy chest, and I wrap my arms around him too. Sometimes, I catch a whiff of home when he hugs me like this, but I’m probably only imagining it. When we pull away, he fondly smooths the ruffled hair on top of my head. “My brave little lassie, don’t get discouraged yet.” Despite my brave face, tears trickle down by cheeks.
Yet, Papa knows better than any of us the harshness of this new world. Time and time again, employers hire other, non-Irish, workers instead of him, and if he is given a job, it pays far less than other worker’s wages, but he has yet to lose his determination and optimism. Many of our brethren have turned to drinking, drowning their disappointments, while hide their Irish-ness, but Papa’s turned to faith as his crutch.

Every night, and I suspect the majority of the day, he prays in earnest for deliverance of some sort, any sort even. Together, we pray the “Hail, Mary”, but when I glance at him, his face is utterly focused. Though his prayers seem grave and somber, afterwards his smile spreads wide, and he believes God will aid us according to His will. I struggle to have faith as strong as his.

I quickly stop my crying, and Papa and Daniel sit down on the other bed, the one without Colleen, to read the newspaper together. I walk over to Colleen’s resting place and wrap a few more blankets around her frail body. She needs to eat more, but so do the rest of us. Suddenly, Daniel gasps in fury.

“Look at this… this cartoon!” He is nearly yelling. I snatch the newspaper from his hands, and my pride flares to indignation.

That bloody cartoonist decided that drawing Irishmen as thoughtless apes was horribly clever. We came here for a better life like their ancestors did, yet they see as barely human!

Papa stands and calms us, “Hush now. Colleen’s sleeping. You’ll wake and then we’d all be sorry for this ruckus. There’s nothing we can do about it now but to prove them wrong. Hmm? We’ll show them our spirit and strength if only in little things. Our first plan of action is to forgive. Before you two give me those looks, hear me out. They expect us to respond in anger and to retaliate, and if we do, then we’ll be all they say we are. ‘Love thy neighbor.’ Forgiveness is the last thing they expect, and it proves them wrong. We’re not just hulks of muscle doing the dangerous work they refuse. We’re a people striving to create better lives for ourselves.”

I plop down onto the bed, with its frayed, threadbare sheets, and ponder. Almost grudgingly, I decide that Papa’s right. We’ll gain their respect slowly, the hard way. I don’t look forward to it, but flying fists won’t show them our true worth, only a hot temper.

“I’ll do my best,” I promise, trying to hide my reticence.

Unwilling, Daniel echoes, “Me too.” I bet he’d rather punch them, not forgive, but the n again, sometimes so do I.

The smile that covers Papa’s face is huge. Despite our disconcertedness, it catches, and we’re all grinning.

The door opens, sending a cutting breeze through the room and some stray snowflakes. Mama’s home, and Colleen immediately awakes. She slept through Daniel’s, and my, yelling, but the moment, Mama arrives, her eyes fly open. Shedding all of the blankets bundled around her, Colleen sprints into Mama’s waiting arms.

Through the mess of Colleen’s reddish curls, Mama exclaims, “It’s colder than the Devil out there. Hello, everyone.”

“Why hello,” Papa laughed and gave her a kiss right smack on the lips.

The next day, Daniel and I walk through the streets. The snow from yesterday stopped falling, but stayed upon the ground, hiding ice from view. We carefully pick our way across the road. Papa sent us to run the errands, mainly scrounging up some food with our meager amount of money, Mama’s latest wages which she received yesterday.

With all that hidden ice, I watch my feet and only peek upward every now and then. Yet, I’m thinking more about Ireland than my feet. The fjord strays into my thoughts again; its waters sparkled like emeralds and sapphires in the sunshine. Daniel, being more occupied with the world before us, walks a few paces in front of me, so he misses what occurs next. I slip, but not because of ice. Another boy came up behind me, just to trip me.

I shoot up and whirl around to face him. The rage gathering in my heart, I felt a full-fledged tongue lashing, with some choice words, preparing itself in my mouth.

Before I begin, the boy sneers, “Sorry.”

That nearly set me over the edge, boiling over like a kettle pot, but I remember Papa’s point from last night, forgiveness.

Swallowing pride and ire, I force out, with as pleasant and kind a tone as I could muster, “I forgive you.”

The boy only laughs and gallops away.

This might just be the death of me, but I must try.
Cooper Schneider
Dramatic Script: Chicago Fire of 1871
Pattonville Senior High School
Janet Baldwin, Teacher

Scene 1
Narrator

Chicago, otherwise known as the windy city, is home to many in America. However, 1871 was devastating for this city. Dan Grey and his family dealt with what was known as the Great Chicago Fire. Dan Grey is walking home from his workplace, the Tribune, on the very same day the disaster had started, October 8. It is currently 11:00 p.m. Mr. Grey had been working late for his family and was just heading home. In the distance he sees a faint light. He shrugs and continues to walk until he arrives at his home, near northern Chicago.

Dan quietly walks into his home, trying not to wake his family. He enters a large room, with a fireplace in the corner with a bed next to it. There are multiple toys scattered about the room. As he enters, he's surprised to see his wife, Melia Grey in her rocking chair, waiting for him.

Dan Grey
You shouldn’t have stayed up for me. You need rest.

Melia Grey
(In a frazzled and angry voice)
Why should I be the only one to get rest? That’s the fifth time this month you’ve stayed at work until nightfall. You can’t keep doing this; we have a family that needs to see you.

Dan Grey
Melia, we’ve discussed this. You know I need to work overtime to keep us fed and well. Mr. Medill pays me a fair amount and I mustn’t refuse when I want to keep my family safe.

Melia Grey
Maybe so but I just… just…
she pauses for a moment, thinking what to say

Dan Grey
What is it honey?

Melia Grey
I just don’t think it’s right for you to work so much and not see the children at all.

A withered, raspy voice speaks up
Or me!

Dan and Melia turn, seeing Grandfather Wilson, lying awake in his bed near the fireplace. Grandfather Wilson has a hunch, white beard, and missing hair. He stumbles around a bit when he walks.

Melia Grey
Sorry, father, did we wake you? You need no concern about this. We are figuring out a solution ourselves.

Grandfather Wilson
(Angered)
This is my concern! This man not only takes care of you and your children, but also me.

Dan Grey
Hushing Grandfather Wilson, There’s no need to be so loud, you’ll wake the kids.

Grandfather Wilson
(Yelling)
I think I need to be louder because you can’t hear what I’m trying to say. You need to spend more time with your family. They’d rather de livin’ on the streets with you bein’ around, then livin’ alone in this here place.

A soft voice approaches the main room with Dan, Melia, and Grandfather Wilson. Patricia, a young child, only around 10 enters. She is fairly short.

Mom… What’s going on?

Melia Grey
Nothing Patricia, go back to bed.

The small child sees Dan Grey
Patricia
(Exclaiming)
Daddy! Guys, dad’s home!

Two more children approach, both little boys and smaller than Patricia. Jacob, the elder one of the boys, and Bobby, the smallest are standing in their pajamas.

Jacob
It’s Dad!
The children run up to their father and hug him.

Dan Grey
How are my two boys doing? What about you, Bobby?

Bobby
Real good, Dada.

Melia Grey
(Sternly)
See Dan... This is what I mean. They never see you. Both Jacob and Bobby never see their dad.

Patricia
(Exclaiming)
Hey, I don’t either, Ma!

Jacob
Maybe so, but you’re a girl and Dad wouldn’t want to hang out with you anyways.

Patricia
(Yelling)
That’s not true!

Jacob
(Responding quickly)
Yeah it is!

The two children start fussing and arguing over the rest of the family. Eventually, they calm down and go back into their room.

Dan Grey
(To all the children)
Good night! Back towards Melia, Look, I’ll stop staying late as often as I do now for the kids, but just know I still need to work overtime for this family and home.

Melia Grey
Pausing for a moment with a look of agitation, all right, fine. But please take it easy. I don’t want my husband getting too overwhelmed.

Dan Grey
I’ll be fine. Let’s go to bed.

They retire into their room and fall asleep.

End of Scene 1

Scene 2

Enter the chief of the fire department, Robert A. Williams, into his own home. He is worn out and has visible soot on his body.

Chief Williams
Darling, I’ve returned from my venture.

Williams’ wife
Oh, thank goodness, you’re okay. I always worry when you leave for work.

Chief Williams
You’ve no need to worry. It’s always the same. I have put out over two hundred fires this year. (A little frustrated) This city is just too flammable! There have only been seventeen recorded days of rain and the whole city is made of wood. We’ve lost so many houses, too. If only the mayor would supply the funds necessary for our department to increase in size, dependability, and productivity.

Williams’ wife
Don’t fuss over such things, you are a wonderful fireman and this town would be completely burnt to ashes without you.

*Chief Williams pauses for a moment with a disgruntled face*

Chief Williams

With how much our patrol has been working, I wouldn’t doubt if this town burnt… This last fire we extinguished took us two hours. We’re all exhausted and sore from our work.

*Williams’ wife*

Dear, it’s okay. I’ll treat your blisters and then we should retire to our room. Come now.

*Williams and his wife go into their room. It is now 3:00 a.m. Williams is abruptly woken by a large siren in his room. Startled, he jumps out of his bed and reaches for his telegram and listening for a message. A few clicks go off from the telegraph. Williams writes down the message:*

Chief Williams, this is lookout Matthias Schaffer. I’ve noticed a fire around the Southeastern part of town.

*Please send men quickly.*

*Williams puts the note he wrote down and rushes into his suit and sounds an alarm for his fire station. End of Scene 2*

Scene 3

*Narrator*

Two days have passed. It is now October 9th. Dan Grey runs back home. He slams his front door open sweating and tired. It is 9:30.

Dan Grey

Melia!

Melia Grey

(Startled)

Oh, Dan! You scared me. Whatever is going on?

Dan Grey

(Catching his breath)

Melia, a fire… it’s spreading… Dekoven Street.

Melia Grey

Breathe, Dear, breath.

Enter the children and Grandfather Wilson.

Patricia, Jacob, and Bobby together

Daddy!

They run toward Dan, hugging him. Dan, still fearful quickly brushes them off and turns to Melia

Dan Grey

Melia, you and the kids grab everything valuable you can and leave.

Melia Grey

(Befuddled)

What? Why? Whatever is the matter dear?

Dan Grey

(With Passion)

Two days ago Melia, Two days! A fire started on Dekoven. People at work told me. But now I've seen it myself. The large flames are being carried by the gusts going household to household. There is smoke approaching the whole business district Melia! It came from Dekoven Street Melia! That’s the other side of town.

*Grandfather Wilson, angered, speaks directly to Dan Grey with his face only being a few inches away.*

Grandfather Wilson

What do you take us for, boy? No way in hell a flame could reach more than halfway across town. If this be a joke, we ain’t laughin’.

Dan Grey

No! It’s no joke. I’ve seen it myself. He quickly turns to Melia, pack some valuables and take the kids. He turns back towards Grandfather Wilson, You’ve got to believe me! I saw it myself! People say it happened at the O’Leary’s house. Their barn was burnt, and it caught to their home. Neighbors tried to put out the fire themselves

Grandfather Wilson
(Sternly)
We have a fire department. Why are the people of Chicago extinguishing these flames!
   Dan Grey
The fire department never got the first two alarms pulled right after the fire. Instead they got one about an hour after the fire started and were misled in the wrong direction... Coworkers that live near the area have all told me he same thing!
Fearful and frazzled, Dan Grey starts to pace around the room and mutter to himself. He heads into his room and starts packing himself. Grandfather Wilson stumbles around himself, but then grabs a few things himself. The family gathers and hurries outside. They see a wagon-taxi and stop the man.
   Dan Grey
(Yelling)
Stop! Please Stop!
The wagon driver approaches. He is a fat man, with an Irish accent.
   Wagon driver
Ey’, you lookin’ for a ride outta here.
   Dan Grey
Yes, please take my family and valuables. We need to leave before the fire worsens.
   Wagon driver
You got it. That will be $100.00.
   Dan Grey
(Surprised)
$100.00!
   Wagon Driver
If you don’t like it, you can take your own chances with the fire!
   Dan Grey
(Stuttering)
N-n-n-nno! I-i-it’s fine. I just wasn’t expecting so much. No matter, my family is worth more than gold.
   Dan pays the man and the family leaves toward the edge of town in the wagon-taxi. End of Scene 3.
Scene 4
The family gets off on the north edge of town. The wagon-taxi driver lets them off.
   Dan Grey
Can you bring me back into the city near my home? I have a few things I still need to collect. I’ll pay you again.
   Wagon Driver
Sorry pal, that’s my last stop. The fire is getting’ too much fo’ me. I’m stayin’ here.
   Dan Grey
(Flushed)
What!? It’s not quite there yet. I promise I’ll pay well.
   Wagon Driver
Can’t do it. I gotta bail.
   Dan Grey
Fine. He turns to his family, I’ll go back and grab a few more valuables, and you all stay here.
   Melia Grey
Dan, no! What if you get hurt?
   Dan Grey
The fire hasn’t reached our home yet. I’ll be fine. I promise I’ll make it back.
   Grandfather Wilson
(In the Background)
Have you not been listening to anything I’ve said. Don’t risk your life for a few valuables over your family.
   Dan Grey
I’m going and that’s final.
   Grandfather Wilson
Well, I’m comin’ with ya. If you really need more valuables, then you better have another set of hands.
   Melia Grey
(Scared)
Father no! You’re too old. You’ll get hurt! I’m coming instead.
Dan Grey
He’s welcome to come, Melia, but you must stay. The children need a mother in case something were to happen.
Both Dan and Wilson run back into the city, not saying another word. Melia stands alone with her children, weeping softly.
Melia Grey
I love you Dan... Please come back to me.
End of Scene 4.
Scene 5
Dan and Wilson running around the city. They see the home straight ahead. Unfortunately, fire has already caught to the building and is spreading quickly to other homes.
Dan Grey
(Yelling)
No! Why must my home be burnt down as I approach it? 
Grandfather Wilson
I knew this would leave us to nowhere. We can’t even come back with my valuable coat.
Around the corner two men appear running towards Dan and Wilson.
Dan Grey
(confused)
What is this? Two men running toward the fire?
Grandfather Wilson
What you think we be doing’ boy? Besides, I think they’re comin’ for us, not the fire.
The two men jump on Dan Grey, trying to take his money and clothing. In a struggle, Wilson hits the men and knocks them off. The men now jump on Wilson and make him fall, stabbing his right leg with a knife. Wilson yells in agony. Dan quickly gets up and grabs some nearby rubble and knocks the two men out by hitting them on the head.
Grandfather Wilson
(Screaming in terror)
My Leg! Oh, dear heavens, my leg! Those rotten thieves!
Dan Grey
We need to leave. Grab my hand, I’ll help carry you back.
Grandfather Wilson
No, don’t! I can carry myself.
Wilson stumbles and falls trying to get up. He yelps while in pain and grabs his leg again.
Dan Grey
I’ll get you out of here.
Dan picks up Grandfather Wilson. While doing so, a building collapses closing a passageway to Melia and the kids.
Grandfather Wilson and Dan Grey Simultaneously
Oh, No!
Dan Grey
(Worried and speaking quickly)
We have to go. Fast! Wh-Where can we head out? Dan notices a small area surrounded by fire. We have to go that way. It’s dangerous, but we must escape.
Dan runs through the flames carrying Wilson. There is debris falling from every angle. The flames from other buildings start to catch up to them. One falls right in front of them. Both yelp and cover themselves.
Dan Grey
We’re not going to make it. This is the end
Grandfather Wilson
Not for you. I’m holdin’ you back, boy. Leave me be. I’m an old man anyways. Tell my daughter I love her.
Dan Grey
I’m not leaving you... Not now, not like this... you’re... you’re Dan stumbles upon finding the right description
Grandfather Wilson
I’m old and hurt, boy. There’s no point of me draggin’ you down. My daughter and her children need someone to care for them... They’ll be gone too if you risk yourself for me. What am I to the life of your family?!

Dan Grey stares Wilson in the eyes
Dan Grey
(Softly)
You are part of my family.

Grandfather Wilson
No I’m not. Go...

Wilson closes his eyes and lays where he is. In the background, more debris starts to fall. Dan Grey quickly turns around and looks at his surroundings. He starts to run to an opening. He looks back real quickly and pauses.

Dan Grey
Farewell, old friend.

Dan Grey keeps running away from the flames. End of Scene 5.

Scene 6

Dan makes it out of the city. His clothes are singed and he has blisters around his right arm. He finds Lake Michigan and jumps in quickly with a sigh of relief.

Dan Grey
I’m safe...

He is surrounded by many other families and people.

I wish I had my family... I’ll just have stand here until the fire calms.

Out of nowhere, the sky rumbles and some thunder can be heard. A few drops fall around Dan and then the rain starts to become more furious. Dan smiles and laughs

Rain! Oh thank the lord and his tears for they have shed down onto our city to help extinguish all that is left.

Dan starts to run around with joy until he passes out and the next day comes. It is now, October 11, 1871. The fire has died down to ashes and little sparks in the town. The rain has stopped. Dan awakens from the ground and runs into town. He starts yelling the name of his wife and children to search for them. After a while, he sees them, perfectly safe, near where there home used to be. He runs toward them screaming their names. The family turns around and sees Dan.

Melia Grey
(Crying)
Oh, Dan! We thought you were lost within the flames. You never returned, and we were worried. I’m so glad you’re safe!

Patricia, Jacob, and Bobby simultaneously
Daddy! You’re back!

Dan Grey
Yes, I am and I won’t ever leave you guys again. I need to spend more time with my family. Work may keep us alive, but we are not truly living if we don’t spend time together.

They all hug and smile with each other. Eventually, Melia notices Grandfather Wilson is missing. She starts to shake and cry some more.

Melia Grey
Dan... Where is he?

Dan Grey
(Pausing and speaking slowly)
We... we were attacked and mugged... Your father saved me, but hurt in the process. He told me to leave him to help you...

Melia falls to the ground and starts to sob more. She gets back up looks around the city and speaks.

Melia Grey
(Trembling Voice)

A fire usually will destroy... And it has. But I feel as though we, as a family, have been built mightier than before.

End of Scene 5 and story.
Victoria Schoemaker
Flash Fiction: *I Had A Reason*
Plattsburg High School
Laura Ryczek, Teacher

There’s a surprisingly long time to think when you’re drowning in the ocean, once you can get past the roaring sound of the water (or maybe blood) pounding in your ears. You think about your life, both the one you’ve led and the one you know you’ll never get to. You think about the things you regret, like that time in second grade when you told Shelby Marshal she was fat and she cried for two hours, and the things of which you are proud, like that same day, when you told Shelby you were sorry and you didn’t mean it, and she forgave you instantly. For example.

When you’re drowning (some might even go so far as to say ‘dying’), you think about things you wouldn’t ever expect to cross your mind. The last coherent thought Isaac has before he’s pulled to the surface is, Now, *Ilia will never know that I love him.*

Isaac bursts into the land of the waking with a gasp and a sputter. He automatically tries to sit up, but finds strong hands are holding him down. An unfamiliar voice fades in and out, fuzzy like an old CB radio. “Kid… ear m… wake u… come on, k… listen!”

*Ilia,* Isaac thinks, tries to shout, but for some reason the sound won’t come. *Ilia, I need Ilia.* “Il… ia. Ili…a.” He tries to say it louder, but the people surrounding him still don’t hear. His chest hurts like someone played hopscotch across it for hours, and he can’t tell if it’s from holding his breath for so long or from the CPR he’s sure his rescuers had performed, or are still performing. Oh, it hurts.

“I think we lost him. Charlie, stop. The kid’s gone, Charlie, quit!” a woman shouts.

No, Isaac wants to say. *You didn’t lose me. I’m not gone. Don’t leave.* But the world is fading to black and he’s sure this is the end.

When Isaac drifts into consciousness the next time, he’s lying on something soft, and he can hear his parents sobbing in the background. His eyelids feel too heavy to open, but he still expends too much energy trying. Everywhere hurts. The pangs of hunger in his stomach are almost unbearable, but nothing compares to the gut wrenching sorrow that rips through his heart at the sound of Ilia’s thickly Russian accented voice.

“Isaac was a wonderful friend and a great person.” *Was? Isaac thinks. What do you mean ‘was’? Ilia, I’m still here.* “I am sad to have lost him, but he is in a better place now. Of that, I am sure. I only wish I c--” Ilia breaks off into a sob. “I only wish I could have saved him. I should have been there.”

Saved me? *Ilia, I’m still here. What’s going on? Talk to me, please.* Isaac can hear his mother speaking comforting words in Ilia’s ear. “It’s okay, sweetie. It’s not your fault. You couldn’t have known what would happen. You couldn’t have known he would drown.”

Drown. Drown. Drown. The word echoes in Isaac’s mind, and suddenly he’s back there, under the water, thinking what he assumed to be his final thoughts. And it’s like he’s sinking all over again. He can practically feel the icy cold penetrating his skin, taste the salt that filled the space surrounding him. Isaac knows that if he could, he would be hyperventilating, but he can’t. It’s like there’s a weight settled on his chest, restricting his movement to only the shallowest of breaths.

He knows where he is now, deep down in his heart. He’s not going to acknowledge it, though. To acknowledge it is to make it real, and this cannot be real. Because, if it is, then there is only one place he could be.

*Funeral.*

Isaac tries to call out, scream, shout, whimper, anything to let the people lining up to place flowers around him know that he’s not gone yet, but he can’t. He can’t move; he can’t make a noise; he can’t even open his eyes. He can barely breathe. The only thing his struggles gain him is crushing exhaustion. The sounds around him grow dim, and he falls into a dreamless sleep.

The first thing Isaac notices is the smell, a combination of decaying earth and rotten flesh. It makes him sick. He knows at once what happened, and the tears stream down his face in a way he didn’t know was possible. He feels like a character in those spooky stories he and Ilia used to tell each other.

*Buried alive.*
He ran faster, heart pounding, feet slapping against the wet cobblestones. The footfalls reverberated off the alley walls, cutting through the silence of the early morning. The cool wind brushed his dark hair across his face in a way that would have been relaxing if he hadn’t been in his current state. Oh, how he wanted to stroll through the town with her; holding hands, admiring the flowers, trinkets, and rich aromas from nearby shops. He shook the thought from his head. They would have time for that later. If--No--When he got there. He looked up at the nearest shop window, a bookstore with gilded Bibles in the front row, and grimaced. He had made a wrong turn. He spun around abruptly and dashed off again. He had to make it. He had to. The blood pounded in his ears; his labored breath now gained a slight wheeze. He was tired and wanted to sit a minute, but he pressed on. He raced past the small apple tree where he had proposed a month ago. He remembered it clearly; the pleasant memory was seared in his mind. They had just taken a stroll and had stopped under the tree; a favorite spot for both of them. It was where they had first met, and it was relaxing place for them to be themselves. He remembered how broadly she had smiled when she saw the ring. How she had tearfully choked out a yes, and had hugged him tight. He remembered how soft her blonde hair was when he had cradled her in his arms, and how smooth her skin was when he gently slid the ring on her finger. He always smiled when thinking of that day. He smiled as he ran; feeling hopeful again. Then, his grin hardened with determination. He had finally made it to the courthouse.

Five blocks to go. He glanced up and saw the town’s clock overhead. A few minutes to twelve. He had to get there! He ran forward with a new burst of energy, clutching the stack of papers he carried to his chest. A page of the testimony fluttered to the ground. He snatched it up. The bell started to toll. 1. He tripped over a nearby cart someone had left lying out. 2. He leapt up... 5. He took a shortcut and scrambled over a gate. His jacket got snagged on a barb of metal. He ripped it free... 6. He made it to the square; only to be greeted by a gathering mass of people... 7. Scanning his eyes over the area, he saw no higher ledge. He pushed through the crowd. There were so many bodies, all crammed together, it was no wonder he got knocked down... 8. He curled into a ball to avoid being trampled and managed to stagger to his feet... 9. He surged forward again. He could hear the judge’s testimony being read.

“This wretched beast, using her devil’s powers, has killed the ones we love most. If no one has proof that this woman is not a witch...”

10. He could finally see glimpses of the scaffold. He was so close! He had to make it! 11. With a great force, he leapt and burst through the front of the crowd... 12. Panicked, he looked into her eyes. Her blue eyes that seemed to be searching his soul. He watched them as they slowly turned dark; the rope squeezing the life away. They clouded over, and his breath hitched when he realized her last look had been of accusation, hateful judging. He sank to his knees, howling from the pain that pierced his heart. His burning tears stained the ground. How could I have ever thought I could be a lawyer, he thought bitterly as he flung the papers away, when I couldn’t even save her? He shook with self-loathing, and his body racked with quiet sobs. He faintly felt someone touch his shoulder. In a daze he shook it off and slowly rose to his feet. He saw the world dim around him; as he lost all sense of reason. He wildly snatched a gun from the nearest guard. Guilt was the last thing he ever felt.
The hallway burst with energy. People flashed past me, sprinting toward their friends, finally seeing each other after being separated for six months. The reunion was rambunctious and overwhelming as more and more people arrived. It seemed as if a celebrity had just entered through the translucent glass doors. My eyes could not fixate on anything. Everyone talked and moved in different directions. The crowd migrated toward the doorway, and I was forced in the direction of the current, aware only of the direction in which I was headed. I was shoved through the wooden frame and stumbled into the small, compact room. Before I could even catch my breath, I was bombarded with hugs. A huge smile spread across my face. I had been awaiting this day for months.

The reunion was cut short.

A strip of thick, itchy cloth was pulled tightly over my eyes. The once energetic room suddenly fell silent. Disorientation overcame me, the loss of sight coming as a shock to my body. All conversations instantaneously ended as an unsettling, ominous whisper was spoken into the microphone.

“All we ask is that you be silent.”

It felt like forever—standing there in a dazed, confused, frightened state, sweating, unable to move without seeing. Just as my mind began to wander, a thick, braided rope was placed into my relaxed right hand. Startled again, I tightly gripped the frayed rope as if it were my lifeline in a deadly situation. The silence became eerie and uncomfortable as I questioned what was happening to others around me. Was I the only one with a rope? The only one confused? The only one scared? A few long moments passed and the ghostly voice breathed slowly, dramatically pausing between each sentence.

“Place your left arm on the shoulder of the person in front of you. Slowly follow the rope. You do not have permission to do anything other than the directions just given.”

The train of teens slowly began to move forward, our right hands still guided by the tattered rope, my tight grip leaving red indentations on my sweaty palm. The shoes around me, once silent on the plush carpet, now clicked, indicating the tile of the hotel lobby. I was surprised how far we traveled. Distance was hard to discern without sight.

I had only taken a few steps before arriving at my first turn. A small, delicate hand pulled at mine, loosening my grip, and gently placing it onto a slightly looser, more frayed rope, perpendicular to the one previously guiding us. The line halted and started up again repeatedly. Finally, as the line became dramatically more spread out, we arrived into what I can only assume to have been a spacious room. The journey terminated and the room filled with the sound of heavy breaths.

The ominous whisper returned, relaying us more instructions. “The goal is to get out. You may not alter the rope in any way; this includes breaking or untied. Your right hand may never leave the rope. If you need help, raise your left hand.”

The line slowly began to move again, my hand burning from the frayed rope. I knew there had to be some kind of trick; there was not going to be a break in the rope allowing us to break free; that would be too easy. I continued to follow the rope, frantically trying to come up with a plan of escape.

Before even arriving at the next corner, I felt the rope become less taut, but it was not my doing. How did the rope get looser if was not allowed to be cut or untied? Pondering this question for a while got frustrating. With all the logic puzzles and brain games completed in my pastime, I was so confident that with my intelligence I could figure out this course; but it was proving more difficult than I had expected. I continued the path in deep thought, interrupted again by that same unnerving sound.

“If you need help, just raise your hand.”

Annoyed that they interrupted my train of thought with a repeated sentence, I still continued to walk the course. I began to mentally draw a picture of the turns we made in order to figure out the “game,” hoping this would help.

“If you need help, just raise your hand,” the voice seemed to repeat every minute.
Meanwhile, the rope got looser and looser. It felt as if I was now one of only a few people holding it up. But we weren't allowed to let go of the rope, so why did they? Suddenly a light bulb went off. The other people must have gotten out! But how?

“If you need help, just raise your hand.”

After what seemed like forever, I was finally able to complete my mental image. I was correct. We were walking in a square with no breaks. So how were others getting out? I felt torn, indecisive. Part of me wanted to give up and just ask for help, but that phrase, “giving up,” didn’t rub me right. I was not one to give up, especially at a task that seemed so simple. I decided to continue walking until I could get myself out all on my own.

Another few minutes passed as I turned the same corners again and again. But I couldn’t be the only one. There had to be many others that were stubborn and self-sufficient like me. Yet I felt stupid knowingly walking in circles yet not being able to find the exit.

Beyond frustrated, I hesitantly raised my hand to ask for help.

I heard footsteps coming towards me. Suddenly that raspy whisper was spoken directly into my ear.

“Take off your blindfold and duck under the rope.”

I reluctantly untied the dark cloth, relieved to remove the itchy fabric from my eyes. As my eyes adjusted, I saw hundreds of people sitting on the outskirts of the course. I ducked under the rope and joined my friends.

Looking in on the course I saw only a handful of people. I watched them struggle, following the rope with no way out. I couldn’t help but laugh at their attempt at an impossible endeavor. I realized that just a few moments earlier I had been aimlessly walking with them—one of the few remaining who was too determined to ask for help.

I sat there, physically present, but my mind completely absent, withdrawn from the conversations occurring around me. It had once seemed to me that being persistent was always a good thing. I had considered asking for help a form of giving up, a sign of weakness or lack of capability. But I just sat there, looking at the empty space, realizing that not everyone felt this way, that asking for help was okay.

***

Months later, I found myself in school on a sunny Friday afternoon. The light glared through the window behind me. Uncomfortably settled on the rock hard chair, I continued to listen to the teacher, trying my best to understand the curriculum. All I could hear was an accumulation of astronomical words and phrases, which I was unable to comprehend. I tried to jot everything down, hoping I could learn the information later; but the teacher rushed on with new words and phrases before I could even begin to write the previous one. In a burst of frustration, I slammed my head into the palms of both my hands, my elbows resting on the table at a perfect ninety degrees.

As my hands hit my palms, my mind immediately returned to the situation where I had felt a similar sense of frustration, one hand on a rope and the other in the air. It was a situation that had not returned to my mind until that moment.

The blare of the school bell jolted me back into reality. I leapt up from the plastic child’s chair. With my shoulders back and my head high, I walked over to my teachers desk, prepared to ask the most simple question.

“Can you help me Mr. Smith?”
Her name was Roe. At only 17 years old, she was an entrepreneur. She never found herself bored with all three of her different jobs. On that day that changed everything she was on her way to her second job, a dog groomer. As she walked down the crowded streets of New York City, she passed hundreds of faces. Only one, though, caught her eye. For a split second, time froze. The only people in the world were her and the boy gleaming back at her. Then, the world resumed and she kept walking.

His name was Evan. As the snow fell that November morning, he was on his way to the soup kitchen. He passed by folks wearing Louis Vuitton, Michael Kors, and a bunch of other names that he had no clue what the pronunciation would be. Evan kept thinking to himself why can they afford these things and he lives on the street. He wondered what he did in his life to deserve such darkness. As he thought to himself, a sudden ray of light flashed in his world. There, walking directly at him was a girl. He swore that she was the most gorgeous woman he had ever laid eyes on. Her hair was a shiny gold that bounced with every step she took. Her eyes were of the deepest blues. Evan then swore to make it his mission to find whoever that mysterious stranger was, no matter the cost.

Three weeks had past and Roe had forgotten about the boy almost entirely. Evan, on the other hand, couldn’t stop dreaming about the unforgettable girl. He walked the same street he had first spotted her on twice a day hoping to come into contact once more. What Evan didn’t know was that the dog spa, Dapper Dog, where Roe worked at every Tuesday and Thursday had relocated. Roe now had no reason to walk down 5th Boulevard. For weeks, Evan searched and searched for Roe until he finally gave up.

Four days had passed since Evan’s decision to forget, but the only thing he had been having trouble with was just that: forgetting. Every night, he dreamt of the first time they saw each other on that cold, brisk November morning. The memories were far too fuzzy for any sort of clue regarding the whereabouts of his mystery soul mate, though. That is until the fifth night after the search ended.

He replayed the scene in his mind starting from when it always begun; him thinking about all of the rich snobs in New York City. This time though, the image seemed a bit clearer. He noticed small things he hadn’t noticed before like a small white Shih Tzu with brown ears walking past him or the piece of blue bubblegum that he had almost stepped in. Then, it was his favorite part. It then came to be the part when the girl walked by. It never lasted very long but he still liked the few seconds in which he felt like he actually knew her. Just as they were approaching each other, the world suddenly split into slow motion. As the two slowly walked past each other he noticed something. It was what seemed to be an important clue. He then saw that the young lady had on a name badge. It read Dapper Dog in swirly font. Just under that it read Roe. Just like that, he had a name; Roe. It was a beautiful name that he only imagined would belong to a beautiful girl. In that instant, the search was back on.

The very next day, he trudged down to the new Dapper Dog on the corner of Kensington Street and 7th Avenue. He had worn the nicest clothes he owned, that to anyone else would just be average. As he walked through the front door, he heard the soft sound of wind chimes and approached the front desk. A woman sat in front of him, filing her nails and smacking her gum. Evan then asked, “Roe, is it?” hoping that the response would be pointing him in the other direction.

“Yeah right! Do I look like some bratty rich girl? She’s in the back. Who are you?” she answered.

“A friend. Just a friend.” he said,” Can you go get her for me?”

“No. She’s with a client! Her shift gets off in three hours. I guess you could come back then. Or whatever.”

“Oh. Well, thanks. I guess,” As he turned and left, the door to the back room swung open and out came Roe.

“Who was that?” she asked the receptionist.

“How would I know? He was looking for you. He said he was a friend.”

“I’ve never seen him before!” Just as Roe spoke, she knew what she had said was a lie. She was suddenly transported into a flashback. It was the day when she was on her way to the old shop. As she turned back to
catch a glimpse of a man that had simply left her memorized, she recognized him. The guy she had been
dreaming of for weeks was so close to her. And just like that, he was gone, never to be seen again.
But, Roe just couldn’t let him slip out of her fingertips again. She burst out of the shop and sprinted down
the street, in search of someone she had only seen one other time. Frantically, she looked left and right. Just as
she thought he was gone for sure this time, she spotted a man walking away from her wearing the same tired,
dirty old rags she remembered so vividly from her repeated dreams. Roe then ran up and tapped him on the
shoulder. Just as Evan turned around, a spark ignited. As he looked into her eyes, he knew they were the same
ocean blue eyes from before. It was the same spark they had felt the first time they had bumped into each
other. At last, he had somehow stumbled upon who he thought had to be his soul mate.
Roe leaped into his arms. They were again the only people in the universe. Without a care in the world, the
two just stood in the middle of the sidewalk for ages, just embracing the other’s presence. Then they finally
spoke, “Sorry! I just felt like I have known you forever. I’m Roe by the way!”
“It’s fine. I was just thinking the same thing! I’m Evan.”
At that instant, the two wandering souls were united, as if they were drawn together by fate. When you
first glance at the couple, they seem to have tremendous differences! Then, at second look, they only thing
that separates the young lovebirds is the poverty line.
The Crooked Cast

Central High School

Vickey Meyer, Teacher

Let us describe this beauty
with words that lock your jaws.
Let us plant within you
the seed of an inorganic garden;
monochrome wildflowers-
mildflowers.
Let us guide your hands-
make this puppet
creep along the page,
blatant.

Set before you are the monoliths;
Learn.
Take heed.
Take words.
Take lines.

Do not let your eyes reach
farther than this page.
Let us force you
to rape the evidence of your passion set upon paper.

Straight lines
never stray.
Run away
slap your hand
“Back on track
now I know
to stay in place
and never go.”

And it is this
that breeds stagnation;
that settles roaring waters

Let us strive to cultivate creativity.
Let us garner minds that shake foundation.
Let us break this cycle of mediocrity.
Dear god let my words fall on screaming ears;
desperate to spread the gospel of a stranded thinker
Abigail Smith
Flash Fiction: Watchful Raven
Fort Zumwalt South High School
Amanda Bramley, Teacher

I give the dull glass door a shove and stumble outside. A piercing ding from our doorbell follows me into the sun. Immediately, the stifling desert heat beats against me from all sides. My black uniform pants cling to my body in all the wrong places. The stiff collar of my baby-blue button-up shirt closes in around my perspiring throat. I shuffle two fingers inside the collar and yank at it, as I pull out a carton of Marlboros with my other hand. I fiddle with the cigarettes and discover that there is only one lonely torch left in the small box.

“Today is just my day, isn’t it?” I grumble to myself, shaking my head in frustration. My voice is rough and gravelly with years of smoking.

I lean back against the warm, coarse brick wall and light up my final indulgence. A puff of smoky relief escapes my chapped lips as I take in the familiar sickly taste of tar. The embers reek of ash and sweat and poison. I keep my shoulders hunched but relax my hands into my pockets. My bad habit produces a false sense of ease. Smog hovers in the bone dry air and hugs my face. I stare blankly through the ashen cloud at the desolate used car lot where I have lived out my days. Rusty, abandoned shells of what were once useful machines sit idle baking in the white-hot summer sun. Beyond our chain-link fence lies the dusty and barren landscape of the Arizona desert. I can almost hear the buzz of heat coming off the dirt and asphalt road. The unrelenting sun jumps sharply off grimy windows and scratched paint jobs and soaks into the inky blacktop.

A plump black raven floats over the lot and drops a loud splat on the windshield of a blood-red Chevy. I’ll be the one sent out to clean that up later on.

“Perfect,” I mumble to myself.

My gloomy eyes begin to follow the raven, but suddenly I’m overcome by another coughing fit. Dirty air coats my lungs and congests my airway. I hack and choke so forcefully that I drop my cigarette and clutch at my chest. I have to ease myself down to sit on the side of the curb to regain my rattling breath.

I’m staring down at my cheap black leather shoes when I hear an eerie caw from somewhere above my head. I twist around and crane my neck to catch the fat raven staring down at me with cold, unblinking eyes from the edge of the faded orange roof. The sun reflects off its glossy feathers and beady eyes. It does not look away. The bird continues to eye me, waiting for something.

“Stupid bird,” I scoff half-heartedly and grab at my pocket, only to remember that I’m already out of cigarettes.

I turn away from the bird disappointed, and continue to glare out at the ancient ruins of the car lot. Brightly colored plastic circus flags strung between light posts flap and snap lazily in the hot breeze. Dust hangs in the air like a fog. Our air conditioning unit hums steadily as it works hard to make the inside of the office bearable. A single drop of sweat trickles down my temple and more moisture collects along my back and beneath my arms.

That senseless raven squawks at me again from the rooftop and tilts it’s head, it’s gaze never leaving the back of my skull.

I can hear the rush of blood in my ears and my hands are now cold and clammy despite the sweltering heat. I glance up at the stark white sun and it pulses in my vision. Suddenly the ground dips and whirs beneath me. I am sitting on a child’s spinning toy top. Static fills my head. Spots bloom before my eyes. The raven caws.

The spots grow as I hear my own body smack the sidewalk, followed by the sharper thud of my skull.

I am staring up into the glowing sun.
The raven stares back.
Abigail Smith
Poetry: Watercolors
Fort Zumwalt South High School
Amanda Bramley, Teacher

I am a painter of words.
My careful cursive strokes speak of
depth purple summer nights
spent under a blanket of heavy stars,
buttery wildflowers and hidden trails through the forest,
tanned bare feet squishing cool mud between their toes.
Grainy orange dirt scuffed with a gasp of blue adrenaline,
the overwhelming turquoise rush of sea foam
dribbles down the page, smearing verses.
Blazing blood-red campfires burn with crackling secrets,
and sweet pink confessions.
Deafening white thunder, a downpour of obsidian rain,
shattered hearts and spilled paints.
My ink pours down so loud that it is silent.
The page darkens and begins to thunder,
crimson nightmares leak through my trembling fingertips,
My words leap from sweet tea and gentle sunrises,
from pitter-pats on a shiny tin roof,
to a downpour of darkness, a sudden eruption of sound.
No one is safe from my tainted watercolors and sharpened stories,
There cannot be beauty without the beast.
Across the badlands of South Dakota to the big sky of Saskatchewan, up the boreal jungles that engulfed the Klondike River and on into the lowlands on the Alaskan plain where he finally settled, the nomad soul roved. Born to Mr. and Mrs. Clark from northern California, he rejected the name as he felt it was inane and rejected his kin as he felt they were as well, preferring instead the fantasy that he was born to some lonesome, nameless pariah dog in a wasteland somewhere. There was a romance to it, that in a world that so frequently showed it’s callous hand to him that he could have no reservations in mimicking it’s indifferent perspective. But he would never describe himself as misanthropic as he liked the thought of being above petty spite, and it brought about images in his head of some naive ‘rebel without a cause’ which was a persona he hated almost as much as that of the droning, frustrated slave to society that he left at home. He chose not to see the hypocrisy that he was yet another member in a long lineage of true American sons drawn to the north by a handbill proclaiming promise of an uncharted frontier.

He left out of fear. Fear of boredom, fear of eventually being complacent with his boredom, mostly fear of someday expiring like the assimilated mass, with dying thoughts of regret and futility. He knew that he had always been someone of a profound mind and primal taste, one who persistently looks for purpose in a world that offers none while fighting off the ever-present reality that his aggressively human mind could never be satiated by the world he inhabited.

He thought Alaska could save him. It was pure, more real than California or Utah or Alberta or any of those. It’s still air felt tangibly brittle, as though a breath too greedy would cause the environment to shatter. It’s horizon was expansive and broad unlike the oppressive timber of the Yukon, allowing a clear view of the naked sky that was laboriously painted behind the landscape.

As is any place so prehistorically candid, its sapient residents looked to exploit it to the furthest extent that they could. It is as a member one of these armies of progress that the boy found a resting place: a logging camp outside of Moose Creek.

The pay was minimal, but he wanted no part of the slips of paper he was handed every week and the quarters and food were suitable. He found his fellow employees’ camaraderie puerile much to his own frustration and he wondered if he had come all this way to discover that he was as lost as ever, but every time he was tempted with the thought of desertion his respect for the unit manager kept him earthbound.

The unit manager was a rugged man by the name of Jethro. He stood over two meters tall, his powerful frame pulled together by taut muscle, testosterone swelling up his veins like coursing blood. His face was hidden behind a heavy, dark beard that was so bristly you could whet an axe on it. His disproportionately small eyes looked out from his massive head, piercing and storm gray, with a tinge of persistence. As a whole, he evoked the image of some sort of towering Biblical giant.

The boy thought Jethro was different than the rest, profound in his purposes for destruction. Jethro looked introspectively, recognized his own sentience and did not disregard it. His work in the logging camp was his duty as a pioneer, a conqueror. From his stump perch he looked out over the operation with pride, an infinite success, a mission that could not be failed and a company that could not be terminated. When the wolves or cougars or bears reared their heads he chased them off with the incessant roar of the chainsaw, a high pitched whir so brutally mechanical that it’s industrial teeth could tear an ecosystem asunder. And it did.

As the months went on, the forest had been cut back to the shore of nearby Lake College leaving a swath of unresisting corpses in their wake, a task completed with lethal efficiency. On a rainy day in late August, the squadron of lumberjacks sat to take a short break. The lack of sun had sapped most of their wills, all but Jethro and the boy’s. The boy sat cross-legged on the ground, facing away from the others as his eyes drifted towards the desolation of their handiwork. Jethro sat next to him, fruitlessly wrapping duct tape around a tear in his heavy canvas hide as a boorish attempt at restoring it. The boy turned to him.

“You ever feel sorry about it?” He said.

Jethro rolled a sideways glare in his direction.

“For what?” He responded gruffly.
“The whole lot. Cutting down the trees, mostly.”

Jethro did not answer immediately, pondering his own thoughts. The boy wondered if he had offended him and immediately regretted his question, but Jethro spoke up.

“Oh,” Jethro too turned his head to the mass grave of trees. “I ‘spose I do. Best not to think about such things in this line of work. Gotta look at the end goal.”

This goal piqued the boy’s interest. “What’s that?”

“What’s what?”

“The goal.”

“Well, helpin’ people. Makin’ ‘em houses, roads, other things they’ll appreciate.” He moved himself around on his behind so him and the boy now faced the same direction. “Animals don’t appreciate that stuff, they don’t need it.”

The boy nodded genuinely. They sat in silence for a while until the boy spoke up once again.

“So the animals, you say we can take it from them because they don’t need it?”

“That would be my way of thinking.” Jethro responded, though his voice had nearly softened to a dull whisper. “If we are able to do this—”

He gestured out to the emptiness in front of them.

“—then, operating under their own rules, I see no reason why this isn’t moral.”

“Sounds like pretty godless thinking.” said the boy.

“Well, this is pretty godless territory.” Jethro swept his arms around him. “You see any churches anywhere? He doesn’t belong with the animals.”

They once again sat in silence, when Jethro abruptly stood up.

“Why’re you askin’ these questions, Clark? You having some kind of internal crisis?”

The boy stood as well, and in a moment of trust he looked Jethro in his steely irises.

“I guess I just don’t really know what I’m gonna do. Walk around some more, maybe. I’m from California, y’know.”

Jethro’s eyes widened.

“California? That must be two thousand miles away! How’d you manage that?”

The boy couldn’t help but smile after having been reserved to himself for so long.

“You walk.”

“Well, shit.” Jethro said. He looked around at the others, seeing that they were content he turned back to the boy. “Well, what’re you planning then?”

The boy turned to the lake.

“I’ll find some things. Things that haven’t ever been seen before.”

“Everything’s been seen before, Clark. There ain’t a babbling brook on the whole damn continent that isn’t labeled on a map.”

The boy grinded his teeth together.

“Then I’ll throw the map away.”

“That’s a lotta maps.” Jethro stated plainly. “Don’t you fear you’ll get lost?”

“If I was scared of getting lost I wouldn’t have found this camp in the first place.”

A slight tint of animosity filled the air, and they ignored it. They gazed at the lake, the sun in the sky, the trees on the hillside across the sound. Finally Jethro spoke up.

“You’re a smart kid, Clark. Too smart for this job, maybe too smart for all of it. I don’t know if you want to stay here with us.”

The boy ground his teeth again. He spoke, seething.

“That’s all I can really be, huh?”

“What’s that?”

“A smart kid.”

It was a label that had been placed on him since he was a child. You’re a smart kid. You’re gonna do great things. You’ve got so much potential. He resented it.

Without so much as a second thought of consideration he walked away from the other lumberjacks and into the forest. There was a light rain picking up, and the pattering drops of water on the ground helped beat out the pestering thoughts in his mind. He walked aimlessly, even more so than before. Without even noticing
it, he found his way across the lake, on his way up the cliff that overlooked the water and the camp opposite him. He climbed atop it.

The view from the hilltop was breathtaking in its undeniable trueness. The water was alive with the constant pounding of rain and the forest was tranquil. He looked back across the sound to the loggers who were readying up to leave, as the sun was setting. Good, he thought to himself. They’re mucking the whole thing up anyway.

He sat with his legs dangling over the cliff. And as the cobalt sky compressed the spectrum of oranges and greens and yellows that the sun had shone through the rain clouds on the horizon, the man had a realization. It was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen. He’d never be happy again.

But he had found it.

The rain let up, and with the ceasing of the rain, the man heard a subtle rustling behind him. He turned his head dreamily to discover that he was peering into the noble face of a grizzly bear, standing on its hind legs.

Finally complacent with himself, he did not struggle or even call out. The bear tore at him with its gnashing claws and teeth, but the man did not think of brimstone. Instead, he thought of how remarkable the urgency with which the bear mauled him was. How could a living thing like he was be so strong...

When the sun revealed itself to the world in the morning, the man was dead, ferociously torn apart but not a single piece of him eaten. Just another gruesome body in a long lineage of lost American sons, dead like a Pariah dog.
Missouri Youth Write 2015

Liberty Smith
Personal Essay/Memoir: The Never Ending Story
Platte City Middle School
Devin Springer, Teacher

“Hello, is this Lisa Bosch’s daughter?”
“Yes…”
“Can we speak to your dad?”
“I am currently with my grandparents.”

A few words can change a life in a moment. Many parents dream about “that phone call.” The one where their child is in a car wreck, middle of the night, the hospital calls. However, in my case, the roles were reversed. My brief phone encounter with an unknown number changed my life forever.

February 2010
My parents had divorced when I was very little and I never really thought to ask why. I just followed the routine I had followed for as long as I could remember, live with my dad during the week then stay with my mom on the weekends. I didn’t always enjoy this arrangement but it worked, and I was too young to choose where I lived.

My mother was supposed to be on her way from her home in Effingham, Kansas to pick my sister and me up, but we were never picked up. My sister and I were used to waiting for her because she was usually a bit late, but it was getting dark and our mother was nowhere to be found. My father would give her a call about every twenty minutes but she never answered.

After hours of waiting, my mother finally called my father back. My dad handed me the phone so I could talk to her. I was expecting her to say she was caught up in traffic, or she was held up at work, but those words didn’t come out of her mouth.

“I won’t be able to get the girl’s this weekend. Tell them I love them, I have to go. Bye.”

The call ended right after she said those words, I wasn’t even able to say hello. Her words were so devastating, I couldn’t help but cry. The only words I was able to mutter before I ran to my room where, “She’s not coming this week.”

My sister came into the room crying a few minutes after I did, and we just sat on my bed, tears streaming down our faces, until we both fell asleep.

The next day I had completely forgotten what happened the night before. It was just a normal Saturday morning, birds chirping outside my sister and I’s bedroom window, the aroma of bacon filling the air, the sound of music coming from the living room, just a beautiful Saturday morning.

Nobody said a word about my mother, and when I was even slightly reminded about what had happened that night, I just shook it off like nothing was wrong. Month’s had passed since then and it was the same every week. My sister and I lost hope; we had begun a new routine. Every other weekend my sister and I would come home and wait for the call from our mother. Soon my dad began declining the call, and after that my mom stopped calling all together.

Those few months turned into years of not hearing from my mother.

May 2014
My sister and I were at my grandparents’ house in Atchison, Kansas for part of summer break. It was just a normal summer weekday when my grandfather got the call.

My sister and I were playing around with makeup in my grandparents only bathroom when my grandfather came into the room and told us he needed to talk to us. At first, I thought he was just going to ask us where we wanted to go for lunch, or what we wanted to do for fun the next day, but when I saw the tears streaming down my grandmother’s face and the worried look in my grandpa’s eyes, I knew something wasn’t right.

“Your mother was somehow able to call me this morning, and she would like to meet with you guys by the river.”

I was speechless. My mother not only left my sister and I, but she left my baby brother and all the people that actually cared about her. I wanted to see her, but I wasn’t willing to forgive her. I told my grandpa that I would love to visit her by the river, but I honestly wanted nothing to do with her.
When we got to the river, I didn’t recognize my mom. She was so skinny because of the little amount of food that she ate and the long list of drugs she was addicted to. I noticed the terrible condition she was in, but I didn’t say or ask about it.

After she played in the park with my little brother and sister for a while, we all packed into my grandpa’s truck and began our trip to the hospital. When we got to the hospital, my mother found out that her kidneys were failing. I wasn’t able to visit her for the few weeks she was in the hospital, but she got better and prepared herself for rehab.

She was sent to a rehabilitation center somewhere in Independence, Missouri. My two siblings and I were able to see her twice a week, for a few hours. She wrote us letters and drew us pictures. Everything seemed to be getting better. And for the most part, it did.

Epilogue
A few months later, after my mother was released from rehab, she moved in with a friend in Atchison, Kansas. I went to her house whenever I could. I tried my hardest to get close to her again and bring back our strong bond, but that unfortunately never happened. She met a guy online and moved to Colorado to live with him. I haven’t talked to her since. All I know is that she now lives with her boyfriend in an apartment with a few roommates, and she supposedly hasn’t touched an illegal drug since.

I also found out that over the many years my mother and I lost contact, she was kicked out of the house she was living in and forced to live on the streets. All of my siblings and I’s baby pictures, trophies, awards, clothes, furniture, etc. were thrown in the garbage. My mother ended up having very little money and eventually ended up living behind a gas station. Which is where she was able to find someone to let her borrow their phone to call my grandpa.

I would love to add a very cliché “The End” at the end of this story, but the story isn’t over. It’s still being written...
Stephanie Songer
Poetry: At the Edge of a Cliff
Olathe North Senior High School
Molly Runde, Teacher

What happens to you
At the edge of a cliff?
When you know you are about to fall
But you don’t fight it anymore
Do you hear the words of the people you knew
Jumbled together,
A radio of your life trying to become in tune?
Do you wish you had taken the longer route for the scenic view
Instead of rushing to be ten minutes early?
Are you overwhelmed by the smell of a musty rain
On a boring, dreary day?
Does your stomach feel like you’ve just rounded the top of a rollercoaster?
Or as if you’ve fallen in love at first sight?
Do you remember the punchline
Of a long forgotten joke?
Is it like stumbling into an overwhelming ray of sunshine
After being frozen for too long?
Do your childhood memories become filtered
Through rose-colored glasses?
Do you realize that every regret you’ve ever had
Means nothing at all
Because for one second of your entire existence
You know everything is fine?
Or are you already gone?
It's Saturday night and I'm exhausted from a long day of racing motocross, and the fact that I have to babysit the neighbor's kids in their really strange freaky house across the street makes me even more exhausted. I pass the house every day when I drive to school and just looking through the dark windows with those old ripped white curtains sends chills down my spine. Every single time I try and not look and I still feel like there's eyes on me from one of the many windows that old wood house has. It's a two floor house with a giant staircase according to the people that currently live there. They stopped by and asked if I could watch their 8 year old twins. Apparently they need some time out of the house. Something was very sketchy about them when they came over. They sounded kind of…frightened. Almost as if they were hiding something.

I'm supposed to go over there and baby sit at 7:00, it's 6:30 right now. I walked downstairs and went to the garage where dad was working on his RC airplanes. As I walked in I took a nice long look at my Suzuki RM85L all clean and race ready sitting on its stand after I cleaned it up after today's big race. My dad heard me from behind, “What's Up son?”

“Nothing much just wondering how much them neighbors will give me for babysitting,” I said.
“Not sure dude, They're a weird bunch but a rich bunch so you might get lucky,” He responded.
“Did my Rockstar Energy graphics come in the mail yet for the RM?”I asked.
“Oh as a matter of fact they did, their on the kitchen counter. You might have time to put them on before you leave,” he replied.
“Thanks,” I said.

Until 7 I was able to get the all the Rockstar energy decals on the bike. By the time I got done my watch showed 6:50pm. I left the garage and told dad I'd see him later on tonight after babysitting. Before I walked out the front door I thought for a moment, Twins. A 2 floor house made of old planks. A weird family. Before I left I decided to grab my glock 22 pistol in its concealed carry holster and clipped it onto the inner lining of my jeans then pulled my shirt over. I felt stupid for bringing it but something gave me a gut feeling to keep it on me. Even though the house was right across the street I still drove. While driving my friend Logan called me, “Hello?”

“Hey dude what’s up?” Logan asked.
“Nothin much just about to go baby sit the Mullen’s kids at that strange white house,” I replied.
“Man you better watch your six over there. Last time I heard people were slaughtered in that house a hundred years ago during a starvation crisis by little girls ,” He said.
“Well it doesn’t help that I’m pulling into their driveway right now Logan. Anyways you wanna ride tomorrow at Big Springs?,” I asked.
“Yeah su...,” Call Ended. What the heck? Oh well, knowing Logan he probably ended the call on accident. I noticed that I drove through a gate on the way up this steep driveway that lead to the house built on a hill. When I shifted the truck in neutral and pulled the parking brake there it was. At the corner of my eye something was looking at me through one of the windows before it vanished and the curtain closed when I glanced over. Then I heard a garage door open and an old 69 Ford Mustang GT Fastback pulled out next to my truck. Surprisingly the guy wasn't too creepy looking after all. He rolled down his window and kinda yelled over the aftermarket exhaust he had on the car, “You must be Casey. I'm Frank,” He said in a generous voice. I noticed his wife wasn't with him.

“Pleasure to meet ya. Where's your wife?,” I asked curiously.
“Oh I'm picking her up from work then we gonna go see a movie together. We should be back before 10,” He stated.
“Sounds good. Where are the kids at?” I questioned.
“Oh they'll be dropped off by the school bus soon,” He responded.
“Oh so no one is in the house? Why did I see someone looking at me through that window and curtain?,” I asked.
“You probably just saw the curtain moving from the air vent that’s below it. Well I got to get a move on son. If everything’s good I’ll pay ya a whopping 100 bucks when we get back,” He said in a kind of suspicious voice. This wasn’t a bad deal at all. 100 bucks would get me into the race this weekend.

“Yeah ok sounds good. Have a good time with your wife,” I said.

“Thanks the doors are unlocked just walk right in, See ya,” He yelled as the car was backing out. I gave him a thumbs up and got out of my truck.

As I was walking up the wooden stairs that led up to the doors they were very sturdy and creaky. Frank was wrong, I did see something in that window, and it wasn’t an air vent. I thought about that for a long minute before I put my hand on my holster and opened the door. I smelt that old kind of moldy smell you smell in old houses as I looked up at a giant staircase that led to the second floor. To the left was a hallway and to the right was the kitchen and living room. Everything was vintage. The furniture, the kitchen, the walls, everything. I watched TV on this really old TV in the living room when the door opened and two really skinny 8 year old girls walked in and stood there staring me down. “I’m Casey I’m supposed to be babysitting you until your parents get back,” I said blankly.

The girls didn’t say one word. They just walked upstairs. They were exactly identical. Their shirt, their pants, the braids in their hair. It’s been 2 hours of watching television when I just now realized the twins haven’t put out one sound since they have been upstairs. It’s already pitch black out. I slowly walked up the old stairs. I heard a jack in the box type sound as I got closer to the top. I saw an opened door and when I looked in the room there was one of the twins just sitting there slowly rotating the lever. The jack exploded out of the box and it didn’t even scare her. She just started laughing with a strange witch type laugh. Something wasn’t right. I looked down and there was a trail of red on the floor outside the doorway that led to her sitting in the middle of the room and it was all over her white shirt. It was blood. I freaked and backed up to then ran into the second twin behind me whose face was blank. The only thing that was on her face was a smiley face drawn of blood. I yelled and backed up even more to end up tumbling all the way down the stairs.

I hit my head hard, I was passing out to the sound of laughing and playing. As I tried to regain consciousness with my heart racing with terror, Every Time I opened my eyes they got one step closer on the stairs. They had blood all over their shirts and were dripping of it. The disgusting smiley face twin was dragging a knife against the wall as she walked down the stairs. I had barely enough energy to grab the pistol. By the time the glock was in my hands I took two shots. Both of them at their chests as they fell to the floor screaming the worst sound I had ever heard in my whole life. I had to get up, I had to get out of here. I dialed 911 as I was limping to my truck. My ankle was sprained.

A voice answered, it wasn’t an operator. “You belong here,” It whispered in my ear.

“I can kill you! Leave me alone!,” I shouted.

By the time I got to the truck my door was locked. I didn’t lock it before. I punched through the glass with my elbow. The keys weren’t in the ignition where I left them. “Looking for these!?” a scream came out from the top of the stairs that lead up to the doors. It was one of the twins with the keys right in her bloody hands. My heart pounded but the only way I was getting out of there was my truck. I limped out of the driver’s seat furiously and aimed my gun at her as she ran towards me with a knife. I pulled the trigger, Click. I grabbed a mini sledge hammer from the floorboard of my truck and swung right at her head. She was out but still mumbling on the ground with her bashed in head. I grabbed the keys and put them into the ignition. I turned over the motor as it roared to life. When I looked in my rear view mirror the gate was closed.

At this point I didn’t care whether it was closed or not. Before I pulled in the clutch and moved the stick in reverse to gun through the gate, “Going somewhere!?” I looked to my left and by the time I did the other twin was trying to pull me through the window. She was choking me to death with her bloody hands. Then the thought came in my head, the brass knuckles in the center console of my truck. I struggled to reach my hand over and grab them. Once they gripped around my fingers, PLINK! She was out with a gash in her eye but her hand was literally clamped onto my door mirror. I backed the truck into the gate and sure enough they broke open and the twin let go after being dragged 10 feet down the driveway. I was still gunning in reverse down the street until I jerked the steering wheel and swerved the truck around.

I raced into the driveway of my house and got out limping to the door of my house. I opened the door to see my dad and mom on the couch and they yelled about twenty different questions. They were told the whole story. Crime scene investigation came. The FBI categorized this case as paranormal activity. The parents of the twins were never found again. The whole house was torn down thankfully. This whole incident was on the
national news and I've had about 40 interviews by people on their stupid shows. A lot felt bad for me. Some of
the motocross riders at the local track found out about it and so did their main sponsor guys. They hooked me
up with a pro action sponsor that was dedicated to supporting me in the races. Racing was the only thing that
got this tragedy off my mind. It scarred me for life. Those twins left hallucinations on me for life. Nobody
understood me. I was never the same. Even now when I'm happy and safe, I still look at the area that the
house was torn down and every time I do the twins smile at me in my head. Smiley always had the biggest
effect on me. But there's something I forgot to mention, The twins’ bodies were taken by the CDC and were
never even spoken of again by crime scene investigation and FBI.
Missouri Youth Write 2015 | 436

Julia Stolfus
Short Story: A Mask for My Mother
Central High School
Kyla Ward

Twelve years and three months ago strange people showed up at our house. They told me to collect my things and come with them, I'd be safe. Long coats and looks of worry were worn as masks by the people. My mask was pajama pants, old sweater, and my face streaked with tears burning through my skin. It didn't matter how much I cried, I was going to go with these people, no matter what.

The strange people with long coats and worried faces assumed I'd be happier in an orphanage. The truth, though, was still masked to them. Never uncovered, was the idea that I didn't want to go, that I loved being with my parents. I loved that my mom would sing to me at night with an angel's voice, and the way my dad swayed with alcohol running in his veins providing a rhythm I grew to memorize. I loved the way my mom whispered in my ear that she loved me, that she wanted me to never be like my father, and that no matter where she went, she'd love me.

I remember our last night, it was cold, and I was being tucked in bed. My mom’s song for me was about mountains and oceans. When she finished the song, I saw tears welling in her eyes. Her eyes were forming oceans of their own. I wanted to hold her hand and tell her that the two of us would be just fine. Promise, was what I wanted to say. That’s when the noise started.

My dad came in the house and knocked the pictures from the walls, revealing the holes he'd punched a month before, but was too lazy to fix. Nonsense spilled from his mouth and came to my ears in waves of screams. I could see my mother wince. I sat up and embraced her in a hug, tears rolled down my cheeks and onto her shoulder. It was then she whispered in my ear the words that will stick with me forever. Then, my mom left the room and I heard her voice, filled with urgency, trying to calm my dad. It was a strange way to hear her, considering I was so fond of her angel-like singing. Of the last two ways I remember her voice, I try to only remember the peaceful version. That night, I was lulled to sleep by the screams I’d grown accustomed to hearing.

I was awakened by strange hands attached to strange people shaking me. The strange people were standing above me, looking at me with a mixture of pity and sadness. As I crawled out of my bed, my pajamas felt odd, shriveling me inside and swallowing me whole. I clenched my hands around my stuffed rabbit, trying not to tremble.

The strange people took me to an orphanage, where one of the ladies told me her name was Martha. Martha told me that my mom had sent me to the orphanage, and that she, Martha, would be my social worker. This was when my heart fell. So many people are afraid of failing, but what I found in the orphanage, is the chance it provides to fly. My love for my mother soared to exponential heights, in the orphanage. I lived with a positivity that there was a woman in the world who loved me, and she was waiting for the right time to save me. The other kids, had no such positivity.

They told me I was ridiculous. Laughed at my naive dreams of being reunited with my mother. All of their remarks, they made in voices that boomed within the room. I did not understand this for a long time, but they spoke with such loud voices because they were not scared. If fear crippled them, it would cripple their words, too. Cause them to speak in hushed tones; like the one my mother used.

Twelve years and three months was how long it took to understand the different voice levels used by people. The kids, had spoken loudly to make me feel small. My mother, had spoken softly to give me words that held great reverence. She whispered in my ear, because she was telling me a sacred message, and soon I hope to return the message.

It is now my eighteenth birthday, and I am standing on a street corner waiting for my mom to meet me. I am so nervous. There is a lump in my stomach that seems foreign to me. Now, I am truly nervous. At the orphanage, everyone told me I wouldn’t be able to recognize her, but when Martha picked me up, she told me she had no doubt in my memory of my mother, and agreed to accompany me. We've been waiting for a while now, but we did come ten minutes early. As the clock on the city hall chimed noon, the lump turns into a boulder.
It is then that I see a woman walking across the street, toward us. My feet start to carry me, and soon I’m enveloped in the arms of my mother. She’s warm and smells like lavender— the scent of the flowers planted outside my childhood window. I hear her voice whisper in my ear, “I love you.”

Impossible to be counted are the years that passed and caused me to suffer a drought of love. I felt the palpitations of my heart every night, and wished them to subdue. Now, caught in a world I’m not sure isn’t fantasy, my heart aches with the knowledge that I don’t have to suffer such hurt. An ache, so good, that I feel my cheeks burning as the tears return. Tears that formed oceans in a six-year-old’s eyes, and washed down her face to distract from the sound of glass crashing on the floor.

Still embracing me, my mother looks into my eyes. Hers, are as dark as the last night we shared. They are deep enough, that I dive into them and realize the secret of the once perfect life we had.

A mask. That was all it was. A mask of patterned ties, picture books, and painted nails, to cover up the bottles, holes, and broken hearts. I see the aching in my mother’s eyes. The aching that follows the realization of the dissolution of our old life together, the only life we have known. Following it closely, is the hope for our new life. The life that we have uncovered, and will never mask. Finally, my mother and I see each other, face to face.
Serena Strecker

Poetry: While Spending the Night in my iPhone
Strafford High School
Jessica Williams, Teacher

I need to nestle in the chirping circuits,
tear a lean-to from a transistor, and
harness an electron for a fire. Jolting,
pulsing amid the atoms like city traffic
on musty Jarnsaxan nights, I can’t catch them
quietly. The green pastures seep
to the horizon, sprouting
oscillators that sever seconds to their clicking ticking time.
Still, the dark forest foliage freckles my skin
the color of 4:00 AM pacing in the gaps
between my copper-wired veins
that cradle mercury and steam.
Capacitors charter rivers
between coagulated waterfalls—
connection pins that, when plucked, shudder a harmony
surge from the landscape’s corners.
Metal tendrils smear filigree between me and the
sequined skyline mottles hearth fire
tremulously to meet the moonlight pallor of the LED’s.
Even the silent shadow-fractures
mock the memory of idylls
not hewn from silicon and dreams.
The human mind may be the strangest thing anyone will ever encounter. It’s wonderful how such a simple organ inside an ordinary being can imagine the most exotic scenarios. Humans have become the most intelligent organism on the planet. We have felt more emotions than any other known animal. We have gone further than any other organism. Yet, we use under ten percent of our brain. At a time. Imagine what we could do if we used our whole mind. The human race would be so advanced and so complex. We could do almost anything. We could even travel the galaxies. Imagine if we were all like me.

My name is Alex, short for Alexandria. I was born on the 12th day of March, 2023. My parents thought I was normal for a long time, until the day I turned four. My mother and I were home alone, and I wanted a cookie. Of course, Mom wouldn’t let me have one, so I did what any typical four year-old would do. I manipulated my mother’s mind and took control of it. I walked her to the kitchen and simply got a cookie out of the jar on top of the refrigerator. My young and immature brain was using about 48% of it. Now I’m using 82%. By the time I’m an adult, I’m supposed to be using my whole mind. Forty-eight percent is about how much “Brain Power” you need in order to manipulate other people’s minds to control/read them.

You may think that is the coolest thing ever, but I would do anything to be normal. Yes, there are some perks to being a super-human, but the cons are too big to even compare. The government wants me. They want to take me and observe my mind and how my brain works. But in the process, they will have to kill me. So in order for them to not know I exist, I have to stay hidden. I can’t control other’s minds, I can’t work out math problems in the speed of a calculator, and I have to pretend I don’t know.

It’s Monday. The most dreaded day of the week as everyone goes back the school/work. As I get on the big, yellow vehicle full of wild apes, I look over the flailing hands of kids for my friend Hailey. Hailey isn’t the sharpest tool in the shed, but she’s funny. She is sitting in our usual spot, six rows from the back to the left. “ALEX!!” She screams at me, which I am sort of grateful for because if she didn’t yell, I would’ve missed her. She is very short, about five-foot-two. This is ironic, because she may be the loudest person in the school. Sometimes, if she is inside the classroom next to me, I can hear her voice through the walls like she is in the same room as me. She can’t keep quiet if her life depended on it.

Before the following day Hailey didn’t know my secret. Tuesday that same week was when I told her. We were in my room; it was exactly four-twenty-six when I mentioned it. “Hailey, I have to tell you something and I trust you to not tell anyone, not even your parents. My life depends on the next few words that come out of my mouth, so please listen.” I held back the urge to run. I knew this was a mistake. I shouldn’t have done this. Oh dear god, help me. Hailey responded with a simple “I promise.” while crossing her heart. I inhaled deeply and uttered my thoughts so quickly I’m surprised she even heard me. “I am 15 years old and using eighty-two percent of my brain. I am the most intelligent human being ever known to exist and only I and my parents know. The only reason why I’m not famous is because I have to hide myself from the government and their obsession with killing everything that is out of their control which is therefore me.”

Of course she didn’t believe me at first. And of course I proved it to her.
“What’s six-hundred and twelve times eight point four eight nine two?” She asked me.
“Simple, 5195.3904” I say a half-a second later. “Come on, is this preschool? Give me a harder one.”
She hesitated. “What’s three-hundred-”
“What’s three-hundred eighty five divided by forty-five point two one seven six three? 8.51437813. And your next problem was going to be five point eight seven one times pi and the answer is a rounded 18.4.”
She was dumbfounded. Completely speechless.
“Hailey?” She didn’t respond. She didn’t move for about five minutes. “Hailey, say something.” She looked at me with a stupefied look on her face, got up, and left.

The next day when I got on the bus, everything was different. It was way too quiet. The air was thicker. The only noise was the whispers as I passed by. It felt as everyone was staring at me. I can feel the tinges on the back of my neck. They know. I can hear their minds screaming my name the labels I will probably hear out loud soon. Hailey told them. They are the first ones to know, and then it will spread around the school like a
wildfire on steroids. Then around the city, then the whole country. At that moment I wanted to cry. I hate Hailey. I hate my peers. I hate my parents. I hate the government. I hate myself. Dying felt like the only answer at the moment. I might as well let the government take me away and dissect every inch of my body. Later that day I skipped three classes to sit in the bathroom and do nothing because my eyes refused to leak the tears balled up inside me. I was too mature for this. I felt like a stupid little teenage girl dealing with her first heartbreak. Except my situation was so much worse. I was going to die.

Thursday, five forty-seven pm. I heard a knock at my door. Not just any knock. This particular knock is the one I will never let myself forget. This knock I have feared my entire existence. The very knock that will change my life I slowly got up and walked to the door. I fought the sudden compulsion to break down in sobs when I saw what was standing before me. Three men in black suits blankly stared at me while holding an FBI badge. “Miss Connor, you are to come with us.”
The world is dank and dreary and shrouded in white fog, and she doesn’t feel anything about this storm except that she doesn’t want to feel it on her, so she sits in her car and waits for it to let up.

Her hands have stiffened on the steering wheel. She turns the heat way up and sinks in the front seat, crosses her arms over her chest, watches the windows fog up and the highlands way out past the stores and the docks and the water get gray and then gone.

Alex had wanted to go camping. Out in the highlands. He’d wanted to drive out with their packs tied down on top of his car and canoe them across the water and hike up over the highlands to the other water and sleep on the cold beach.

The wet month and the split had balked the trip.

The walnut probably did it, anyway.

She hopes he gets a cold.

The weather softens and she pulls the key from the ignition, pulls her yellow raincoat on over her arms.

Outside, two people stand holding hands at the end of one of the docks, in red and in blue, and she wants to join them and be a matching set. She takes her backpack from the back seat and steals away into the heavy brick coffee place to the left.

She doesn’t want to be wearing her clothes, it’s so hot inside, and no one’s there but two sleepy baristas she’s never seen before. She likes people best when they’re a little sleepy.

“Thai iced coffee, please” she answers the beard and flannel behind the register. He puts her name on a sheet, counts her money, and heats something until it’s hotter than the room while she settles into a loveseat by the TV, balls up her coat and strips down to her undershirt. She considers employing the Wi-Fi and skimming the internet, but doesn’t; slips into a book with a map of a woman on the cover.

She hadn’t expected to find it in the medical textbook section: Anatomies. A Cultural History of the Human Body. Maybe the social sciences, or the art row, but not, with its soft cover and pretty print, in the medical texts section.

“Wendy?”

The mustache and attitudinal sweater summons her from behind the counter. She stands and carries her drink in its tall mug back to the couch.

The steam from the drink attacks her round calico glasses and she slides them off, pulls the book in tight to her face and reads the introduction.

Someone picks them up, swabs them with the cotton of his shirt, hands them to her. She slides them on and looks up.

“Yeats,” he says. “I’m Yeats.”

He’s an inkwell.

“I’m Wendy.”

He reaches out his hand and she shakes it. He sits down opposite her, on the other loveseat. She drops her legs so her feet touch the ground.

“That was weird of me,” he says, in the most unapologetic way imaginable. “Sorry.”

“Huh?”

“Your glasses.”

“Oh,” she says. “Yeah.”

Dark blue sweater, gray pants, hair like a super hero’s.

“I saw your book and it looked like you’d just started it and I wanted to say it’s great,” he says. “And then your glasses were there” [he points to the table] “and the book was right there” [he holds both his hands up close to his face] “and sorry.”

“You’re fine.” She adjusts them on her nose and sets down the book, takes a drink of her drink.

“Yeats?”
The beard and flannel summons him from behind the counter. He stands and brings his food on its tray back to his couch.

She reads.

He watches the TV.

She only half reads, half studies him with his Fitz’s and his nachos and his guacamole and his cherry bomb spicy mocha iced monkey toblerone candy coffee. He’s disgusting and she wants his order over hers.

He only half watches the TV, half studies her Thai iced coffee and her book and the condensation from her drink beading all around her mug and her big eyebrows. She just looks smart and he wants her face near his so he can taste her drink.

She knits her hair into a braid while she half reads.

He pulls the sweater over his head and folds it while he half watches the TV. His button-down features sketches of nude men and women dancing. She thinks they’re dancing.

“What is it?” she says.

“You can eat.”

He looks down at his tray and the rest of the table. “I like food.”

She takes a chip.

“So there’s a ghost,” she says, “and, to really see this, he’s like a plain white sheet with holes cut out for eyes, but he’s really a ghost. And he’s lying out on one of those long couches talking with a psychotherapist.”

“Yeah?”

She wonders how old he is, if he’s old enough that it’s okay he didn’t catch the joke.

He wonders how old she is, if she’s the sort you have to cut open and count the rings to learn well enough.

“Trish?”

The mustache and attitudinal sweater beckons a girl in gym shorts out from behind her castle of text books.

Wendy reads.

Yeats watches TV.

“Weird shirt,” she says.

“Huh?” He turns to face her totally.

“You’re shirt is weird.”

He looks down and smiles funny. “Oh,” he says. “Yeah.”

“Are they dancing?”

“Sure.”

She smiles funny.

“Do you want some nachos?”

She nods and he centers the tray between them, drinks his disgusting drink.

“Yeats?”

The mustache and attitudinal sweater summons him back and he comes back with a dribbling shakes in glass.

“Want to hear a joke?”

“No.”

She takes a chip.

“Sure.”

“So there’s a ghost,” she says, “and, to really see this, he’s like a plain white sheet with holes cut out for eyes, but he’s really a ghost. And he’s lying out on one of those long couches talking with a psychotherapist.”

“Yeah.”

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“But that’s it.”

“Yeah.”

She takes a chip.

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He looks down at his tray and the rest of the table. “I like food.”

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“Want to hear a joke?”

“No.”

“So there’s a ghost,” she says, “and, to really see this, he’s like a plain white sheet with holes cut out for eyes, but he’s really a ghost. And he’s lying out on one of those long couches talking with a psychotherapist.”

“Yeah.”

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“Trish?”

The mustache and attitudinal sweater beckons a girl in gym shorts out from behind her castle of text books.

Wendy reads.

Yeats watches TV.

“Alex?”

Wendy looks up and it’s not him.
The boy buttons his sleeves up to just above the elbows.
The girl huffs at something in the book’s Introduction.
“The bladder?”
“Yeah.”
X-Files is what’s on the TV.
The boy snorts.
“Y’know, I had the biggest crush on him as a child.”
“Did you?” She folds away her book again and leans toward him, eating another chip.
“Yes,” he says, and then, as if to clarify, goes on: “I actually, well the first crush I think I ever had was on Cole Sprouse when I was like eleven and he was on that Suite Life show, and for like a year I thought that meant I was gay.”
The girl snorts.
“Right? And I was really distressed about it because I was dumb and young and didn’t want to be, but then I met this girl and fell in love with her for like a year and a half and I guess Cole Sprouse was just a phase.”
“Abigail?”
The beard and flannel beckons a girl in leggings.
“Go on.”
“Yeah, a phase, which is like, sort of shitty, because that’s what all the bigoted adults say when someone comes out - that it’s just a phase, and I feel like eleven year old me is their sample space. I promulgated the bullshit.”
“You’ve caused so much hurt.”
“I’ve apologized.”
He’s funny.
They watch together awhile. Agent Mulder asks Agent Scully why she doesn’t believe. It’s all very dramatic and low budget.
“I like your shirt, too,” he says without looking at her.
Her tank’s got sharks on sharks on sharks on it.
“Thanks,” she says, “I like it too.”
Someone says something about super powers.
“What’s yours?”
“I’d totally want to be able to make people forget about object permanence,” he says.
She cracks up.
“Yours?”
“I can’t top that.”
“Try.”
“If I could just have like, one wing.”
“One?”
“Yeah,” she says, “and just fly around in circles.”
“No.”
“No?”
“Pick another.”
“Super speed,” she says. “But only while drunk.”
“I’d like to be able to summon Vaseline.”
“Create minor inconveniences for other people to just ruin their days.”
“Change the colors of objects into their complementary colors.”
“Instantly mastering the swear words of every language.”
“That one’s genius,” he says.
“I’m a gem.”
“Thank you for not saying like, mind reading or flying.”
“Only with one wing.”
He leans back, laughs.
“Oh, I know the best one.”
“What’s that?”
“Having great teeth and gums,” she says.
“What?”
“Mouth sanitation is important,” she says. “Brush your teeth, floss your teeth, because death creeps in through your gums.”
He laughs again.
“Don’t laugh,” she says. “It’s a serious truth.”
He finishes off his soda and starts in on his shake and all his food.
“That tree is really sad,” he says at the scrawny Christmas tree under the TV.
“Nah,” she says. “Nah, that tree’s got character. It’s earned character.”
“How?”
“It’s persevered through freezing winter and forest fires and floods,” she rambles. “Woodpeckers, maniacal woodpeckers, pecking at it, day in and day out.” She takes a swig of her coffee. “Peck peck peck. He’s a survivor.”
“Alex?”
And she looks and it’s not him again.
“Getting coffee after all of this will make me sick, huh,” he says.
“They can spike it.”
“Yeah?”
“Yeah.”
“I’m underage.”
“Yeah.”
“They wouldn’t serve me that.”
“They’d serve me.”
“How’s that?”
“I can work the system.”
“I didn’t picture you as the high-stakes deception type.”
“That’s my middle name, Wendy High-Stakes Deception Earhart.”
“You can’t actually get us drinks, can you?”
“Nah.”
“Hey, we’re closing up in a few.”
The beard and flannel starts shutting down his machines.
“That’s a hell of a name, though,” Yeats says.
“Your name is Yeats.”
“Moot point.”
“Not in the slightest.”
He finishes off the guacamole.
She packs her book back in her bag and pulls on her sweater and coat and layers.
He laughs.
“What?”
“Your backpack.”
She looks down and there’s a funny word embroidered into its face.
“There’s something laborious about needlepoint cursing.”
“It’s endearing.”
He stands and pulls on his sweater, picks up his tray of leftovers.
She heaves her bag over her shoulder.
“So, I’ll see you around,” she says.
He nods and takes his tray away.
She walks to the door and opens it and walks through the door.
“Wendy?”
The superhero hair and obscene shirt is behind her in the doorway.
“I think you dropped this,” he says, picking a scrap of paper up off the floor, handing it to her, ten numbers, all legible, in blue, and a name on it.
“Yeah,” she says, “I guess I did.”
“Good night,” he says, holding the door open.
“Yeah.” And it’s still raining, really hard.
Clara Swanson

Poetry: Fiction
St. Teresa’s Academy
Dianne Hirner, Teacher

You have known the feeling
I am tearful over,
Haven’t you?
The sanity, the terrible silence
When your throat blazes as if a
Sandpaper flame inside of it is twisted
In heated wrath,
As though the millions of bleak, dead words
Your dry mountain lips will never utter
Have committed red-hot suicide just to make a real point—
As though someone is trying to look here,
At the age-old scurrying of feet in your wasted eyes,
Condemning you for your loss of direction and
Telling you that your stance in this world is not stable enough
To hollow out your consciousness while remaining upright!

They sneer, you are not sad.
A dwelling built within you from the finest rotting wood
Stands above the foothills of your boulder tongue.
And the household of rotting wood,
Is awake and going about its decomposing day
It is exhaling a thousand sighs and inhaling none
It is celebrating nihility—
The usual.

And on these raw, bitter days, I can feel it within my bloodshot eyes
I can feel the handshakes and those dirty, worn backpacks
I can feel the downed cups of coffee
In cheap Styrofoam cups
I can feel The New York Times,
Spitting grey numbers and letters at the bags under my eyes.
I CAN STILL FEEL THE DRONE OF MY HEART BEAT
AND I THINK IT IS KILLING ME.

You’ve known the feeling,
Haven’t you?
Like insane is no longer sane?
And see,
This isn’t just because
Some desperate soul told me it was...
And I think that soul was me!
Oh, is it impossible to say just what I mean? *
But you know, you know,
It’s like a midnight piano repeating the
Same
Four
Notes
Over and again—
A pitiful cycle.

And when the world finally ends,
After all this talk,
You will not find me hiding.
You will find me searching for your hand.
Like a voice in your head decides that
You’re a work of fiction
Forgotten in the corners of those dusty bookshelves,
Above glamorous eye level and
Hidden in that little aisle that no one ever bothers to walk through.
And like the thousands of lonely,
Beautiful,
Liberated worlds you’ve created and loved
Just stop mid-step in their sorry treads
With an askance in their petty frowns
Partly confused,
Partly relieved.
And then,
Before they disappear altogether,
Rasp, “I told you so.”

*With apologies to J. Alfred Prufrock
Eight pairs of eyes watch me as I slide into the Heilmann’s faded, black stern. With unsure hands, I connect my NK microphone into the jack of my metal Cox Box. Turning the volume up, I ask with a slight tremor in my voice, “Can you hear me?” No response. “Hello?” I venture, a bit louder this time. With a slight delay, the girl in my bow seat tells me to turn it up a bit. I obey her request and take a deep breath as my rowers and I lean away from the dock and push off. As I break past the goose-poop covered wooden dock, the real challenge reveals itself. I must clear the bridge to get to the main part of the lake, where I will then have to spin my boat and “tour” the lake several times without crashing into anything.

With my hands clenched tightly around the steering mechanisms at either side of me, I spend the entire practice anxious and scared that I will plow into the swamplike grasslands at the far side of the lake or crash into the boat moving next to me. In fact, as the night creeps closer, I almost do send our boat flying into a few menacing brambles until my stroke seat—the rower closest to me—yells at me frantically to turn the boat around. I don’t know what calls to make or what details to point out when my rowers go through drills; instead, I sit nervously and take in the information.

It’s my first time out on the water facing forward. For the past three weeks, I have spent my time sitting in the back of the boat, learning how to row with the rest of my teammates. Despite my start as a rower, I always knew that I was meant to be a coxswain for three reasons: I am small, energetic, and most importantly, not physically coordinated. During the past month, I had anticipated this experience, but after seeing how skilled the fall novices already were, I worried that I would not be good enough. Coxswains are leaders; they are supposed to keep their rowers safe while still motivating them to perform at their best. Throughout the entire practice, however, my rowers had told me, the shell-shocked, silent newbie, what to do and how to do it.

Directing our boat toward the dock at the end of practice, I held back the growing sensation that my rowers were as utterly disappointed in my performance as I was.

Overflowing with a myriad of memorized stock calls and tips from coxswain advice columns, I step carefully into the Heilmann three weeks later with my rowers and test my equipment. Our coach, Kai, walks toward us with a hopeful grin on his face. He takes off his mud-stained baseball cap, clasps his callused hands together, and announces, “I know this is our first big regatta, but I believe that if all of you work together and row hard, we can break into the top three.” He quickly reviews our race plan with us before giving a good-luck thumbs-up and sending us into open water. On the way down to the race course, I try to motivate my girls, but my body won’t listen to my head; I’m so nervous that my teeth chatter against each other and the rest of me starts to shake.

One minute remains until our two thousand meter sprint begins. To soothe my nerves, I chant the calls I have memorized under my breath. Eyes as wide as the finish buoys I can see in the distance, I constantly make adjustments to my point. Both the wind and the stake boat holders seem to be conspiring against me for my first regatta; my sixty foot boat moves from left to right, evading the perfect point even as the announcer makes our starting call.

“St. Louis B, Cincinnati C, Dublin A. Attention…go!” With the discordant honk of a buzzer, we are off. At least for the first ten strokes we are. Focused on staying within the buoys and barking out our beginning sequence, I don’t even realize that the Heilmann has skidded to a halt until multiple shouts break my concentration. My seventh seat’s red-and-blue oar, stuck underneath the water, has acted as a brake on the port side of the boat and made us move entirely out of our original lane.

In complete shock, I gulp and stammer unconvincingly, “Keep rowing, ladies.” Every other stroke, I attempt to spit out a memorized call, it flits out of my mind with no regard to the time I had spent ingraining it in my mind. Left with nothing to say, I am lost and in crisis mode. We take a diagonal back into our own lane, and I spend the rest of the race haphazardly steering our boat to an utter loss. My rowers can’t even look at me on the bus ride home, and the girl who caught the crab won’t stop crying. Where were my good calls when I needed them? What am I doing wrong, and will I ever do anything right? I feel like I’ve failed my rowers when
they counted on me the most. Closing my eyes, I pull a fuzzy blanket over my head and block myself out from the rest of the team. *Maybe I should just quit.*

A light tap on my shoulder interrupts my pity party, and I peek out to see the head varsity girl’s coxswain, Abby, smiling down at me. She kneels, puts both hands on my shoulders, and stares me in the eyes. “Hey,” Abby whispers, “I know you feel really bad about today, but I just want you to know that it’s only your first regatta. You’ve already improved so much. Wait until you get some more experience, and you’ll be amazing.”

“Thank you,” I croak, embarrassed to be seen in such a state. She gets up and walks away calmly and full of confidence. When I’m alone again and under the confines of my blanket, I whisper to myself, “Why wait to be amazing when I can be amazing now?” From now on, my bent and water-damaged notebook of calls will no longer be needed.

Several months later, we are neck and neck with LPJ, a Chicago crew. Our four moves like a machine; port and starboard are synchronized from the catch to the finish to the recovery. “We cannot sit on them, ladies! Let’s take a ten and break past that bow. Make them scared.” I begin to count off, and somehow, these numbers work magic on my exhausted rowers’ bodies. With each stroke, we creep an inch forward until I am even with their bow ball. Their coxswain eyes me ruefully from her perch, and a few seconds later, her boat vanishes from my line of vision. The last 1,000 meters are steadily approaching in our club’s final five thousand meter head race of the fall season. In the first five minutes of the race, we knocked off all the competitors in our event; the boat we have just passed is from a completely different event. I know we are looking at a top finish, but I control myself and stay confident, articulating the rest of our race strategy while keeping our shell pointed along the winding blue-and-white buoy line. We cannot become complacent at such a crucial moment.

“JoAnn and Sarah, take a hard 10 for the gold; Maida and Ginette, for SLRC. Let’s finish strong.” A wave of concentration takes our boat and doesn’t let go. Legs driving against the foot stretchers, oars slicing with determination through the water, bodies pulsing with pure energy—these combine in 500 meters of pure ecstasy so that nothing can stop us. Our bow crosses the two huge buoys amidst the audience’s booming applause. How we manage to leave two varsity eights floundering in our path amazes me. My rowers—dripping with sweat and bliss—whoop and pass down a chain of high fives. Without a doubt, this has been my best race yet. I kept my cool, prevented any possible catastrophes, and executed my plan successfully. Most importantly, though, not one of my calls was premeditated. For the first time, I can see myself as a respected, capable coxswain.

The multifarious merchandise sold by vendors and the heavenly aroma of greasy hamburgers wafting from food trucks and the constant bustle of coaches, spectators, and rowers do nothing to distract me from my destination: the results board. I sprint up so quickly that I almost tri. I press my trembling finger against the sheets of paper and search for our event in between exhausted pants. My finger drops, and faster than I came, I rush off to find my teammates.

Grinning so widely my cheeks start to hurt, I gather them around me and declare, “We got gold! We won!” A mess of arms entangles me; we can’t stop squealing. After the rest of my girls leave with heavy medals clinking against their chests, my stroke seat tackles me and whispers into my ear, “You were amazing.”
I roll over, wincing as pressure shifts to the many bruises on my side, and detect a soft glow through my eyelids. Suddenly distressed, I open my eyes to find sunlight glimmering over the horizon. No! It can’t be morning! Mourning the darkness, I force my thirteen-year-old self out of bed and onto my feet before trudging to my tiny closet on stiff legs. From within it I pull out a white shirt, a beige tunic, light brown pants, and brown boots. I also remove a basic set of leather armor that Master is getting me habituated to wearing. After trading my nightclothes for these I turn to a small mirror hanging on my wall and weave my dark chocolate hair into a braid that reaches the small of my back. With my hazel eyes still glassy from sleep, I stumble on the way downstairs and find my sort of wiry, dark-haired master, green-eyed Master waiting for me, looking alert and ready for another day of training me to be a dragon trainer.

“You know, Vivian, by now I’d have thought you’d be used to rising at dawn.”

“I’ve been at this for five weeks, Master Liam, and it’s still awful,” I grumble.

“I could make you get up an hour earlier when I do,” he jests.

“You do that, and I quit,” I counter, knowing that with the nearest town miles away at the edge of this mountain range I couldn’t make my way back to my family if I tried. Master Liam laughs.

“Get a good breakfast. Today you’re graduating to learning to fight dragons.” A knot forms in my stomach at Master’s words. He’s been teaching me to fight with swords, but only against him, and even with him going easy on me I still think I do poorly. I feel totally unprepared for dragons, but I know better than to protest and instead focus on eating. Once I’ve eaten my fill, Master leads me from our stone lodging to a nearby building, also made of rock. Like during many of the past daybreaks, I’m taken with the rolling mountains I now call home. Their soft peaks fade into the distant horizon with tones that make them seem to want to mimic the sky. Master Liam’s brilliantly green, amber-eyed dragon, Veirdan, greets us as we pass. His scales glint beautifully against the spring green backdrop of the trees. We enter our destination. This is our armory. I locate my chainmail shirt, and slip into a side room to put the armor on underneath my tunic. The metal weighs heavily on me and only reminds me of how nervous I am.

Rejoining Master Liam to retrieve my weapons, I immediately go for a pair of twin blades. They’re lightweight and have simple, gold-colored metal for their hilts, which have thin cloth strips bound around them to improve their grips. These are the most comfortable for me, although I’m still slightly awkward with them. These I wear in belt sheaths with one resting against each hip. I could use back sheaths, but I would hate to be clumsy and injure myself while drawing or sheathing my swords. However, these blades are dull for training, so I probably wouldn’t do much damage to myself. I also have a sharper pair in waiting to switch to when I improve.

“Ready?” Master Liam inquires.

“As I’ll ever be.” With that, I follow as Master Liam heads outside and mounts Veirdan. I clamber on behind him.

“Veirdan, could you please help us find Avalla? She should be small enough for Vivian to handle, and she doesn’t have a clutch of eggs to protect,” Master Liam asks his partner.

That’s right. It’s that time of year. I shudder. There’s almost nothing fiercer than a dragon protecting her eggs. We care for some dragon eggs, but if we do it’s because of circumstances such as if the mother not being able to do so.

With a mighty flap of his wings, Veirdan takes to the air. We find Avalla with relative ease, since, like most dragons, Avalla has a general routine. Unlike Veirdan, she’s a burgundy dragon without spikes on her back. Instead a black splotchy stripe runs lengthwise down it. Also unlike Veirdan, who’s close to two stories in height and is long-necked, Avalla’s about my height and has a shorter neck. Her serene brown eyes match her generally patient nature.
“Miss Avalla,” Master begins cordially, “you’re as lovely as ever.” The dragon rumbles what I think is a question, but her eyes are smiling. I can almost imagine her saying, “No bonus points for flattery. What do you want?”

“Would you mind teaching my young apprentice a thing or two about fighting dragons? She has yet to train against one, and I suspect you would be an excellent judge of how hard to push her.” Avalla turns to me, seems to think for a moment, and then nods. “Let’s start with you just using your claws and teeth, since this is Vivian’s first time, and almost all dragons will use those in combat.”

I stand a few yards away from Avalla and draw my swords as I face her. I start with my left hand extended in front of me so that hand’s sword passes in front of me, and with my right arm drawn back, so that hand is slightly behind me and at neck level with the sword pointed forward. I note how much my hands are shaking and how heavy my breathing has become as fear tries to grip my mind. No. I’m going to do this right.

As Master indicates to begin, I rush forward and take a swing at her chest, but Avalla deflects with a swipe of her claws before lunging forward and snapping at me. Everything seems to be moving more slowly than it should as I leap back to avoid the teeth, though I can still tell that Avalla isn’t moving at full speed. I shift to my left and swing for her shoulder and follow with a jab at the underside of her foot as she raises it to move out of the way. Unfortunately, I’ve entered an almost thoughtless, panicky state and have the precision of a blind man. Avalla then bats me down, hitting one of my bruises from a past training experience, and stands over me with a foot on my chest. She’s gentle, but still firm enough to declare that she wins. Heart still pounding, I immediately begin criticizing my performance. Master has some comments of his own, some of which were similar to mine, but most weren’t.

“Make use of her limited reach. You won’t always be able to, but use what benefits you have now. Also, your use of two swords means a shield isn’t an option, so you will have to depend on dodging and using more precise blocks. However, having two swords means your offense can be quicker, so make full use of that.”

After more rounds than I care to count, I finally win one, though it takes several more to do it again. By the time midday comes, I am ravenous, parched, exhausted, achy all over from physical exertion and getting beaten down, and frustrated almost to tears. My hands are starting to blister, and I’ve acquired several new scrapes and cuts. At least Avalla had been generous enough to just graze me. In short, I’m not happy. As Master Liam and I sit down to lunch, he is crazy enough to talk to me.

“There’s nothing quite like the first day of learning to fight anyone with that much more strength or experience than you. I must say, you are very persistent.”

“Please don’t talk to me,” I respond stiffly.

“You have nothing to be ashamed of,” he adds, but I don’t reply. Lunch is completed in silence. The afternoon is spent with Master teaching me about different kinds of dragons. After all, there are more than just dragons like Veirdan and Avalla, and each kind has different strengths, weaknesses, behaviors, and needs. By the end of the day, I’ve calmed down significantly, and I sleep like a corpse.

When the next day dawns I wake to Master pounding on my door, but the last thing I want to do is get up. Every muscle in my body is sore, and my limbs are heavy. When I finally do rise, I hurry to get dressed and hobble downstairs. I apologize to Master for being late, but he doesn’t seem upset. He tells me I’m only a half hour late.

This morning passes in much the same way as yesterday’s. Partway through my training, however, Master Liam has Avalla use more of her speed after I win three consecutive rounds. Unfortunately, those wins have exhausted me, so when Avalla speeds up, I feel like I’m back at square one and become frustrated all over again. In an act of mercy, Master lets me stop early to rest. By the time lunch comes, I’m in a more talkative mood.

“I can already see improvement. Don’t be so hard on yourself, Vivian,” Master says encouragingly.

“I know,” I whine, “but I lose so often it starts to feel like failure.”

“You have time to learn. It’s only day two after all.”

“But I worry about not being able to win when it really matters, and what if it matters sooner than I expect?”

“Then there’s no point in worrying about it now. You don’t always know in advance when you are going to need to fight. Just focus on getting better in the meantime.”

“Fine,” I sigh.
That afternoon proceeds normally enough, until a chilling roar interrupts my lessons. Master springs to his feet, gauging from which direction the cry came. Whatever’s amiss, violence is likely coming.

“It seemed to be from north of here. Vivian, go get your swords—the sharp ones—and meet me outside.” I run as quickly as I can on sore legs to my room. I leave my training swords in the armory building, but my sharp ones stay in my room or with me if I’m out and about in case of emergencies.

I join Master, who’s already on Veirdan with his sword and our pack of basic medical supplies slung over his shoulder. A round shield rests on his back. Grunting, I drag myself first onto Veirdan’s hind leg and then up to his back behind Master. I am barely settled with a firm grip on the spike in front of me when with a mighty whoosh Veirdan propels us skyward. Not accustomed to flying at this speed, my stomach gives a little lurch as my ears pop. I feel my braid waving behind me like a banner in a windstorm. More roars pierce the sky as we draw closer.

We spot a flash of burnt orange scales below and Veirdan starts circling downward. He lands with surprising gentleness and Master Liam jumps off him. I slide off as gracefully as I can, which isn’t saying much, and force a run to catch-up with Master.

When I finally reach him, I see Master has his sword out and his shield on his left arm, and he’s gotten between two petrified, wounded people, a man and woman, and a very angry dragon one-and-a-half times his height. The apparent victims look like average people, perhaps from some village or other, but they’re dressed for travel. Master’s left the medical supplies in their pack next to the couple. Upon seeing me out of the corner of his eye, he instructs me to take the couple back to Veirdan and start tending their wounds. This is easier said than done, since the pair’s injuries inhibit walking. The man has a gash on his leg, but he at least can walk for now. The woman isn’t doing so well; her left lower leg is broken. Using supplies from the pack, I do a rough job of cleaning and bandaging the man’s leg and making a splint for the woman. I leave the other, less serious injuries for later when we’re away from here.

“Help me get her balanced on her good leg between us,” I command the man. He blinks several times as his focus slowly shifts to what I’m saying before complying. This is going to hurt,” I warn the woman, “but we need to get out of here.” She gives only a wide-eyed nod in response and the three of us begin our slow progress back toward Veirdan. We’re almost back without the orange dragon noticing when, seeing us struggling as we approach, Veirdan closes the rest of the distance himself. The woman cries out from a combination of fear of Veirdan and pain as her left leg brushes against the ground when she stops moving. I’m about to make some impatient remark out of my own fear, when I look at the couple and see terror in both pairs of eyes. Unfortunately, we’ve now attracted the orange dragon’s attention. “Don’t worry about Veirdan, the green one! He’ll protect you!” I assure my companions.

I hear Master shout with language he doesn’t normally use. When I turn to look, he’s crouched down blocking a burst of flame with his shield. I gasp when I see the burnt holes on his clothing. The dragon leaps over him and proceeds to pursue us. The dragon looks barely wounded! Didn’t Master Liam take the offensive more? I would’ve thought Master would’ve done better than that. It also occurs to me that most dragons refrain from using fire this close to trees. No wonder Master Liam was surprised.

“Vivian!” Master calls out to me. “Be careful! I didn’t think she’d use fire this close to her eggs!”

“What? Her eggs?” I shout back. No wonder he wasn’t more aggressive. This dragon has babies to care for! Unfortunately, I don’t have much time to think. She’s almost upon us. I do my best to lower the woman to the ground hurriedly, which admittedly didn’t work so well, and draw my swords. As I approach the orange dragon, Veirdan steps in front of the two travelers. If he were to fight the mother dragon, he’d probably stand a better chance than Master and me, but he’d also be more likely to do permanent damage to her, so he stands guard as a last defense. That’s fine. At this point I’m beyond fear, and I can focus with a strange clarity.

“If you stop attacking, we’ll leave!” I offer. I have no idea if she understands, she may not have had enough interaction with humans to be able to, but she reaches a large set of talons forward to knock me aside, but I see this coming and spring back. Next, she tries arching her neck to bite me, which I sidestep. I continue to dodge several more attacks. When they all fail, I see her turn slightly to slam her tail into me. Contrary to what I might normally do, I dive forward behind her leg and, noting how her scales are more like a regular lizard’s than battle armor, reach with my left sword to graze her tail. My attack connects, barely drawing blood. She shifts backwards in an attempt to step on me, but I slip back towards her front with my swords crossed in front of me blocking the claws that would’ve otherwise nicked me.
At this point the orange dragon looks to be tiring and Master Liam joins me. He’s hurt, but not as much so as I’d feared if he’s still able to fight. The mother eyes us warily, as if deciding whether to back off or not. To convince her that backing off is a good idea, Veirdan gives a warning roar, after which she looks anxiously at each of us, responds with a shout of her own, and takes flight.

With sighs of relief Master and I turn to get to work on our new patients’ wounds, and to tend our own, apparently the mother dragon had succeeded in clawing me once. Several minutes into the process I gasp with the onrushing pain of my wound and achy body, but I rally to continue helping Master. The difficult part is figuring out how to transfer the woman without causing her much pain, but Master Liam seems to have handled this problem before. He leaves me with the villagers and rides Veirdan back to our house to return with some rope, a large net, and a wooden board that could cover a twin bed. We rest the board on the net, the woman on the board, and have Veirdan lift the whole contraption by the excess ends of the net so Master and I could secure the woman as well as we could with the rope. We then help the man up onto Veirdan before Master climbs on in front and I settle in the back.

By the time we safely deliver the couple to the town they were trying to reach with their “shortcut” off the normal mountain paths and through dragon nesting territory, it’s evening and time to go home. Today was hard. Tonight, though, I can’t help but feel proud of myself. Before I go to bed for a much needed night’s rest, Master stops me and holds me at arms-length.

“Excellent work today, my young Apprentice.”

“I did it,” I reply triumphantly, returning his smile. “I still haven’t gotten over my fear of failure, but I can handle my fear of fighting dragons now.”

“Well, you’d be foolish to not fear anything. Fear is an incredible motivator of progress. If you didn’t have it I’d be more concerned you’d get yourself killed.”

“More concerned?”

“Now go on. Get to bed. I bet you can guess what you’re doing tomorrow.”

“Ughhh.” I take his advice, and my bed feels wonderful.
“Carter. Carter Newton.”

My name came over the loudspeaker with a screech.

Hmmmm, I had already wrestled and I wasn’t due to wrestle another match for the rest of the meet. I wondered why they wanted me at the head table.

I walked up to the announcer’s booth and told them that I was Carter Newton.

“Son, we have a bit of a problem and we think you can help us out.”

I love wrestling. Always have. Always will. I’ve always wanted to wrestle, but other sports held me back. I was either at the tail end of football, or working out for baseball, or doing something for my family. My eighth grade year was the year that I decided to give up on my baseball career and start wrestling.

One day, my buddy Matt and I were sitting in Spanish class talking about random stuff and during our conversation, he brought up how he was so excited for wrestling to start. I started to ask him a few questions about wrestling and I could see how much he enjoyed it. At the end of our conversation, he told me that I should go out for the sport. I knew in my heart that I was becoming less interested in baseball and when I heard Matt’s enthusiasm for wrestling, I began to think seriously about signing up.

I had a heart-to-heart conversation with my dad about giving up baseball for wrestling and in the end, he told me that it was my decision. My mom had a different take on the sport and she wasn’t as excited as I was about joining, but after talking to her about how much I wanted to be a part of the team, she gave me her OK. That was good enough for me. I texted Matt that night and told him that I wanted to meet the coach.

The next day at school during passing time, Matt and I walked into Coach Rolo’s classroom and I asked if he would consider putting me on the team. A huge grin spread across his face. He said he had been looking for some more wrestlers and had a spot open in my weight class. That’s how it all began.

When the first practice rolled around, I was obviously the new kid. I had no idea what the coach or the wrestlers were talking about, and I especially didn’t know how to do any moves. Coach worked with me individually and taught me some, but the way I learned best was from my buddies Matt and Nick. They worked with me every day after school at practice. I felt like I was a kindergartner just learning how to read and write. They took it slow step by step and by the first match, I felt like I was ready.

I was so excited to be going to my first match at Pioneer Ridge. The long bus ride to the match only fueled my excitement more. The guys on the bus were all talking about approaches, take downs, and pins. I could feel the fire of competition building up in my gut and by the time the bus arrived at Pioneer Ridge, I was ready. We were all ready.

During my first match, I walked out on to the mat. I wanted my opponent to know that I was a serious contender. I looked at him without a smile on my face. I thought I saw him go a little pale but probably I’m making that up. Whatever I told myself then, it was right because I won 7-1. I’ll never forget when the ref grabbed my wrist and flung it up in the air as the winner. I came off the mat with a huge grin on my face and went directly over to the opponent’s coach and shook his hand and then went running up to my own coach who had a smile on his face that matched mine.

The next match changed my life.

“Carter Newton. Please report to the head table.” Again, I was confused. I had already wrestled and I didn’t know why they wanted me to come to the table again.

“Carter, we have a bit of a problem and we think you can help.” It was the opposing coach from my first match.

“Okay, what’s the problem?” I asked, thinking that somehow I did something wrong and I would have to give up my win.

“We want you to wrestle with one of our very special kids.”

“OK, sounds good.” I thought now that I was so good that I was going to have to wrestle someone who was more experienced than I was. Little did I know.

“His name is Robert and we want you to give him a good match.”
“OK, I will.”
“We want you to wrestle him with the moves that you were taught. Don’t go too easy on him. He doesn’t want that. He wants to be a normal wrestler.”

Now it was all coming together. The opposing team had a wrestler who was probably injured or had a disability and they picked me to wrestle him. At first I was confused, but the more I thought about it, the more honored I felt.

“His name is Robert and he’s a little lighter than you are, just to let you know.”

I’m looking around the gym for this wrestler and I think I see him. He does look lighter than me but I don’t see anything else that looks any different, until I see him walk. So in my mind I’m already making up the moves that I work on him. I don’t want him to think that I’m taking it easy on him but I am scared that I might hurt him.

I walk up to a kid who fits the description that the coach gives me and I ask, “Are you Robert?”

He looks at me like he’s confused, but he shakes his head yes. He makes a few sounds that I don’t understand, but I talk to him like I completely know what he’s saying and ask him questions about school, wrestling, and what video games he likes. When he can’t talk he shakes his head yes or no. He’s smiling all of the time and I hope that it’s because he’s getting to wrestle. Before I leave to go to the other side of the mat, I tell him with a grin, “Don’t think I’m going to take it easy on you kid.” He laughs and I leave him with a big smile on his face.

Before I begin the match with Robert, I ask my coach if he has a disability. My coach answers, “Son, Robert was born with CP.”

“OK.” I have no clue what that means, but I know that I want to make this match as special for this wrestler as my own first match.

I walk to the head table to sign in with Robert.

“Are you ready, Robert?” I ask him.

“Are you going to let me win?” He asks in return.

“No, I think you’re better than me so I’m going to have to fight.”

When the ref calls us onto the mat, we both trot out and put our ankle bands on. I help Robert with his as I notice that his hands have trouble making the velcroed ends meet.

I look up one last time and ask him, “Are you ready, boy?”

Robert just snarls jokingly and laughs at me. “Yeah.”

By this time, I had my plan all worked out. I was not going to “let him win.” It would mean more to both of us if I gave him a good match. My plan was to make him work hard and earn the win. I was going to let him take me down a couple of times and I was going to be gentle and take him down a time or two. I wanted to give him the opportunity to put a few moves on me that I knew he had probably practice and I was going to do the same for him. It would be good for both of us. In the end, I wanted the match to go into overtime and that was where I was going to lay down just a little and hopefully let him earn the win.

The whistle blew and we started circling around the mat. He takes a shot. I let him take me to the ground. I slowly stand up. Then I slowly take a shot and lightly take him down. He stands up and he takes another shot. I let him gain four points back. I can feel his body shaking a little and I look up and see that he laughing and having a blast. This is a lot of fun for me, too. I’m laughing as much as he is.

I get up and act like I’m taking a shot and I let him block it. He takes me down and I slowly reverse it. Now I’m on top and I ask him if he’s OK. He just laughs again and I take that for a yes. He starts to grunt as he tries to flip me over, and I know he might be in pain. I let him flip me and now he’s on top trying to go for the pin.

When the final round is over, the ref blows his whistle and I get up and hold a hand out to Robert to help him up. Neither one of us has looked at the scoreboard. As I take off my ankle strap, I sneak a glance at the scorer’s table and I’m disappointed. I beat him by one point, 10 to 9. When I look back at Robert, I know that he doesn’t care. He has the biggest smile on his face that I’ve ever seen. After the ref holds up my wrist as the winner, I reach for Robert’s and hold his up with mine. We were both winners today.

The match may have only been seven minutes, but I know that it will be a memory that will last a lifetime for both of us.
Dear Phil's Phamily Corp.,

I am sorry to say that the sister I received in the mail is a bit defective. It appears that the handling department of the Intergalactic Shipping Co., Inc, was none too gentle with the package, and this can only be traced back to the lack of priority sync by SpaceShip, which was included in the deal we arranged through our Comms-Linc exchange. The model is dented, tattered, lacking a limb or two and seems to have a permanent sneer on her face. Needless to say, it is not a pretty sight.

I also must complain about the intelligence of the Sister. She is dumber than a rock, and so are all the ones my friends received from the special three for one offer as seen on VirtHub. It seems the Intelligence Systems installed at the Reproduction Plant that you own have been tampered with during the trip between the labor building and the final inspection strip. This is unacceptable. You claim to have the some of the most secure production facilities in the universe. I, however, beg to differ. Unless I am mistaken, this flaw is not possible without some level of hacking and infiltration. I strongly suggest you check your security resources.

The Sister also has no appreciation for the classic works of art of the past age. Works such as Lord of the Rings, the Origin of Species, the historical text Enders Game, and even the almanac “The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy” are immediately shunned by her petty ears. She formulates opinions of topics before she has even been exposed unbiased to the topic itself. This is stupid. This is intolerable. This should be a crime against humanity.

Her emotional center seems to be a bit hyper-reactive. She is caught up in everything current, and is constantly on Ultra-Gram and FaceWeb. She has an insanely and annoyingly positive outlook on things when she is in a good position, but as soon as one thing that is only the tiniest bit offensive reaches her ears, she practically burst into tears. I tried to correct her Drama setting, but alas, it is stuck on “High.” She hates a challenge, and thinks she and her friends are the coolest thing since Icesmashers. The Sister seems to have psychological problems as well, since she thinks that being nerdy is cool and is what she is, and acts impossibly stranger whenever her friends are around. Almost all of her time is spent either HyperMessaging or on Face2Face or watching horrible abominations of children’s shows that either milk the life out of kid actors or are so insanely childish and dumb that they don’t deserve to exist. Also, she sings to the radio.

I would like for a full refund of the purchase price, plus shipping.

Sincerely,
Jimothy Suixjahv

60284021 Main Street Rd.,
Freeland, New Eden
3/27/2115

Dear Mr. Suixjahv,
We have received your letter, and would like to apologize for the inconvenience we have placed you in. We here at Phil’s Phamily Corp. assure you that this will not happen again. Not only have we refunded your purchase price, but because of our error, we would like to present you with an (up to) 75% Off Gift Card! that can be used on your next purchase at here Phil’s Phamily Corp!

However, it is my duty to point out the misunderstandings that have gone on between us.

First off, you seem to have forgotten that the Sister we sold you is, in fact, based on a real-life flesh-and-bone human being female sibling, and is therefore stupid and fickle by nature. You may not be aware of this, but there was once a time whenever a sister was made by two people, specifically a man and a woman, who loved each other very much. The woman then grew very large, until the time came for her to have a child, which would be a sister if it was a girl and possessed another sibling, be the sibling boy or girl, younger or older. This process was called natural reproduction. The sister would then, at least in most cases, would grow to have exactly the features that you described in your letter as being annoying. Therefore, we did not make a mistake in the Sister’s qualities; the mistakes were made by nature.

The next misconception that you seem to have is that it is our mistake that the Sister was injured on its journey to your home. We support Intergalactic Galactic Shipping Co., Inc, as you should have been made aware of by our sales representative. Even so, it is not IGSCI’s fault for the imperfections in her model. It is very busy this time of year with InterGalactic Holiday Winter Giving Day, and the Mailbots get very stressed while trying to make their exceptionally longer routes for delivery. It is the holiday strain that is the cause of this strife, and no one is responsible.

We hope we did not cause too much pain or sorrow, and we hope that you will continue to buy from our stores. I might suggest that you buy the “Perfect Sister” next time you go searching for a sibling, as they are much more customizable and better for your psychological health.

Sincerely,
Robert Planc
Complaints, Phil’s Phamily Corp.

4/3/2115

Dear Phil’s Phamily Corp.

I have received your reply and am happy to say that I will never be purchasing from you again. There are much better family creators out there that not only cost less but also have much better quality as well.

I did try to use your gift card, but when I went to the checkout table, the cashier totaled up the bill like it normally would have cost. This started a major argument between the two of us, which eventually ended up in me getting arrested for a week for threatening the cashier and manager with a gun. He said that the price was right as it was, gift card included. This made me rage, as I hadn’t realized that Up To 75% Off! meant any number that had a value less than 75, including but not limited to 0. I am disgusted with your attitude and way of customer service, and personally think you should go to let’s just say very bad place.

Yours Truly,
Jimothy Suixjahv
Faith Vietor  
Critical Essay: For Love of Country: Why Sweden’s Social Structure Survives  
Blue Springs High School  
Tara Edwards, Teacher

Kailey begins her mornings already weighed down by mature problems. On the surface, life as a ten-year-old girl in Iowa, living with her mother and brother, seems like the quintessential American experience. Dig a little deeper, and you will find a naturally vivacious child muted by a financial quandary. Kailey’s mother is a single-parent hairdresser, who despite working long hours, struggles to provide her children with enough food. Kailey admits she goes to bed hungry sometimes and does not have the luxury of snacking. Her brother, age twelve, mows lawns and gives all but a few dollars back to his mother. Kailey receives no extracurricular enrichment; instead, she wanders around town collecting cans in her free time. The family is forced to give up their dog and move into a motel where they refrigerate their milk by icing it in the bathroom sink. This story is not an anomaly; sixteen million American children live below the poverty line (“Poor Kids”). It is almost unimaginable that a country with one of the most powerful economies features such raw socioeconomic inequalities. What is more disturbing is that this strife is avoidable. The socialistic Swedish government enacts practical programs to benefit all citizens, such as housing, child support, and retirement, whereas United States citizens desire the benefits, but are not willing to pay the taxes to support these programs.

Sweden’s approach to welfare is tailored and well organized juxtaposed to the United States’ blanket method of giving money to the lower-income earners. The Swedish government promotes specific programs that function proactively in defense of poverty rather than funding remedial fixes later. This enlightened method of relief hinges on the humanitarian methods in which the government perceives problems and conquers them. Opposed to a one-size-fits-all detached program, the Swedish have built in smaller safety nets, decisive methods that have definitive results. In terms of health care, physician visits are subsidized in local county clinics. Prescriptions are also subsidized, but life-saving drugs are free, meaning no citizen would be forced to foreclose on a home because of an unfortunate diagnosis. Free hospital care is also provided. Dental treatment is subsidized, but for children it is offered for free. There is no female plight in Sweden: free maternity clinics, sterilizations, and abortions are available, again at no direct cost to the patient. Other measures promote a concentric familial life, giving parents a combined sixteen months off work with eighty percent of regular wages. High-quality daycares and preschools are required by law to be locally available for at least three hours a day. Prices for these centers are capped at one to three percent of a family’s yearly income. For each child in a family, parents are given a monthly payment of about $135; for single parents, there is an additional payment of $170 per child. Not only are these institutions keeping their citizens’ vaccines current, they are setting up the younger generation of Swedes for healthier and more productive lives. Collectively, these programs hearken back to the days of the United States’ Great Depression. President Roosevelt attacked widespread poverty with novel strategies, by paying regular citizens to build new government structures, compensating artists for murals and theatre productions, and funding forest service squads. It is logical that instead of retroactively managing poverty, the Swedish are using unique and pointed methods to help citizens in the most beneficial way. The United States needs to customize policies because “promoting employment without addressing issues of skills training, discrimination, and physical isolation will not lift low-income working families out of poverty and into the middle class” (Simms). Before a widespread system of benefits reaches the middle class, fundamental programs must be laid as groundwork for the disadvantaged. Vocational schools and tutoring centers should be located in every neighborhood. Fully funding preschools will give disadvantaged children a foothold in this competitive economy. Interestingly enough, “the United States has the fifth highest social spending in the world, just after Sweden” (Morgan). Yet, the percentage of social spending is lower per person for the United States, which leaves a sobering message. Rather than bicker over the quantity of money available, the next initiative should be to enact meaningful strategies with the capital we do have.

Although the Swedes pay almost half of their incomes to taxes, there are definitely no free lunches. While the benefits of this high-tax system are innumerable, they are also superior. In the United States the average maternity leave consists of four to six weeks at home with the baby, but women are only guaranteed their pay
if they work at good companies or they are professionals, sometimes, not even then. The law requires a new parent’s employer to hold his or her job for only three months (of course without compensation). Sweden’s policy is luxurious in comparison. Both parents share sixteen months leave, and each is required to take at least two months. Eighty percent of income is replaced for the first thirteen months with a set rate for the last three. This time off can be utilized at any time until the child’s eighth birthday. Once again, Sweden proactively plans social welfare to produce positive outcomes. Olsen maintains, “Swedish policies have sought to create greater opportunities for women to enter and remain in the labor force and to reconstruct traditional gender roles by, for example, encouraging men to play a larger role in childcare.” One key factor of the social programs is that they are available to all types of citizens and are hassle-free. In the U.S. inaccessibility stifles the poverty-stricken. Minimum-wage workers often do not have the resources, transportation, and time to meddle with the paper work of the Medicaid and Women Infants and Children (WIC) programs. On a smaller and perhaps more meaningful scale, they cannot readily seek out local aide opportunities for the same reasons. Sweden succeeds at a being reliable. Instead of a patchwork of coverage, all Swedes can count on their citizenship to give them crucial benefits. With the United States’ position of power, it is quite shocking how the country compares with equally developed nations, in terms of humanitarian assistance. Sweden’s edge is that it goes straight to the heart of its people’s needs. Their system does not give direct welfare strictly to the poor. The United States, on the other hand, aims help towards the lower-income bracket, but instead, poverty levels remain stagnant. Not surprisingly, “although many countries have experienced rising poverty and inequality in recent decades... what sets the United States apart is how weakly these trends have been counteracted by tax and spending policies” (Morgan). It is clear that Americans will never come to expect the yearlong maternity leave of the Swedes, unless they agree to pay higher taxes and start climbing out of the capitalistic hole in which many workers are trapped.

But Americans have been raised on a “me and mine” philosophy, rather than an “us” philosophy. By looking out for number one, Americans miss a larger picture of what could improve all our lives. One tenant of the Swedish social welfare system is its full-backing by citizens; the Swedes are raised to care for their neighbors and the common good, while Americans have developed a staunchly selfish approach to life and material possessions. Although most Americans would tout their patriotic and Christian ways, the current United States social system does not care for the plight of the low-income earner. The Swedish recognize that major portions of their incomes are paid to the government, but, unlike Americans, they deem it reasonable and ethical. Even if a family in Sweden is financially sound, they know their tax dollars are funding the improvement of the country and its citizens in need. Meanwhile, in the States, fundraisers are held in churches and schools for families fighting recent cancer diagnoses; Americans seem to feel that this is an acceptable method. The Swedish people not only look to the immediate needs of their citizens, but also make honest investments in their people as humans who deserve meaningful lives. Rather than give them dilapidated Section Eight housing or boxes of Kraft macaroni on the WIC program, all Swedish people are incorporated into the regular standards of society. They receive the same top-notch medical care and are even offered free personal contraceptive counseling. Also, there is an average of a six to one ratio of students to teachers for local preschools. Alternately, the United States handles the issue of social help begrudgingly, looking down upon those who need assistance, while wondering why precious tax dollars are not doing more for the country. Unfortunately, “U.S. social welfare spending is comparatively high but only minimally redistributive,” leaving many Americans to feel as if parting with their hard-earned dollars is a waste (Morgan).

Even socialistic European countries have flirted with the American model of lower taxes, but these countries have experienced American social angst. When Sweden’s government suddenly became more conservative, moving away from the strict Social-Democracy in the 1990s, funding was cutback, and the negative effects were evident. There was no sign of a pending economic slump; employment rates were high and the budget was secure. Ginsburg and Rosenthal cite a more precise causation, noting, “the emphasis was on free markets, deregulation, and privatization... The national government has [since] increasingly thrust responsibility for health and social services onto local government.” As the country became less efficient and unemployment spiked to the highest levels in decades, it was clear that the system was not operating effectively. The entire complex of social welfare—the low inequality rates—collapsed because of the capitalistic greed. During this time, tax cuts favored the rich, and a huge government bailout was required. Conversely, “poverty among children... [rose] from 3 to 4.2 percent” (Ginsburg and Rosenthal). Some might perceive this downturn as an experimental blip that proved the Swedes to be overly dependent on the welfare...
system. This turmoil more accurately proved that the more capitalistic a government becomes, the more frequently citizens are abandoned. The spectrum of wealth is shifted, heavily favoring the small sector at the top of the scale. Rather than promoting a burst of energy from the lower classes, it places them in precarious positions that are impossible escape. What the United States government has yet to understand is that if programs are designed to promote individuals into a high-functioning status, they will not have to rely on a constant income check and will become self-sufficient.

The most critical aspect of the Swedish welfare system is its endeavor to provide equal opportunities for all individuals. America is held up to be the land of possibility. Can this title still be claimed if we have children like Kailey who are already disadvantaged? If our next generation of citizens is to be the power behind biotechnical revolutions, new alternative energy resources, and overseas outreach programs, we need to raise all of our children with the idea that each will contribute something grand to the human condition. The United States must surpass the preconceived ideas of welfare, recognize the shocking need, and enact tailored solutions.

Works Cited

A report exposes the challenges performing musicians are subject to. A large percentage of professional musicians suffer from a psychological issue and about half are raging alcoholics. Anti-social working hours seem to be a leading cause and are a big problem for professional musicians regarding their mental health. It is not confirmed whether or not these hardships stem from work or drugs; however, this seems to be an ongoing problem with no means of improvement within the arts. This is quite possibly due to the fact that most musicians can’t afford a therapist considering the average performer only makes about $41,600 a year.

A performing musician can’t always expect a steady income unlike most occupations. As part of our own study, we interviewed a few musicians and asked them what they do when ends don’t meet. Many have resulted to prostitution, drug pushing, or substance abuse. These are their stories.

In one particular case, an anonymous musician reported that he once was asked to play the viola in his underwear at Motel 6 for 45 dollars an hour while the customer ”adjusted his antenna.” According to the musician, “the experience was quite uncomfortable. I would never want to do something so humiliating and awkward again, but whenever you’re not sure if you will be able to pay off student loans you would be surprised what you might resort to,” he sobbed.

In another interview, a musician claimed that she has had to push drugs in order to make house payments. The former crystal marijuana saleswoman said “I’m not necessarily proud of what I’ve had to do in order to stay afloat, but I would do it again if I had to. She understands the harm in what she’s done; she has watched lives crumble with each drug deal. This guilt has led to depression which led to alcoholism consuming her life. The worst part of it all is that once her business really started to take off, crystal marijuana was legalized. Every Wall-Mart across the country was matching her prices. Even then she still made enough to survive, but eventually everyone jumped on the crystal marijuana sales band wagon. She stated that, “the last straw for me was when I walked into my neighborhood West-lake and saw four adorable Girl Scouts selling crystal marijuana brownies to support their club. That was the moment all hope was lost.” It is clear the life of a musician is very trying and extremely diminishing.

On that note, I wanted to take my research a little further. I interviewed one of my close friends, Mara Sathews, and asked her to tell us a little bit about her life as a musician. She started music at a very early age and it’s played a large role in her life since. Throughout adolescence, music had a positive influence on her life up until she got a taste of what the professional world was like. After being beaten in an audition by a flute player with only one arm, Sara fell into a deep depression and became shamefully addicted to crystal marijuana. Sadly, her addiction cost her musical abilities, friends, family, home, and Victoria’s Secret underwear collection. She did have a brief relationship with a freeloading sociopath because, in her fallen state, she believed he was the best she could do. The relationship ended shortly after, when the man realized he could only date someone if they were capable of paying all of his bills and doing his laundry.

These accounts reflect the lengths people will go in order to survive in the cold world of the arts. As classical music appreciation dwindles, so do the lives of musicians everywhere. So next time you’re walking down the street and you see a starving musician on the side of the road, consider dropping some coins, or giving up a few French fries, or possibly a piece of gum. Even the small things can help. Together, we can help mend the broken lives of these musicians.

This article was updated on 8 January 2014.
After Dr. Powers told me that my dad needed me immediately, I asked my friend’s mother for a ride. On the way I couldn't feel my breath. The air suffocated me. He was in the hospital for three days, and his condition was fine. He just had an angry stomach. Why would he want to disturb me during school?

It turns out that it was to make a decision. The surgeon came in the hospital room and said, “We don’t know what is exactly bothering him. We need to open his belly and see if there is a twist or a knot on his intestines. It won’t be a big surgery, don’t worry, everything depends on what we find during the surgery.”

I stood there and frowned. Millions of thoughts passed through my mind while the never-ending tick tock sound from the clock reminded me that I was wasting time.

The doctor looked at me, and said, “Every surgery has its risk, we will do our best. Now, I’ll give you two some time to make the decision.” She walked out the ward and closed the door behind her.

I narrowed my eyes and stared at my father’s hand. I raised my vision and saw the sodium chloride fluids passing through the tube. He was lying impotently on the hospital bed with a sense of misery in him. His throat tightened when he tried to make a sound but no word could be heard. His legs became swollen from the injection of IV fluids. There were too many tubes and needles for me to keep track of. The veins were so distinct that it hurt my eyes. His lips had pieces of skin hanging which someone could have easily ripped off. There was a distance between the bed and my position. I knew I should have said something supportive but I just stood there, avoided eye contact with him, and said nothing.

Subconsciously, I blamed him for putting my in a situation where I am expected to treat him as a family member when he was never a family member to me. The memory from the past inundated me. I remembered myself, as a kid, asking my aunt when I would be able to see my father. I remember at the parent-teacher conferences, the only family member I had was my aunt. I remembered his absence for seven years. I remembered the odd feeling when I moved to America and lived with my so called father. It was like living in a stranger’s house.

Every precise beat from the clicking medical machine made me want to shove a plug inside of my ears and separate me from this stressful world.

I could feel his eyes fixed on me, I knew he was trying to talk to me, but there was nothing to say. It was clear that other than the biological connection between us, there was nothing.

I knew I had to make the choice. I held my fists together and suggested, “It’s better for you, just to make sure. Let’s do it, ok?”

He opened his chapped lips, and huskily replied, “ok.”

In the prep room, I was standing next to my dad. I still did not know what to say. I was just looking at the floor stolidly. The aggravating beatings from the heart rate machine were the only life symptoms in the room. The nurses came in and out. They always smiled at me when they were passing by. It was the smile. I hated it. How could anybody smile in a hospital? It is supposed to be full of grief and sorrow. Why would they smile?

Then an old man came in. The blue surgery uniform fitted perfectly on him. He stood tall and straight, and introduced himself as the anesthesiologist for my dad’s surgery. His lips were thin and they made a huge curve. There was something special about him. I do not know if it was the vibe he was giving or his sound. It was so reassuring and I liked his smile.

After the formal introducing, he said, “ni hao.” The sound that came from his low voice was so shocking.

My dad muttered some vowels excitedly. He would've jumped up if he could. It was nice to have someone to communicate with in a foreign country. The anesthesiologist said that he was fascinated by the Chinese culture and language when he visited.

My dad found his voice back and gasped, “I know. It is really amazing, isn’t it?”

The anesthesiologist giggled and smiled at my father. Then he looked at me and said, “I understand it is hard for you, I understand. Please, trust me. I know what I am doing.”

It was his tone, his gentle voice. It broke me.
When he said, “I understand,” that low and deep voice touched me from the deepest part of my heart. That was all I wanted. I did not want the vague phrase that “everything will be ok” or “he’ll be fine.” I wanted someone to understand how hard it was for me. After my world fell apart, everyone was expecting me to be the bravest and hang in there. I tried, I really did. I was only fifteen, and what can you expect from a teenager? I was all by myself, and it was the most difficult thing I have ever had to deal with. I tried to keep my optimism, but it was hard.

My eyes teared up and I turned around when the anesthesiologist was talking to my father. They were speaking in Chinese. The vowels of the words that came out of my father’s mouth were clearer. His words with the delightful tone filled the room. I suddenly felt sorry for him. It was also hard for him to be sick in a different country, while the only person he could rely on was his fifteen year old daughter.

Then I turned back. A faint smile grew across my father’s face as he was talking, but his eyes were watery. His lips were still dry but they expanded to a great length that his skin started to peel off. His smile extended to his eyes, and despite the wrinkles on the corners, his eyes were like the shape of a half moon.

He was happy.

At that moment, he was like an innocent child. All he wanted was someone to talk to him, but I just stood there the whole time. He did not want to be sick, but even a strong man like him would fall down someday, and it was not his fault. I never tried to understand him. I never realized that all he wanted right now was a company. He needed family members beside him and I was the only one. After all, he still tried his best to support me in his own ways. I just didn’t see it since I was so trapped in the idea that he didn’t fulfill my expectations of a father, which is just my naive understanding of responsibilities.

The room went back to silence. The conversation between them was over. It was time for my father to go into the surgery room. The anesthesiologist pushed my father’s bed in motion. I felt a sudden urge to walk towards the bed. I looked right into my father’s pitiful eyes. I bit my lips and licked them. Hesitantly, I made out the sentence.

“Just relax. It’s going to be ok. I will wait here, dad.”

It was the time for me to grow up and take care of my old man. I am his family, and he can rely on me.
“Everything happens for a reason and there is good and bad in everything.” – Susan E. West.

My mom would always say this and most of the time I didn’t believe her. I had the mindset that if you are having a bad time, it was bad and there was no bright side to it. But later I learned she was right. I was only four at the beginning of everything, but it made me realize how important life is and that if you find the good in the bad it will help you get through the hard times.

In 2004, my mom was driving my sister to school when she began to have a seizure. The seizures were all because of a drunk driver who hit my parents head-on causing a traumatic brain injury in 1994. Not long after she began to have seizures and, in 2006 she had Grand Mal seizure, According to Mayo Clinic, “A grand mal seizure — also known as a generalized tonic-clonic seizure — features a loss of consciousness and violent muscle contractions.” I can remember it happened when Chloe, my sister’s friend, was about to leave and we were eating rock candy. We were in the other room and my mom was at the front door waiting to open it for Chloe’s mom. We heard a crash, it was my mom; she had gone unconscious and fallen to the ground. Next thing we knew, the ambulance was there along with my dad. I can remember visiting her in the hospital one night and almost breaking down in tears.

She battled with seizures up until 2010, when she had surgery to remove the part of her brain where the seizures were coming from. This helped for a while, but they later returned. After the surgery, her short term memory was partially gone. She would sometimes forget things she had just done. Watching her have a seizure was one of the scariest things for me. Even though I had seen it before, it scared me every time. You never knew what was going to happen.

During the next few years, every Labor Day she would have a big seizure. They couldn’t find where they were coming from. After numerous tests and MRI’s they discovered the other side of her brain was producing the seizures now. She stayed in the hospital for weeks while doctors figured out all the details of the problem.

After fighting and suffering for many years, my mom took her life. It was November 18th 2013. I can remember the last words I said to her the night before “Night mom, love you” she replied “Night, love you too.” I would have never imagined those would be our last words to each other. The memory of that day sticks in my head like it was yesterday. I stayed late at school that day because I had after school band, and I rode the activity bus home. I rang the doorbell thinking my mom would be there to answer it, but no one answered. I assumed she had gone on a walk or that my mamaw had come up early. As I walked inside, I yelled “MOM, MOM!” No answer. I tried not to panic because the thought of “What if she killed herself?” crossed my mind a couple of times. I set my backpack down on the kitchen floor began to walk back to the bathroom. As I passed my sisters room I saw a note on her desk, so I walked in. I normally would have ignored a piece of paper on the desk, but that day something told me to go read it. I began to read it out loud. As I read it, the words stuck in my brain, and I knew they wouldn’t leave. “I’m sorry I wasn’t a better mother, enjoy your life without this burden.” That’s when I broke down crying.

I called my sister out of panic. The words that were coming out of my mouth made no sense. I screamed “Mom’s dead!” and kept yelled “Come home now!” I didn’t know what to do, so I ran to the living room and waited for her to get home. When she arrived, she read the note and began to cry as well. We called our dad and told him to get home now. He turned on his sirens and raced home. We set on step outside waiting from him to show up. He tried to keep his composure for us but I could tell he was in pain. We stood outside while he ran around the house frantically. Our neighbor noticed us and asked what happened; we just started crying in her arms. The thing about our neighbors is they are like our extended family. Danielle my sister was sitting on the driveway with one of our other neighbors standing next to her.

That night we were surrounded by my family members, neighbors, friends and police. I can remember my aunt saying “Tell me all the happy things you remember about your mom and try to think of positive things.” That night flashes in my mind every day and is a constant reminder how important life is.

Through all of this surprisingly there was something good that came out of this. It taught me to always stay strong and helped me become a better person. It made me respect all aspects of life. I don’t know why all
of this happened to our family, but I believe God had reason for it and I may never figure it out. I think all of this shaped who I am and my character. I still cry about it every day, and as it approaches a year since that day, I think about it even more. When something bad happens, it might be hard to think of something happy or good but it will help you get through it.
Mahatma Gandhi once said, “The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.” The summer I turned seventeen, I discovered this truth for myself when a little girl whom I had the joy of serving introduced me to my value as a person without ever saying a word.

I was born with a disease called Alopecia Universalis, which has affected my immune system in such a way that my body perceives my hair follicles as infections, and consequently expels them from my body. My disease does not threaten my life, but it certainly does alter it, and life as a bald seventeen-year-old girl is often less than ideal. More curious than my condition, however, is my society’s response to it: Although my disease certainly causes me to stand out in a crowd, strangers see me first and foremost for what is lacking. Somehow, despite the telltale appearance of the disease that stole my hair from me, those who manage not to taunt me simply act as though I do not exist. Beyond the reaches of logic, far beyond my understanding, a disease that cannot be hidden has in turn hidden me from much of society.

This unsettling truth has always upset me, but never did I question its validity until the summer I turned seventeen. That summer, I lived a beautiful five weeks in the golden, rolling hills of southwest Missouri, serving as a volunteer at a Christian summer camp for people who have special needs. Surely there is nowhere quite like those campgrounds, where strangers linked by faithful hearts give their lives, their love, and their strength for one another for weeks at time. The campers, young and old, rich and poor, verbal and non-verbal, bring indescribable joy to the volunteers who love them so. Grounded in that joy, the days that transpire within the camp gates surpass even the best of days outside of them, for there and there alone can one discover one’s true worth. The beauty of this particular summer camp rests in its innate ability to peek under the thick layers of diagnoses to reveal the shining personality of each and every individual who walks or wheels into its gates. As a long-term volunteer there, I had long since acquired this ability, and to this day, one of my greatest joys comes from reveling in the vibrancy that these often-overlooked individuals exhibit when simply given the chance. Though I delight in uncovering such value in others, I struggle to find value in myself.

During my third week as a volunteer there that summer, I met a little girl named Lilly. Sweet Lilly, who is only nine years old, was born with a handful of medical labels ranging from a chromosomal abnormality to seizure disorders, and plenty in between. Because her developmental age is about eighteen months, gentle Lilly needed my help with eating, bathing, dressing, diapering, and walking, and she didn’t talk much. While they naturally dictate much of her day-to-day life, none of Lilly’s diagnoses define her in any way. In fact, this little girl thrives under conditions that would enervate people many times her age. From the day I met her, I refused to see Lilly as anything but perfect, and I genuinely delighted in the opportunity to celebrate her worth during our week together.

As Lilly and I grew closer that week, and as my body grew stronger from carrying her and pushing her in her chair each day, my heart for her expanded by the second. That week, I lived to make Lilly smile. I truly endeavored to push my own needs away for her sake— not for my own boasting, but for her greater joy—and so it was through serving and celebrating this little one who had so deftly captured my heart that I discovered my own worth.

All week, at every mealtime prayer, I kept my eyes locked on my girl, convinced by the knowledge of her seizure-prone diagnoses that the moment I looked away, she would seize. My time at camp had familiarized me with seizures, and I had provided aid for at least a dozen of them in the three weeks before meeting Lilly, but never had I seen one overcome someone as small as she. I was terrified by the thought that if I closed my eyes for a moment of reverent prayer, I could open them to find this child seizing and scared. I watched her vigilantly for those first four days, and never once did Lilly seize.

On the fifth day of camp, as campers prepared to return home to a world that too often hesitates to embrace them, I prepared my heart to say goodbye to the little girl I had come to love so dearly. Despite my dedication to attentive prayer with open eyes locked on Lilly every day, I decided to close my eyes during the final supper prayer in tribute to the deeply spiritual week as it came to an end. Suppertime came, and as we
bowd our heads, I closed my eyes at last. Less than fifteen seconds later, following the “Amen,” I opened them, feeling peaceful and refreshed, until fear gripped my heart.

Lilly was seizing.

The very thing I had worked to avoid had begun while I sat obliviously less than an arm’s length away. I was overcome by a devastating guilt as I cleared the dishes from her place setting and worked to help my girl, delegating the emergency response tasks to the volunteers around me. A dreadful two minutes and sixteen seconds elapsed as I sat by her, wanting nothing more than to help and yet finding myself completely useless, knowing that there was nothing I could do until the convulsions began to slow. As Lilly came out of her seizure, grey face dripping with tears and saliva, I scooped her up in my arms and carried her safely to the well-house, where doctors and nurses would monitor her closely.

Lilly continued to seize as I held her that evening. As closing ceremonies wrought with laughter commenced around camp and volunteers snapped smiling pictures with their campers, I held my girl close on the lower cot of a bunk-bed in the well-house, praying for rest to supersede the waves of convulsions. Late that night, when her seizures finally slowed, her medication kicked in, and she sank into a deep recovery sleep, I climbed up to the top bunk and drifted into fitful dreams and shallow rest. I awoke twenty minutes later, struck with a sense of self-hatred like the likes of which had never hit me before. Lying on that plastic cot, listening closely to be sure that Lilly kept breathing, I was beside myself with shame for having taken a moment of rest just when my girl needed me most. Hot tears rolled sideways off my cheeks onto the mattress as I replayed the evening’s events, and despite having been awake for so long, sleep eluded me.

Finally, in the earliest hours of the morning, my grief shattered when I heard Lilly cry out in fear, having woken up from the effects of her medication and having found herself engulfed in nighttime darkness. I banished all thoughts of self, from the sleep deprivation to the uneaten supper and everything in between, and jumped down off that bunk to get to her side. As she fell asleep in my arms, pacified by the presence of someone who did her best to make everything better, I cried in relief as I realized that the very child whom I felt I had failed still loved me simply because I loved her. It didn’t matter to her that my very best hadn’t been enough in those two minutes and sixteen seconds, because in every other moment throughout the week, it had been enough. Lilly knew I loved her. She knew how much I cared for her, so to her, the moments in which I was not vigilant did not invalidate all the moments before and after when I was completely present.

Furthermore, I realized, Lilly had never cared that the counselor with whom she was placed was the bald one. She had never factored that into my value as a care-giver...so why should I factor it into my value as a person? Needless to say, I was stunned by the pure forgiveness and unreserved love that this little girl gave to me so freely, and I stayed awake from that moment on, sitting upright and cross-legged on the cold floor at the foot of Lilly’s bunk in case she needed me again. Still I was unable to sleep, but instead of overbearing self-loathing, the hindrance was now an overwhelming sense of gratefulness for the precious little life that changed mine.

As the sun rose over the happiest place on earth, Lilly awoke. She smiled when she saw me, and giggled all the way to breakfast. The seizures that had wrecked my heart were just another part of her life, and her recovery was seamless. Although it broke my heart that such scary episodes had become commonplace for Lilly, her quick recovery soothed my fears for her wellbeing, and the lesson she taught me clung to my heart.

I said goodbye to my girl that day, sending her safely home with her family. The camp began to clear as volunteers and campers returned to their homes, and in preparation for another week at camp, I returned to my cabin to rest and reflect.

In the eyes of much of the world, Lilly’s life has little worth. After almost a decade of life, she still struggles with speech and movement, a hindrance has become fundamental to the way I perceive myself: Because of Lilly’s diagnoses, but in the world around her that refuses to see the beauty that radiates from her life.

Loving Lilly taught me that beauty exists beyond just the traditional sense. Beauty blooms where compassion thrives and where quiet love wins. That single moment when her innocent logic quelled my self-contempt has proven invaluable to me, and has become fundamental to the way I perceive myself. Because of Lilly, now I see that that which is overlooked is not unworthy, it simply has yet to be discovered.
Yueyi (Emily) Zhao
Short Story: Elegy
John Burroughs School
Eleanor DesPrez, Teacher

The boy dreamt dreams the consistency of chilled molasses throughout which birds outside pined hymns. He had fallen asleep to the last forlorn sun of daylight savings and when he awoke the clock read 6:31 am. The sparrows still strung out their dirges.

Dad, he said. His dad had promised to take him apple picking. Today was the day. He dragged himself down the hallway on legs still sloggy with nightmares. He walked into the room and his brain cracked with foreboding. It already smelled empty.

Dad?
Dad?
Dad.

The boy called his mother first and she took an hour to arrive. By then he was sitting at the breakfast table with a slice of the pumpkin pie they had bought the previous day. She stood in the doorway in her new fur coat that smelled of another man and looked at her son’s milk mustache.

Will.
Is he here? he asked.
Who?
You know who.
What are you talking about. She might have been crying.
Mark. Is Mark here.
He’s outside in the car. I couldn’t drive myself.
Okay.
Why are you eating pumpkin pie?
The boy finished the slice. She stayed standing with the door cracked open behind her. His fingers on the milk glass were slender and cold. He put the plate and fork and glass in the sink. The fur around his mother’s neck glistened.

Dad’s upstairs. In his bed.
I know, honey.
We need to go get him.
Yes we do.
We need to go get him.
I can’t do it right now.
Do you want me to get Mark?
What? No.
We need to go get Dad.
I’m going to call 911 soon.
You should go see him.
I don’t know if I can.
Okay. We were going to go apple picking.
I’ll take you apple picking, she said.
No you won’t.

She finally closed the door and took off her coat and laid it across the back of his dad’s dining chair. Like the big dark animal that had eaten him from the inside. Big and dark and unknown. He went to the window and saw a silver car behind his dads with Mark’s silhouette staining its driver’s side window and its exhaust spinning sad spirits into the morning. Behind him his mother had sat down in the chair still warmed by his fevered body and set her head on her forearms. A mousy bird flew into the glass. Why did the bird want to be inside? He hated the bird for singing his dad’s elegy. If it came inside he would kill it.

I’m going biking.
You shouldn’t do that right now.
I’m going to say hi to Mark.
You’re going to go biking anyway aren’t you?
Yes.
Okay.
Okay.
A shadowy arm behind the silver car’s tinted window batted a greeting but the boy passed without acknowledging that the formalities or desires or squelching heart or rasping lungs of the thing inside the vehicle. He rolled his dad’s bicycle out of the garage. The sun pricked the exposed chrome. Garish flecks. The seat was too high for him so he leaned it against the corner of the garage and tried to scrabble his way up. He slipped and the sparrows laughed as his body scraped pink against asphalt.
Pink the rims of his dad’s eyes. Opened wide but not seeing the blank ceiling.
The sky was of the bottomless deep autumn variety. The kind of sky in which the boy’s supple body could almost lose itself as it leapt from bough to bough rattling the overripe apples into heaps. The orchard was a five minute drive down gaunt gravel paths along the two lane highway. His dad had said any pedestrians on those paths must have a death wish but he had also promised to take the boy apple picking. The boy pumped through the neighborhood of sleeping houses and out onto the big road.
He thought about Mark getting out of the silver car and sitting down next to his mother in his dad’s old dining seat and he almost turned around. It was too early for anyone to be driving on a Sunday especially after daylight savings ended so he biked along the yellow double lines. He had forgotten his gloves. And a satchel to bring back apples. The apple satchel would have been in his dad’s closet balled behind rows of dress shoes so shiny he had once begged his dad to not wear them. He wondered whether they would take the shoes. He did not know who they was. The grassy nothings on either side of the road reminded him of his mother’s eyes. He hoped she would not touch the shoes.
He knew the orchard owners still slept because their Labrador was not outside to bark at him when he leaned his bike against the halfhearted fencing around their trees and slid through the small gate for friends. He thought about going to the front door his dad had helped paint rich navy and telling them. They would still be wearing the velvet slippers the wife loved so much. She had given a pair to his dad. They nested at the foot of his bed every night. This is how it would go.
Good morning mister and missus.
Good morning Will. It’s awfully early to be picking apples isn’t it. Although you’re always welcome you know.
Yes. Thank you missus. Dad just passed. I thought you should know.
Oh goodness poor darling come here. Is your mother—you came all the way by—have you called anyone—
He left the navy door untouched. The orchard reeked of fermenting fruit. The tree limbs barren so barren against the rich sky. He crunched apples underfoot as he walked to his favorite tree. When he had climbed the highest he could go he dangled himself from the branch and flailed off and splattered apples as he hit the ground. He climbed and leapt and climbed and leapt until the slight bones of his ankles moaned and his knees ground small earthquakes with each landing. He twisted limp apples from their stalks and threw them down to break them.
Yellow tinged white flesh shivering nakedly in the dull grass. His father’s face in the slivers of light that slid from between the slats of the blinds. A worm inching for cover.
When the boy heard the Labrador he walked to the bicycle on bruised joints. He followed the yellow line. He heard a honk behind him and veered to the left. As the hulking metal passed he saw a pink tissue box tumbling in the back window and suddenly another windshield was coming at him. Which way to go.
He wanted to stay where he was. His poor bent legs and broken heart. Motionless like his dad. Instead his arms twisted him to the right and he was on the asphalt again. This time red. Blood from some unimportant part of his frail body. The car had stopped. Mark was picking him up.
No no no.
Oh Jesus Christ Will what the hell oh god I have to get you home. Your mom is going to be—
No put me down. Where’s the bike. Where’s the bike.
We’ll put the bike in the trunk but oh god you have a big cut on—
No no no no no. He tried to get away and there was blood on Mark’s neat white shirt but he would not let go.

Will you have to go home your mom needs you right now okay. I have an extra towel in my trunk. Let’s just clean this up okay.

No. He wanted to bite Mark’s eyebrows. He wanted to go back to the orchard and kick in the navy door and be adopted by mister and missus.

Okay.

The neighbors were clogging the yard already and when they saw the boy get out of the silver car with a raw elbow they clucked condolences. The paint of his dad’s bike was chipped black where the asphalt had gnawed it and Mark wouldn’t let him roll it back into the garage.

Oh my god what happened, said his mother.

I went to the orchard. For apples.

Oh my god. She brought him inside to the foot of the stairs and her tears dripped into his hair.

Have they taken him away?

Not yet. I cant.

So his shoes are still there?

What?

Are his shoes still in the closet?

Yes.

Okay.

He went to his room with another slice of pumpkin pie and laid out a black shirt and black slacks. His mother had made his bed but his dad still lay in the other room with the blinds closed. When he went to go get the shoes his mother and Mark stood at the end of the hall so he went back into his room. She had stopped crying again.

He locked the door and said nothing even when his mother and Mark and the neighbors all called his name. He hoped they couldn’t take his dad away with asking him. He knew they had.

When it was getting dark again he looked out his window and the neighbors were all gone. 6:31 pm. In the faint moonlight a sparrow still called and his dad’s bike glinted against the mailbox. He thought about climbing the drainpipe down to the bike and following the double yellow lines forever. He pictured himself biking in his dad’s velvet slippers. His knuckles strong around the handlebars. A satchel for apples and Labradors. Legs steady on either side of the sleek metal frame. Biking forever under an anorexic moon drowning in the sallow premature dusk.

Will, said his mother.

He thought of the scratched paint and his elbow. The slippered people behind the quiet navy door in the orchard. He would never see them again. A bloody towel in a silver car’s trunk. The smell of dead animals in his mother’s voice.

Will we have to go;

Okay. He began to cry.
In 1954, Roger Bannister became the first person to run a mile in less than 4 minutes. The sub-4 mile had previously been thought to be a barrier impossible for the human body to break.

Running is how I combust,
my stardust bones and muscles echoing their sisters
in the sky and
gloriously igniting.
People say it’s just, only, merely the
Lactic acid, Carbon dioxide, nerve endings firing
But if I run hard enough, I can feel
the demons sizzle, their fingers
tangled in the dark space
just north of my sorrow
crushed by the roar of my joints, the
deafening solitude of my breath,
If I run hard enough everything burns—
the secret is,
we are all made of dormant fire,
calcification of celestial matter
that once clipped across space—time faster
than even despair can fly
on its fogged-ice wings.
People say it’s just chemistry but
they also once said
no one could break a four-minute mile.
I casually borrowed that first OptiFlow rollerball pen from my father's desk, thinking the exchange would be no more than a blip in human experience. An inconsequential encounter.

Fate has its own purposes, however, and at this point in time every OptiFlow pen in my family's house—and possibly the Greater St. Louis area—is in my possession. I theorize that from any vantage point in my room, one should be able to see an OptiFlow: sleek-barreled, pearlescent plastic that seems to give shape to productivity itself. Of course, its aesthetic alone cannot account for its ubiquity.

The OptiFlow is admirable in its resilience, able to bear my constant gnawing and emerge just as calmly, industrially purposeful as when it first rolled off the assembly line. Its ink is divine, zipping through paper, skin, park benches, cynicism, despair, writer’s block, profound ideas, mad ramblings, dreams, universes. Its sultry darkness speaks confidence, the unquestionable ability to safely contain ideas both feathery as singular strands of cotton candy and heavy as the end of hope; since its discovery I have gone so far as to, in fits of sleep-deprived madness, turn in tests covered with its quietly sensual markings. It blurs across any surface at obscene speeds, writing faster than I can think.

These virtues, though individually impressive, collectively reveal the pen’s most winning characteristic: its understanding of my straitjacket of writer’s delusion. I suffer from the phantom appearance of word-clouds that hover around all objects and people and occurrences—“outsider’s syndrome,” as David Lynn of the Kenyon Review calmly puts it. The present inexplicably speaks as a line of poetry, a trail of preterit verbs, three dimensions of space-time compressed into twenty-six letters. I scramble to compose lush descriptions of what is happening before my very eyes before it finishes happening. I am caught scribbling at wildly inappropriate moments—crossing a roaring intersection, attending stiffly formal banquets, using a rank bathroom—and in those moments time is of the essence. The gravel-worn cough of a busker between jazz licks on a saxophone almost as big as she is; the glimpse of a man begging for empathy and spare change at the cold traffic lights; the unbearable stench of a restroom, raw with some unique ingredient—what is it? laughter? desperation? gulab jamun?

I must capture them before they vanish. That my pen purposefully blurs across all surfaces, faster than I can think, faster than these instants can flit away, is of vital importance, then.

William Faulkner famously scribbled ideas for his Pulitzer prize-winning novel, A Fable, across the walls of his home. Dismayed by dismayed by this irreverent home décor, Mrs. Faulkner repainted the room, only for her husband to rewrite and permanently affix the marks with a coat of shellac. To me, this word decal sounds familiar and reasonable, probably a good indication of what my future living spaces will look like—though, as of now, I can only aspire to author a Pulitzer prize-worthy work. Mr. Faulkner used a pencil. I will be using an OptiFlow.
Yueyi (Emily) Zhao

Personal Essay/Memoir: Jascha Heifetz Plays Picardy Thirds in Handel-Halvorsen Passacaglia

John Burroughs School
Eleanor DesPrez, Teacher

The wildernesses that frighten me most inevitably lie in territories previously assumed familiar; thus was the nature of my venture in the Preparatory (PREP) chamber music program last fall. I was implored to join PREP by its director, who also happened to be my former piano teacher, to combat the dearth of wind players; assuming that the invitation, which sounded like a guarantee of admission, meant the program would be more than manageable, I neglected to learn more about it. I auditioned not knowing that PREP was “designed to augment the individual music study of exceptionally talented string, woodwind, brass, and piano students who anticipate pursuing a career in music.” Certainly, I had never experienced any severe discomfort reading, understanding, or performing music, having started to read music at age five—but never in my life had I ever contemplated “pursuing a career in music.” I understood the statistical futility of a professional musicians’ life, which is disproportionate to the rigorous efforts poured into it. That rigor, I had decided, was not for me. PREP’s premise lay in a region of possibility I had thus far been unwilling to explore, and had I known I might never have auditioned. And so I stumbled into the unknown.

Upon arriving for my first session of the program, I was greeted by the sound of my new peers discussing the prevalence of “Picardée” thirds during various periods of music history. One of them continuously cited a recording by people named “Hifets” and “Permrose,” a piece titled “Pass a Colla.” I sat down next a student too preoccupied with his book to engage me with any similarly cryptic conversation starters, and an involuntary glimpse at his open page’s header informed me that he was studying the “Bebop Mode of Mixolydian Scales.” I wondered whether the music school’s attendant had directed me to the wrong room—the university’s graduate class, perhaps, maybe even a casual gathering of impossibly young St. Louis Symphony professionals.

To my dismay, my PREP fellows continued to converse using phrases such as:

I like Jascha Heifetz’s fourth string octave shifts in the third movement of the Mendelssohn, but overall I’d say Jimmy Lin’s left pinky is a lot more accurate—also in the Saint-Saëns, and I don’t understand why Cleveland is always sharper than New York when they play the second movement of Tchaik 5 and Oh, my favorite part of that sonata is the Neapolitan modulation in the development section...except it’s not really a development section, because it’s not technically in sonata form. The Rondo sounds like an Andante. Bold choice, Sergei, bold choice.

It felt as if someone had come to my brick apartment of 12 years and peeled apart the walls to reveal that they were actually paper mache, telling me that the warmth and shelter I had sustained from them were only figments of an imagination made mighty by ignorance. My “musicianship,” products of those countless hours of work, seemed to totter on a hollow foundation of superficial understanding. Perhaps my admission to the program had been a fluke—but even so, other auditionees had been rejected in favor of me, and I could not simply quit at the first sign of adversity. Stuck in that wasteland of foreign vocabulary, I remained silent during our group lessons, bobbing my head, praying that my flute-playing was good enough to disguise my lack of knowledge.

In retrospect, I realize that Google and YouTube probably could have saved me from those initial weeks of shellshock. At the time, however, I felt that there was something inherently flawed, a deficiency that would require either infeasible amounts of work or sorcery to make up. The other musicians spoke as if their chromosomes spiraled in trails of solfege tones rather than nucleic acids; this made the task of “catching up” seem futile, since no amount of Wikipedia can rewrite DNA. Or perhaps I should have worked harder from day 1 of my musical career. Tongue-tied with what I perceived as self-inflicted helplessness and inferiority, I regarded the long semesters ahead with resigned dread. I had arrogantly stomped across the homeliness of music into an uncharted void.

Fortunately, I discovered that PREP students were friendly natives. A month into the program, my subconscious decided that it would rather risk the dreaded ridicule than fake another knowing nod at the mention of Jascha Heifetz; my tongue blurted a question of its own volition. Though my immediate reaction was to cringe and wait for the scathing commentary—“What, you don’t even know that?”—my comrades actually expressed delight at the opportunity to flood my social media with YouTube links of their favorite
performers. They prefaced all of the URLs with “You HAVE to listen to this” or “His tone ohmygod asdfkajsdff;aksj so good" or "[Insert performer's name here] is godly." Some friends even brought physical CDs. They showed me the nuances of the musical landscape that might have taken me months or years to discover on my own—and more importantly, their loving generosity lifted the numbing sense of irrevocable alienation and self-condemnation that had prevented me from trying to improve my situation. I eagerly followed the trails of links, names, and orchestras; though I sometimes woke up bleary-eyed from having spent a late night listening to entire symphonies, the task no longer felt like a survival tactic. The sheer rock face of alienation I had been clinging to, up which I might be able to climb to an escape via knowledge randomly gleamed on the Internet, transformed in the light of my peers’ enthusiasm into a slope up which we ran together.

Soon I no longer felt crippled in conversation; by the end of the two semesters, I found myself spitting out previously cryptic trivia such as Did you know Heifetz and Primrose’s 1941 recording of the Handel-Halvorsen Passacaglia is on YouTube? It’s not even that crackly. Heifetz’s Picardy thirds are perfectly in tune. My ear, seasoned by the deluge of music, became more exacting, and my performances drastically improved. The months that might have stretched unbearably in cold isolation flew by far too quickly, happy rehearsals and concerts leading not to my liberation from a foreign wilderness, but rather to my grudging eviction from a place dearer to my heart than ever before.

Though the beginning of my time at PREP can only be described as lonely and uncomfortable, it remains one of the happiest “misadventures” I have ever bungled through. I embarked in the barren restraints of my own ego, and emerged in the lushness of a fuller appreciation of both music itself and its lovely human connection. The landscape of classical music itself remains just as vastly awe-inspiring, and perhaps as intimidating to outsiders, as it has been for centuries—but in this place of overgrown with tonalities and key signatures and composers, I have managed to build a home all the more inviting for the labor and aid required in its construction. I might have remained lost in the sterile bounds of previous ability, doomed to forever breath in the same stale air and knowledge, doomed to fear those at home in places foreign to me, had I not become lost in this wilderness.
The walls still had spots where the tape had ripped the paint away. All the pictures of us gone, and the room felt very empty. I curled up in blankets on my bed and lay in my room alone. I rarely left, not to eat, not to talk to my mom when she got home from work; my family had to come to me to talk. My pillow was wet and covered in mascara. I felt like it was my fault. Luke was my best friend and I’m pretty sure I loved him. I know I loved him. We went through thick and thin. Now he’s gone. I was wretched, enraged, and confused.

Laying there, I realized my whole life had changed in a blink of an eye. Weeks passed and the weight on my chest seemed to get heavier. It was too much to handle. The sadness was agonizing and I didn’t have any choice but to talk to my mom. It took a lot for me to talk to her, because I didn’t want to disappoint her more than I had in the past.

It took a few months to get in to see a psychologist. At the time I didn’t really know what they did or what their purpose was. My mom told me that they would help us. A week or so before our first appointment I remember I broke down in tears and I thought it wasn’t going to stop. Inside, something broke and I knew deep down this wasn’t going to be an easy t to fix.

Almost every day I would leave to go smoke pot. It numbed the pain; it made me forget I had problems that I didn’t want to deal with. When I was high I felt like I was in a dream. I loved that I was more optimistic when high, because it was very difficult to see the positive in things otherwise. I never wanted to get away from the feeling. I wanted to take myself higher. I just didn’t want anyone to find out.

The day of my appointment came up and I had no idea what to expect, or what they were going to tell me. I was very tense. The building was three floors and the layout was confusing. We signed in, then sat down and waited. They called my name and my anxiety shot up. I tried hiding my emotions the best I could.

When we got into the room I was surprised. He had really good decorating skills for a man. Black leather couches and nice abstract paintings. I sat the far from my mom. I don’t know why, but looking back on it I wish I would have been right next to her. He asked me a lot of weird questions and a lot of comforting questions. It made me happy knowing he cared. He paused for a second and let out a sigh. He told me I was manic depressive and I had depression. I felt like I was going to be sick. I had always heard about people suffering from depression, but me? I have always been a very happy person. He gave me Zoloft. He gave my mom the script and we left. It actually wasn’t as bad as I was expecting. Minus the diagnoses, it was going to be ok.

A few weeks passed and we started noticing the Zoloft was not working. I was infuriated all the time and I was having worse mood swings than before. When we went back, he put me on Risperidone, Bupropion, and Gabapentin. Risperidone was for my anger, the Bupropion was for my depression, and my Gabapentin was for my anxiety.

My mood started to become stabilized and I became happier. Things started to look a bit better and things around the house were getting excellent.

A few months passed though, and I started to get upset, very upset. For a while, I had thought things were going to get better but I started to lose faith. I started hanging with the wrong crowd, and I started going downhill from there. Luke decided to start messaging me again. I didn’t know what to think about that whole situation, honestly. I would sneak out to see him at our spot. We did everything we used to do before we broke up, so we decided to get back together. He had the same bad habit as I did, but I thought he did it for fun.

Then one day, he messaged me and said he was going to Two Rivers and my heart stopped. I wanted to be there for him but I knew I wasn’t going to be able to go see him in the hospital. It stressed me to the max. A week passed and he got out. All I wanted to do was see him but I we both needed to get some things together. I asked him to meet at our spot, in the front of the church. It was kind of chilly and there was a nice breeze. He walked toward me with “that look”. The look he always gives when he misses someone. He gave me the look he gave his little brother Nathan when he saw him for the first time in three months. That really broke my
heart, but I had to do what was best for us. I told him that it was over and that things might work in the future but right now things are hard. He just ran off and skated down the road and you could tell that he was discontented. I can remember that inside I felt like a snow globe that had fallen off a shelf. In pieces but in some ways I’m still together.

Later, I walked to Fleetridge, a few blocks away. When I walked past the dock, I saw Luke’s best friend Damon skating with his brother and Simon. Damon waved, and I went to the back, sat down under a tree, and leaned against the brick wall. I lit up a blunt and smoked away the pain, like usual. I still managed to shed a few tears. I zipped up my jacket and put up my hood.

Damon came walking around the corner and I didn’t really know why. He came and sat next to me. He took the weed away from me and said “You don’t need that!” He threw it into a puddle.

I gave him a dirty look “Hey!”
“What?” He smiled at me.
“What. What?”
“What, what. In the butt?” he sang horribly.
I giggled at that.
“Are you ok?” He asked me.
“I’ll be fine. I’m just upset.” I told him.
“You have my number. Text me if you need to,” He told me. “Stand up.”
“Uhhhh. I don’t want to, though” I replied.
“Do I have to pick you up?”
“No.” I got up and he gave me a hug.
“I’ve got to go. I’ll message you.” He said as he walked away.

That cheered me up a bit - knowing that he wasn’t a total mess up like most people in that town. Talking to him cheered me up, but I got my phone taken away and I was done. I could not take anymore. I knew when they took my phone I was going to be isolated. Isolation is my worst enemy.

A few months passed and I was now a 7th grader. Woopiedoo! Not really... I still didn’t have my phone back and I was upset about that. I decided to go out with some of my friends for the night. I told my step dad I was leaving. My mom was at work. When I got home about one, my mom was home and I was perplexed, on what was going on? I walked in the house and before I could even look up.

“Where the hell were you?!” my mom yelled, she was infuriated.
“I was with Sarah. I told John.” I told her. I couldn’t deal with this so I started walking to my room. I heard her in the background

“No you didn’t!” She screamed at me.

I thought to myself maybe if Steve wasn’t focused on video games 24/7 he would know what was going on.

I could hear her coming to my room; I braced myself for the worst.

“You know we put out a runaway report for you?!” she told me.

“Why would you do that? I told you. I told John I was with Sarah.” I flopped on to my bed. “Maybe if John was an adult or fit to be a parent this wouldn’t happen.” That didn’t mean to come out but, you know, I meant it, I was about to snap.

“No!” she said “You’re lying.”

I started to sob. “Mom I can’t do this anymore. I’ve tried so hard for so long to stay strong but I can’t.” I gasped for air between breaths.

“What do you want me to do?”
“I want the pain to stop.” I started bawling.

It was late, I was tired and I was in pain. I was ready to sleep, but she said we were going somewhere. A cop car pulled into our driveway shortly after she made a call. I started to panic. The cop had a short conversation with my mom with my mom inside and I sat on the porch. My mom had her keys in her hand and her purse in the other. Her hair was up and she still had her scrubs on from work. I followed her cause I thought I was going to ride with her, but I wasn’t.

They put me in the back of the cop car and I buckled up.

“What radio station do you want to listen to?” he asked me.
“Oh, I don’t care.” I replied. I was confused cause on TV shows the cops are always rude to people. He played 95.7, my favorite radio station ironically, he rolled down the window for me. “Thank you,” I said to him in confusion.

I found myself walking into Research Psych Center. I had my breaking point. I didn’t know what to expect from this either. I was hoping that it would help me more than anything else had so far. I was there for five days. I met a lot of good people, people with a good sense of humor. Then there was the hot ginger that Kelly and I wouldn’t leave alone, and there was the booty juice. I thought that was hilarious. You know that shot people get when you act up? Yeah, that one. We called that the booty juice or you got booty juiced. Ha! Funny right? It still makes me laugh. The hospital isn’t at all what you’d think. Once I got out, I spent about a week in my room.

Then it was my birthday. Worst… Birthday… Ever. I went to Oklahoma Joe’s though. I started 7th grade, and I was a mess. I need someone to save me, but no one did. I started skipping school to go to a friend’s house that accepted me. People would never leave me alone; they would downgrade me just because I wasn’t a size zero. I got 3 days of OSS the second time I got caught. That was the first time I ever got in trouble at school, and I didn’t even care.

I was alone on winter break and I was just done with the past year. I don’t know what was going through my head, but I got drunk. I could barely walk or talk. My friend found it hilarious. When I saw sobered up that’s when I woke up….

I was almost at a point of no return. A point where no one could have saved me. I called my dad crying and told him what I did, and he said I could come spend the weekend with him. I needed to get away. Away from all that reminded me of the past.

When I got there I had a sense of relief. There was something about being there I liked. The weekend turned into a week and then it was almost time to go back to Raytown. I started get upset. My dad could see it. He knew I didn’t want to leave. I don’t know but something in me said I had to stay here. I asked him if I could move in, and he said that’s fine with me, but it’s going to be a full house. It took some persuading my mom to let me stay, but she finally agreed.

A week later, I got enrolled into Jeff Middle School. Right after winter break I started. It’s funny, I remember the exact date: January 19, 2014. That was a new beginning, a fresh start, new opportunities, a place to improve who I used to be, put my mistakes behind me. You know, this was a huge - and I mean HUGE - day for me. It took six months to actually develop a relationship with people there.

Ronny, Tess, Michelle, Edward, Ross, and Maci are the best friends I’ve probably ever had. They are great. Just like frosted flakes but even better! Everyone says your “crew” doesn’t stay together through high school, but I know I’ll keep them around because they are like a milestone for me. This year I did something I would have never done if I was still in Raytown. I completed cross country! I cannot believe I did it. I wanted to quit so many times, but then I remembered how far I made it.

I have a lot of experience. I know how it feels to feel downgraded, to be confused with who you are, I know how to help someone get over a breakup, and I can give advice. I speak from my heart when people really need it and will do almost anything to help them. I can help direct someone in the right path, so they don’t do what I did. Nobody should have to go through that. I can tell somebody when they are wrong and I can be blunt, very blunt.

I want to help people and guide them in the right direction and to achieve any goal they want to, even if they say they can’t. I want to help give them a boost in confidence that they can achieve any goal and any dream, and tell them that you sometimes you have to fall before you fly.
“Incoming” said the soldier attending to the wounded. A mortar shell was coming straight for the captain’s quarters. Within a blink of an eye the captain and most of his officers were blown to oblivion. Only one of his officers remained, Second Sergeant James, was now in charge of the men in that division until they can get reinforcements. The bombing stopped and SSgt. James sent a man to go see what happened, when he saw what had happened he couldn’t believe his eyes.

It was 1914, and the war was starting up in Europe. The British Army was going to a town to see if they can get volunteers to help them with the War. The town was located somewhere near Newport. When the men arrived the officer said “If any man would like to help us win the war please step forward”. No one stepped forward. So the officer decided to make a deal with them, “If you can prove of being worthy of being in this army you will be able to leave a year early” said the officer. Still no one wanted to step forward.

When all hope was lost two young and brave men stepped forward “We will help you win the war”, said the tall and skinny one. The names of the men were Pencil James and Dixon “the pencil” James, they are brothers. As young boys they grew up with a mother and a father until the tragic accident that killed their parents and younger brother. Since that day they both decided to help with any cause. When the two men stepped forward the officer welcomed them into the war. Whenever the men got to the base camp they went under heavy training. They were the best in that division. After five months of intense training the soldiers were off to their first fight.

When the men got to the city it was deserted. It was supposed to be full of Germans. “It's quiet, to quiet”, said the buff officer. “Keep your eyes open and weapons ready.” As the men marched forward, deeper in the city, they found trenches that went for miles. “We could use these,” said the buff officer. The men marched toward the trenches, when out of nowhere Germans popped out of the trenches. Most of the allies fell back to another set of trenches.

As the fighting went on the ground planes in the sky dove down on the allied forces. When the planes went to refuel only 50 soldiers remained. When they thought everything was over, mortar fire started again and everyone was going to give up. When all hope was lost Sgt. James stood and influence the men. “We may be here right now, but why are we here?” “We are here to fight for our country and we are ready for anything they throw at us.” As he said that 5 canisters of gas flew in and almost all of the men died. Only 20 men remain.

A whole day went by until this happened. “Incoming” said one of the soldiers attending to the wounded. A mortar shell was coming straight for the captain’s quarters. Within a blink of an eye the captain and most of his officers were blown to oblivion. Only one of his officers were alive, Second Sergeant James, was now in charge of the men in that division until they can get reinforcements. The bombing stopped and SSgt. James sent a man to go see what happened, when he saw what had happened he couldn’t believe his eyes.

20 tanks, 5000 soldiers, and 100 planes were coming straight for them. The British were outnumbered 263 to 1. By the time the soldiers had come up with a plan, the Germans had destroyed the defenses and captured all the enemy soldiers. “You can’t do this you ignorant bad person”, said SSgt James. He was knocked out before he could finish the sentence. 20 hours later James started to wake up and when he realized that the smell of beer, cigars, and decomposed bodies, he knew that he was in trouble.

He could see about 10 Germans playing a card game and 5 dogs eating on a dead body. He looked around and he saw that his brother and 2 other soldiers were in the same cell as him. They got together and devised a plan to get out of that hell hole. He looked around some more and saw that the cell door was rusted and worn. So he kicked down the door and when the Germans realized what had happened all hell broke loose.

Bullets everywhere, blood splattering all over the place. This is what happens when you don’t plan anything out and you just do whatever you want. As the Germans gave James everything they had, James was trying to see if he could find anything to deal some damage. He looked around and he found a piece of a rod that is about 5ft long and he threw it as hard as he could and he made a kabob out of 5 Germans and the remaining dogs. The remaining Germans fell back to another part of the prison.
Now that the whole German army knew where they were, James had to figure out a plan to get out of that prison. “Men grab the enemy’s weapons, we’re getting out of this place”. As the German soldiers and officers get ready to fight the breakers, James was on his way to a room in that prison. He looked inside and he saw that 20 German officers were talking about stuff. He told his brother to throw a grenade into the room and when the nade went off the prisoners killed off the rest of the remaining officers.

As they move on, a German MG was straight in the path of the escaping prisoners. When the men entered the room the MG opened fire and when he did that a German tank rammed through the wall and fired a round at the men. The last thing that came out of the men were screams. 10 seconds later all the allies were dead and never to be seen again, because the round was so powerful it disintegrated the men.
My earliest memories are about my dad. My dad helping me brush my teeth. My dad taking me to day care. My dad lacing up my soccer shoes for my first game ever. Where was mom? She wasn’t at home, cleaning, she wasn’t always at work making money for the family of five at home, where was she? Oh yeah, that’s right she wasn’t there. Not for me, not for my dad, not my brothers, nor anyone else. And people wonder why I never talk about her…


The first two years were like any other. I grew, I ate, I walked, I talked, etc. Sure, my dad was the one measuring me, showing me how to eat, holding my hands for balance, and sounding out words for me, but still my mom was there, in the same house watching over my 14 and 15 year old brothers at the time, well kinda.

When I was around three or four my mom became a different person. She was a lot to handle for the whole family. Without going into detail, she ran us out of money, forcing our family of five to move to a smaller house. As we made the move, so did she, in another direction. After many whispered fights, brooding glances at each other, silence so thick you could cut it with a knife, my parents decided it was time for a divorce.

This really had no effect on me, my dad was my primary parent either way and my brothers were old enough to understand why this was happening and to take of themselves. Now, since I was just about three, I didn’t really know what was happening, I just understood that “mommy” wouldn’t be around as often.

Of course, after two years of living comfortably at the new house, the owner of the apartment complexes died and the new owner forced everyone out. We had to move to yet another house in what is now, my hometown. That summer, we moved up and my brothers moved out, I was now alone as a child. Five years old, brothers gone, single dad, new house, new school, whoa.

Sure, it was a bit overwhelming to move yet again in such a short time but my dad was always there and I led a pretty normal, athletic childhood.

Then around the time I was ten, my mom thought it was time to start trying to be a part of my life yet again. She did not live with my dad and I, but she did have her own studio apartment near town. Mom never showed up to practice of any sort, but dad was always there. Mom would show up to games, if it was convenient for her. Mom would also try to take me out to dinner, or spend time with me but again, only on her schedule which never seemed to be my schedule. She wouldn’t necessarily try to accommodate me. If I couldn’t go, she wouldn’t reschedule. An attempt at parenting seemed to be good enough for her.

My dad has always there for me; with school, with food, with housing, with sports. And my mom wonders why I don’t bond with her. Seriously?

After two years of this haphazard parenting, my mom moved to Texas to be with her family. I began to see her twice a year – when it was convenient and believe me, it was never convenient.

When I turned twelve, my mom moved back to my town. Another attempt at parenting. Sometimes I wonder what she thinks about me – what goes through her mind. Things are back to the way they were. My dad remains my caretaker; responsible for food, clothing, shelter, and of course, his ever-present love. His constant love has been a source of strength for me. Mom steps in every once in a while. I think just to assure herself that she is actually a parent. She has no idea – truly not a clue. Thank heaven for air quotes - they fit her perfectly.
Missouri Youth Write 2015

Amanda Arbuckle

Humor: Death by Waterfall (Almost)
Collegiate School of Medicine and Bioscience
William O’Neal, Teacher

It was not a waterfall, as one may have assumed from the title, which nearly wiped out my family. The waterfall itself was harmless. However, the trip to view the waterfall was the virtual walk of death. Why, you may ask, did my family put themselves in such peril? The blame can be placed on the shoulders of my dear mother. We were new to California and had spent many a weekend exploring various parts of this beautiful and fascinating state. My mother has always been a bit of an adventurer and loves to see and try new things. The waterfall had been mentioned in an article in the paper. The location was also close. It was not far from the town of Julian, a place we had traveled to many times, and was hidden among the rugged mountains that make up much of this area. My father, mother, brother, and I eagerly jumped into the car and headed towards this new and fascinating exploration. Little did we realize what we were truly in for on this casual journey!

We arrived at the park in ebullient spirits. We had never seen a waterfall before so this was truly a treat. The sky was blue and the sun shone brightly. It was early morning and the air was still crisp. The mountains lay before us and the path down the mountain was steep, yet easily maneuverable. As we began the trek down, it never occurred to any of us that eventually we would have to come up this same steep path. Our first missed clue.

Our spirits were high and the views around us were stunning. Far below us, one could see the river as it snaked its way through the valley. Mom took hundreds of pictures as we walked. Along the way we met many fellow “explorers”. The exhaustion and weariness showed plainly on their faces. Many travelers were huddled in small groups along the cliffs, sitting or lying in the dirt. One woman was being half carried up the path while another was throwing up into the brush. These “clues” were also overlooked by my excited and foolhardy mother.

The day became much warmer. This was to be expected when you were in the desert. My brother and I asked repeatedly if we would ever arrive at the bottom of this endless path. Many times my parents would stop hikers going up to ask if the waterfall was close. We heard over and over that it was just a little further. My mom echoed the travelers’ words. “Just a little longer!” She called, after another hour elapsed with no waterfall in sight. Hours had passed by this time and my family had considered turning around more than once, but we pressed on.

We finally reached the valley, and flat ground. After walking for another half hour, we reached the waterfall at last. It was breathtaking. It was nestled among the large rocks and trees that stood towering above us. It cascaded down from high bluffs into a small pool of water, which was perfect for swimming. Much to our surprise, the area was filled with people. There had to be at least 100 fellow travelers, many of them college age. My mother said the atmosphere felt like a college fraternity party, which somewhat tarnished the moment. We found a place to picnic, and then Jack and I threw ourselves into the cold refreshing pool of water. My parents had failed to bring bathing suits so they were unable to partake of this activity.

Sadly, it was time to leave this small paradise and head back. The temperature was now over 100 degrees and the sun beat down upon our faces. The flat ground ended, and towering above us was the mountain that we would be forced to climb to reach our car. What little merriment that was left in our bodies from the waterfall quickly evaporated. With every step, the sun seemed more intense, and the path steeper. We consider ourselves a fairly athletic family, but the mountain had us beat. My mother, the instigator of this fun and carefree hike, was the first to become sick. Our water supply was used up and she was dizzy and nauseous. Like many hikers before us, we stopped often and huddled against the cliffs, attempting to find even the hint of shade from this evil and unyielding sun. At one point, my mom threw her body on the ground and refused to go a step further. Crying, she begged Dad to call a helicopter and rescue her. Dad encouraged her to go on. We walked for a few minutes, stopped. We walked a few minutes more and stopped. In this slow and painful way, we progressed up the path of this beast of death which wound around and around the mountain. Three hours later, we could just glimpse the makeshift parking lot and what appeared to be our black car. “We’re almost there!” I rasped, my voice barely a whisper. Painfully, we scaled the last few feet of
the mountain path. Looking upwards, we spied our car in the distance, and with the last of our strength, attempted to speed up our barely moving legs. With one last glance behind us as a reminder of what we had just conquered, we made the last turn around the top of mountain and almost crawled to the car. As we reached the car and blasted the air, we heaved a sigh of relief. Amazingly enough, we had survived the waterfall!

We can laugh now at this traumatic event in our lives. My mother has even joked that we should go back again when the weather is cold. Even now, when we have to do something undesirable, we call it a “waterfall experience”. I myself have wondered many a time how some of the people we met at the waterfall could ever have made it up that steep mountain. We are no triathletes by any means, but we really thought we could handle this hike. I learned a very important lesson that day. Be wary of any day trips your mother suggests that involve walking, mountains, deserts, or ... waterfalls!
You never know when you will say your last goodbye to someone. For all you know, it might be when you least expect it. You say “I’ll see you tomorrow.” but are you positive you will?

“Is your grandma okay, I heard she’s in the hospital?” Ashley asked me with concern.

“What are you talking about? She’s just sick,” I am completely confused by her question.

“I saw an ambulance outside your uncle’s house since I live across the street and my mom is her nurse.”

“Huh, I guess my parents didn’t tell me.” I knew Grandma was sick and not feeling well but why would there be need of an ambulance?

When I got home from school, I asked my mom about what Ashley was talking about.

“She went to the hospital last night because she was really sick and it was the worst she has ever been.”

“Will she be okay?” I ask starting to tear up not sure if I wanted to know the answer or not.

“Honestly, your aunts are flying in tonight to come and see her. She’s on life support,” my mom explains to me choking up. I guess it’s good she didn’t sugar coat it too much.

“No. No. No.” I repeated that over and over as I ran to my room.

Later that night, we left to go see Grandma after picking my aunts up from the airport. There were many relatives and close family members going in and out of the hospital room meeting my grandma. My younger brother, sister and I had to sit in the waiting room because she was in the ICU. After being in the waiting room for about an hour, I got a call from my cousin in New York.

“Hello?”

“Hey, um... are you at the hospital?”

“Yeah, but we’re in the waiting room.”

“Okay, well, when you go in to see Grandma can you...” she was cut off by muffling sounds that sounded like crying.

“Can you tell her I said goodbye. I can’t fly down to see her so can you please tell her I said goodbye,” completely breaking down.

“Y-Y-Yeah I’ll do that but let’s just say she’ll be fine. Okay?” I say starting to tear up.

We bid our goodbyes and my dad walks into the room.

“You guys can go and see Grandma now but try not to cry or she’ll get upset.”

I wipe my tears and follow my dad down to the ICU. I see my family gathered around the bed and once they see us, they move away so we can meet her. I can already feel myself tearing up but take a deep breath before walking forward. I see all of the IVs hooked up to her and lots of other wires that were hooked up to machines. She looked so tired and it looked like the life was just drained out of her. At that point, I lost it and ran out of the room. After cleaning myself up, I go back in. I go up to my grandma and giving her a hug making sure not to pull any wires.

“Hey Grandma, how are you?” I knew she wouldn’t be able to reply but I still talked to her trying to break the complete silence.

She tried talking but it came out as a raspy cough.

“It’s okay Grandma, don’t talk.” I tried to get to stop and gave a weak smile.

She looks around the room examining everyone’s face and I knew she was happy that everyone was here. My aunt took out her phone and started playing some hymns. The next several minutes were filled with silence other than the quiet hymns.

The next day was Saturday and we spent the rest of the day in the hospital. Grandma was getting worse and worse. You could see it by her appearance. She wasn’t able to eat and just looking at her made me cry.

I think back to August when she was barely able to move around and somewhat healthy. No matter what, someone had to be with her at all times. My uncle would stay with her during the day and after school, I would go over to his house, where she stayed, and stayed with her until about five hours. While I was with her, I would get her food, help her move around and give her anything she needed. My aunt would come home from work and take care of her. Everyone tried to do whatever they could but since everyone was at work, it was really hard.
“We’re going to go back home now guys so go say bye to Grandma,” my dad says walking into the waiting room looking completely tired out.

I walk into the room that’s tucked away at the end of the hallway and see my relatives with blotchy faces. My grandma turns towards me and gives me a weak smile. Silently I walk up to the bed and just hug her carefully, resting my head on her shoulder. I feel the tears about to spill and lift my head up wiping them before she sees them. I give her a light smile so she won’t suspect anything and give her a kiss on the cheek. Turning around quickly I wiped the tears and waited for my parents and siblings. I gave my grandma one more hug and kiss. We left after saying goodbye to everyone.

Before going to bed that night, I said a small prayer: Dear God, please help Grandma in her time of need. We all need you right now more than ever. Please help us. At this point, I was bawling and then I was passed out.

I woke up the next morning to my dad telling us to come downstairs. Sleepily I walked downstairs and got breakfast. After eating, I got up to put my dishes away and Dad started talking.

“Guys, last night a few hours after we left—” he took a pause but continued, “Grandma sh-she, she um, she passed away. She’s gone.” He finished trying to stay strong.

I fell to the floor in shock. I expected myself to start crying but I didn’t. I sat there and after a moment I felt my eyes start to tear up and I completely lost it. Once one tear dropped, there was no end. My dad picked me up in his arms and held me tight as more tears slipped.

“Shhh, no more crying. I don’t want to see you cry and your grandma wouldn’t have either,” my dad said as he held me close.

The rest of the day, I stayed in my room and cried for hours, only coming out when my mom forced me to eat.

Well God, I guess you wanted a new angel up there with you and that’s what you got. Take care of her for me please.

You don’t realize someone’s role in your life until they leave one day. You think of them with a smile on your face and when you realize they’re not there, it’s like you’re missing something. Your life changes completely and little things start to remind you of them. A countless number of times I reminded myself that she was in a better place and she was no longer hurting but I always ended up in tears. After it happened, I realized how much she did for me and my family. Without her, nothing seems to be the same anymore.
Dear Dad,
You hate me. You never cared for me. You never wanted me. I was just a mistake you made from your teenage years. All you did all day was drown yourself in that filthy alcohol. Let’s not forget about Mom. You’re the reason for the bruises. You’re the reason she’s not here. You’re the reason she lived a hard life. You’re the reason the only thing that kept me going is gone. Now, after 18 years, I’m leaving. I’m leaving your life forever and you will never see me again.

Kamryn Nicole

I pull the torn duffle bag higher on my shoulder. I look at my shoes as I walk through the misty air through the streets of my small town in Seattle. I sniffle softly due to the cold weather and light wind. I look back up and see the bus stand at the end of the street buried behind the local diner.

Slowly, I walk up to the stand that’s being watched by an old man who looks as if he’s about to fall asleep. “Hello sir, I’d like one ticket to Los Angeles, California,” I say trying not to be too quiet. “Oh, uh here. The bus will be here in five minutes,” he replies with no interest whatsoever.

I walk to the bench that the bus will stop in front of and sit, bringing my back into my lap. Shortly after, I am walking up to the bus and finding a seat. I look at the faces of the people on the bus. Most of them asleep or looking out the window. I walk farther back where I see a guy looking out the window in complete boredom. I sit in the seat behind and diagonal from his and rest my head on the window and my bag on my lap. After about four hours, I see the “You are now leaving Washington, come again!” sign. I feel the presence of someone next to me and look over to see the boy that was sitting in the back of the bus as well.

“Hello?” I say kind of as a question.
“Hi! I’m Noah. Noah Sage Crawford to be exact,” he replies sticking out his hand in front of us with a smile on his face.

“Hi Noah, I’m Kamryn Nicole. I’m kind of dropping my last name because of bad memories if that makes sense,” I say shaking his hand, not sure what to do next.

“Nice to meet you Kamryn,” Noah replies still holding my hand in the shaking position.

“You too. Not to be rude or anything, but why are you talking to me, I’m a complete stranger?” I question him.

“Um, friends begin as strangers and we have a couple hours left on this bus so I thought I’d come and talk to you.”

“Oh, um Noah?”
“Yeah?”
“My hand...”

“Oh, uh, yeah sorry about that,” he says with an embarrassed laugh. He takes his hand back, releasing mine, and scratches the back of his neck looking down.

“Um, so tell me about yourself,” Noah says after a few minutes of us just sitting there in silence.

“Well, what do you want to know?” For some reason, I felt like I could tell Noah anything. As if he was my best friend. As if I had known him my whole life.

“Um, what’s your favorite color?” he asks with a serious look on his face like he really wanted I know what my favorite color was.

“Really, my favorite color?”

“Yes, I want to know your favorite color.”

“Um, probably orange.”

“Why are you going to LA?” He asks another question.

That was a jump. He goes from my favorite color to why I’m going to LA. I would expect myself to be afraid to tell him why I’m going but I seem okay with it. I feel like I can trust him with that information.
“Well, my mother passed away three months ago and my father was an alcoholic and he would abuse my mother. It got so bad that it was the cause of her death and then he began beating me. I just turned eighteen about two weeks ago and now I’m here, leaving to start anew,” I say not making eye contact with him because he probably thinks I’m some weirdo with a messed up life. To my surprise, I feel arms drape around my shoulders and pull me close and my head is rested on his chest.

“I am so sorry, I have no idea what that’s like but I’m sorry;” he says in a hushed tone.

I don’t know what to say at all. I just burst out and the tears stream down my face. I don’t know where all of this is coming from but I can’t stop it. All my life, I’ve kept my guard up, I’ve stayed quiet and to myself, I never let anyone in. But now, I’m letting all of my emotions out to a complete stranger who I met barely an hour ago.

“I’m sorry, I guess I’ve been keeping that in for so long. It had to come out some time, huh,” I say pulling back a little so we were looking each other in the eyes.

“It’s fine but now my story of me going to LA was just because I was meeting my grandma in Seattle,” he says with a laugh that I join in.

For the next several hours, we shared stories, got to know each other and laughed… a lot.”

The bus comes to a stop at the bus station in LA signaling we had arrived our destination. Noah and I both grabbed our items and headed to the front of the bus so we could get off. I take a step onto the cement floor and look out at the sunny sky and road with many passers-by filling them. I turn behind me to where Noah was and give him a genuine smile. He looks at me and smiles back.

“Welcome to sunny Los Angeles,” he says with his arms out and a smile still on his face, “How do you like it so far?”

“Well, from the two minutes that I’ve been here, I know this is where I belong and that I’ll love it,” I say squinting so I can see him.

“Oh, here put these on,” he says taking off his sunglasses from his head and putting them on my head. Well, attempting to that it. Instead of smoothly sliding them on, he pokes my right eye.

“Oh-ow-uh-yeah-that-ow,” I say holding onto my eye with my hand as if that will take the pain away.

“Oh my goodness. Kamryn, I am so sorry. Uh- here, open your eye,” he says and I obey what he says. He begins lightly blowing in my eye after I get it completely open.

“Thank you, but don’t you need those glasses yourself? I could just get my own pair from the gift shop or something,” I say handing them back to him.

“No, I have a second pair right here,” he says grabbing another pair from his back pocket and I smile at him as a thank you.

“Well, I should go now since my mom is expecting me home in a few. Where are you going?” he asks me worried.

“Oh, my aunt from my mom’s side is letting me stay with her here. Uh, oh! There she is,” I reply to him pointing to my aunt as I see her and waving to her.

“Well I guess this is goodbye friend,” he says putting out his hand for me to shake.

I look down at the hand and back up at his eyes and I surprise myself by wrapping my arms around him, “Not forever though, right?”

“Of course not,” he says wrapping his arms around my waist, “See ya later,” and with that, he turns around and walks away. I do the same but head in the opposite direction towards my aunt.

Two years later...

I was going through the aisles of the local grocery store, getting the essential groceries. I was turning the cart into the next aisle when I feel it stop after hitting something, well someone.

“Oh my goodness, I am so sorry,” I say moving the cart out of the way and picking up an item I dropped.

“It’s okay, really.”

Wait, I know that voice. The voice of my best friend. The voice of my only friend.

“Noah?”

“Kamryn?”
There in that dark, deserted high school hallway, with a deluge of tears streaming down my face, I found myself. I had just made that walk of shame out of the gym, followed by the even more mortifying five-word-phone conversation with my dad. “I didn’t make the team.” Those dreadful, disappointing words left the sourest taste in my mouth and the sharpest pain in the pit of my stomach. All I could think about was my sheer embarrassment and undeniable feeling of inadequacy. I wasn’t good enough, and I hated that.

That November day, I faced a harsh reality: I am not a high school athlete. Yes, all my friends are athletes. Yes, my sister was a successful high school and college athlete. Yes, my parents were both high school and college athletes. No, I am not. That November day, I also faced a new dilemma: what now?

My quirky, World-of-Warcraft-playing, Lord-of-the-Rings-loving, speech teacher had been pestering me for months to join forensics. He had seen me present dozens of speeches in his class, which I had only signed up for to complete that pesky speech requirement and make room for fun, petty electives. He told me I had a great voice, great inflection, great writing, and great potential. For the thousandth time he asked me to join the team; I finally caved, desperately hoping to achieve success after my recent shortcoming. How many people are in this club anyway? Like fifteen?

I skeptically walked into a forensics meeting the following day expecting to encounter a couple of humdrum, introverted kids reading plays and writing speeches. Fifty were present. I knew five of them. Some guy I had never seen before walked to the front of the room and started presenting his piece, a humorous interpretation. He acted for over ten minutes—no script, no other actors, no stage fright. I was smiling, I was laughing, I was in utter wonderment and admiration. I felt the sudden urge to break out into a rendition of Jasmine and Aladdin’s “A Whole New World”! (Thankfully, I didn’t because whereas my athletic talents are mediocre, my musical abilities are completely nonexistent.) In just ten minutes, I had been introduced to a whole new breed of affable, hilarious, artistic people, a whole new level of talent, and a whole new world within my high school. Why had I never even heard of forensics until then? Why wasn’t this confident, talented guy being praised on the morning announcements?

I continued to expand my horizons. I enrolled in a journalism class; the first article I wrote was published in my school’s newspaper. Suddenly, I was transformed from morose basketball reject to resilient state qualifying forensicator and Editor-in-Chief of my school’s newspaper. I shut the door on aimlessly shooting free throws and opened a window to confidently, purposefully writing, reporting, and speaking. I abandoned my notion that I had failed and proudly embraced success. I threw away my basketball shoes and picked up a pencil. I found my niche. I found my place. I found myself in that dark, deserted high school hallway.
Janessa Barmann
Short Story: *Far from You*
Platte City Middle School
Kelly Miller, Teacher

I didn’t think that I would ever come back here. Once my family left me in my dorm room freshman year at college, I thought I was free, but everyone knows you’re never free if you’re from Clearwater, Kansas. This place follows you, you’re always drawn back. Silly me, thinking that since my parents died a year ago, maybe I wouldn’t have to come back, though I live 20 miles away in Wichita. Freshman year was years ago. I have a job now and hopefully a family soon. Unfortunately, that requires a man in my life. Which I most certainly don’t have. My hopes were high, but my doubts were higher.

The funeral went by in a blur, don’t get me wrong, I love my parents, but I have learned to live my life without them. I went to my old house, what was left of it anyway. It’s hard to see the rubble of my childhood memories, burned in the same fire that killed my parents. Part of me is glad that it’s gone, no attachments to this town anymore, but part of me was sad to see it go. There was an unfamiliar red truck on the road in front of the property with a blue and white sign saying “Ted’s Reality”. As if on cue, two men in charcoal-colored pea coats come around the trees beside where the house used to be. They stop in their tracks when they catch sight of a puffy-eyed, makeup smeared, messy hair, and a blotched face looking back at them, it was me.

Anger rises in me. Though I don’t want the place, it still felt like it was mine. As I storm up to the man and the realtor, their faces become confused. I make sure I speak loud and clear so I don’t make a fool of myself. You know how in junior high when your class is getting yelled at by your teacher, but she fumbles with her words and you are in a life or death situation? If you laugh, you’re done. That’s what I made sure I’d avoid.

"Who are you and what are you doing in this proper.. Uh what are you doing ON this property?"
Great job. I think to myself.
I have seen one of them before, his face on highway billboards. He must be Ted. The other one flashes a smile as he reaches out his hand.

"I'm sorry, my name is Mason Perry. I'm looking into buying this place to tear down the remains and rebuild it." He said pulling his hand away realizing it’s not the time to tell me his future plans of our property.
"I'll go get the papers from the truck," Ted murmured just loud enough for me to hear.
"That won't be necessary." I shot back.

He turned to walk away to his truck marking the beginning of a long and somewhat strained silence between Mason and me. A few awkward glances went by before he cleared his throat.

"So, uh what brings you to 'the sticks'." He asked jokingly. This made me furious, though I don't know why.
I gave him a little "hmph!" before I stomped back to my car.

***

I stop at a diner in town to figure out what I was going to do from there. As my food arrives, Mason walks through the door. Thankfully he doesn't notice me, I was not in the mood to discuss the property. He heads to the counter to the blonde waitress that looks a little younger than himself. They're talking and suddenly I felt a ping of jealousy, but I instantly turn it into anger.

After eating only a few bites, I storm straight towards the counter, and pull out a twenty. Right when Mason recognizes me, he smiles. *Ugh I hate when he does that, it’s so obnoxious.*
"Thanks" I spoke as coldly as I could manage. The waitress looked back and forth between us with a quizzical look on her face.

As the sun starts to set, I pull up to an old bed and breakfast. At the register, a gray-haired couple welcomes me with smiles while the man's arm is around his wife. They remind me of my mother and father. I hold back the tears until I reach my room. It has a creamy beige tint on the walls and a floral bedspread that makes you feel at home. On the desk there is a picture with a note saying "For our guests, here is a little bit of information about Clearwater, and some photos."

In one of the photos I find an old picture where the edges are beginning to curl, and has a yellow tint to it. I recognize the house as my own. Except it looks brand new and the paint on the front shutters isn't chipping away, and there isn't a broken front porch railing support bar broken in half, like I remembered from the last time I saw it. I tucked the picture in my purse to keep with me.
The next morning I woke up full of energy and ready to seize the day. In the kitchen, the husband made breakfast. He was making a special heart pancake for his wife and that was when I realized why I wanted the property; for my parents. They were special, in love, soul mates. I wanted to be that kind of happy. There was no way I would leave without this place.

I hear the door open and to my surprise it was Mason with that silly grin on his face. Ugh. He catches my eye and gets that I need to talk to him, and he smiled. What a jerk. When I turn back around, I see the wife was smiling at me with a suspicious smile on her face. She had something to do with Mason just so happening to show up at the same place I was staying.

As soon as I started towards him, the anger came back. Still, I'm not really sure why I'm mad.

"Well good morning, beautiful." he smiled sheepishly. What was that?

"How did you find me?" I tried to make it so my question had as little emotion as possible, but I ended up sounding like a lost little girl.

"Let's just say I have some connections in this town, the town where there's not really much of a selection for guests staying all night." He disgusted me. Thinking he's so clever he found me.

We talk in the living room by the fire place about where he's from and why he wants the property when he starts asking the questions.

"What about you? I saw your plates were from Sedgwick County... What brings you to Clearwater? It most certainly wasn't the selection in men, was it?" He flashed his smile again. After I feel like I know so much about him and how he just opened up to me, I didn't really mind it.

I explained how the house that burned down on the property was where I lived when I was younger. It held the memories of my childhood that I could never get back because that's all they were, memories.

"The couple that died in the fire were my parents..." I wasn't sure how to finish my sentence, his face fell when I only said this.

"I'm so sorry. I truly am, but I can assure you, the house I build will be beautiful and I won't ruin the land, pollute the air, or litter the yard. I will take care of it." He said this truthfully, and I believed him.

Gosh, why is he so perfect. Did I really just think that? I didn't know how I felt, but I did know it wasn't the anger from before, or the jealousy. It was something different that I have never been experienced to. Could I actually like this guy?

We talked all night long, on the couch next to the fire. I woke up in his arms and we had a blanket on us. Though I didn't know for sure how it got there, I had a feeling Suzanne, I learned from Mason that was her name, put it there.

We woke up at the same time, around 7:50. I didn't want to leave, I wanted to stay there forever. Isn't that every teenage girl's dream? To fall asleep by the fire?

I turned to him.

"Well I believe you. I don't know why because I have only just met you, but I do. Take care, I need to get back to California for work. Did you know they don't like if you skip days of work in a row?!" I asked jokingly. Did I really just say that? What a fool. I'm falling for this guy and I'm going head first.

"Oh yes of course, but will you..." He trailed off and just began looking at the ground. That was my cue.

"Well I should get going to get back in town not too late... and you probably need to get home to your girlfriend..." I hadn't actually said it aloud, but that girl at the diner had really bothered me. Maybe I took all the compliments, honesty, and all those smiles, the wrong way? Serves me right for falling for a guy from stupid Clearwater, Kansas.

His face fell, he looked hurt. Should I have not mentioned her? I always do this, I let my emotions take over and I say the wrong things. He made me fall for him, he was asking for it. All those flirtatious comments and glances, he hurt me.

“What are you talking about, Lauryn, what girlfriend?”

He's denying it... I saw him!

“I know for a fact you know I saw you and her at the diner! Why did you play me? You made me fall for you and when I did...” I couldn't finish, the hurt was rising up in my throat.

“Lauryn, that was my sister! She is just out of college and is having some troubles getting along so I am trying to be there for her! Please don’t leave mad, actually please don’t leave at all.”
I couldn’t take his word for it. How many times have you heard that lame excuse “it was my sister” or “she’s my cousin”? Today was Saturday and Monday would come too quick; I had to get back to the city.

“It’s getting late” Then I left him with that, though it was only 7 o’clock. What are you supposed to say when you are breaking it off with someone who gave you a sense hope?

***

To be honest, I missed him. He gave me a feeling only people in love understand. You feel it, when it’s real, butterflies don’t even begin to describe the turning in your stomach. It’s something you can’t express with the perfect words. It’s been only hours since I last saw him, but I made a mistake that I needed to fix.

I went back to the bed and breakfast, found Suzanne, and told her the story. She knew where to find him, and exactly what to say. The way I left was unfair, maybe there was a reason I came back again this year, or maybe there was a reason he just happened to be looking at the property the day I came up.

A hint of worry hit me when I looked at the time in the car, it was 1:23 am. As I turned a corner down the street I saw one house with the light on. Instantly, I knew it had to be Mason’s. I took my steps to his porch steady, for all of my emotions were heightened. After I rang the doorbell, a man with messy hair, puffy eyes, pajamas and a t-shirt answered. There was no need to ask why his eyes were puffy, he was crying over me. For a few seconds we just looked at each other, but it wasn’t like before. There was no awkwardness, only relief and love was in the air.

“What are you doing- how did you find my house?” He sounded like it took so much out of him to ask one question.

“Let’s just say I have connections in this town.”

Then finally, the sparks. He embraced me into his arms and it felt like that was where I was supposed to be all along. like I was lost, but am now found. Gently, he held my face and kissed me.

***

Months and months went by, close to a year, with only dates on weekends and a call every night from Mason. He came up to Wichita for a night on the two year anniversary of my parents death. Recently, when he invited me to stay over for the weekend, there was something...off. I don’t know how to describe it, but it was almost as if he had something else on his mind. Another girl? Could he be seeing someone else while I am living in Wichita? I blocked those thoughts from my mind and for the entire weekend, I tried to act as if nothing was wrong, as if everything was normal.

It was a warm spring day when I was in my office, and my phone beeped, indicating I had a visitor. When I opened my office door, I was greeted by warmth and the smell of old spice.

"Mason, what are you doing here?" I breathed.

"It's a surprise. I already talked to your boss and you're free to leave with me as soon as you're ready. Grab your stuff and I'll take you to my car and put a blindfold over your eyes." He spoke his words clearly, but shakily.

This must have been why he was so different from our last conversation on the phone, but where was he taking me?

"We're almost there, just a couple more minutes."

This made my heart race...what was going on?

I felt the car stop and heard Mason get out. A few seconds later I felt the wind from my car door opening and reached for Mason's hand. I slowly got out of the car with the assistance of Mason. All of the sudden I felt my feet leave the ground and Mason held me over the threshold. He began running somewhere, then up some steps. He put me down, but I almost lost my balance. Partly because my feet suddenly touched the Earth with no warning, and also because I was laughing too hard.

What is he doing?

"Okay, take off your blindfold."

Tears filled my eyes as I took in the view. A house, exactly like my parent's old house, down to every detail, was sitting right in front of me. Then there was Mason. He had his ridiculous smile across his face, cheek to cheek. He was on one knee with a tiny box. Inside propped up was a stunning diamond ring.
Jasiri... Jasiri... Jasiri! I startle from my sleep by the sound of my name. Even though I already know the origin of the infrasound call, I turn towards the direction of the sound to find Melinda watching me. It is almost feeding time and I didn't think you'd want to miss it, she adds. I make no effort to move toward the gate where in a couple of minutes two zookeepers will appear out of it to set down our buckets of food. Look, Jasiri, I know your mother's death has been hard on you, but your really should be making more of an effort to move on, Melinda adds as she stalks toward the gate. Again, I remain silent. Who is she to judge me? I know we have been pen-mates for three years now, but Melinda’s mother and daughter are always in reach of our infrasound calls, while my mother is dead. I watched hopelessly as she died only a week ago. Could it have really been that long now? I already feel as though I am forgetting the soft murmurs of her calls to me and the warm, protected feeling of her trunk caressing my neck. I miss her so much.

As if exhausted by this short remembrance of my mother, I let my trunk fall to the ground in front of me. I'm sitting now on the south edge of the small pond located in the center of our cage, using the thick green foliage to my right to hide from the small crowd of humans gathered around the north edge of our pen. It's a hotter day today than most, even though every day in July is hot in Orlando, but the people are as happy as ever to observe me. They're all laughing, smiling, pointing. It's disgusting how excited people get over seeing another creature, especially one of my size. “Jasiri! I have food for you!” My zookeeper named Jacqueline has entered our pen and noticed my lack of enthusiasm to eat the bland food they provide us. She walks over to me and begins to rub my side. “How've you been, girl? Are you having a bad day?” she asks in an annoying high-pitched voice humans often use to talk to their own babies or animals. I hate Jacqueline. Frankly, I hate all humans. Most of them are ignorant and obnoxious. It's unfair that they have become the dominant species solely because they have opposable thumbs. I have an opposable trunk, with more muscles in it than humans have in their entire body, not to mention the fact that I'm ten times stronger than any given human, but you don’t see me putting other animals in cages for entertainment.

After a few failed attempts to make me get up, Jacqueline gives me a sympathetic look as she leaves the cage. I hear her stop on the other side of the gate to speak with a few other zookeepers.

“I think it's time...” Jacqueline remarks with a heavy sigh.
“She hasn't eaten her full servings since last week,” another zookeeper mumbles.
“She's obviously critically depressed.”
“Poor thing, she's never been separated from her mother until now.”
“I think this is the right thing for her.”

Their conversation continues, but I’m now ignoring them. It's clear they’re talking about me, but I don’t quite understand what they’re discussing. What is it time for? What is the right thing for me? I’m searching through my mind trying to remember if I heard anything in the last week to hint at these answers, but I’ve been uncharacteristically unobservant since the death of my beloved mother. After a few minutes, I sense Jacqueline returning to my cage. She walks up to me with tears in her eyes and tells me how much she'll miss me. I barely even have time to contemplate what she means, when I feel the dart pierce through my thick, rough skin right behind my head.

I wake probably days later, estimated by the stiffness in my joints. I’m alone in a dark room barely large enough to hold my large body. No, wait, the room is moving. Out of the corner of my right eye, I see light coming through a window no bigger than the size of my hoof. I then finally realize that I’m in a car- a truck more specifically. Even though I have ridden in trucks countless times to be transported between zoos, my pulse begins to quicken, and I’m short of breath. Something about this specific joy ride doesn’t seem so joyous. For one, I’m alone and out of the comforting presence of my mother. Then, I realize the source behind my discomfort- the normal sounds associated with driving- car horns, the low purr of the engines, the squeaking of the breaks - are all absent. Whatever road I’m travelling on is either isolated or abandoned. In fact, I can’t hear anything except the sound of one engine and a few human voices in the front seats of the truck I’m being transported in. By the sound of the voices, the truck contains Jacqueline and three other males.
After another hour or so of driving, the truck comes to a stop and the wall directly in front of me is unlocked and lifted up. I'm taken aback by the intensity of the light that immediately hits me, briefly blinding me while my eyes readjust to the drastic change in lighting. The first thing my mind registers is heat. I'm hit by what seems like a blanket of hot, dry air. Don't get me wrong, Orlando was hot, and I'm more than equipped to deal with it, but it is almost overwhelmingly hot.

“Hey there, Jasiri,” Jacqueline says in a soft tone. “Why don’t you come down here?” she says, gesturing to the ramp at my feet. As if I didn't understand what she said, one of the males accompanying her grabs hold of the rope that's laced around my body and head, attempting to pull me forward. I oblige and exit the truck, giving me a better view of the mysterious world around me. At first I'm confused because my surroundings closely resemble those of my old pen. From the light brown, dead grass thinly covering the dry dirt on the ground to the random patches of tall trees scattered around as far as I can see. It all is so familiar, yet, so strange. As my eyes and ears scan my environment, I realize I'm not in another pen in a different zoo. There is no fence, no viewing areas, no sidewalks, and no end to what I previously thought was an exhibit. I suddenly remember that Jacqueline had suggested something about an international wildlife park in Africa. Not that I know what any of that means. I know humans refer to me as an African elephant, but I don’t know how that connects to my current location.

As if answering my unasked questions, Jacqueline says to me, “you know, Jasiri, you’re going to like it here in the wild. You'll meet lots of other elephants and have so much fun with them. You won't have to take orders from your keepers. And besides, we think it should help with your grief,” she finishes with a pitying look on her face. Even though I despise her, sometimes I think Jacqueline is the only one that realizes that we can understand people. One of the guys mumbles that they should be leaving before the sun goes down, so Jacqueline instructs them to remove my leash while she makes sure my tracker is in place. After Jacqueline is done sobbing and saying goodbye to me, the four of them drive away, leaving me alone in a place Jacqueline called “the wild.”

This is one of the first times in my life I've truly been alone, and I’m debating what to do now when I hear them. The soft footsteps of at least fifteen elephants echo in my ears. I turn in the direction of the noise, but they must be a couple miles away because I can't see them yet. I don't dare to greet them through infrasound, for I know that many elephants can be rude, especially to outsiders. But now that I know I won't have the zoo to rely on for food and water, I decide following them will be my best bet for resources. Even though I know they can hear my footsteps, I stay a safe enough distance away so I don't bother them. After walking through the night, the herd arrives at a watering hole. After the long walk in the extreme heat, I'm dangerously thirsty. Nonetheless, I stay back from the waterhole, making a conscious effort to not invade the herd's space. Although I've been in hearing distance for hours now, I haven't been listening to the herd's interactions. But now that I have nothing to do but lay here and wait for them to clear away from the water, I allow myself to begin reading the quiet messages.

Be careful, baby. Not too deep, one mother said to her daughter.
Alex, come out of the water. It's Megan's turn.
Who's that watching us?
Don't know. Maybe she lost her herd.
Everyone drink some more; it has been too long since we've had water. When this elephant speaks, all the others simultaneously stop their conversations and return to focus to the water. This confuses me very much. What makes this elephant more dominant? I can tell she was more aged than all of the others, but why do they all immediately listen to her command?

I observe the herd for a length of time until my thirst finally gets the best of me. I rise and walk in a large semi-circle around the herd to arrive at the water on the opposite shore from the herd. Unfortunately, on this side of the small lake, the ground is higher so that there is a small cliff between where I'm standing and the surface of the water. I try leaning forward and lowering my trunk to the water, but I still couldn't reach. I don't know what to do, and I really miss my mother because she would know what to do in this situation. About to give up in defeat, I turn around to walk away to find that the whole herd is behind me, now blocking me in with my back to the water. I remain silent, too frightened to communicate.

Please don't be afraid, the eldest elephant said after a moment. You look like you're in need of a drink. We’ll help you. Turn back around and be very still.
Although I know very well that they could easily drown me, I obeyed anyway. What’s the point? If I don’t drink some water soon, I’ll likely die from lack of water. After I do as she says, the herd closes their circle around me. Their plan is unclear to me until they reach me and interlock their trunks under my stomach. All at once, they lift me ever so slightly off the ground and inch me forward until my head is hanging over the water. They proceed to lower my head until the water is in reach of my trunk. I gulp the water gratefully until it’s clear that I’m becoming a burden to hold and they reel me back to the ground.

Thank you, I reply after a moment.

You’re welcome, the oldest elephant said hesitantly. I noticed you have a tag on your ear, are you from captivity?

Yes, I replied. I was raised in zoos throughout America.

America, huh? What brings you here?

Umm, my mother died and apparently my keepers thought coming here would help me.

Interesting. Well, we better keep moving, she said to the rest of her herd. All at one, they turned around and followed her in the direction of the rising sun. After fifteen or twenty steps, she turns her head in my direction and says, well are you coming, kid?

Again, I hesitate. You want me to travel with you?

Well you were going to follow us anyway, right? I don’t answer, confirming her suspicions. And you have no family, friends, or herd out here, correct? Again, the clear answer is yes. So, you’ve got us now. We’re migrating back to a river in the east where we’ll have plenty of water and be safe from poachers, but you’ve got to keep up. She turns back and continues to lead the herd in the direction of the sun. I’m so shocked from the sudden turn of events that it takes me a moment to make my legs move again. When I catch up to the group, I’m overwhelmed with loving comments flowing from the rest of the herd.

Welcome to our family!

My name’s Clove!

I can tell we’re going to be good friends!

How’s life in the States?

What’s your name, dear?

My name’s Jasiri, I replied, and that’s how it all started. For weeks we travelled across the dry land, only stopping at the chance for a drink of water and to rest. All along the way I spent time with each member of the herd, getting to know her. Mags, the eldest elephant, is our leader and guide. When she speaks, everyone in the herd listens.

The dynamics of the herd are like nothing I’ve ever seen. If someone is hurt or tired, everyone stops and helps her. If someone gets stuck in quicksand or mud, we all work together to pull her out. Even when we were met by a herd of lions at a waterhole, we all stayed close together to protect the few adolescents of the group. I always knew my mother would do all of these things for me, but never have I seen a group of non-related elephants go out of their way to protect each other. After a couple of weeks, I express how my skin on my back is starting to cause me pain. Clove replies that she has a solution to that. She moves over to the pond we’re at, fills her trunk with mud, and sprays it over my back. I instantly feel relief and tell her thanks. To this she replies, no need to thank me. We’re family now. And family looks out for each other.

It’s true. In a matter of a few short weeks, this group of fifteen elephants has become my family. It’s not that they are replacing my mother- no one can do that. Instead, they have filled my heart with so much love and joy that I no longer am overcome with grief or despair. I feel as though I am finally doing what I’m meant to do. I wasn’t made to be confined in a three hundred square foot cage for the entertainment of humans. I was made to roam the beautiful plains and deserts of the country of my origin with my wonderful, loving, compassionate, new family.
Ellise Bartlett
Personal Essay/Memoir: Stars
Shawnee Mission South High School
Travis Gatewood, Teacher

I was truly, gloriously, and completely alone, surrounded by nothing but grass and utter darkness. The crispness of the autumn wind sent a chill up my spine as I blindly made my way through a field. I was headed to no particular place, in no particular direction. I was simply wandering through the crushing blackness of night attempting to clear my head of all my worries and doubts. My reality began to warp and bend as the environment around me faded into nothingness. I could have been anywhere. I could have been nowhere at all. My senses ceased to function, as I began to drift away into the world of my imagination.

I took myself back in time, to the days of simplicity and childhood carefreeness. My mind wandered to six-year-old me sitting on the lap of my grandfather as he strummed his worn guitar with passionate precision. The music rushed and swelled through my head as the lyrics stuck to every cell in my body. I thought that even as a young girl, I felt the surge of the organized, rhythmic noise in every part of my being. I was fully fascinated with the ability of music to captivate me both mentally and physically. In that field, I wanted to dance, I wanted to cry, I wanted to scream. As I continued to aimlessly saunter, the words continued to repeat in my head. I began to sing aloud.

“Eleanor Rigby picks up the rice in the church where a wedding has been,
Lives in a dream
Waits at the window, wearing the face that she keeps in a jar by the door
Who is it for?
All the lonely people
Where do they all come from?
All the lonely people
Where do they all belong?”

The lyrics poured through my mouth as I thought deeply about how their meanings had changed. They had changed the way I had changed. They grew with me. I was no longer the little girl on the lap of her loving grandfather, I was a struggling teenager with too much on my mind. I was lonely, and I wore another face to hide my problems. I was Eleanor Rigby, and I was scared of how my song would end. I collapsed. Tears flowed down my cheeks and onto the itchy, bug filled grass as I gasped for air. With my eyes closed and my back on the cool, damp ground, I slowly regained my composure. The realization I had made started to put things into perspective.

As I lay on the heavily dewed grass, with eyes finally open and moisture soaking through my over-sized shirt, I found myself mesmerized by the pure, beautiful complexity of the stars. Millions. Billions. More than you could ever imagine, more than I had ever seen. Brightness spread across the sky in shimmers, flashes, twinkles. It engulfed me. I was swallowed whole by power and majesty. The world was no longer as dark as it had seemed. It was only an illusion of my brain. I was actually surrounded by sparkles of joy and glimmers of hope. All I had to do was focus on the light right above my head and look past all of the black gloom before my eyes. The stars were there all along, but I thought too much of the darkness to see the light. I allowed the world around me to hinder my view of the big picture. I was never completely alone. All I had to do was look to the sky and ask for help. After that day, I was lighter. I was freer.
Elizah Becker

Personal Essay/Memoir: The Power of Disease
Kirkwood High School
Simon Drew, Teacher

The brain slowly disintegrates over years, even decades. My grandmother was once the strongest woman imaginable: accomplished, independent, and firmly set in beliefs progressive for the mid-1900’s. After my grandfather passed, we discovered in his basement a box of poems my grandmother had once written. Brought up in a privileged white household, this remarkable woman at the age of 17 had asked the unspoken:

March 8, 1947
Where and what is the answer to this infernal question?
Is it a question of hatred or contempt?
Is it based on knowledge or ignorance?
Thought or tradition?
People sit out in the summer sun
Trying to get a good sunburn,
Then curse men because their skin is dark!
White man oppresses black man:
Drives him to drink,
But blames him for his drunkenness!
White man always suspicious of black man:
“Never trust a ‘nigger’”
And yet he eats food cooked by one!
What are the reasons for prejudice?
Why am I so helpless?
Why can’t I do anything about it?
Why? Why?

She wrote this sixty years before Alzheimer’s had started to invade her mind, attack her brain, and infect her beautiful way of thinking. Now she no longer prays for equality in the world, no longer questions society, no longer opposes the status quo. She lives her everyday life being told what to do, being fed a meal of someone else’s choice. She has no say now because she has no words. I imagine her mind full of desires and wants that she’s forgotten how to communicate. Instead, she weeps and sometimes resorts to violence, throwing a powerless punch towards her stay-at-home nurse.

Towards the end of their lives, my grandparents were complementary. My grandfather was exceptionally powerful at mind, though physically feeble and dropping pounds by the week. Eating was too painful, swallowing seemed nearly impossible, and digesting was agonizing for him. He didn’t have a specific eating disorder, but his eating without a doubt was disordered. My grandmother, on the other hand, was physically fine, although she didn’t remember how to use her physical ability. My grandfather would ask her to retrieve dinner from the kitchen; she’d leave but come back empty-handed. Everything was capable except her mind. They attempted to work together for a while, my grandpa telling her what needed to be done, and she accomplishing the actions. It became a weekly routine for my grandfather to create the grocery list and for my parents and I to take my grandmother to the store. This was typically followed by a stop at Subway to purchase a week’s worth of the same old 12-inch chicken sandwich that served as every night’s dinner for the two of them. This worked until she began to forget the instructions he gave her. She was always up at night, unaware of when to sleep. He still loved her dearly, and told her as much every day, but she began to lose recognition of who he was.

In the past ten years, I’ve seen her forget the fact that we visited her the previous week, forget that she ate an hour ago, forget names of and relationships with her grandchildren, children and husband. More recently, she has forgotten how to communicate and every now and then she resorts to violence to get her point across. On one occasion, my grandmother was confused and upset to the degree where she ended up
kicking her husband, tearing his thin and fragile skin from his lower leg, turning it black and blue and leaving it bleeding.

Nowadays, she has trouble with even basic tasks because she doesn’t realize that she should be doing them. We sit her down at the dinner table with a plate loaded with her favorites, yet she doesn’t know to pick up the fork and eat what’s in front of her. She still recognizes red as a color she adores, and some muscle memory has stuck with her but not much. One surprising thing about her Alzheimer’s is that sense of music is one of the last things to go. Music and rhythm are located in a different area of the brain than memory, so instead of communicating, my grandmother constantly *bum bum bums* to some unknown tune. Once, my uncle Steve, being a musician, tried to crack the code and uncover the never-ending melody. His attempt was unsuccessful, and the tune proved to be unrecognizable and meaningless. We looked for significances in her behaviors just to comfort our loss, but we found none; her actions had no rationale. These days, even her mysterious song seems to have died out, so she sits in silence.

Unlike other grandmother and granddaughter relationships, she and I can’t converse. She can’t tell me the story of how she met my grandfather, or what it was like living through World War II. She has never gardened with me, baked cookies with me, or offered me a hard candy. Instead, my dad and I occasionally visit her on Mondays and Wednesdays, bringing her some of her favorites: meatloaf, baked beans, and mashed potatoes. We have to feed her because often she doesn’t remember how. My father and I take turns bringing the fork to her lips; she opens her mouth and does the rest, occasionally spitting out any unwanted pieces. We talk to her as if she’s functional, yet she shows no sign of processing our words and can’t put together a relevant response. We joke around, trying to make her laugh, and her doing the same for us maybe without even knowing it. She makes childish, absurd faces and sticks her tongue out while blowing us a raspberry. She also puts her fists up as if in a comedic boxing match.

She alternates between laughing, *bum bum bumming*, and random outbreaks of weeping. These outbreaks seem unprovoked; she might be coming to a realization of what her life has become, she might be lonely and miss her husband, she might be frustrated with the fact that she is unable to communicate. It’s impossible to solve the mystery of what’s going on in her mind, since that question cannot be answered by a questionnaire or discovery in the lab.

*The Curious Case of Benjiman Button* wasn’t far off with the idea of aging in reverse. My grandmother began life unable to speak, feed herself, or remember what occurred in the previous five minutes, and that’s exactly how her life is coming to a close right now. She raised my father and his siblings and now they are taking care of her. Since the disease is genetic, soon enough my father might be in the same position, and then so eventually might I. Fortunately, I have time; time for medicine to be developed, time for studies to be done, time to find a cure, or at least an effective treatment. There are, in fact, tests to be taken to determine if a person carries the Alzheimer’s gene. I’m not sure if that’s something I would even want to know. Either I live my life knowing and fearing the inevitable, or I live a fearless life, unaware of what’s to come.

Becoming so helpless in my final years is possibly the worst impression to leave behind, yet that is how many people pass away; similar to how they began life. My grandmother has spent the last 80 months erasing her first 80 years. It’s as if the minute she turned 70, someone hit rewind on her life, flying back through her adulthood and returning to her early years. Now, she is reliving those essential, formative years but this time in reverse; losing all the qualities, desires, and convictions that she spent all those years establishing. Now, I look across the dinner table into her vacant expression, her once vibrant eyes, once full of love, compassion, and energy, do nothing more than stare across the room at her granddaughter, a complete stranger.
They gave us an explanation in Hebrew, and one of my peers translated for those of us who were less confident in the language. They told us that we were about to go on a Masa, a journey, which all soldiers must complete to earn their rank in the army. This was the culmination of all we’d worked for, something difficult but a point of pride for all who completed it.

However, what we were about to embark on was not exactly the Masa that every Israeli soldier completes. Compared to the usual 70 Kilometers in the heart of the mountainous desert, ours was a mere 4 km on the side of a road (granted, we were still in the desert). This modified version was proportional to our entire experience, which was just one week of basic training—and we were simply Americans who participated in this program as a part of our four months of studying abroad. And yet, we had real m’fakdim, commanders, from the Israeli Defense Forces who presented this journey to us as it is presented to real soldiers; thus it had an air of authenticity.

When we were told to line up, my eyes immediately shifted down, so I could shuffle my feet until they were in perfect alignment with the “soldier” in front of me. This is the kind of habit I’d acquired from the rigid instruction I was used to during the past two and half days. These days were filled with ten-second sprints, and the rushed and confused counting backwards in Hebrew: “Eser… tesa… shmona… sheva… shesh… hamesh… arba… salosh… (10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3)” only to remember that I must stand with my heels together, toes apart, and hands in a triangle in the center of my back, before “shtayim… achat (2, 1)” Anticipating that kind of physical activity coupled with harsh discipline had caused uneasiness leading up to this experience. I could never have imagined myself—an unathletic, out of shape, and unpatriotic girl—acting as a soldier. I had arrived at the army base and immediately felt out of place. But the last two and a half days had proved I was wrong. As each sprint finished, I felt good about the small challenge. By the time I found myself at the start of my masa, I had endured the worst of my worries, and this felt like a walk in the park. Yet a little over halfway through this supposedly life-changing journey, we were commanded to stop and kneel down, to signify that we were listening to orders.

The translator translated: “We will be crawling the short segment of the path you see in front of you, like soldiers do during combat. You all know how to army crawl from this morning. You all have to go from the start to the finish, and no one gets to go on without finishing.”

I could feel my nerves creeping up my chest and to my throat. I thought back to the mere preview of crawling we had had earlier that day. I learned in those ten feet of practice that crawling was not my forte. It had given me a glimpse of what I had pessimistically expected out of my army training. Any confidence I had felt before—the confidence of the ease of willpower, strength, and principles—faded with the simple introduction of crawling. Not only did I completely lack the strength to drag myself across the desert floor with only the most obscure parts of my hands and feet; not only was I already sweating through the layers of my army uniform due to the blazing sun; not only was it painful for my elbows and knees as I crawled with form that lacked in excellence; I was also completely terrified to allow myself to be so vulnerable in front of this large group of people that I already called my best friends, despite only having known each other for less than a month.

Despite my overwhelming fears, I had no choice. I watched as those in front of me began crawling, without any trace of the difficulty I anticipated. When I arrived at the starting point, I faked confidence and started out boldly. But soon it was clear that I was not good at this skill. I saw green lumps quickly pass me on all sides, for I was slow. I felt my limbs attempt to clumsily move around my torso, for I had bad form. Heavy breaths escaped from me, for I had no endurance. I felt the burning sting of raw skin on my elbows and knees, even through the thick uniform. As my inner lamentations grew, and I continued to fall behind, I felt any optimism of the past few days float away like a mirage I had simply imagined. I was not good at this kind of thing. There was a reason the demands of the army had always been so distant and irrelevant to my own life—I did not fit that predetermined outline of a soldier after all.
My thoughts raced in pessimistic circles. I had to keep going, but it was as though there was a thick cement wall in front of me, and tackling it was not an option. But suddenly, there was something that pushed it just a few inches forward. Two of my friends, my fellow soldiers, who had already completed the length of crawling, had returned back to where I was. While others standing around me gave encouragements, they lied on the ground next to me and starting crawling. Tears swelled up in my eyes, both from the immense difficulty I was going through and the overwhelming support I felt.

“Go! I know you can do it!”
“You got this.”
“Keep using your feet— it'll make it easier!”
“We believe in you.”

With each shout I heard, the wall in front of me was pushed further.

With each inch that the three of us crawled (I the only one obligated to do so), the wall before me seemed to make huge strides forward. This invisible barrier became less intimidating, and it was even something that, at the right moment, I could push forward all by myself.

Eventually, the wall crumbled and I had reached the finish line. I stood up and took a moment to breathe, but then I simply kept going. We walked together until the end of that masa, taking in the vast desert around us as the setting sun slowly brought in the evening. Back on base, I continued sprinting and sweating those last two days, knowing all the while that despite being in the desert, I was anything but deserted by those around me.
Football hit me like Sean Taylor. When I was little, I was a shy kid, afraid to speak for myself. Of course when you are shy, you don’t have too many friends either. Most of my classmates were athletes, too and when I was young, I wasn’t interested in athletics, but I still wanted to fit in. You have no idea what it’s like for a boy who isn’t interested in football, or basketball, or baseball. It’s an exclusive club where the members are chosen solely based on their athletic abilities. You have to get in early or you’re left out in the cold.

Because I wanted friends, I started football in fourth grade. Slowly I formed into a football player. I got new friends and gained the confidence to speak for myself. Instead of being picked last for teams, I began to be picked first. I was getting better and sports and because of that, I started acquiring new friends. As I started gaining in popularity, I wanted to become better. I became more and more competitive. I liked the feeling it gave me. Every time that pigskin is in the air, I turn into a dog going for a treat. Football was all I saw in my future. Not on the side lines, the stands, or at home on a Lazy Boy, but on the field making fans jump up out of their seats.

My mom said it was an accident that I fell in love with football. I say it wasn’t an accident, it was destiny. My dad wanted my brother to play football. He thought my brother had all of the talent. My dad was relentless in his pursuit of football for my brother. I could see why he wanted Jay to go out for the sport. He was big and somewhat of a natural athlete. Every time my dad would ask Jay to go out and try, he refused. I saw the disappointment well up in my dad and so I decided that I wanted to be the one to catch my dad’s eye. In the back of the van one day, after my dad had talked to Jay, I quietly said “I will play football.” You could have heard a pin drop. No one said a word. Jay just looked at me and I could see my dad glancing back at me from the rear view mirror. The next day, my dad took me to sign up and my journey began.

Our first practice was a disaster. It seemed as if I did everything wrong. It would have been worse if my dad was there. He had to work long hours and couldn’t make any of my practices. After practice when my mom picked me up, I sat silently in the van. My mom knew what was wrong. She watched the practice. I would catch with my head and throw with both my hands. Novice stuff. I wanted to quit after my first practice, but I didn’t dare say anything to my dad.

On the weekend, my dad had me come into his room and watch football. I hadn’t broken the news to him yet (remember I am shy). On the television, I read at the bottom of the screen that New England was playing the New York Jets. They were playing at Foxborough, Massachusetts, the Patriot’s home field. Dad pointed to the screen at the beginning of the first offensive play. Tom Brady dropped back, looked left, and saw Randy Moss running a fade. Brady let it fly. Touchdown! From that point on I watched the New England Patriots and taught myself how to play football by watching it. I would scrutinize every play, take mental notes, and try to memorize the plays. I watched when the quarterback, Tom Brady would drop back deep in the pocket and wait for the perfect pass.

At practice, most of the football players on the team would talk about how their dads or brothers taught them this or this. as well help them practice their plays at home. Some of the guys had older brothers who had played high school ball and some even played college. The odds were not in my favor. My dad tried to teach me how to play, but last time he played football was probably in the 1970s and it just didn’t work between the two of us.

I struggled to play and at every practice I embarrassed myself. I just kept repeating to myself that I couldn’t quit. I couldn't stop learning and being better. I had to do it for me, but I also had to do it for my dad. I had to keep teaching myself by throwing the ball in the air and running to go catch it. I had to teach myself defense and the only way to do it was to stack empty laundry baskets, pretend they were my opponents, and tackle them. It wasn’t easy, but I made it work. I was too embarrassed to ask any of my teammates if I could come over to their house to practice. I got better by challenging myself. Sometimes I could see my dad watching me from the deck. He didn’t say much, just watched.

Time passed and I got better with every practice. After a few games had passed, I got my first catch. Then I was thrilled when I scored the first touchdown. I couldn’t believe it when coach started me as safety on
defense and I was able to reach toward the ball to capture my first interception. Not long after that, I scored my first 99-yard touchdown on a kick return. I look up into the stands hoping to see my father and hoping that he feels the pride that I feel. I have accomplished a lot, but what is next? I know that I have accomplished my first goal which was making my dad proud. My second goal? Wearing a Division One jersey.
The stealthy gray clouds crept quietly across the dull blue sky. “War,” my father had told me before I enlisted, “is noble.”

I had thought back to my older brother and asked, “Why do you not support Charlie?”

My father replied plainly, “He chose the wrong side. You, my boy, are a Confederate. You chose well.”

The conversation had ended like that. My father had unknowingly forced me to wear gray, but I had always wanted to wear blue like Charlie.

The clouds continued to inch across the sky, continuously creeping until only a thin sliver of blue remained. A small group of gray men gathered a few feet away. I slowly walked towards them and began to button my jacket. A nervous habit. Some of the men were yelling taunts towards the center of their cruel circle; others tried to conceal their pity.

I finished buttoning my jacket and found an empty spot in the circle to feed my gross curiosity. Five new Union prisoners stood quivering in the center. They were dirty, caked in mud, drenched in tears, trying to be brave. I started unbuttoning my jacket.

A merciless guard grabbed the tallest prisoner by the jacket and threw him to the ground, laughing.

The brave blue soldier was not phased. He sprung up and punched the guard in nose. The guard staggered back and flicked the blood away angrily. “You will pay for this! I’m going to kill you! I will kill you... I swear,” he screamed. He was going to beat this boy to death, and the fated prisoner knew it.

The boy turned towards me.

I recognized his tattered face.

This isn’t real...
This couldn’t be real...
"Charlie," I whispered. He stared pleadingly at me and believed that I was his last hope for survival. I was not.

"Please, Daniel do something!" He ran at me and fell at my feet. He was caked in mud. His eyes revealed that he was terrified. I had never seen Charlie so scared.

I stood there and quietly watched my brother. If I said anything, if I tried to help him, they could kill me. They would kill Charlie.

"Get over here you Yankee. I hope that you can see now that you chose the wrong side," a guard said. He grabbed Charlie’s collar and thrust him on the ground again. The guard began to kick Charlie, over and over.

I stood there, silently. What was I supposed to do?

The guard called over to one of his friends who walked over to pick up the limp body of my brother. The guard smiled at me and threw a punch at Charlie’s face. And another and another until his nose was bleeding and he was yelling, "Please, Daniel please!" Over and over...

I just stood there, silently.

The guard beckoned me to come to him. And I did. I was not Daniel, I was a Confederate. I kept reminding myself that I wasn’t supposed to care for Charlie, but he was my brother. I was supposed to love him. The guard looked at me and smiled, "Care to have a go?"

"I... I’d rather not..." I told him.

"Ask yourself boy, are you a Union sympathizer? We have a special place for those."

I looked at Charlie, his eyes begging me to not do anything with the last bit of his strength he said, "please."

"Are you a Yankee or Confederate?"

I stood there, silently.

"Are you a Yankee or Confederate soldier?"

I stood there, silently.

"Are you a Yankee or Confederate?"

"Louder!"
"A Confederate sir!"
"And you would give your life for the Confederate States of America?"
"I would... sir."
"Then punch the boy."
"But sir, he's... he is my brother."
"Oh, well in that case," the guard said mockingly backing away. He didn't believe me. "In that case, kill him."

The guard handed me a gun. The man holding Charlie threw him on the ground. Charlie stared at me, his eyes wide with terror, "please, Daniel please." I looked at the small crowd that had gathered. Were they going to stop this? These were my friends. But I figured that if I couldn't even prevent my brother's death on my own; what should they do?

"Do you remember how to shoot a gun?" The guard asked knocking me out of my daze.
"Yes sir, I do remember," I mumbled.
"Then shoot."

I closed my eyes, held my breath, and took aim. You are not Daniel, this is not Charlie. You are a Confederate doing your job killing a Union soldier who deserves to die because he is flawed. He never deserved to be born in the first place.

A shot rang out. My eyes flew open. I dropped the gun. Charlie went limp. His helpless eyes were still open and staring at me. The wind carried his voice up to the sky, "please."

I had not shot my gun. I had not shot my gun. I had not shot my gun.
A figure on a horse stood above the crowd. His gun was steaming. "You could have done something," he said. No one turned to look at the man with the gun. They continued to look at me.

I looked from Charlie to the crowd and back to my brother. I had not shot my gun. It was the man on the horse. You are a Confederate soldier who just killed a Union soldier. That is your job. You have done your job.

The guard smiled at me and dragged along the rest of the Union prisoners. The last boy in the line turned around and looked at me. His eyes were a dull blue and full of disgust. They whispered, "How could you do something like that?"

"I didn't," I shouted out loud, "he did." I pointed at the break in the crowd where the man on the horse had been.

There was no one there.
Horses are something that brings the women in our family together. We are a close family anyway, but the love of a horse is a bond as strong as family. Our horses had been pastured at Sue Duncan’s ranch and when I turned ten, my father told me that we were finally going to be able to bring our horses “home.” No more traipsing out to the countryside to “visit.” Our sweet Blossom and her brother Chief, would forever be at our home.

In the heat of July, my brother was home from South Carolina and everyone had something to do. We were all either playing volleyball, recovering from surgery, taking a break from school, or completing our never-ending errands, and when we had time, we would all take a break and go to the country club filled the days of summer.

My mom had to run to get food at Winstead’s and pick up one of my sisters from volleyball, when my brother Duncan chose to say, “I think I’ll ride Chief today.” The grin on his face made it hard to tell if he was joking or for real. He was the wild child, the Top Gun of the family and the fact that he had just acquired his pilot’s license him being a pilot didn’t help his case.

“Duncan don’t. They aren’t used to their surroundings yet! If a car drives by too fast on the gravel, they’ll freak out.” My mom was trying to get her point across, saying her words slowly and giving him the “mom’s eye” -- sometimes it worked on him and sometimes it didn’t. Yet my brother thought he was invincible and only God himself could take him down.

Duncan Don’t was my mom’s catch phrase for Duncan. Growing up my mom was always telling Duncan don’t. So when he turned into one of the star athletes in high school, my mom started saying don’t just a little more often. It turned into a nickname ever since I could remember, and it fitted him better than anything.

“Mom, I’ll be fine.”

With Abbey asleep in the house nursing her wisdom teeth extraction aftermath, my brother and I headed out to the shed. Opening the gigantic steel doors revealing a fort of hay bales, John Deere tractors and horse tack. I tried to help as much as I could, so I grabbed the saddle pad and bridle. Heading out to the sweltering heat of the summer, I followed in step of my brother, the one I looked up to ever since I could remember. We headed for the army green gate that connected to the few acres of wires that contained our four-legged beast.

“You can catch him and help me saddle him.” I felt like it was Christmas morning, seeing the presents filling our living room. Awestruck, I lifted the lever to enter the gate; the sound of hooves hitting the rock hard dirt greeted me. To me that was the best feeling you could have, seeing two animals of absolute beauty run up to me like a child, never seized to take my breath away. The way their manes of threaded silk bounced on their thick muscled necks, and the flicks of their tails whipped from side to side.

“Hi babies.” They immediately nuzzled into my body, seeming to show some affection. But, in reality they were checking for apple treats. For seeming to eat all day they always seemed to think every time that we came to say hi or ride them they would be rewarded with food. Still nuzzled into the space between my torso and arm, I inhaled the musty aroma of sunshine, sweat, and the smell of the barn. You know they say everyone’s house has its own scent, that scent is a sense of comfort for most people. But nothing compares to the scent of a horse that’s been out in the pasture all day, soaking up the sun and all the aromas of summer.

I slipped the rope around Chiefs neck to keep his head from jerking away from me as I slide the halter up his nose. He let out a rush of hot air and shook his head, as if to share the sense of irritation of what he knew was coming. I hooked the lead onto the loop in the halter, just in between the two cheekbones. I made sure to stay at a 45 degree angle from Chief’s front foot to avoid a sidekick. I brought him down to the army green corral around our open barn for the horse, Duncan was waiting for me with the saddle at the ready. Once I had him still enough Duncan slide the saddle and saddle pad onto Chief’s back, lining the nose of the saddle just a few inches below the ridge of his shoulder blades. We tied the cinch and then walked him around for a little bit then repeat the process again, just in case he was bloating out his stomach to make the saddle loser.
I held Chief still as Duncan mounted up and handed him the reins once he was settled. I stepped back and let him take control. He’d made a few tight circles around the corral and it seemed to be going just fine, until I saw a car coming down our road. Gravel was flying out from underneath the wheels of the car, creating a cloud of dust that traveled behind the car. Everything went so fast, the horses reared up and started bucking and before my eyes I stood in horror as my brother was tossed from the saddle, probably 12 feet in the air. I couldn’t think, my brother was laying on the ground and the horses ran wild, scared for their lives.

“Crystal get the gate.” The sound of Duncan’s strained voice brought me out of my coma of blankness. I ran as fast as I could, forgetting for a few moments the rule of not running while you’re around horses. My brother struggled to get to his feet then meet me up at the gate. We ran not saying a word up to the driveway and sat down as my brother called my mom and told her what had happened. I felt terrible that he had to go through all the pain, my sister brought down an ice pack and we waited. It seemed like hours before my mom got back, and the ride to the emergency room was longer. Two broken wrist were what Duncan had to show from his flirt with death. We were thankful that was all. His dream of returning to South Carolina was crushed, being close to home after something like this was his only chose. Never will I forget the fear I felt while seeing my brother I idolized be thrown into the air like a ragdoll.
Anna Blachar

Poetry: This is Where Pretty Starts
Bode Middle School
Josie Clark, Teacher

Feet together
Thighs apart
This is where pretty starts.

I listen to this every day, in my own head
My own sick mantra.
It keeps repeating in a staccato beat,
What keeps me from taking that last bite,
What keeps me from eating at all.

Feet together
Thighs apart
This is where pretty starts.

I thumb through the magazine,
admiring the girls and women,
who all have what I don't
Who all are what I will never be.

Feet together
Thighs apart
This is where pretty starts.

120, 200, 300, 500
done.
I don’t want those extra calories,
weighing me down, clogging my clean stomach
Keeping me from my full potential.

Feet together
Thighs apart

This is called the starving art.
Sarah Blachar

Poetry: *Internal Bleeding*
Central High School
Kyla Ward, Teacher

Faces, mirrors, beauty
Beauty?
Is it really,
Or do you tell yourself that
To make sure,
to make sure that you don't go overboard
Overboard, completely insane,
C'mon, don't you have a little fight in you?

Pills, liquids, bottles, and capsules
Being thrown into the underworld at the grasp of your disease
It controls, it persists,
You swim, swim, entangled in the mesh that binds
Swimming forever

It’s never enough, is it?
Oh wait. Pills take them, you want to sleep don’t you?
Swirling, swirling, swirling

Wake up! Rise! The day is coming
Look in the mirror, what do you see?
“I see a pretty, young.” WRONG
Don’t you see, darling? It’s all a lie
Pretend you’re beautiful, and you’ll be happy
But just see the truth for once. FOR ONCE.
Look! Zits, blemishes, and oh!
What the hell is up with your hair today? What will everyone think?

Tossed around like a shell in the deep azure of the sea,
Judged, hopeless and helpless
Cascading down, you are an autumn leaf, leaving it’s tree for good
Shivering,
Alone,
Not listening to the whispers
You don’t fit here. You are not a part of the puzzle
You are different, and that’s-
NOT GOOD. Why can’t you just belong?

Falling,
Down, down, down
You wait until you hit the bottom
Memories fill your dreams, dancing blue and yellow light
Bum, ba-dum, ba-dum
Yes, sing that will make you feel better

The legato lyrics,
Flickering aromas fill the air,
Tasting golden sunflowers,
And hearing the whispers of the lights that drench you with their euphoria

Guitars, bass, and violent violins—the sweet melodies fill your head
Bum-ba-dum-be-dum-de-ba-de-dum
Long, legato beats
Play, play, play

Head in the clouds
The heartbeat of an earthquake,
Marvelous lyrics subside into nothingness,
Twirling, like a swan dancer, spiraling down

Hands, hands, hands
They push, and pull you down
Souls crushed,
You start to listen,
A new hand emerges out of the abyss
Get up! Go!

Rising, waiting
Out of your melancholy misery,
Helping you out of the water
Take me, take me away
Away from here,
This sorrow never ends!

Punching,
Kicking,
Trying to leave
Don’t worry darling,
There is always a light at the end of the tunnel
Isn’t there?
There is relief,
Isn’t there?

Internal bleeding,
Inside is a corrupt soul,
Tearing itself apart,
Taking, taking, taking
But never giving

It takes and takes until there is nothing left
Nothing but a soft sheet of wool billowing in the wind
Limp, lifeless, ready for release
Many let it take,
Yet many take control,
Internal bleeding takes its toll
Clarissa Blakely
Poetry: I Surrender to my Fantasies and Our Spirit of Boundaries in Releases
Central High School
Kyla Ward

I Surrender to my Fantasies

I walked on the path to the botanical garden
And watched as the ink smoothed my feet.
Dark, metallic breath lashed my ears,
With guilty imperfection the words licked
My thoughts, offered a rush of nirvana

I swallowed his soul,
And slid down my promises.
“It’s only for a minute”
His hand touched the small of my back,
With suave radiance.
My compass led me to air of smoke,
Like amnesia.

Sharpening seduction,
His serpentine lips blended my skin
Slamming the banister.
We hop scotched innocence
And peaked the octagon of catastrophe.

I marble over the mushy stuff
And taste his goose bumps.
I want to fall into infinity,
With him I conjugate my actions.

Through the heart cords
I reach the end of the borders,
Cascade through burnt words.
Reality paves me
With relief and desperation

Our Spirit of Boundaries in Releases

Caution tape
Streaks me,
Living in my naked emotions
Isn’t easy
And neither is healing wounds
It takes time like
The hands of a clock,
My hands show memories
In their lines of dirt
I shoot lines of the earth
But it hasn’t sulked me in yet.
I dug through the mines,
Looking for gold  
But I found hacking respiration instead  
And I had no arms  
That were cradles.

I saw others run raw,  
And reckless  
In Pitiful nightmares as cold as the Night,  
The lake sucked your kisses from my mouth.  
The fog evaporated them  
Sank them  
Shook them  
Raked them  
Blocked the moonlight from  
Burning my skin.  
His hand is a branding iron  
But cupid’s arrow was  
Dipped in morphine.  
My coma heart combed through my brain  
Saying it was okay  
But I need to regain attention  
So it could repair my hesitation.

I am scribbles  
On scrolls,  
Hoping for connections  
Everything is  
Gray and dull  
The day devoured like meat  
In mouths of mutts.  
I told myself it was in the past  
but that was only yesterday  
And I have buckets of pain  
I met you in the rain  
And my tongue tasted tears  
When I tilted my head  
We are all storm clouds  
With floods of ultimatums.

Don’t regret  
Your beautiful  
Name.  
It’s not in vain  
Cliff hangers were like  
Swaying on vines until my lyrics  
Were gargled by gutters  
And my voice was silent but  
My fists were raised  
By pencils and praise.

My parents said  
I’d shoot my eye out,  
So they handed me a sword
That stabbed kind words
From slashes of mouths
Into the ribs of
My victims.
I threw darts
At threads of
Trust gloves
When they held me
From love that
Nipped my heels
Trying to click me
Home

I bound my head
To pound like a bass drum chainsaw,
Chewing into my fingertips.
I’m not leaving my fingerprints
On freefall air.
I create black spaces
In slacks of roped sunshine.
I create valentines,
Alive to twist and bind.
I’m killing you,
My love.
I create society’s poisoned remedies,
That sink blooms of summertime.
I believe brigades of blood pumping
Is God’s sign,
And I signed off my life
To my demons’ mockery
But I’m ashes folded
Like a piece of paper in the trash
But my hands are still folded.

You,
Hang upside down,
Because the smile is lost
Though on the island under your bed
And you’ve only been hanging your head
In shame.
You’re not a monster,
You’re a fenced mouth beggar
With his palms on his holster.

I want you to walk.
Walk,
To the end of the cliff with me.
We will be infinitesimal
And melt into the earth.
Walk,
Walk on the safari
Of my street where
You keep me next to you.
Wild
With a holey parachute.
The holy land is our destination,
I wish my halo wasn’t burnt in
The hot air balloon.

You’re messed up,
And so am I.
We can stop burning bridges and
Hold each other up
For the other side.

You’re my lighthouse
That screams the Darkness
Into plummeting parts of the sea.
You are my street lamp,
Shinning when the shadows
Cast my dreams electric.
My pondered breathes of resentment
And gags gravitational gratification.
So sojourn here.
Lock the toggles that tribute
To trouble minds.
I will wait until my skin is pale,
And my blood is rained around me,
And you wrap me in safety.
My nose tingled with a foul smell that filled my nostrils all at once. I stopped looking for the item that had grasped my attention for the past five minutes and opened the door, as the smell of smoke and fire swirled up my staircase.

“Ahhhhh!” my brother cried, “Miranda!!”

Rushing down the steps I came to a quick stop. Bursts of small orange, yellow, and red flames were climbing up my wood cabinets and countertops. Confused and dazed, I scooped my brother off the floor and yanked the phone off the wall. The flames soon became as big as me, then taller, bigger, and brighter, catching my eye. Almost tripping as I tumbled out the door, I jammed my fingers onto the button that opened my garage and sprinted out, my brother in hand.

The sun was shining and the birds were chirping, but the serene weather couldn’t cease my shaking shoulders. Flustered, I slowly pressed the three numbers that I had been taught to use since I was little.

“9-1-1 what is your emergency?” the operator said, calm and collected.

“Um uh my kitchen is on fire,” I muttered, trembling and sounding like a terrified child after she has just been punished.

The sirens boomed and buzzed, making my stomach turn in knots. My mind was like a race car zooming in all different directions, not slowing down for my thoughts to catch up. Neighbors stared and hesitantly jogged over to my brother and me, constantly glancing towards my house to catch a peek at the drama.

My mom pulled into the driveway as the muscular men in brown suits were leaving. The brakes screeched to a stop. Soon enough, her arms were wrapped tight around me.

“I’m so glad you’re safe. I love you!” Her soothing words helped me breathe a deep sigh of relief.

After the men left my house, we wandered inside. We walked through the hallway through my laundry room, office, pantry, sunroom, until we saw it. The kitchen was a mix of charred wood and translucent powder. The ceiling, before pure white, was now caked with a thick black smoke remain. The smell of a campfire wafted through the air and bothered our noses.

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With every turn the tension in the car was rising. For some reason, words couldn’t find a way out of our mouths. We slowly pulled into the vast parking lot and unloaded all of our suitcases onto a gold, rolling cart. As we walked to the immeasurable glass doors, my eyes followed each car’s license plate. Arizona, New York, California, Maine and the list went on and on. While envying the others who came to this place- who chose to come to this place- for a quiet escape from their life at home, we continued to walk in silence.

The lobby, with walls decorated with upscale designs and floors with elaborate seating, overwhelmed me. Regret, excitement, and confusion consumed me. I couldn’t decide if I was pleased or stressed about our new living arrangement.

Once we got to our room, we lugged our heavy bags through the hallway, pulled the zippers open, and threw our clothes in various drawers. I showered, scrubbing hard with soap to wash the memories of the day away. I stayed awake that night, my eyes and body not recognizing the new mattress I was supposed to be sleeping on.

***

“BEEP BEEP BEEP,” The irritating screech grew from the metal clock on my dad’s nightstand. My ears instantly recognized the familiar noise I had heard every morning for a month, so my body rose without struggle, but my eyes were not as easygoing. I brushed my teeth and dashed down the hallway, late as usual. I jabbed the button, still in a sleepless daze, heard a ding, and the sliding silver doors opened as if they knew I was coming. Rushing through the lobby, I came to a stop at the cereal selections and quickly filled my bowl to the top. While I poured the milk in, a little splashed on the counter, and Mark, the charming man in the lobby, offered kindly to clean it up for me. Taking up his offer, I climbed into my dad’s car and rode to school.
After school later that day, my mind was instantly interrupted as my stomach growled and mumbled. The savory smell from the dinner next door had caught my nose’s attention and a craving made its way into my stomach. Luckily, the stomachs of my family were noisy too.

We walked into the lavish hotel lobby and chose a comfy booth to sit in. I sat on the far end, drowning in a pile of Biology papers. Trying to memorize, recite, and learn, I didn’t participate much in the conversation. Everyone’s hunger was soon satisfied as we scarfed up the meal that was served from the kitchen. Even though he was not hungry anymore, my brother still could not sit still. I watch him start to jump, lay down, and he finally resolved to consistently yanking my sister’s long tangled hair until she screeched.

Somewhere between the argument going on at the table, the big glass pitcher of scrumptious lemonade toppled over onto the wood top. The lemonade didn’t just soak the table, but the sea of papers, before crisp and white, were now soggy, yellow, and sticky. My face turned red and steam poured out of my head. I wanted to yell and scream and cry, but no words made their way through my mouth. Hours and hours of thoughts and concepts, ruined.

“I’m sorry!” My sister muttered as she continued to eat, not bothering to offer her assistance while I cleaned up.

“It’s okay you can always print off new ones!” My brother exclaimed, more interested in tugging my sister’s hair.

I stomped my feet up the numerous flights of stairs, not waiting to take the elevator. Water started streaming down my cheeks. I finally reached our room and tried helplessly to recover the demolished work. Regret and sadness continued to flow down my face. My newly destroyed work closely resembled my destroyed house, which just made my lust to be back at home grow.

Anger still driven into my body, my family crept into the room. They worked hard to help me revive my lost work, but it still wasn’t everything I had before. The sky got darker and darker, but soon my papers were almost back to normal. My hot head slowly went away and the rage that was stuck inside of me started to disintegrate. All of our eyes briskly shut until we heard the familiar ring of the alarm clock.

The next few weeks consisted of constant arguments and events just like the lemonade spill. The prolonged disagreements that were going on everyday just led to more and more tears. It had gotten to the point where fighting between us was inevitable. Tensions were high, anger built up, and living in a luxurious hotel didn’t seem spectacular after all.

* * *

Soon enough I found myself rolling my suitcase up the driveway of my house. The insurance company had helped us rebuild and clean, and everything was fresh and new. The smell of lemon cleaning spray glided through the air and we raised the windows to help push it out. I sat down making myself comfortable. It was like we had never left.

Eating dinner together as a family that night rekindled the loving spirit our minds and bodies had before the fire. Our laughter was revived and everything in the past was disregarded, at least while we had our minds off things. We giggled, grinning from ear to ear. My brother told his humorous stories that my whole family had heard multiple times. We still laughed more than we ever had before.

The sweet home cooked meal made my taste buds scream with enjoyment. After, I climbed the stairs and found my room. I felt like a stranger wandering through something for the first time. Instantly, my mind remembered what it was like to curl up in my covers and to fall asleep without hesitation. I drifted off faster than I ever had before. It felt good knowing my family was safe and sound asleep and the serene room closed my eyes for me.

The fire and the close quarters we suffered through had grown the strength of our family bond, love, laughter, and all, in a way I hadn’t realized. It was those family dinners, full of smiles and enjoyment, that told me it was worth all of the tortuous sleepless nights and tears in the hotel room. And since then, I have never passed up a dinner with the people I love most.
Miss Short, a seasoned veteran in the realm of education, was no stranger to the bar-coded papers splattered with the infamous bubbles and “A B C D” answer options that she grasped in her hands. Between the aches and groans of complaints issued by each student as she distributed the tests, she watched the eyes of a particular student with intense focus. Mario Gonzalez sat silently towards the back of the class, making no eye contact with anything except the latest challenge that lay, tauntingly, on his desk. As students began to shuffle their pencils, Mario sat stagnant and remained so until the end of the hour when Miss Short found herself kneeling beside his desk. She saw in his eyes the same look she had observed in the eyes of minority students for the past two decades of her teaching career: a look of constriction. She recognized the look of complete frustration, for she realized that this test would not accurately represent the studious hours he had spent feverishly preparing with the school’s translator or his dedication to being the first of his family to graduate high school. This test would fail to evaluate his education properly simply because it was not in a language he would understand. However, this test would serve as a culminating assessment to largely determine his academic future. This vicious cycle, centered on standardized testing, lies at the core of America’s failing educational system. An instinct in the educational world is to overcompensate for the government mandated standards by focusing less on students as individuals, but as statistics represented in standardized tests. This method obviously has adverse effects on the students by limiting them as learners and future active citizens. Standardized testing is a major factor in the apparent failure of the American public education system because of its tendency to limit the learning experience, limit potential and progress, and limit betterment through evaluation.

An obvious by-product of the influence of standardized testing in the educational realm is the removal of the traditional learning experience that is necessary to create inspired and successful students. As quoted by the wise and influential Albert Einstein, “The only thing that interferes with my learning is my education” (Brainyquote.com). Einstein, though his education existed in a different era, realized the immense value of teaching through cognitive, involved strategies. However, learning has seemed to have taken on a new identity since the mid-1900s; educators, all too often, seem to concern themselves less with teaching their students and more with preparing them for standardized tests mandated by the government. Kathe Taylor, assistant director for assessment and academic policy at Washington Higher Education Coordinating Board, and Sherry Walton, member of the faculty of Evergreen State College, perfectly explain this rising circumstance in the article, “Co-opting Standardized Tests in the Service of Learning”; “What is included in the curriculum may have more to do with what is included on the tests than with a clear curricular philosophy about what is good for children,” the document states. (Taylor) Teaching by this method leaves curriculum confined to the standards of the test, leaving little room for necessary creativity, group discussions, or individualized learning. Brian Cutting, Educational Director of Wendy Pye Limited, in his article “Tests, Independence, and Whole Language”, explains the hindrance of standardized tests by stating the following: “Unfortunately, tests don’t free learners; they constrain learning to what test developers believe to be important” (Cutting). This method of “teaching” leaves students at a complete disadvantage, for they are commonly placed at the disposal of the content dictated by the all-important tests. Traditionally, learning has been viewed as an in-depth process that relies on the insight and technique of the teacher; however, standardized tests entirely limit that concept, and instead replace it with misleading statistics.

When limitations are placed on learning by standardized testing, students’ knowledge and understanding of curriculum is not the only aspect that is harmed; the building of fundamentally sound individuals is drastically hindered as well. It is widely recognized that the educational experience does more than provide students with core curricular knowledge; it also allows impressionable youth to develop into responsible citizens. According to Cutting, “The whole point of learning is to be independent” (Cutting); therefore, “The focus on independent learning implies that the focus should be on independent evaluation as well” (Cutting). Independence through education is gained largely by participating in the active learning process known as the “constructivist philosophy”, as explained by Taylor and Walton (Taylor). This tactic employs “collaborative and
interactive methods” that entices student questioning, encourages students’ deliberation of several perspectives, and the collaboration of multiple resources to develop well-constructed conclusions (Taylor). The combination of these strategies seeks to not only successfully teach a lesson, but also generate independent thinkers. Julia Barrier-Ferreira, teacher of reading and language arts and doctoral candidate at Western Connecticut State University, states in the article, “Producing Commodities or Educating Children” that “Because the stakes have reached disproportionate levels, educators are often forced to abandon all things unrelated to the test and consequently lose sight of what is important: the whole child, who is not simply composed of intellect but is emotional and spiritual as well” (Barrier-Ferreira). Unfortunately, all too often these perspectives are bypassed due to an overwhelming adherence to the standards of the infamous standardized test. The American education system has taken pride for many generations in producing very innovative, unique individuals; the limitations provided by standardized testing is a step away from those contributing citizens and towards simplified drones with little reasoning beyond that required on multiple choice tests.

Due to the No Child Left Behind Act, standardized testing puts limits on potential and progress, particularly in inner-city schools, by directly influencing their allocated funding and accreditation. The American public education system is arranged to have its schools reflect the surrounding area in demographics and socioeconomic status. This concept has little effect on suburban, mid-income districts; however, inner-city schools find themselves receiving the brunt of the problems caused by the public school system’s failures. Sara Mosle, charter member of Teach for America and fourth grade teacher at P.S. 98 in northern Manhattan, recalls her experience at an inner-city school vividly in the article “Scenes from the Class Struggle”. Mosle found, as do most teachers in urban areas, that a majority of her students spoke English as their second language, thus creating an immense challenge when asked to complete a test entirely written in English (Mosle). In addition, most students attending these schools were first generation students, meaning their parents did not attend or graduate high school (Mosle). Consequentially, the students’ home lives were lacking in resources, nourishment, and support; yet they were usually overabundant in violence, drugs, and distractions (Mosle). However, standardized tests do not take these circumstances into account; funding is allocated according to statistics. Therefore, already traditionally low tax-revenue districts receive the lowest amount of additional funding. Mosle further recounts that the school had neither a nurse nor supportive principle (Mosle). Mosle also reflects that with her extremely limited resources, “it was nearly impossible to offer individual attention” (Mosle). The culmination of these factors, inherently has adverse effects on testing results, and therefore, the future of these schools. Due to the limitations caused by standardized testing, lack of funding inhibits the potential progress at already at-risk schools.

In addition to funding, standardized test results also determine a school’s accreditation status. Essentially, a diploma received from a school lacking accreditation is usually worth less to higher education establishments. Therefore, it can be adequately concluded that students who attend schools with lost accreditation are at a blatant disadvantage. According to Richard Rothstein, Rebecca Jacobsen, and Tamara Wilder in the article “From Accreditation to Accountability”, accreditation is lost when a school fails to meet standards or scores set in place by private evaluation agencies (Rothstein). A school that is inadequate is put on probation until the necessary changes are made or the accreditation is removed. Seeing as though many hundreds of students’ futures in higher education may rely on their school’s accreditation, it seems unreasonable that standardized test scores determine this factor. The situation of loss accreditation was all too real for the Kansas City, Missouri school district in 2011, according to Christina A. Samuels in the article “Kansas City-Area Districts Brace for Influx of Students”. The article explains the perspective of Robert Bartman, the superintendent of the district, in response to his district’s loss of accreditation: “Is it the right thing to do to uproot kids in the middle of the year and send them to another school?….What does that do to the district where the kids are leaving?” (Samuels). This cycle of relocating select students to other districts and leaving discouraged and disadvantaged students to improve the dismissed school allows for little room for progress. Therefore, when a struggling school’s potential for progress is based ultimately on its students’ performance on standardized tests, little room for evolution or success exists.

Standardized testing, because of its being a single dimension evaluation method, has long been known for its failure to thoroughly assess both students and teachers. The voices of educators are typically the most renowned on this subject simply because they are in the forefront of the issue; they witness the efforts their students expel and then experience the testing system fail them time and time again. According to Anthony
Rebora, a published journalist for Education Week, writes in the article “Teachers Place Little value on Standardized Testing” that, according to a report published by Scholastics and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, “only 28% of educators see state-required standardized tests as an essential or very important gauge of student achievement…only 26% of teachers say standardized tests are an accurate reflection of what students know” (Rebora). These statistics, primarily because they are sourced to educators, reveal the fact that standardized tests lack the credibility to match the power with which they are associated. Furthermore, teaching is an incredibly complex, individualized concept that lacks the simplicity needed to be captured in a single statistic. Rebora also reports that Scholastics and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation found that “teachers see ongoing formative assessments, class participation, and performance on class assignments as much more important measures of student learning” (Rebora). In contrast, a lack of in-depth analysis in standardized tests fails students more often than not due to their single faceted approach to the evaluation of learning. However, it is proven that continuous testing quite frequently affects students’ emotional connotation of learning. Cutting’s evaluation of standardized testing roots at its disruptive tendencies in students’ psyche; “...[students] will begin to associate learning with failure. After repeated failure, they'll see school as futile,” the article states (Cutting). This opinion towards education, if continuously fueled with unproductive standardized tests, will only continue to blossom in future generations, creating a very negative atmosphere in the educational realm. Therefore, although the intentions of standardized tests are to assess the knowledge of students, they commonly limit the students’ opportunities for betterment through a proper evaluation.

Standardized tests’ limiting affects, however, do not only inhibit the evaluation of progress of students, but teachers as well. As the American educational system develops an ever-growing affinity for the standardized testing structure, this evaluation arrangement will only continue to develop more power. This concept exists most prevalently in extremist districts that are moving towards basing their administrators’ and teachers’ salaries off of their students’ testing success. Taylor and Walter explain this issue by stating the following: “When superintendents’ salaries are contingent on the achievement test performance of students in their district—an extreme example of accountability, but nevertheless a real one—the power of these tests is apparent” (Taylor). Immense pressures such as these only successfully provide teachers motivation to abandon essential knowledge and adhere solely to the test content, which puts students at an extreme disadvantage. However, a consistent reform suggestion is being made by educators that relates to progress instead of test scores. Rebora’s article on Scholastic and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation cites that “most teachers (85%) agree that their students’ growth over the course of the year should contribute significantly to evaluations of their own performance” (Rebora). This overwhelming statistic proves that teachers realize the importance of evaluation, but have witnessed the adverse effects of one-dimensional tests. Although the impending need for a proper assessment of both students and teachers will always be prevalent in the educational realm, because of the limits they place on bettering learners and educators alike through evaluation, standardized tests will likely never prove to be an adequate solution.

Unfortunately, due to the biased and restricting nature of the American education system, the limits and constriction Marion Gonzalez experienced in Miss Short’s class will not soon end. His schooling career, until standardized testing is removed from its role in the educational realm, will continue to be speckled with the unnecessary challenge of combating the disapproving statistics resulting from tests that he cannot read, but could pass based upon content. Miss Short will continue to see the look of constriction in her desperate, dedicated, yet disadvantaged students’ eyes each time she places a bubbled sheet on their desk. If America’s intention with the educational system is to produce quality, independent citizens, drastic changes need to be made in relation to the current evaluation arrangement. Students must return to their place in the system as the only priority; they must never be viewed as solely a statistic. However, until that concept is widely recognized, students and teachers will continue to observe standardized testing limit their learning experience, potential for progress, and betterment through evaluation. America, being a highly innovative and resourceful country, has the ability, however, to regain its position as a force in the educational realm. Through diligence, creativity, and respect for the learning process this nation can continue to produce respectable citizens that have the power to produce real change in the global community and no bubble sheet can change that.
“Mikayla we’ll be back at 9 tonight, remember to feed your brother.” my mom said to me before she left.

“Okay.” I said as they left. It was 4:30 right now, so I’m going to be home alone with my stupid little brother for 4 and a half hours. For an hour we were sitting in the cozy living room watching TV, I got up at 5:30 to go start dinner. For dinner we had chicken nuggets and French fries. We finished eating at 7:00, 2 more hours to go. I went up to my room and so did my brother, After 15 minutes I heard the front door creak open.

“Mom? Dad? Is that you?” I asked. No reply. I opened my door slowly and peeked into the long hallway leading to the stairs. I opened Michael’s room door to check on him and he was playing video games, so I know it’s not him. I started walking to the stairs then froze when I heard footsteps from downstairs. I just stood there not moving, I couldn’t move I was too scared. I heard footsteps getting closer and closer and closer to the staircase. I finally got some guts and turned around and quietly tiptoed to Michael’s room.

“Why are you in here?” He asked me as I locked the door.

“There is someone downstairs that isn’t mom and dad.” I said quietly.

“Why are you talking soft? And you need to call the police.” He said to me.

“When I turned around he was walking towards the stairs, and I can’t you don’t have a phone yet and I left mine downstairs and all the home phones are downstairs.” I said.

“We need to get out of here!” He whisper shouted. As we heard footsteps walking down the long dark hallway.

“I know that,” I whispered back “But how?” as the footsteps got closer and closer.

“I don’t know” He said.

We both looked at his door when the footsteps stopped.

We both quickly, and quietly tried to hide somewhere in his room. I ended up under his bed and so did he.

“I know you’re in there.” the creepy man said in a raspy voice, “Why don’t you guys make it easy on yourselves and open the door.”

“Don’t.” I told Michael.

After 5 minutes of silence the door flew off of the hinges and broke in two. The man walked in slowly and started searching the room, First he checked the closet. Then he walked over and jumped on the bed. He was laying up there for at least 8 minutes, Michael and I were holding each other in fear of the man getting us. The man sat up and put his feet on the floor he bent over and looked underneath the bed.

“You’re coming with me.” The man said creepily.

There was nothing we could do but go with him, I told my brother that we had to go with him and just hope the police find us. The man tied us up and took us outside to his van, He threw us in the back and slammed the doors and opened his door and got in. We drove for what felt like hours. Finally the van stopped and the man opened the back doors and dragged us into what I’m assuming is his house.

He started dragging Michael away from me.

“Nooo, STOP!” I yelled at the man, “You can’t separate us!”

“Really, Watch me.” He said back. As tears streamed down mine and my brothers faces.

We screamed for him to let us stay together but he still wouldn’t. I sat in the cold empty room, Why did this happen to us? I wondered to myself. I wish mommy and daddy were here to save us from this torture. I could hear the faint sounds of Michael crying from the other room, and I wanted so bad to go save him. I was beating on the door to try and get out but it didn’t work, eventually the cries stopped and I fell asleep.

I awoke from my deep sleep to the sound of the door open, I looked up and saw the same man from last night and I started screaming and hitting him. Turns out that was a bad idea. He beat me to the point I couldn’t move. He gave me a turkey and cheese sandwich for my breakfast, I could barely eat it because of my beaten body. He left the small room and locked the door.

As tears slowly rolled down my cheeks, I sat in there and thought about a million things. Am I going to die? What are my parents doing? How is Michael being treated?
He came back in at noon for lunch, he brought me a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. I could move now but it hurt. I took the sandwich out of his hand and slowly took a small bite out of it. I chewed it slowly, He still hasn’t left yet.

“Why are you still in here?” I managed to say.

“You’ll find out..” He said creepily.

I finished my sandwich and sat there. The man stood up from his sitting position and came over to me.

“We have to change what you look like.” He said.

“No.” I said plainly, I’m not going to let this psycho touch my hair.

“Yes.” He said sounding frustrated. He jumped on me and tried to cut my hair at the same time, I tried to get him off of me but he wouldn’t. I wasn’t strong enough to get him off me so I had to give up. He tied me to a chair and cut my hair, Then he died it from its luscious blonde to a dark brown.

He laid me down on the floor and left the room and locked it. Weeks passed and we still got beaten for not following orders, if we tried to fight back we got beat up.

I was awaken from my deep sleep by the roaring engines of about 6 cars, and car doors. I heard a knock from a far distance, and tried to listen. They kept beating on the door and after about the 4th time the door was knocked down. I ran up to the door and started banging on it, It hurt to do it but I needed to be rescued from this place. I heard footsteps getting louder, That must mean they are getting closer.

“HELP!” I screamed.

“Back away from the door!” A man shouted.

I backed away from the door and then the sound of splintering wood entered my ears.

I looked up and there were policemen here. I ran over to them and hugged them and thanked them for saving me and my brother. They discovered Michael almost beaten to death and they rushed him to the ambulance. They led me out of the house and took me to my parents. As I was walking out I spotted the man who did all of this. I looked away and jumped into my mother’s arms.

We got in a police car and they took us to the hospital to go see little Michael. Michael survived but he had 2 black eyes swollen shut, A broken nose, 3 broken ribs, and a mild concussion. The man who is responsible for all of this is in jail for kidnapping and attempted murder. All I had was a broken wrist and some scars and bruises. We left Michael behind at the hospital to go home and get some sleep.

I went upstairs and went into my room and laid down, I slowly drifted off into a sweet dream.
For many years the American society and populace have trusted the police force to protect both the people and the people’s rights. For the longest time the police were viewed as a strong and dependable public service that are tasked with protecting the people to the fullest extent of the law. However, in recent years the police force has been viewed in a different, harsher light. The mass media and other sources, especially when shedding light on the many conflicts amongst the police force, along the lines but not limited to police brutality, racial profiling and corruption among the force and officers of the law, have showed the police officers more negatively than ever in the United States. It is due to the fact that now the police force is viewed as a societal detriment more than a public service a nationwide police reformation would be the best way to protect the people as well as the police force as a whole (Barack 2007).

In the mid-1900s, key social issues began to develop in the American police system. At the time racial tensions where high and many police officers were caught up into the conflict of racial inequality (Barak 2007). This conflict that the police were faced with was considered to be the beginning of what society deems today, as racial profiling. Gregg Barak author of a series of books concerning the American criminal justice system defines racial profiling as “a preset bias of innocence determined by a suspects race.” (Barak 2007). This preset bias Barak is talking about is exactly one of the major flaws in today’s justice system. Other issues that he presented are also major conflicts still today such as police brutality and civil forfeiture both of which are only shown to carry the issues and bring new ones to the table. One major issue all negative characteristics of the police corruption is distrust in a community which leads to a massive increase crime of all kinds (Bach 2014). However such events have not escaped the vision of the United States on November 13, 2013, a report was produced by the Congress of the United States on the effects in a small town where police were mandated to wear body cameras and actually found that police crime dropped 56% and reports of police misconduct dropped 96% (Bach 2014). With the statistics found the benefits did seem to outweigh any harms showing how a police reform would be the best way to protect the people and the police force as a whole.

However, similar to a coin with each up heads there is a tails just on the other side. When looking into police reform it is shown in the area of trial within the congressional report crime in the local area rose by 36% “due to officers unwillingness to engage a suspect in fear of being accused of misconduct due to the necessity of force the situation required” (Vepher 2014). This shows the tail side of the coin that is a reformation of the police force in how crime increases in the area as well as police inactivity. In this situation in order to correctly weigh the benefits and the harms a time frame must be established as well as deciding which is more important to the people affected, a safer police force or a safer society.

The issue of the increased crime rate is major harm to society because with the escalation of crime and social deviants the public setting is off-balance and showing a major flaw with the suggested reformation process. Another issue arises in that of who oversees the video collected from the police body cameras and how will personal information be protected. With the issues that were presented along with the clear benefits in the congressional report being fairly equal, yet still in the early phases of thought it, becomes clear that such a method of research would not only be unsuccessful but more harmful than helpful to both society as a whole and individual communities across the country.

Some experts in the field of criminology believe that the best way to truly clear out the police system of all corruption is the clean slate process (Reynolds 2004) in which all ranks of the force are completely re-instituted by new officers with no corruption what-so-ever, however the article also shows the downfall of this which is simply that the system would be run by hardly-trained un-seasoned officers of the law which is extremely dangerous to everyone across the nation. The system would collapse on itself (Hu 2014) and create an ever more increasing unstable society obviously showing how any clean slate mentality are would never be successful.

In sight of all of the theoretic reformation ideologies the question of whether the situation in the status quo is bad enough in order to call for a reformation at all. However the corruption with brutality and racial profiling only affects direct victims the issue of civil forfeiture affects everyone equally. Civil forfeiture is an
instance of a major abuse of power by officers of the law (Oliver 2014) in which they either have confiscated personal property such as money, vehicles, and even houses and actually put these items on trial in a court of law. As ridiculous as this may sound cases in Missouri (Courtney 2013) that have occurred in the past year are United States vs. 2038 dollars in U.S. currency, United States vs. 1999 Honda civic, and even United States vs. 3841 Westward Court and there are many more charging actual items that the police believe may have been used or will be used for illegal activity. These affects are not only long lasting but are usually decided as guilty because for cases of civil forfeiture there is no jury or judge the case is brought before the department commissioner (a police officer) only furthering corruption. Another issue that civil forfeiture catalyzed was that police units show an enormous amount of ill-spending and misuse of funding (Oliver 2014) such as the Michigan police departments purchase of a National Hockey League issued Zamboni ice smoother, the New York police departments purchase of fourteen margarita machines after reportedly “breaking the first thirteen ‘cause we used it too much” in the words of the departments police chief (Costa 2008) which is not only clear evidence of misconduct and corruption but further begging the question would a police reform be the best way to protect the people and the police force as a whole.

Misconduct is a very serious issue in the police force because it endangers both officers but also the public and are not under any circumstances, safe. This issue that arises in the status quo is also evidence that not only is a reform necessary but has serious repercussions if left the same. In sight of this, however, another question arises in whether the decision of a reform itself would be more beneficial than the status quo or not. When looked at analytically, few suggested systems of reformations actually make sense though some are meant to protect officers not the public.

Since 2003 the number of violent crimes towards officers of the police force have increased exponentially (Hall 2009) and in sight of such many officers see the necessity for change, so they themselves are safer on the streets. Many police units have actually started to increase the number of on-duty officers at a set time shift in order to employ what is known as the buddy system. The suggested reform would not only protect individual officers but also increase local employment, and has seemed to decrease crime (Hall et al. 2010) However, economic issues arise in local communities with low economic stand points which are usually seen to be the most in need of a police reform for the protection of the people and police all together. The suggested plan Hall proposed for the reformation actually self-solves by allocating subsidies to the police force from local sin taxes focuses mainly on Tabaco and alcohol of all kinds. However while the issue of economics is solved, corruption nationwide would still run rampant as Hall discussed. The method discussed does protect police and is economically sound yet it does not quite meet expectations in solving the clear matter of issues with person to officer relations and corruption. Yet again another seemed solution has a shortcoming that would result in the fact that a police reform would not be the best way to protect the people and the police force as a whole.

The massive problem with corruption in the police force is not only the fact that many officers take advantage of power as seen with civil forfeiture but that prosecuting an officer on corruption charges is even incredibly more difficult than criminal charges, with only 2.4% of corruption charges being perused in a court of law (Hu 2012). The reason for this lies in many key defenses the police force has set up to protect itself from such a thing such as the blue wall of silence. The blue wall of silence has been recorded to exist since the mid-1900s and is widely known as the anti-tattletale operation in the police force. The wall has had become an almost sacred vow amongst officers where each officer swears not to go to authorities with information on any corruption within the force. This is a major issue because while police are expected to uphold the laws of the United States, yet because of the hold the blue wall of silence has on the police force this weakens trust and police populous relations. Yet, this like every other argument, begs the question, how should this massive detriment to the police-populous relations be solved over all?

Police have had an increasing harmful view in media and due to the expansion of the Internet the news travels rather quickly only harming the police image even more when negative information is spread. The simple reason that is most likely the largest issue with the police force is because if the people you are supposed to protect do not trust them enough to allow the officers to protect them than what is likely to ensue is anarchy and mobocracy (Williams 2003). To prevent the destabilization of society the police force itself must be stable and corruption is the exact opposite of this conflict and the addition of police brutality and racial profiling does not help the authorities view among the people.

In order to ensure stabilization, which is depreating at such an alarming in the status quo a reformation, must occur but currently no reformation has been suggested that fixes all issues however a combination of the
three may be the most beneficial over all. The police body cameras suggested in the 2013 United States congressional report saw a decrease in corruption but an increase in crime yet the buddy system say a decrease in crime and protected officers but did not solve for the alarming rate of corruption inside the force. However, no study on combining the two solutions has taken place and the most likely outcome would be a benefactor in both aspects of the police force. While one solution solves for the corruption and the other for the crime the other issues of economic detriment and social unrest are also solved. First economically, the allocations of public subsidies taken from sin taxes as proposed by Hall et al. allows for not only both sides of the reformation to be funded while also opening up many job opportunities in a community possibly revitalizing a community do to the influx of jobs and economic out flow. The issue of social unrest is also solved yet by the other half of the plan in showing how the body camera system showed a drastic decrease in complaints of police officers in addition Hall et al. addressed the idea of body cameras and suggested a new division of national police screening not only stimulating more jobs and the economy but also to allow the corruption to decrease because police officers would no longer investigate their own matters the issue would be over seen by congress and a new division with no ties to the police. The combination of the two plans is shown to not only be successful in diminishing issues among the police force in its relations with the populous but also improving local economic standards by improving job quantities and employing a sin tax which is a deterrent for adolescents to engage in negative actions like smoking (James 2011) with the situation proposed the solution is seen as a win-win-win situation showing how with the combination of the two plans a police reform would be the best way to protect the people and the police force as a whole.

WORK CITED

Jupe had his eyes completely transfixed on the planet’s mounds of gases swirling, and piling up on one another like paint on the artist’s canvas moving around the prodigious, red planet. Jupe had never actually believed that he would have the opportunity to witness such a feat in his life, but fate had proved him incorrect. This would be the day that Jupe would take part in being an onlooker in the inhabitation of a planet. In this case, the planet he was named after: Jupiter. Jupe glanced back down at the instruments in his cockpit. They all gleamed with pride. At times, Jupe felt that these tools were the people, in this case, that he could genuinely trust, and rely upon these “people” without hesitation. If these instruments were to fail him one day, he would know that there really was nothing left in this already crumbling galaxy. Just as this thought had been thoroughly interrogated by Jupe’s mind, the noise of two, parallel treads could heard from behind him. As Jupe turned around from his pilots chair, he already knew what to expect. A shimmering, ruby colored robot stood just before Jupe in the cockpit. This, was Rh1n0.

The legal name of this robot was RH-1N0, but Jupe had adopted this robot as his own and decided to attempt to make this machine as human as possible. The very thought of living with an unfeeling “companion” the whole trip was completely unbearable to Jupe. It would be like limiting one artist to a single color their whole life, or giving an author only ten words to construct a meaningful piece. For a moment, the duo just stared at one another, even though they had seen each other thousands of times before. Two, side by side treads were Rh1n0’s support, from this, the metal console connecting the treads lead up to the ruby torso. Rh1n0’s mouth was in a neutral position. The only indication of any “feelings” or “opinions” might have solely based on the words coming out of the shining red head. Robots were as common as a grain of sand in the Gobi Desert, and this was one of the many motives provided to urge Jupe into making Rh1n0 as original as these technological humanoids could possibly achieve.

Rh1n0 finally said, “Greetings, Master Jupe. How may I assist you?”

Jupe responded, “I want you to get the ship into the planet’s orbit, and stop calling me “master” alright?”

Rh1n0 responded, “Yes, master.” The word “master” made Jupe shutter slightly, but then he picked up his stride once again and left the cockpit without a word. “Some things you just can’t change.” Jupe thought to himself. Once at his personal living quarters, Jupe entered in his password on the touchpad by his room. The cyan colored light that the touchpad had emitted had always comforted Jupe, ever since he was a child living in the Horizon, the very ship he lived in to this day. It still bothered him that Rh1n0 called him master, even though they had been in each other’s company for 6 years. Jupe shuttered briefly for a second once more. With galactic slavery occurring at such a rate it did on planets such as Neptune and Saturn, it was hard to have a healthy morale and be called a “master” without a negative connotation. Jupe laid down on the cold, hard metal that most ship corporations called a “bed”. With this thought, Jupe chuckled to himself. Everything on this baron ship still felt the same, the whole 23 years that Jupe was aboard the Horizon. The only problem was, the ship was missing three valuable passengers. Three passengers that Jupe was determined to recover. With this thought in mind, Jupe drifted like a cloud in the night sky, into a deep sleep.

Jupe awoke to a sulking figure above him. The room was too dark to portray anything. “Get up” the figure said in a raspy voice. This black shape in the room obviously wasn’t human, but possibly humanoid at most. As Jupe sat up, he discovered a gleaming, shining black Electro Rifle in the hand of this threat. Standing up, he peered into the face from a reptile race known as the Oklari. This race of alien had completely black eyes that resembled an abyss and scaly skin varying from red to green. A long, thin tongue was visibly flicking in what light was provided in the room. Finally, Jupe saw the memorable three, sharp horns as the center piece upon the creature’s head. With brute force, Jupe was pushed down onto the bed and handcuffed with Electric Binders. Jupe, being human, knew there was no hope in putting up resistance to this war-adoring species. He was outmatched. Without a word, Jupe was escorted out of the room with the Electro Rifle digging into his head anytime his pace didn’t match the creature behind him. As they both neared the main hangar of the Horizon, Jupe felt his breathing speed up. These infiltrators weren’t looking to make extra money, they were obviously skilled and well trained, Jupe was anxious and knew very well what these Oklari wanted, slaves.
Once Rhîño and Jupe had been tied up with about as much resistance an ant to a boot, the Oklari began to circle their new prize.

“Soooooooone...” One of the Oklari remarked, “Lookssss like thissssss isssss itt.”

The sound of this species made Jupe cringe. It was like hearing a snake coo at a mouse before the creatures inevitable death. An Oklari leaned down to exam their loot. This ravages species felt dominant to all lesser creatures. Jupe spit in his face, and the creature let out a sound of utter disgust. With this action, Jupe had already crossed the line of dominance that the Oklari had thought they had fortified. “What do you snakes want?” Jupe asked bitterly. Jupe immediately felt a boot impact his head at a devastating speed. Jupe began to taste the coppery flavor of blood in his mouth. “Wouldn’t be the first time” He thought to himself. Jupe commented, “We don’t have any goods, or any other passengers on the ship, so this raid is a waste and lost to you criminals” Another kick to face silenced Jupe. “We don’t want ssssqlavesssss, goodssssss, or even dissssssgusting humanssss like you!” A red skinned Oklari remarked. “We want your sshship” Jupe glanced down at the splatter of blood starting to collect from his lip on the ground, it reminded him of the loss he had come to know in prior years. “My associate and I were just making our way to the North-Eastern part of Jupiter to where we would witness the colonization of the first humans on Jupiter.” The red skinned Oklari smirked revealing a bottom row of teeth that would make a machete look dull. The pool of blood began to drift towards the Oklari. The Oklari retorted, “Are you humanssss unaware that Jupiter is a slave planet?” Jupe cocked his head to the side in a sarcastic fashion “Really? We had no idea of the rest of the planets inhabitants and their evil doing” Another kick to the face. The red skinned Oklari began to walk away towards the cockpit. Jupe couldn’t stand much more of this. “If you are taking the Horizon AND me, would you mind telling us where we are going?” Jupe responded. The Oklari halted mid stride and with a sneer, turned around and responded, “The Eye of Jupiter” With this, the blood stopped drifting.

“What happened?”, Jupe asked Rhino, his teeth clenched so tight, Jupe's jaw began to become sore. “I had simply put the ship into autopilot when those creatures began to pursue us, I couldn’t attack, it would be going against any and all programming in my files, ma.” Jupe interrupted “STOP!” The breach in this conversation was abrupt and irrational. “Listen... we need to work together if we want to escape these things alive.” Jupe had made the word “things” nearly inaudible. As if it gave him a pain when this word was uttered by his mouth and mind. “Those creatures don’t have enough honor to have their own race” Jupe explained to Rhino. Jupe examined the room they were being contained in with a touch of chagrin as well as dismay. “How did I let this happen?” Jupe wondered to himself. The room stunk of diesel fuel, the red paint running through the middle of each wall was fading, the glossy, dark gray tiling was beginning to chip. The pair, in Jupe’s view of the situation, were chained to a pole in a central location of the room with rusty, outdated Electro Bands. Jupe knew where they were being held captive, the boiler room. With both members of this duo being restricted like a man in a straitjacket. It was while this thought expired that another made itself evident. Jupe performed a thorough analysis on a red and black explosive rod with a fading and tearing sticker present on the front, visible side warning the user that this item was dangerous. It was within a legs distance. Jupe smirked to himself. It could have been the Oklari being highly unintelligent, Jupe forgetting to exercise safety in boiler room, or plain luck, but the man in the straightjacket found a way out.

Jupe positioned his foot underneath the rod with a slight angle to the rod. Jupe knew this model of rod was highly sensitive to forces touching or pushing it. Jupe exerted as much force as possible into projecting the rod into the air. As if in slow motion, the barrel sailed across the room and into the opposite wall. The sirens scattered throughout the ship whaled and whined showing the red lights flailing and moving in a circular motion. The Oklari were now alerted there was a hazard in the boiler room. Just as Jupe had predicted, the emergency water sprays stationed on the ceiling began to stream the water at an impressive pressure. The water seemed to have come from the heavens, and for all Jupe cared, it could have. The water streamed as if it was coming directly from the Niagara itself. The rust on the Electro Bands began to multiply and become a presence on the cuffs until Jupe heard the assuring song of the cuffs: “PANG, CLICK” The duo was free. Jupe was overjoyed until he witnessed the green, reptilian face of an Oklari pirate armed with an Electro Rifle, eager to release its contents upon the victim opposite of it. The Oklari snarled and licked its thin, forked tongue across the daggers in its mouth. Jupe managed to allow two words to escape from his mouth. In an exasperated effort, Jupe mouthed “Let’s dash.” With this, they ran from the nearing agent of death.

Rhîño and Jupe tore the hallway at a blazing speed. Sirens whaled all around, scattered like beads spilling from a jar throughout the vast, empty hallway. “Our best bet is the bridge, from there we will be able to
control the ship and manage the cameras stationed throughout.”, Jupe explained. As the pair sprinted to the bridge, Jupe managed to reach out and grasp the cherry red fire extinguisher which seemed to be cemented in place on the wall right of Jupe. The weight of the extinguisher took Jupe by surprise. Jupe stumbled for a moment then regained his balance and continued at the heart pounding pace they were presently in. Jupe glanced down at the cylinder in his hand. It gleamed as Jupe passed under each light in place along the ceiling. Jupe’s pace was steadfast until he noticed something, irregular reflecting off of the soon to be weapon in his hand. A shimmering, dark blue light shown in the distance. “The bridge”, Jupe breathed. Rh1n0 was silent. The two stopped before the door. Jupe rested his hands on his knees and panted. His hands ran through the khaki material his pants were made of. For whatever reason, this comforted him. Jupe stood back up. He finally said, “All right, let’s get in there.”

Jupe, with Rh1n0 by his side, entered the bridge with an essence of bravado, but this sense had completely diminished at the sight of three Oklari, two armed with Electro rifles cracking with their blue electricity as they growled like a dog guarding a house, positioned by the ship controls. Each instrument shined and gleamed with pride from surrounding stars. The bridge smelled of the air filtration system and humidifier. The bridge and cockpit felt like a baron ghost town due to the lack of crew members. The lights dangling from their flimsy, black rubber rods swung back and forth, as if urging Jupe to turn around and leave. Jupe cleared his throat, “Great to see you guys here” The three Oklari turned around. The red skinned one snarled. “Get them!” The two armed Oklari charged and took shots at the two as they scrambled for cover behind chairs and desks. Jupe, remembering the fire extinguisher in his hand, fumbled with it for a moment, then positioned himself the rusting, metal desk. Jupe looked up, the sound of clomping, nearing feet with claws was growing louder as each second ticked by. Jupe stood up and, with the speed of a race horse, reared back the extinguisher and brought it back down at a blazing speed to the Oklari’s head. The skull of the Oklari made a faint cracking sound as his eyes rolled back and the Oklari began to fall backwards. In a sense of astonishment, Jupe, with his jaw down, stared at the limp, lifeless body before him.

Jupe bent down and, still cautiously picked up the still crackling Electro gun. Through the iron sights of the weapon, Jupe could see Rh1n0 attempting to escape an Oklari flailing his weapon around at the defenseless robot. Jupe raised the gun slightly and felt the cool metal against his cheek as he aimed. It gave him a slight chill, as if a ghost was tickling his back. “PANG, PANG, PANG” The Electro rifle projectiles sailed through the bridge and struck the Oklari in the back of the head. Jupe turned his head to find the red skinned Oklari working vigorously at the controls. Jupe ran at full sprint towards the red Oklari with the Electro rifle held above his head and brought the weapon down. This time Jupe didn’t hear a crack, he heard metal, metal being bent of place. Jupe gaped in horror at the weapon he once held in his hand, now, slightly bent cheek bone. The red skinned Oklari roared a ferocious growl and began to once again pursue its attacker. Jupe ran towards the exit then directly broke left and began to head back towards the controls. The Oklari growled again and thrust out its arm, but felt only cloth. This grasp was enough to disrupt Jupe’s stride towards the controls. Jupe stumbled forward with a dose of chagrin, and smashed his head against the controls with a BANG. “I couldn’t have better balance?”, Jupe thought to himself. A dominating grasp now held Jupe in the air by his neck. Jupe felt the claws of the red Oklari digging into his neck and he cried out in pain. The Oklari laughed satanically. Jupe began to feel the grasp of the Oklari get tighter, like a wrench clasping a bolt. Jupe’s vision began to blur. With the final strength available in him, Jupe threw his hand back and smashed the remote controlling the ship. The ship lurched downwards and the Oklari was thrown off balance. The Oklari’s grasp released and Jupe fell down and was toppled around as the ship sailed downwards. None of this mattered to Jupe, he was free.

Jupe glanced up and saw the Oklari pressed against the cockpit window. Jupe began to feel himself drift towards the glass as well. Then, Jupe heard a crack and a small thread began to creep through the glass. The Oklari began to whimper. The Oklari almost resembled a frightened animal, but Jupe felt no remorse or pity. The glass shattered and the Oklari was sent into space. Jupe was instantly lifted, but activated the airlock.
control in time. Jupe immediately shot towards the floor. As Jupe began to regain his focus from the painful impact of the cold, frozen floor, his vision swirled, just like the gases that Jupe had witnessed around the red, awe striking planet. The feeling of his vision moving around was unsettling. Finally, Jupe stood up and peered out what was left of glass in the cockpit, right into the red eye.

The red eye of Jupiter gazed upon Jupe like a child with a small insect. Jupe gulped out of anxiety. Jupe began to work furiously with the instruments on the control panel. Jupe pushed the hyperdrive button. It blinked and a green light then crackled. Then...nothing happened. The Horizon still moved at a blazing speed towards the massive planet. This was it, this was the day that his tools had failed him. The once gleaming, prideful tools were now dull in this comparison. “Sir, we are exactly 6,000 miles away from the planet of Jupiter at the speed of 30,550 miles per hour. I recommend immediate maneuvers.” Rhino commented. Jupe looked up from the controls then turned around. “You...didn’t call me master” Jupe said. “No” Rhino responded. Jupe could tell Rhino had refrained in this instance. Jupe produced a faint smile. “I taught a robot to, somewhat, be human. Maybe there is some hope for this galaxy yet.” Jupe thought to himself. He then turned around and once again faced the planet. “Maybe there is hope” Jupe thought to himself. With this, the Horizon plunged into the planet. Maybe there was hope...someday.
“My little girls, Tori and Kobato, this is the story of another little girl and a tatsu who become great friends,” Yukiko told her daughters with Aya by her side sleeping.

“Is this about you and Aya?” Tori asked.

“You will find out.” Yukiko told Tori.

Twenty years ago, a six year old little girl was attacked by a big leathery beast with giant wings. “Mama, Papa, wake up!”, cried the little girl. The tatsu was screeching so loud she felt like her ears were bleeding. The little girl yelled at the tatsu to leave her alone. Surprisingly, the tatsu listened to her and left. The little girl was sitting in the ruins of the house crying, “Mama, Papa, it'll be okay,” when a group of knights came and took her away on a big black horse.

The knights left the little girl on the front steps of the local orphanage. Before anyone noticed her, she ran off into the woods to find her house and her parents. It was starting to get dark when she found a nest with a golden egg. She picked the egg up, thinking she could keep it and give it to her mom as a gift. After searching for a few hours, the little girl felt as if she was lost. It was pitch dark, and the girl started to remember all of the stories her mom told her about nightwatchers, who eat little children. She was so scared that she screamed, "You can't have me, because I am Yukiko!" When she said her name the little golden egg started to glow and then broke right before her eyes. Out of the egg came a sleepy little baby tatsu. When the tatsu opened its eyes it tilted its head towards Yukiko and shrieked. At first Yukiko thought that the tatsu was scary but, then she noticed how adorable it was. Yukiko asked the little tatsu, “Do you want to be my friend?” The little tatsu shrieked in a happy tone that Yukiko thought meant yes. She named the little tatsu Aya. Aya was a dirty gold color with cute little blue wings. Aya also had bright blue eyes and two horns on the side of her head.

Yukiko was so tired that she fell asleep under a tree. In the morning Aya was already big enough to carry Yukiko, so Aya sat down and let Yukiko climb on her back. Once Yukiko hopped on her back Aya took off into the air. When they got above the trees Yukiko looked frantically around for her home. She spotted the pile of ruins the tatsu left. Yukiko told Aya to go there. Aya took a deep breath and burst in the direction of the house. The wind felt so good on Yukiko's face as they got closer and closer to her home. When they were directly over the house, Aya slowly lowered herself closer and closer to the ground. Just before Aya touched the ground, Yukiko jumped off. She ran over to where her parents had been. They were not there. Yukiko looked at the ground that she used to walk on. When she scanned the ground for anything that survived the fire, she saw a bag with a picture of her and her parents. The bag also had jewelry that her mother wore. Yukiko ran over to the bag and hugged it and said “Mommy wherever you are, I will take care of this and give it to you the next time I see you.” Aya came over and nudged Yukiko. Yukiko started crying because she knew what Aya meant; her parents were gone forever. Yukiko took all of the things she could and stuffed them in the bag. Yukiko hopped onto Aya and they flew as far away from her home as they could.

Ten years later, sixteen year old Yukiko and ten year old Aya were up in the sky flying around, having fun with the wind blowing in their faces. They noticed a cave they had never noticed before. They were very curious and went to check it out. When they got to the entrance, Aya blew a little fire on a twig that Yukiko picked up. When Yukiko was ready she went in, but Aya was too big to fit in the hole. Aya was a rare dragon who had special powers where she could shrink and grow as she pleased, so she used her powers to fit inside of the hole. Once Aya walked in, the entrance to the hole closed right behind them. There was no chance to turn back now, she thought to herself. When their eyes adjusted to the darkness a little better, they started down the long path. As they went farther and farther into the cave, it got darker and darker. At the end of the tunnel was a big room filled with gold above Yukiko’s head. In the middle of the room was a dead tatsu surrounded by big pool of blood. It looked like the tatsu was cut in the stomach and had been lying here for a few weeks now. The tatsu was dark red with a shade of brown. As most people know, tatsu love treasure, so when Aya saw the treasure she freaked out and jumped into the pile of gold. Yukiko yelled at Aya to get out of the big pile of gold. It took Aya a little while to find her way out of the pile of gold. When Aya got out she asked Yukiko if she could take some of the treasure with them. Yukiko said, ”Fine, if you want to carry it.” Aya
grabbed a bag to put the treasure in. It was big enough to fit around her neck. They looked all around the room and the only exit they could find was the way they came. “So our only choice is to go back the way we came and hope that the wall opened up again.” Yukiko said. When they got to the entrance of the cave it was still sealed shut. Since Yukiko was so tired she leaned on the wall and the door opened. Once the door opened, they both darted out of the cave into the darkness of night.

They look up into the sky and saw all the glistening. They saw something black move above them. It was too late to realize what it was because here came bright golden fire. They just barely dodged the flames but not all the way. Aya’s tail got burned and they went plummeting down to the ground below. Right before they hit the ground, the creature came and grabbed them and pulled them high into the air. “I am sorry! You scared me,” the creature said. Just then Yukiko realized that the creature was a tatsu just like Aya. Yukiko asked the tatsu to put them down. The tatsu was surprised and asked Aya, “Why do you have a human on your back?” Aya replied, “This is no human. This is my best friend, Yukiko.” Yukiko asked the tatsu his name. He said, “My name is Yuuto.” Yuuto flew down to the ground and gently set them down. He asked them if he could stay with them for a little while because his cave had been taken away from him. Yukiko asked Yuuto if we let you stay with us will you protect us to? Yuuto said, “Ok, I will.” Aya was kind of thinking that this was a bad idea, but she did not want to argue with Yukiko. Yuuto said, “Thank you, now let’s get something to eat.” As they went searching for something to eat, they found a full grown tatsu. The tatsu look like Aya. When Aya noticed that the dragon was there she hid behind a bush and the other two did the same. “Crap, that’s the dragon that’s looking for me,” Yuuto whispered to them.

A few minutes later Aya started to recognize the scent from the attack at Yukiko’s house. “Yukiko, I think this is the dragon that killed your parents.” Aya quietly told Yukiko. “What!” Yukiko yelled. When she yelled the tatsu looked over to where they were hiding and slithered over and grabbed Yukiko by the collar of her shirt. “I think I recognize you little girl,” said the tatsu. “Put her down!” yelled Aya. Once the tatsu saw Aya, she ran over to her and said, “I have been looking everywhere for you.” The tatsu grabbed Aya in her giant talons. “Baby, where have you been? I wanted to see you hatch; Mommy’s missed you so much.” Aya’s mom cried. While Aya’s mom was talking to her, Yukiko stood there frozen in shock, thinking. Yukiko kept telling herself that her best friend’s mom was the one who killed her parents.

“Little girl, what have you been doing to my daughter.” Aya’s mom asked Yukiko. “Mom, first of all, she is not just any random girl. She is my best friend. Second of all, she has not done anything wrong, so don’t touch her.” Aya explained to her mom while she was walking over to Yukiko to protect her.

“Oh, Yukiko. My name is Tomiko. I promise I will not hurt you. Come here.” Yukiko walked over in fear. As she got closer to the big, towering tatsu she felt like she was shrinking. When Yukiko got to Tomiko, Tomiko picked her up and hugged her and kept saying, “Thank you for taking care of my little girl.”

“Tomiko, weren’t you the one who killed my parents about ten years ago?” Yukiko asked Tomiko. “Well I have killed dozens of families in the past ten years, so I wouldn’t know. Wait, I think I remember your family.” After a few minutes of silence Aya started to talk but was interrupted, “Yukiko, you can stay with us if you would like.” Tomiko suggested.

“Tomiko why do you only remember my family.” Yukiko asked.

“It’s because your mother and father owed me a favor for saving your life. When you were young and your parents took you to a meadow on a cliff, you started to chase a butterfly and went tumbling off the edge of the cliff. Thankfully I was flying by and caught you. I told your parents they owed me treasure, and if I did not get it at the end of the year then they would have to die. I also said that I would not kill you, just make you live alone.” Tomiko answered. Yuuto finally came out of the bush, Tomiko got in fighting position and told the girls to get behind her. On the first hit Yukiko and Aya both yelled, “Stop! He is our friend!” Tomiko put her claws down and sighed. Tomiko asked Aya, “Is he your friend too?” Aya and Yukiko both turned around and screamed “No!” when they saw the dragon standing right behind them. Once they said no Tomiko put her claws into fighting position and flung herself towards the random dragon. In the first hit she knocked out the full grown dragon. Tomiko shouted for them to fly as far up as they could. Aya bent down let Yukiko climb on her back, then Aya grew in size and took off with Yuuto following close behind. Just a few moments later, Tomiko came flying after them and darted in front of them and yelled at them to follow her. They followed her over the mountain where Yukiko and Aya grew up together. They flew for an hour straight and did not stop for
anything. When they got to Tomiko’s home they all looked at the landscape and saw the village that Yukiko lived in.

“That’s all for tonight girls. Hope you liked it,” Yukiko said.

“Aya, are you ready to go to sleep?” Yukiko asked. Aya got up and shrunk small enough so that Yukiko could carry her to bed. Yukiko took Aya to the room that she used when she was a kid. Yukiko kept thinking to herself that she was so happy that they rebuilt the house. "I will tell the rest tomorrow.”
Tweaks of pain shot through my knee provoking me to tense the muscles supporting my weight as I crouched against the wall. Sweat trickled down my back causing the little curls framing my face to cling to my skin. Legs trembling, I watched the little red hand tick by on the clock. 4...3...2...1...! I slid myself up the wall and out of the wall-sit, breathing in and out, in and out, using the familiar mantra to steady myself and alleviate the pain coursing through the tendons and muscles in my knee.

The pain in my knee had been with me for over 4 months, although it had begun with a 6 week recovery period. I could barely remember how it felt to sit cross-legged or run. Nothing ever seemed to work. The pain never left me and running was definitely not an option. I constantly thought about losing forever the ability to run. A fog of despair forever clouded my mind, utter misery seeped into every thought and action. Nothing would be the same if I lost running. Feeling the blood pump through my body as things whipped by brought indescribable joy. Laughter always seemed to bubble up inside when my legs flew across the ground. Gloom slowly bled into my reverie. Hope waned closer to desolation.

As I glanced at the clock, loud voices from the corridor nearby interrupted my hopeless thoughts, “Slowly now...careful...” called the voices.

“Oh my god, oh my god! Stop! Stop!” Desperation and pain leaked out with every syllable the girl gasped.

As the girl carefully rolled into an exam room with her knee bandaged and propped up, I saw her eyes widen, then cringe, when her wheelchair passed over a small bump in the carpet. Her swollen, red rimmed eyes brimmed with salty tears. While I continued to watch the procession of people trailing her into the room, my mind drifted to one of my favorite pastimes during physical therapy - guessing each person’s injury and story behind it.

My guesses about the new arrivals injury were confirmed as several junior therapists solemnly whispered “After ACL surgeries, people come out in so much pain..”

“I know, sometimes they’re this sensitive...”

“...I guess the pain can be unbearable...some people have more trouble dealing with pain than others...”

Having only strained my ACL a few months ago, I could only imagine the poor girl’s pain. The therapists were correct in assuming the pain to be completely unbearable. Any movement can turn the ever-present, dull, aching pain into a sudden, searing, knife-like stab. Months had passed since I experienced this level and continuity of pain. But the memories still linger like a nightmare. I am still able to cause myself pain that brings me to the verge of tears if I move a certain way, but I am always careful to keep my waterworks in check. Watching this girl wheeled in brought back a flood of memories.

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I was running again. I had been running all afternoon, and my body was tired. I could feel the wind swirling past my face as I sprinted towards the bar. My legs burned but the inexplicable happiness from feeling the world rush past me, with the wind streaming around me and catching my hair, drove me forward.

With my final step towards the bar, I planted my feet to fly over the top. Something gave. An explosion of pain tore through my leg, as I flung myself over the bar. I hit the mat hard, hands clutching my left leg. Crippling pain radiated all along my leg, centering in my knee. Paralyzed in agony, I lay still. My eyelids crushed together. I began to suck in air, choking on what little air passed through. I began breathing hard, in and out, in and out, attempting to keep the panic at bay. All thoughts deserted my mind. All I could manage to do was breathe.

A shout pierced my terror filled mind “Are you crying or laughing?!”

“Neither!” I choked.

“What?”

“Neither!” The pain broke down my normally civil manner.

The effort to continue breathing overpowered me; my body seemed to be revolting.

Soon I heard other voices coming nearer, calling my name.

My coach’s voice rang out the loudest “..here, come to the edge...come sit over here..”
I dragged myself to the edge, slowly crawling what seemed like miles. Everything appeared tinged with black as I forced my eyes to remain open and dry. Hands helped to steady my swaying body as I crossed the huge distance of only a few feet to a stool.

“Are you alright?” came the obviously answerable question.

“No, my knee...I can’t really see, everything’s dark...” I trembled, forcing each syllable out.

My eyes remained open, but as they searched wildly, everything stayed dark and blurred. I could only make out a few shadows and figures. Soon the shadows disappeared as my eyelids dropped when the irresistible urge to shut down came crashing upon me. Voices and questions continued to pound me. Breathing became my retreat, but attempting to answer the flow of questions became necessary. Breathing out my answers slowly kept me alert until the world began to brighten again and the bile in the back of my throat subsided. I clung to the words and sounds whirling around me, while searching for a source of light.

As my vision cleared, I watched as a golf cart carried Mr. Ban, my coach, and the trainer, Matt, towards me on the track. After they reached where I sat, the trainer started stretching and moving my left leg, making various inconclusive comments, but confirming my fear of injury to my ACL. With one last hope, the two helped me to my trembling feet to see if I could stand without support. But I could not hold. My knee collapsed beneath me. Lancing, fiery pain ripped through my knee. What was once tight and solid had become gel-like and loose. My arms shot out to brace my fall only to be caught by Mr. Ban and Matt before I could slam to the ground. My heart plummeted while terrible thoughts and fears came crashing down. I’d never run again.

A slamming door pulled me back from my memories; I glanced over to where the girl had sat in her wheelchair. My thoughts drifted to the look on her face. Despair and hopelessness seemed to be in complete control of her features. Glancing to the floor-length mirror, my own face caught my eye. The same dull eyes belonging to the girl in the wheelchair stared, reflected back at me. The same slumped shoulders mirrored hers. I knew her pain. I could still feel the stabbing, burning sensation. Not so long ago, that was me—following the doctor into the small, examination room, unable to walk. I still felt her despair though, she was even worse than me. She could not walk or even hobble. I, on the other hand, needed only a brace that supported and straightened my knee.

I slowly walked towards my spot against the wall where I normally iced my knee. Glancing down at my own legs, walking, pain-free, something small flickered deep inside of me. It was something that I had not felt in a very long time. I almost did not recognize it. I no longer had to thump around in a brace or hop around my house when the brace became too painful. No, I slept peacefully now, and bending down no longer brought the stabbing burning pain that had constantly haunted my every moment. I was free. I could walk. Soon I would be able to run, with nothing to stop me. 4 months is only a small span of time in a person’s lifetime. The small glimmer had turned from an almost undetectable flicker to a roaring blaze of hope. I would run again. In time I would heal.
March 16th, 1 a.p.
Dear Larkin,
   It’s been sad and eerily quiet since you left me here. When are you coming back? I’m kinda starting to feel like a damsel in distress, with my missing Charming and all. Please, return to me.
   On another side of things why for the love of leaves would you make the idiotic decision to leave me here? In the middle of the ocean on some abandon island, I have to admit it is beautiful here, although you could have maybe put me somewhere like I don’t know? The side of a railroad track or somewhere near civilization?
   I’m slowly going mad being stuck here while the world descends into a new age of oblivion. Please return to me. I can help in more ways than you would ever imagine.
Love Yours Truly,
Tessa

March 27th, 1 a.p.
Dear Larkin,
   I know you told you’d return soon, but when is soon? It’s been a little over ten days and I’m starting to think something’s gone wrong. Please prove me wrong. I miss you!
   Remember the mobile pod you left for me? Well, it’s cozy and all, but I attached some additions. I put a fireplace that’s mainly outside with a small portion inside so I’ve been warm. Plus a hammock outside between the trees and fishing nets on a mechanical lever with pieces I found in the pod. The trees sure do like holding things up it seems, more than usual. Especially when I need them to, which is odd.
   Anyways, please don’t forget about me. Hope to see you soon!
Love Yours Truly,
Tessa

April 16th, 1 a.p.
Dear Larkin,
   This will be my last letter from this horrid island. After my month of refuging here I’ve come to two conclusions; You’re not returning for me or you have died. From these assumption I’ve taken it upon myself to leave, I’m going north east since that’s where all the birds travel to.
   I also built a hover boat, small but sturdy and have about a month’s worth of cocoa nuts and bananas stocked up, hopefully they’ll last. It’s all that was here.
   I hate to admit, I don’t even know if this silly owl is even getting these letters to you but I just wanted to thank you for him and inform you that I named him Gwindly.
Love Yours Truly,
Tessa and Gwindly

May 2nd, 1 a.p.
Dear Larkin,
   Well as you may have guessed I successfully managed to escape my temporary prison you left me to. I just arrived in a small town in Iceland where we had a wonderful welcoming celebration yesterday! It’s amazing here, I wish you could join me!
   I miss you, and I’m still trying to figure out why you’d leave me there on a remote island like you did. I assume you had your reasons though. Also, I look forward to meeting you so if you have a chance I visit the floating fountain in the middle of the town in Selfoss.
Truly Yours,
Tessa
May 21st, 1 a.p.
Dear Mr. Larkin,

We have caught your mistress. If you wish us to return her meet us at this fountain, you have three days. Or I promise you she will be broken for all to see as my example for rebels. Come alone, do not resist. Hope to encounter you soon.
Truthfully,
Sir Marco of Chaos

May 22nd, 1 a.p.
Dear Marco,

Hello, this is Larkin. You will not survive until tomorrow unless I get Tessa back. Unharmed. Any harm bestowed to her will be done unto you seven times as worse, this is my promise. Lastly, the rebellion lives and we will destroy everything you have ever known or loved, not that you can love.
Larkin
Baily Brown

Poetry: Goldens

Penney High School

Renae Wattenbarger, Teacher

I saw that leap
Across your own old river.
To your own self.
Not someone new to us,
We’ve known you for a while.
It’s new to you.
But the something is old as
That fuzz on your grandmother’s sweater.

That impulse
Across your own old synapses.
I have the same one
Nipping at the back of my brain stem.
That urge to leap
To something new to you
And old to us.
We’ve seen this before, unfortunately.

Maybe your impulse
Will take you further than mine did me.
Not wither and fester
In the baking Missouri summer,
But grow and golden.

And perhaps you’ll come back,
Across your own old river,
To see your gleaming impulse
Amongst the green
The rust
The dirty brown.

You’ll be proud of your golden then.
You won’t want it to be hidden
Amongst the green
The rust
The dirty brown.

You’ll display it
With other’s glass,
Framed by other’s rusted
And unfinished goldens.
“There is a girl
in the front of my class
who I swear I’ve never seen
do anything but laugh.”
-Amanda Lopiccolo, Dark Enough

“Oof!” Kyra grunted as she fell out of bed.
She found herself in a tangle of blankets on the floor and let her head fall back as her younger brother, Nathan, chirped happily.
“Good morning!”
“Ugh... It’s too early for you to be this cheery,” she grumbled, grinning at him in spite of her words.
He giggled as she quickly got up and began to chase him down the hallway, her blankets unfurling as she ran and falling all down the corridor. Kyra laughed freely as she picked him up and tossed him over her shoulder, heading to his room. He kicked and laughed, followed by a loud scream as she threw him onto the bed. Kyra went to his dresser and started picking his outfit for that day.
“Wanna wear your Iron Man shirt today, Nate?”
“Yea!”
She grabbed it and some jeans along with a pair of socks, tossing them to the blonde 4 year old. After she got ready for the day in the bathroom and he changed, they met in the kitchen and had bowls of cereal.
Nathan’s older sister took him to the bathroom and brushed his teeth, along with hers.
“Hey, do you want to hang out with me and Derek today after school?” Liz asked.
“Unless you guys wanna come over and babysit, I can’t. My dad works late so I have to watch Nate.”
“We like Nate. It’ll be fine. Can we come over?”
“Sure.”

At school Kyra dropped her books as she walked into class and all everyone seemed to do was point and laugh. She gathered her things and waved to the girl in the back of the class. The auburn-haired girl saw, but didn’t wave back. Kyra plopped down into her seat between Liz and Derek and went through class trying to ignore the pencils and erasers flicked at her throughout the hour.

The next class was the same; some girl bumped her desk “by accident”, knocking half the books off. Kyra quietly fumed as she picked them up and continued to listen to the teacher droning on and on in front of her. She did her work and continued to her next class. That’s how it always was. Getting shoved around in the crowd, Kyra barely made it to her next class on time. Liz was in this one and got angry when her friend’s chair was pushed, smashing her into the desk, and then pulled out from under her.

Kyra sat back down and out her head down when Liz stood up and started yelling.
“Don’t you ever think that maybe for once in your pathetic life you might just leave everyone alone? No one really wants anything to do with you. They just don’t want to get treated like this!” Elizabeth gestured at Kyra. “Leave her and everyone else alone or I swear to god I’ll-” Liz was cut off by the teacher.
“Elizabeth Winters!” Mrs. Lily snapped. With a heavy sigh, she repeated herself. “To the office. Now.” The bully smirked victoriously. “Both of you.” This time, it was Liz’s turn to smirk as the two left class.

“Liz, you’re amazing! Good luck!” Kyra called after her best friend, earning a quick flash of a grin before she disappeared out of sight.
Both Liz and the bully, Cora, were sent back to class the next hour, and they went through lunch with Derek freaking out about how awesome it was. Suddenly they heard a voice behind them. It was the girl in the back of their homeroom class.

“That was really cool by the way,” she said to Liz, glancing at Kyra before walking away.

“Uh... Thanks!” Kyra’s blonde friend replied, not even sure if she was heard, and definitely not acknowledged.

The school day was soon over and Kyra rested her head on Liz’s shoulder as they rode back to their houses on the bus.

“Ugh. Today sucked. Thanks for sticking up for me though,” the girl muttered.

“What are friends for?”

“Awww I didn’t know you guys were dating,” a random guy sneered, mocking kindness.

Kyra lifted her head and ignored him as she got off the bus and walked down the street to her house with Nathan on her back.

After she set her brother down and handed him a fruit snack package, he sat at the table to eat it. The dark-haired 17 year old plopped down on the couch and stared up at the ceiling. She didn’t move a muscle when a certain tiny little body curled up into her side.

“Are you okay, sissy?”

She thought about how the day went and how the bullying was starting to get to her, but shook her head and wrapped her arms around Nate.

“No, I’m okay. Liz and Derek are coming over. Do you wanna go get a game or something for us to play?”

Nathan’s eyes widened with excitement and he ran off, soon coming back with a box that said “Twister.”

Great, Kyra thought.

“There is a girl
in the front of my class
who’s eyes are glazed over
like newly cut glass”

-Amanda Lopiccolo, Dark Enough

About a week later, Kyra’s bullying was taken to a whole different level. She was in the halls when the most popular girl’s boyfriend came up to her. He put both arms on the wall, her head between them.

“Get away from me,” Kyra pushed on his chest.

He barely budged at all. The brown-eyed girl gripped his shirt in her fists and pushed harder.

“Get away from me!” She shouted as he leaned in.

“Your little girlfriend messed with mine, so I’m just returning the favor.”

His face inched closer, and I instinctively brought her knee up and hit him in the groin. His knees buckled and Kyra let go of his shirt as he fell. I was running away when I almost ran into Ashley, his girlfriend.

Apparently her yelling had caught her attention, and Ashley just saw at least some of that.

Kyra walked away from her, too, getting a harsh kick to her leg as she headed to Spanish. Later that day, as she was heading to the bus, she was grabbed and yanked out of sight. It was Ashley and her friends.

“You're so dead for what you did to my boyfriend.”

Kyra opened her mouth to protest, but the bully’s friends grabbed her as Ashley slapped her and punched her in the stomach. Kyra was shoved down to the ground and kicked over and over for a few more minutes.

“Leave my boyfriend alone.”

“But!” Kyra started to explain when there was another kick to her side.

After they left, Kyra ran home as fast as she could, hurting with each step. Hot tears streamed down her face and flew behind her as she reached the house. Nathan was standing at the door. Relieved that nothing happened to him, she unlocked the door and snatched her younger brother into her arms as she raced inside. Everything ached and she had to put Nate down.

“Sissy... You’ve got boo boo’s... What happened?” The four year old asked.

Kyra wiped her tears with a sleeve and put on a smile. “Nothing. I’m fine. How was your day?”

Nate grinned and started chatting excitedly about how him and Michael played adventurers today at recess. Apparently he was also joined by Maddy, Gabriel, and Lily. It sounded like quite an exciting day for him.

“Sound’s fun.” Kyra said.
“It was!” Nathan chirped.

Kyra flopped down onto the couch and stared at the ceiling as her younger brother sat on the big pillow behind her and rested his tiny feet on her stomach. She put in her headphones and turned his cartoons on for him. The teenager could feel bruises forming on her stomach and her face. Nathan noticed one on her cheek.

“Kywa? Can I kiss it make it better like you do?” He asked me, blue eyes wide.

I smiled, “Please.” He gave me little adorable pecks on my arms and face.

That night, I asked Nathan if he wanted to sleep in my bed, and he did.

“I love you, Nathan,” I said.

“I love you, too, Kywa,” he whispered back.

I laughed a little at the mispronunciation of my name.

“There is a girl
in the front of my class
who’s so sad that you find it rare
to see her smile or laugh”
-Amanda Lopiccolo, Dark Enough

The next day was full of mocking and laughing for getting beat up. Judging. It was horrible. I raced home, laying on the couch and hugging Nathan tightly. I couldn’t help it; I started crying. Then, so did he. And we hugged.

We shared a bed again that night and fell asleep the same way.

“I love you, Nathan.”

“I love you, too, Sissy.”

There is a girl
in the front of my class
who yesterday broke down
and almost took her own life

I left Nathan at his friend’s house and started to go to the tallest nearby building. I couldn’t take any more of this. I dropped a note off at school for my friends. The note read: I’m sorry I didn’t say, but my mind was messed up. You couldn’t save me anyway...

As I reached the building, I looked up toward the sky. I walked in, determined. Taking the elevator to the roof, I walked and sat down on the edge.

“And the girl
in the back of the class
who feels the way I did,
How does someone so perfect
feel so insecure as to
scar her skin with cuts and burns
and still want to hurt more?”
-Amanda Lopiccolo, Dark Enough

I stood, walked back, and rode the elevator back down. I ran to where Nathan was and took him home. We cried on the couch together again. His small arms hugged me as tightly as he could.

“It’s okay, Sissy. Don’t cry.”

“I’m alive for you, I thought, hugging him tighter.

“I love you, Nathan.”

“I love you, too, Sissy.”

**Author’s Note: I added my own verse to the song, "Dark Enough," by Amanda Lopiccolo. It is the verse that does not have quotation marks.**
Claire Butcher

Personal Essay/Memoir: The Beautiful Butterfly
Park Hill South High School
Idean Bindel, Teacher

Dear Diary,
May 10, 2005

Hi okay, I have big news.
My mommy just told me that nana has a little cold and we have to take her to the doctor tomorrow. But that’s okay because I love my nana and I get to see her. I think after we get to go shopping and our nails done. I wonder what my nana has.

One time I went to the doctor and they told me I had to get 3 shots!!! That’s why I hate the doctor because he always makes me get those and they really hurt my arm. I hope nana doesn’t have to get any shots at the doctor and that she will get better soon. Maybe we will get ice cream after like my mommy always does for me.

I have to go to soccer now.
Bye.

Dear Diary,
June 16, 2005

I have gotten to hang out with my nana so much more than I usually do! I’m so happy because I just love her so much. Her house is really cool too. It has a swimming pool!

Nana doesn’t like to swim but she says that I can so she always squirts water guns at me from the side of the pool. I got out of the pool today and laid out with her. She is so silly she just lays out in the sun like a lizard. I asked her why she does that and she said, “I’m as pale as a ghost.” I don’t understand why laying in the sun will make her not a ghost but I didn’t want to make her sound silly so I didn’t ask.

I forgot to tell you, nana didn’t have to get any shots the other day!! But I think maybe my mommy did because when I was sitting outside in the waiting room, she came out crying. I asked her what was wrong and she told me that the doctor told a funny joke and she laughed so hard she cried! But that doesn’t really make sense because you only cry when you are sad. But I didn’t care because we got to leave that icky place.

I’m going to go swim again.
Bye.

Dear Diary,
August 29, 2005

I’m so happy lately, know why? I have been getting to see my family so much more! We go to my nana’s like almost every day now.

But I don’t mind because she has lots of candy at her house. I love candy. Nana and mommy call me the candy queen of Kansas City. My favorite is jelly beans, especially the cotton candy ones. Mommy says I need to stop eating them because all my teeth will fall out by the time I am 10 but I don’t believe her.

Everyone is at nana’s right now though. All of my cousins like Emma and Charlie and baby Nora. The adults are talking inside so we get to play outside.

But I forgot my water gun and Barbie inside and went inside to get it. But the weird thing is that when I went to get it, everyone looked like they had been crying besides nana. I kind of got scared because it didn’t look like happy crying like my mommy told me about. I asked Emma since she is the oldest and she didn’t know what was wrong either.

I have to go to dinner though.
Bye.
Dear Diary,
November 19, 2005

I got to do something really cool today.
My nana asked me to help her with something.
She erased all of her hair. I asked her why and she said that her old hairstyle was getting really boring and she wanted me to help her pick a new one! I told nana that I am bored of my hair too but she said that I had pretty golden hair and that she would love to have it and that I couldn’t get rid of my hair.
I don’t like adults sometimes.

But we picked some really cool hair out. It’s like already ready for your head, a wig I think it is called. I couldn’t even tell that it wasn’t her real hair. But when she bent over, it fell off and she laughed so hard she started crying. It was the first time I actually understood what happy crying looked like.
I love my nana, she always knows how to laugh at herself and make everyone around her happy.

We are about to leave to go make a build-a-bear.
Bye.

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Dear Diary,
January 3, 2006

I had a great Christmas. Santa brought me a brand new American Girl Doll!
I think that nana was sick again because the day after Christmas we had to go to the doctor again. I knew nana was sick this time because on Christmas Eve I asked her to help me carry presents I wrapped upstairs and whenever she lifted a book I got for my daddy, she dropped it. I thought it was an accident but she kept doing it, I asked her if she needed help and she said no it's okay, I've got this one you go on upstairs.
So I went and played with my Barbie dream house. I got that last year for Christmas and 5 other Barbies. I don't change their clothes though because they don't ever go on easy.
I think I'm going to go play with that.
Bye.

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Dear Diary,
April 9, 2006

My daddy and mommy went on a date night. Which is where you go to eat food at a restaurant without your kids. But that’s okay because nana gets to watch me and I haven’t seen her in 2 weeks because mommy didn't want to take me out of school anymore to go see her.
Did you know that there are different ways to climb up stairs? Nana taught me this different way that I never knew.

I asked her if she wanted to go play house in my room upstairs. When we got to the stairs she bent down and got on her knees. I laughed at her and said, “Nana! What are you doing, that’s funny?” She laughed and said that walking up the stairs is overrated, I'm going to start going up them like your dog does.

It sounded like fun so I did it with her and she raced me and I beat her. Daddy's always tells me I'm the fastest on my soccer team.
Nana just called me for dinner.
Bye.

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Dear Diary,
July 6, 2006

This weekend was so fun.
I got to go to the lake with my mommy, daddy, and brother and all of our close family friends. I love the lake because the water is so much fun and there is so many things to do. I usually tube but I tried skiing and I fell a lot but I stood up for a whole minute, my daddy said so!
But I'm back now and when we got home we got to go see my nana. It's so cool, when I went in her house she had a roller coaster! It's on the stairs and it takes you up and down them. Mommy says I'm going to break it I ride it so many times, so now I can only ride it when I actually need to go upstairs.

Nana and I like to ride it together. I sit on her lap and we always laugh and throw our hands up like we are on a rollercoaster.

I love my nana because she is so silly. I hope I'm like her one day.

I have to go help my brother with something.

Bye.

Dear Diary,
November 8, 2006

I had so much fun with my nana and mommy.

We went to Chicago for a whole entire week and mommy and nana bought so much they filled up Nana's whole wheel chair.

Oh yeah, nana got a wheel chair. I don't know why because when I asked nana she said it was just so she didn't have to walk around because she threw out her back shopping. I believe her because she's always shopping. She is so crazy she shops so much I think it's her favorite thing to do.

Her favorite thing to buy is leopard. If I counted everything leopard she owned it would be like 3000000. She always gets me something when she goes, most of the time it's my favorite jelly beans or shoes because I love shoes.

But when we were in Chicago she didn't shop like normal. She got tired after like 3 hours and she never does. She always tells me to shop till you drop and I think that's why I don't like shopping that much is because you get so tired.

I have soccer.

Bye.

Dear Diary,
March 2, 2007

I'm sad.

Remember how I said how my nana was sick a really long time ago? Well my mommy just said that nana is getting really sick and that I need to always be with her.

I didn't think she was sick but now I do because she has to lay in a bed now. She is the same funny nana but she doesn't get up ever. She even has this grabber and it picks things up for you! She doesn't get up and so I asked how she goes potty and she said that she has this special thing that just lets her go in bed. I think that's weird because I wouldn't like that. She doesn't either, so I asked her why she did that and she said she was too lazy to get up.

I also asked how she shops because she doesn't ever leave and she says she online shops. That's so cool how you can pick clothes and have someone bring them without ever leaving your home.

Nana's going to show me how to shop.

Bye.

Dear Diary,
May 7, 2007

I spend a lot of time at Nana's now.

It's really fun when we get to have sleepovers. One night nana told me funny stories about when she was my age and how she hit a boy because he kept stepping on her shoes. I laughed so hard I cried.

I think that nana is one of the bravest people I know.

I could never hit someone because they were being mean. Mommy listened too and laughed but she said that's not a nice thing to do and looked at my nana. Nana always tells me to stand up for myself no matter what. If a boy is being mean to you, you tell him off.
But after we told stories we always eat a bunch of candy. But it's weird because nana only eats the flavored lifesavers. I think it's because those are her favorite candy, but she likes chocolate a lot. I asked mommy why she always eats them because I didn't want my nana to feel bad for eating all of them. But mommy says that nana has a type of sickness where she sometimes can't taste things. I couldn't ever do that because I love food and different favors.

But it's time for bed.

Bye.

Dear Diary,
July 14 2007

I forgot to tell you this last time but my nana has this lady that always is there when I come over. She's really fun though and she helps my nana so I like her.

I also forgot this. I am really confused because the other day when I came upstairs after school to say hi to my nana like I always do, she looked at me like she didn't know me. She didn't even say hi like she always does. She looked at me like she didn't know my name.

Her at home nurse told her my name and that I was her granddaughter, then nana said my name greeting me with a big smile. Come give grandma a hug. And then I said, nana. I call you nana, not grandma, because you said you don't like grandma because it makes you sound like an old person.

That's another thing I like about my nana. She always looks so pretty and she wears makeup and pretty shoes.

But she said oh yeah I was just kidding. I laughed because nana always makes the best jokes. I laid in bed with her like we always do and watched our favorite show, Seinfeld.

I am going to go play with my dog.

Bye.

Dear Diary,
August 1, 2007

Everyone is at my Nana's house. There are so many people here, like everyone that has ever known nana so the house is so full. But I got to wear a really pretty dress so it's okay. Plus there is lots of food and cookies. I didn't know some people so I went upstairs.

I don't even know why we had this big party. Mommy says it's because we are celebrating Nana's life. She explained it a little but I still don't know why because mommy said that nana is very sick and everyone is coming to make sure that she knows how much they love her. I tell my nana that I love her every day.

She is my favorite person ever.

Hopefully she gets better soon so we can go shopping.

I should go say hi to more people, I'm supposed to open the door to greet people.

Bye.

Dear Diary,
September 21 2007

I don't understand.

Why did God choose my nana.

Mommy and daddy told me and my brother in the car about how nana was going to be one of gods beautiful angels but it's not fair because she is mine and I didn't want her to leave.

When we got to Nana's, Mommy said this was the last time we'd be coming. I couldn't believe it because I had been coming here after school for almost 2 years.

But why mommy? "Because like I said", she stopped for a second and I could tell she wasn't crying because she was happy. Why though mommy? She said that nana was very sick and that all this time that we spent with her she was getting sicker and that wasn't good for her.
Mommy told me this a lot but I didn’t really think about it because I get sick all the time and I always get better.

I ran up to the house as soon as we got there and I opened the door and ran to nana. Her nurse said “hello sweetheart” and nana said “hi sweetie”. But it wasn’t as happy as it always was. It was so quiet and her soap opera was so loud. I laid in bed next to her and I hugged her really hard but her nurse said not to because that wasn’t good for Nana’s back. I started crying and said, “Nana don’t go to God please”. I screamed at her and said, “I need you.”

Mommy and daddy came in and were crying and told me to not yell but use my inside voice. Nana’s nurse started crying too. And for the first time I saw my nana cry too. And you know that feeling you get when you do something wrong and her heart and stomach hurts. I had that feeling but 10000 times worse.

We all sat and talked like we normally did. But I didn’t say anything, I just laid next to nana and hugged her. It was getting late and my aunt and uncle and mommy were all there. Mommy got up and said, baby you have school tomorrow and it is 10 o clock. I didn’t want to leave nana but mommy said that daddy and my brother and I were going to go home.

My nana said, “Come give me a big hug my lovely grandchildren”. We went and gave her one and she gave us a kiss on the forehead and said, I’ll love you forever and always. I didn’t know what to say because she always just says she loves me and she will see me tomorrow. So I said I will love you forever and always too nana.

I held her hand but then I had to leave. But when we started to walk out the door I turned around and said bye nana. And she said remember what I said. And she looked at my brother and I like we were her favorite thing in the world.

I didn’t know what to do when I got home so I decided to write in you but I’m sleepy now.

Bye.

Dear Diary,

October 12, 2007

Nana’s funeral was yesterday. We had to drive a long time and I had to miss school. All those people that were at the party were there and it was the worst day of my life. Everyone was really nice to me but it seemed like I wasn’t the only one that was sad. A man who I didn’t even know talked about my nana but he never even said that she was the best person in the whole world. He just said that she was like a monarch butterfly because she was so beautiful and elegant whatever that means. And that she was finally free to fly away.

Mommy cries so much and it makes me cry even more. I cried so much that I can’t barely cry anymore. When I think there is no more, there is. I don’t know what to do now. Whenever my friends ask me to play outside I tell them no because I’d rather just sit and watch TV with the build-a-bear my nana got me. I’m really sad and lonely.

I miss my nana. But mommy says that she is always with me and watching over me.

Mommy says she’s my guardian angel and I like that.

Mommy’s taking me to get ice cream.

Bye.
Amanda Cao  
Short Story: The Audition  
John Burroughs School  
Eleanor DesPrez, Teacher

I deliberately opened my case in the practice room and ran my hand over the four smooth, silver violin strings. I looked around at my competition. I could feel it. This was my year and today was my day. I would show the judges and I would show my competitors. I would show everyone that I deserved the concertmaster seat in this prestigious orchestra. I had worked towards this audition for a whole year and nothing would have delighted me more than to see that work pay off. After taking the violin out from the case, I flipped open my music and began playing my virtuoso concerto. My fingers effortlessly danced over the strings. Satisfied, I moved on to the excerpts. I was in complete control. I could make the trills and the light, high notes of the Debussy piece imitate the playing and rolling of ocean waves, and I could make the soft, slow melody of the Brahms symphony feel like a warm, comforting hug from a loved one.

Suddenly, a short, young lady, presumably an orchestra manager, appeared behind me and tapped my shoulder. “The judges are ready for you,” she said, smiling. As she touched my shoulder, I felt a jolt through my body. My heart jumped and accelerated immediately as my knees felt as if they would collapse. She motioned for me to follow her, and proceeded out of the room at a brisk pace. My body remained frozen. I willed my shaky legs to move, one in front of the other, following the young lady to the audition room.

“Good luck,” the young red-haired lady whispered to me with a cheery smile on her face. I stepped into the spacious, empty performance hall and watched as the small stripe of light disappeared as the door closed behind me. I shuddered, as if I could feel the wind from the closing door. Tentatively, I walked on the thick rug, looking at the thousands of empty red seats covered in shadows. Absolute silence filled the room. After stopping in front of the singular upright music stand, I looked in front of me at a thick black curtain. The music stand cast multiple shadows from the dim golden stage lights, and the well-defined pitch-dark shadow of the black curtain extended a couple feet before where I stood. As I moved my fingers to adjust my bow, I saw the many shadows cast by my arm all move accordingly. I shakily inhaled, desperately trying to conceal the shuddering sound of my breath that seemed to reverberate across the spacious hall.

“Please begin,” a low voice commanded. I put the violin up to my neck. The thud of the violin coming in contact with my neck vibrated across the hall. I slowly brought my bow up to my violin and noticed the bow tip trembling and shaking as I moved my arm. I willed my arm and the bow to become steady. “You may begin,” once again came from someone enshrouded by the black curtain. With an assertive flourish of the arm, I drew the bow across the string to begin the beautiful, romantic opening melody of the Mendelssohn violin concerto. Immediately, the violin produced a harsh scratching sound. The bow felt rough against the string, as the bow had been made of sandpaper instead of horsehair. As I transitioned into the explosive virtuoso section, the bow thudded against the string, producing a low moan, as if the instrument itself were resisting my attempts to play it. I performed a crescendo, yet as I tried to draw out a louder sound from the string, as I dug the bow into the string, the violin produced a dull, choked sound. I inhaled in preparation for the high A that would mark the grand ending of the first theme. I quickly pulled the bow and vibrated my fingers as quickly as possible. The violin produced a high, painful shriek that resonated across the room. Suddenly, I felt as if time stood still, with that piercing A pulsating through my bones. “You may stop there,” a voice behind the curtain commanded.

I lifted the long, smooth bow from the string and examined it. I closed my eyes. I am in control, I thought to myself. I tried to say to myself under my breath, “I am in control. This is my audition and I can win that seat,” but those words were never formed. Instead, short, quavering breaths came out of my trembling lips. As I opened my eyes to view the black curtain, I heard a voice instruct, “Please begin the Debussy.” Once again, I placed my bow on the string in preparation to begin the next excerpt. The bow bounced on the string, producing short, rough sounds, refusing to become steady to start the delicate trill. Wanting to avoid hearing the cold voice behind the curtain repeat its instructions, I quickly began to play the piece. As the bow tripped over the trills and produced a harsh, thrashing sound, I myself wanted to start to thrash and flail my limbs. I shut my eyes tightly as I descended the scale. Please sound right, I silently begged. What were supposed to be
bright, delicate notes resembling the floating, playing ocean waves instead came out as short sputters, as if the violin was coughing or choking.

As I finished the excerpt, I considered screaming at the violin, “NO! I am in control!” I was going to show those judges. I was going to show everyone. I would earn that seat. I looked up into the emptiness of the tall black curtain. Those judges, that commanding voice, nothing would stop me from taking my rightful place as concertmaster that season. I was ready for those judges. I waited, my excitement and agitation mounting with every second. I listened to the soft scratching coming from behind the pitch black curtain. Give me the go-ahead already, I thought. Come on judges, finish already so that I can start the Brahms symphony and claim the seat I deserve! More pens scratching on paper. You can’t prevent me from taking that spot—I’ll show you! I thought to those judges. I would show them.

As soon as the judges instructed me to proceed with my next excerpt, I suddenly felt as if I were going to collapse onto the floor. I looked at my shaking bow. Stop shaking! I willed to the bow. STOP! The bow seemed to move now even faster, uncontrollably drawing circles and shapes in the air. I inhaled deeply, attempting to prepare my mind for the soothing and comforting low melody on the paper in front of me. As I closed my eyes, I felt the bow in my left hand still shaking. A torrent of fury erased the temporary calmness. I struck the bow against the violin strings. No, you can’t take this from me, I thought to my instrument. You can shake all you want, but I’m in control here! As my frustration mounted, I listened to the forcefully harsh and rough sound emerging from my instrument. No! This is wrong! You WILL play what I need to play! I curled the fingers of my left hand around the neck of the violin, gripping the thin strip of wood with all of my strength. As I struck the strings with my fingers, the violin seemed to resist, producing weak and choked sounds. I thought of the slow, flowing melody that I expected and needed to hear. Why wasn’t my violin playing correctly? I listened carefully. Was it me? Was there something wrong with me? Impossible. I had practiced for countless hours. No, I had impeccable intonation, singing vibrato, and beautiful musicality. It wasn’t me. It couldn’t be. Was my own violin going to prevent me from reaching my goals? No, I thought, I will win that seat.

I looked down the violin, following the four shiny strings past my hand and up to the scroll. The four strings felt as if they were slicing into my fingertips. I dug the bow deeper into the string. The low, tense moans that emerged from the instrument resonated across the hall. Furiously, I moved the bow faster, pressed harder, and gripped tighter with both hands. I needed to get the two pieces of wood in my hands to make my music. I adjusted my hands in preparation for the brighter, more hopeful—but still solemn—melody in the higher register that ended the excerpt. This was my final chance to show everyone that I deserved the concertmaster seat. I would take it. I lifted the scroll of the violin with my left hand to begin the melody, hoping to instill one last burst of energy into the music. Anxiously, I listened to the sound that came out, a light, weak sigh—no, it wasn’t a sigh, the notes that came out were short, light bursts. As I ended the excerpt, I recognized the sound—it resembled...laughter? Was my own instrument mocking me?

A clatter echoed across the spacious hall. The bow was no longer in my hand. Resisting the urge to stomp on it, I picked it up, snatched my music off of the stand, and exited the hall. I walked past the young manager without looking at her. I could envision that permanent cheery smile pasted onto her pale face. As I descended the stairs to retrieve my instrument case, she caught up, walking behind me. In a sickeningly sweet tone, she remarked, “You sounded fantastic in there.” When I turned around, I saw that there was no longer anyone with me on the staircase.
Amanda Cao

Critical Essay: Why Hamlet Cannot Kill: Building the Bridge between Thought and Action

John Burroughs School
Eleanor DesPrez, Teacher

In Shakespeare’s Hamlet, the title character possesses a burning desire to kill the king to avenge his father’s death, but for much of the play, he finds himself unable to take any steps towards fulfilling this duty even when presented with opportunities. Instead, he continually criticizes himself and his thoughts as he grows increasingly frustrated with his inability to carry out this justice. While he cannot bring himself to kill the king, Hamlet does cause the deaths of two innocent bystanders, which leads to his own death at the hands of an avenger. Through Hamlet’s inability to act, Shakespeare shows that no matter how much one desires a result, his emotions will not translate into his intended objective until he focuses on and resolves to take up the means necessary to reach his goals.

To Hamlet, the genuine emotions that lead to actions are far more significant than the actions themselves. When his mother tells Hamlet to “cast [his] nighted color off” (1.2.72) and asks why the sadness of King Hamlet’s death “seems... so particular with [Hamlet],” (1.2.75) Hamlet responds: “I know not ‘seems.’ /.../ they are actions that a man might play./ But I have that within which passes show.” (1.2.76, 84-85) Hamlet expresses frustration that his mother cannot understand that his gloomy outlook and depressed behavior are merely reflections of “that within,” namely his lingering grief over his father’s death. To him, the actions by themselves are something “that a man might play,” or something insignificant that anyone could meaninglessly produce. Therefore, he believes that as long as he can manipulate his emotions, he can act accordingly and achieve his goals. After viewing the players’ performance, Hamlet envies that one player “Could force his soul so to his own conceit / That from her working all his visage waned, / Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect...” (2.2.552-555) Hamlet too wishes to control his feelings, his “soul,” so that he can work towards his “conceit.” By changing his emotional state, Hamlet believes that he can make himself cry, become pale, and behave abnormally. To him, actions are merely automatic extensions of his internal feelings.

However, this mentality proves to be flawed when he tries to apply it to his pursuit of vengeance. Immediately after his father explains the circumstances of his death, Hamlet promises to avenge his father and kill Claudius. However, instead of picking up his sword to fulfill his duty, Hamlet exclaims, “My tables—meet it is I set it down.”(1.5.108) In this moment, Hamlet thinks about recording this situation in his memory—he is thinking about how he plans to continue thinking. Later, after much time has elapsed without him coming any closer to killing Claudius, Hamlet firmly declares that “My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth!” (4.5.67) However, Hamlet does not comprehend that this accomplishes nothing. His desire for revenge and his hatred towards Claudius—whom he denounces as a “Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain” (2.2.542)—are both extremely strong, so his thoughts are already “bloody” enough. Thus, he becomes increasingly frustrated and confused as he watches “The imminent death of twenty thousand men / That for a fantasy and trick of fame / Go to their graves like beds” (4.5.61-63) even though they do not have the “Excitements of [Hamlet’s] reason and [his] blood.” (4.5.59) Although Hamlet recognizes that something is wrong that prevents him from carrying out the revenge, he cannot identify what that exactly is and believes that the problem lies in his thoughts, which are “one part wisdom / And ever three parts coward.” (4.4.41, 42) This in itself is the problem: instead of planning out action, Hamlet only focuses on whether his thoughts are “bloody” enough and how “[cowardly]” they are—he only thinks about his thoughts and his inability to kill, and never about actually performing the murder. Therefore, despite his fervent thirst for revenge and his constant contemplation on this subject, Hamlet still cannot kill the king even when opportunities present themselves.

Though Hamlet’s mentality hinders him from accomplishing his objectives, his hatred and frustration do produce many unintended and disastrous consequences. When conversing with Gertrude, Hamlet hears a voice behind a screen exclaim, “What ho! Help!” (3.4.24)—something not threatening at all—and Hamlet immediately stabs the screen, killing the hidden Polonius. After realizing his murder, Hamlet asks, “is it the king?” (3.4.28) The most pressing thought on his mind has been, for some time, murdering the king. Therefore, he instinctively stabs to kill, and his mind then automatically thinks of the king as the possible victim. However, this action does not occur out of any conscious intentions on Hamlet’s part, because he later tells Laertes, the
son of Polonius: “Was’t Hamlet wronged Laertes? Never Hamlet... Hamlet denies it.” (5.2.231,234) By denying “[Hamlet’s]” involvement with the murder, Hamlet distances this impulsive action from his rational decisions. If he were able to think reasonably, he would not kill an innocent man. Similarly, after Ophelia suddenly rejects Hamlet’s affection, Hamlet begins to suspect that Ophelia is working with Claudius. Immediately, his disgust with Ophelia—which results from his intense hatred of Claudius—manifests in his behavior towards her. He calls her a dishonest “bawd,” (3.1.14) and delivers scathing insults such as telling her “I loved you not” (3.1.120), and “Get thee to a nunnery” (3.1.122). However, after Ophelia’s grief over Polonius’ death—which Hamlet is responsible for—causes her to commit suicide, Hamlet proudly tells Laertes that for Ophelia, he would “drink up easel” and “eat a crocodile.” (5.1.278-280) The fact that Hamlet would go to such extremes shows that Hamlet does love Ophelia and does not desire to hurt her at all. Instead of motivating him to act as he desires, though, Hamlet’s negative feelings override his rational thinking and produce unintended results. Ironically, Hamlet’s troubled thoughts and mounting emotions do automatically translate into actions, but those actions are completely counterproductive to his goal.

Only when his thoughts are focused directly on the desired action itself can Hamlet successfully accomplish his objectives. Before departing for England, Hamlet states that he wishes to see Rosencrantz and Guildenstern share the fate of an engineer who is “[Hoisted] with his own petard.” (4.1.214) He plans: “I will delve one yard below their mines/And blow them to the moon.” (4.1.215-216) Here, not only does Hamlet reveal unprecedented determination for pursuing a course of action, but he also states how he will carry this plan out: by turning his former friends’ devices against themselves. Instead of attempting to summon hatred towards his future victims, Hamlet focuses on what he will do. As a result, he successfully carries out his plan, proudly recounting to Horatio, “So Rosencrantz and Gildenstern go to't.” (5.2.56) This same certainty proves crucial to fulfilling his duty to his father. On the day of the duel, Horatio warns Hamlet that Claudius may very soon hear about Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and Hamlet confidently responds, “It will be short. The interim’s mine.” (5.2.78) Hamlet is so sure that he will murder Claudius soon that even a short time limit does not worry him. Thus, when an opportunity presents itself, Hamlet is ready as he takes Laertes’ poisoned blade and says, “The point envenomed too? Then, venom, to thy work.” (5.2.325) Even as he is dying, Hamlet thinks of the action he needs to perform, namely stabbing Claudius, instead of thinking about his thoughts, as he would have done earlier. When he finally creates a concrete plan and decisively resolves to pursue a concrete course of action, Hamlet efficiently and successfully accomplishes his goals.

Although Hamlet does achieve what he sets out to do, Hamlet’s end result cannot be deemed a success because his and Laertes’ families are all killed as a result of his long murder attempt. What Hamlet does wrong for much of the play is that although he is always physically capable of performing his duty, he mentally is not prepared to do such a thing. Hamlet attempts to mentally ready himself by strengthening his thoughts, but in doing so he neglects thinking through his actions, and as a result, his passionate emotions cause him to act irrationally, impulsively, and dangerously. When Hamlet ultimately fixes this problem and begins to focus on planning actions, he can effectively accomplish his objectives. At the cost of his own life and the lives of those closest to him, Hamlet finally discovers that one’s unchecked thoughts and emotions can only lead to unchecked actions, and not, as Hamlet hopes, the successful completion of one’s intended goals.
Orunima Chakraborti

Poetry: The Invisible Line, The Poppy Blooms Today Steadfast, and Accidents of Birth
Blue Valley North High School
Michele Buche, Teacher

The Invisible Line

Out beyond the frame of the west side window, I see her.
After days, months, years of observing each other,
We have discovered that we lead the same life.

That we call our children to us in the same way,
That we cook the same chapattis outside in our ovens,
That we pull on the same clothes every morning.
So much is the same, and yet, everything is different.

It is out there – that line running between our homes,
between our families,
between us.
The line where, if you stand on one side, you will die for Hindustan,
and on the other, for Pakistan.
No one, it seems, ever stands on it.
And already, my children are warned by their father
about letting their games and races cross.
And he teaches them, as his father taught him, how to fear and hate people
they don’t even know.

But I know. I see her through the metal bars on my window.
I see my life reflected back to me across the line.
And somehow I feel that it is the same in that house,
another father teaching his children to hate
and another mother watching helplessly,
as her words die on her lips.
What effect do a tired mother’s words of love have,
when a respected father’s words of hate fill a child’s ears?
It has already become clear to my children.
I can see it in their eyes when they stop their play and look to the west.
Nothing will ever stand out as much as that one invisible line.

The Poppy Blooms Today Steadfast

The poppy blooms today steadfast
against the pull of earth.
The fawn lies down beside the doe,
rejoicing in rebirth.

Spring has come after years and years,
so welcome, mankind feels.
It’s chasing winter out the door,
whistling of grief it heals.

Warm breezes flow to the capitol,
in the room, a man so tall.
His face tells stories, hard yet kind,
dark man respected by all.

Yet whispers struggle back and forth,
masters wear faces of dread.
Thousands of men lie wounded in camps,
so many more now dead.

Life brings death, but now the words
are felt in a different sense.
Freedom bought with a price large paid,
years coming as its defense.

Hope has come, as snow soon melts,
and roads will clear once more.
Grey and blue soldiers march again
to begin a new phase of war.

Mankind will forever strive –
to make themselves disagree,
And women and men will pay its price,
blind nature of humanity.

A poppy blooms today steadfast,
Petal hearts pierced true red.
The same as blood yet to come,
tears that will be shed.

**Accidents of Birth**

Third day of Hanukkah,
I stand to the side.
Decorated kippahs,
around the menorah, family circled.
They sing
Lilting voices, soft Hebrew. My friend
Sarah, twelve years old, stands
between her mother and brother,
lighting each candle,
One, two, three, four.

My mind drifts this family
back seventy years.
Shaved heads, brittle hearts,
Sarah’s mother breaks off
bits of her bread, pushes shards into
my friend’s mouth.
In the snow globe
snowflakes puncture,
cruel wind rips cries from millions’ chests,
thrusts them into another.
Their eyes focused,
on a crooked cross,
counting on and on and on.
Each skeleton there standing
One, two, three, four.

Today I am fifteen,
walking through India’s city
of Amritsar, with its golden temple.
Small square of Jallianwallah Bagh,
a place with no space for humanity.
My grandmother’s voice, her stories
wash over me.
I walk, trace the bullet holes in the walls,
so many, I feel a deep shame
One, two, three, four.

That April day,
ninety years ago,
in Jallianwallah Bagh.
People pressed to all walls,
freedom talk, peaceful talk,
soar through the garden,
hope rising as India will rise.
Children smile as parents straighten,
listening to the brave.
Then the first shot, first bullet, a bomb,
saris fly, babies underfoot, brown limbs flee
away from the white men,
Queen’s men,
that are at every turn, every way out.
A red and yellow spot, hands reaching
through the rusty gate. I see her, my mother.
Cheeks I kissed goodbye this morning,
excited to witness revolution.
I’m running, spinning, bodies falling
one by one, a choreography
of death, I won’t look. Can’t look.
From the well behind me,
it won’t stop, the splashes desperate
One, two, three, four.

I have been born too late,
loved ones born too early
to know.
to really know it all.
But there is some left, that hatred,
Intolerance.
My school mocked for having
too many Jewish students.
Focused students, children who are
this country’s future like any other.
Hands reaching up and pulling down
A brown woman crowned,
representing her country
in accomplishment, in beauty
because she might terrorize
with her foreign skin.
Race, Religion, Gender, Class,
Sexual Orientation, Age, Disability.
One after another
Pulls us apart.
But there is one bond,
holding us together.
One link through all of us –
We are human.
In the short time that you are on this earth, you will encounter many people who describe life as a roller coaster, like a metallic box that just keeps ascending skyward. But they really don’t go into much detail because the breaks have been most likely sawed off, the speedometer has most definitely been broken, and the track is so long that you don’t know where you will be next. The generic flames on the side are so worn that you can almost see the deadly crack in the metal screaming to break. You frantically hold on to the slimy plastic bar in front of you for dear life as the raindrops of subjects hit you over and over again. Maybe it’ll finally slow down into the swirling caterpillar ride that you rode as a kid, or maybe the track ends and all you can see is the corroded bars slowly falling with you into an abyss of nothingness.

What the ‘experts’ don’t say is that life is unexpected, it is not a joyride or roller coaster. It’s a sharp turn into the unknown. Sometimes it may be a rose in a garden of thorns, or a terrible dark secret that twirls around in your veins and injects itself into your heart. My feeling, or point of view, on life has changed. I have come to learn that at any second you could die, any second you could start living your life, any second you could look up and slam your bedroom door. You could build yourself a giant wall, with perfectly placed bricks and you would sit back against it. But when you thought you would feel happy for shielding yourself from the world you feel empty as if something was taken from you. And something was, something that was so important to you that you didn’t realize it had slivered away, your childhood.

The one little thing that could take you away from reality and out into your beautiful imagination. It blocked you from thinking about any of the little obscurities in life. It made you always see the best in people even if they had hurt you. But once you grow up you have to lose that quality because one day you’ll find yourself alone and realize that all of those people that you have so desperately relied on are gone. They’ll be uttering unspeakable things under their breath when their boss yells at them again, they’ll be eating ramen noodles while trying to figure out which college application to send, and you’ll be sitting there just barely making it wondering what Samantha is doing next Tuesday.

At the end of the day maturity is everything. It is the key to adulthood: a short spiny skeleton key that you are too afraid to use. Once you had escaped your childish ways you are stuck. Stuck between future and past, Barbies and high heels, you are treated like a child but you’re expected to act like an adult. You don’t want to dabble too long with your growing insecurities. You want to use the key but you are too short, too preoccupied with what Jennifer is doing tomorrow you can’t find the tall wooden door that will hopefully release you from this awful place. As you climb the mountain further and further trying to find your way out, you fall. You slip into an unknown place and while you are picking up your broken pieces you find joy in finding the other lost souls.

You find joy in life sometimes. You come to find yourself smiling for no apparent reason, but the best part is that you are happy. You are not only happy with yourself but with your appearance, the sound of your voice when it’s recorded, or maybe even colorful fluffiness of your name rolling off of someone’s tongue.

And so you begin climbing again.

Yes you forgot a little of yourself down there but you picked up all of the good stuff. You rub the skeleton key in your hand nervously hoping for a hopeful future, but then there’s an avalanche, and your topsy-turvy world spins around again. You close your eyes remembering the old washing machine that you had accidentally stuck your most valuable tea set in when you were nine, you remember the softness of your first cat Pink, the curiousness of your fish York, and then you stop. The memories spill out like a tipped tea onto the snow. They seep in, melting it. You feel happy once again realizing that every stress, or every anxiety attack wasn’t worth it. That every tear didn’t have to be shed, because you were the only one that could break your own wall.

You look up and shield your eyes because you haven’t seen the real sun in years. The key drops from your hands when you begin to grasp the idea that it was a hoax. It was something that everyone wanted you to believe because they couldn’t find their way out of their little boxes either. Society turned your words upside down and you had to keep turning them back right-side up to read your true story.
This may not be a true memory but this is what the world feels like to a teenager. This is what the world feels like to me. I am not depressed or sad but I am willingly trying to break down my own wall. A wall that most teenagers don’t realize exists. A wall that separates me from knowing what I really want to be as a person or who I want to be.

Because when you are a teenager, you are neither an adult or child, a Barbie nor a pair of high heels.
Sierra Charlson  
**Short Story: What First?**  
Platte City Middle School  
Devin Springer, Teacher

There is an appropriate amount of knowledge in a school textbook and sometimes that knowledge is **not** what's on the worksheet. That is what I am facing now. I am facing a rough subject that I just can't understand. Something that I just can't quite comprehend. I am writing on a blank piece of paper with a broken pencil, a deepening sense of sadness boring into my epiphany.

"Lia, wake up," my dad's clammy hands were wrapped around my shoulder. "Come on. Get up you are going to be late." He stared at me until my whole upper body was lifted off the bed gently waiting for a response making sure I had not turned into a zombie overnight.

"There? You happy?" my voice croaked a little.

"Yeah, just make sure you make it to the bus on time," he pointed a finger at me. "No more absences you got that?"

**You disappoint him.**

I sighed figuring that the secretary had probably ratted me out. "K-okay," I quickly adjusted my speech. I really shouldn't tempt him to ground me today. He meandered out of my room softly clicking my door shut.

"Dang it!" I whispered softly. She might as well have taken the knife that will soon stab me in the back when he learns how many days I have missed.

Twenty-eight.

I accumulated all of my confidence and walked to my depressing closet. My closet has been empty for years now, with nothing but a few coats and two plaid school uniforms to its name. I pulled out a long dark violet jacket that I was told made me look like an old terry cloth burrito and moved towards my dresser. My finger wrapped around its swollen metallic knob sending a rapid fire of lightning bolts up through my spine.

"Freaking ow!" My prosthetic leg quivered, almost tilting me off balance. I grabbed the edge off the dresser which began teetering forward. "Oh. My. God. Stop!" I sat down on my bed again. This has happened for the past months now ever since I lost my leg in The Becoming. Some idiot in The Rebels thought it would be great idea to challenge the Governor’s Officials in Harvested City creating an all-out war with the protesters. The sickening war spread like a disease and maneuvered its way over to Kingston, my home town, and of course like the bacteria we are, we fought and fought until almost everyone needed a prosthetic limb. "Idiots."

You're the idiot.

I reached under my bed and brushed off my torn brown boots. There was a small tear in the side of them where I used to store my gum, until I got caught. The gum had spilled out of the sides of my boot like little trickling aluminum foil tears down my school's hallway. My classmates rejoiced while my teachers stared in fear that it had been poisoned or infectious. Miss Angston, the school’s principal, followed the trail of bubble-popping students to me, the shy, underdressed girl from Rhode Island with torn stockings and a wicked smile.

That’s when it all began. People began to notice my differentness, I guess, and they liked it. My teenage years had suddenly flipped upwards awarding me with the one thing I had wanted for a long time, a ticket to The Rebels.

So far all it has only really gotten me was a few bruises and a prosthetic leg but the adrenaline rushes are great. I live for those. How many of you can say that you've jumped off a building, disobeyed your parents and got that second piercing, or even jumped into a moving car, thinking you wouldn’t break its-

**Knock, knock, knock. “Lia?”**

I jumped off my bed and ran to my closet. "One sec Luke!" The hinges on the doors screamed as I ripped open its guts. Purple plaid skirt with bow umm, crimson socks and red plaid dress? Which uniform was assigned on Tuesday's again?

"I'm coming in!" I heard a slight clang as my front banged open. "Honey I'm home!" Luke's voice twisted throughout the house.

**Why did I give him a key?**

"Hey, purple or red today? I forgot." I stretched my vocal chords so that he could hopefully hear me.

"Why, the Lia Delen is going to school this fine morning?" I could hear his smirk from upstairs.
“Miss Reel ratted me out again,” I pulled on my white v-neck not caring if I stood out. “Why do you think she did it? Was our bribe too low?” I grabbed my brush from table and began untangling my unruly hair. 

Luke scoffed, “Too low? We paid her twenty-eight batteries that’s more than enough!” I heard his feet clomping up the steps.

Twenty-eight.

I quickly ran to my dresser and put on my paper airplane necklace, it’s kind of a tradition with him. knock, knock, knock, “Hey! Don’t come in yet!” I pulled on the plaid uniform skirt over my hips. ‘Briarwood’s School Academy; The School of the Future’ read the tag, for some reason Briarwood was obsessed with what goes on your derriere but not with what goes on your chest.

“Lia!” I turned around just as Luke thrust open my door his hair flopping back and forth. He maneuvered his way around my bed and grabbed my necklace. “I think you are a hopeless romantic Lia,” he patted me on the head as he towered over me making sure to mess up my hair.


His eyes widened as he took a massive step back, banging his head on my closet door. “No, hey you didn’t give me any ammo! This isn’t a fair fight!” His pleading made me laugh. “Life isn’t a fair fight Luke,” I swung the pillow towards him, hitting his forearm. He laughed and tried to grab it out of my hands. I released my grip on the thing and began to run out my bedroom, but Luke caught my right elbow. He spun me around and I shielded my face with my hands. Trying to hide from the hazel-eyed brunette army, it took me a few minutes to realize that my defenses weren’t being attacked. I peeked out of the side of my right pinkie. “Luke…?”

He smiled a warm, heart melting smile and I removed my hands away from my face. “Gotcha,” Luke grabbed my upper waist and started tickling my side. I squirmed to get out of his reach but his hand melted into me like warm wax.


Thud.


“I’m fine, thanks,” I reached up and grabbed his hand avoiding any eye contact.

You thought you could be normal.

You’re an idiot Lia.

I grabbed my backpack that I had thrown in the back of my room. “C’mom we should started going,” he eyed me questioningly as I pulled on my brown boots. “Luke let’s go.” School is literally the last place I want to go. I don’t want to walk in the forbidden hallways and be poisoned with the judgment of the Governor. I don’t want to be stared at by everyone, judged by everyone, but it was the only way I could feel normal anymore.

“You can never be normal Lia.”

“Hey you sure that you’re okay?” Luke grabbed my forearm making sure that I couldn’t bolt out the door. “Ever since you joined them, you haven’t really been the same.”

I ironed on a fake smile, “Listen you don’t need to take care of me anymore.” My knee throbbed as I walked out of my bedroom door. Luke followed me down the drooping hallway. “The Rebels is the best thing that has ever happened to me okay? I’m willing to take one for the team,” I patted my fake leg and began my descent down the steep steps. My joint twisted towards the right just as I grabbed the steel railing next to me. Clumsy, idiot.

Luke ambled down a couple stairs and stopped in front of me. “C’mon, on my back let’s go,” his hands were behind him awkwardly waiting for me to jump. I fastened my grip on the railing and lifted my left leg to his hand. He pulled my fake leg up and I wrapped them around his waist.

You’re helpless Lia.

I tapped his shoulder, “You know you really don’t have to do this.” He jumped over two steps and landed gracefully on the floor. “Besides I probably weigh a ton and…,” my voice trailed off as he grabbed his silver backpack from the sofa and started advancing towards the door.
Luke sighed loudly, “You are so overdramatic Lia.” He twisted his hand on the doorknob and slowly opened my front door. “You see any guards?”

I peeped my head out and surveyed the area. Miss Meekins, my old neighbor, was shoving boxes upon boxes into her car. Mr. T, my cool neighbor, waved at me from the bench where he was reading his newspaper which meant coast was clear. Male and female under the age of 18 are not allowed in each other’s homes without parental supervision; rule #23. The Governor’s rules are so vague. I mean Luke’s 18 and I am 17 so close enough right?

“All is clear in the tiny town of Kingston. The two rebels may proceed in being rebellious for today!” I jumped off his back making sure that I wouldn’t lose balance again. I ran out into my front yard were the perfectly cut grass and stretching tulips stared at me. Mr. T’s dog, Misty, barked at me from behind her porcelain throne.

“What are you doing?” Luke laughed as a smile tugged at his lips. He slammed the door behind him and ran out to tackle me.

I side-stepped him and ran towards the Blue Bus that was oddly painted green. The exhaust fumes swirled with the cold morning air creating a deadly mixture. I reached into my backpack and pulled out my wallet. I grabbed a two dollar bill and knocked on the bus door. Luke slid up next to me out of breath. The doors opened with a large cracking noise sending shivers down my spine. “Hi, Lia Delen and Luke Ryder,” I gave her my best-I’m a great person who gets straight A’s and never associates with anyone against the governor-smile I could manage.

“Wrists please,” I stretched out my arm to her as she grabbed her scanner. Rule #3 any person without a barcode engraved into their arm is definitely a traitor. Rule #4 anyone under the age of 21 must be scanned wherever they go, so that they may be located easily. The lady’s arm wiggled back in forth as if it were dancing to the classical elevator music that illuminated the bus. “K, Briarwood?” She pointed to my bag where Briarwood’s logo stood proud no matter how many time I had tried to kill it with bleach.

Dear lord, let that school burn.

“Yep,” Luke and I answered in the same monotone voice. I zipped up my bag and wobbled to the nearest seat.

“Ugh,” I heaved my leg to the side of my seat keeping my balance. I sat down slowly and Luke followed shortly after. I rested my head on his shoulder, “This is going to be a long ride.”

“Right?” Luke closed his eyes and leaned his head back. “Night Lia.”


“Lia! Do you see this?” I woke up to Luke pointing out the foggy window. “The news is here,” my eyes began to adjust to the harsh fluorescent lighting. A giant crowd of people rioted outside of our school in the distance. “It’s people from our school,” he leaned closer to me and whispered, “It’s the Rebels, Lia.”

As we approached Briarwood a white limo turned into the schools parking lot. “Is that the-?” I stopped trying not to jinx the situation.

“I really shouldn’t have come to school today.”

As I observed the crowd I realized how many were actually everyday students. Max the straight A wizz-kid held up a sign reading: ‘Rule #14, rioting is not prohibited unless outside of the city limits’. Julia held up the second sign: ‘Rule #66, The Governor is not allowed to approve rules, unless approved by the council men first.’ The crowd moved backward when the gleaming car parked in the front entrance, showing that they did not want to fight. A tall white-haired man stepped out of the car. A man that I had only seen on billboards looking strong and sophisticated now looked weak and scrawny.

“Woah what happened to him?” A guard who had held the door open for him quickly made his way over to the crowd. The man’s black armor moved solemnly revealing his gun a few times. “He’s trying to intimidate the rioters.” The bus jerked back sending me against the cushiony seat. I grabbed my bag and tugged on Luke’s sleeve, “C’mon let’s go see what’s going on.” I shuffled to the flabby driver and held out my wrist. ‘Lia Delen checked out of the Blue bus at 7:09am, November 7th’. I hopped down the peeling steps and waited for Luke. ‘Luke Ryder checked out of the Blue bus at 7:10am, November 7th’. I averted my eyes towards the Governor who wore a black tux and a pink tie.

“Why is he here?” Luke’s face scrunched up his face for a moment. “Lia,” he whispered.
“What?”
“He’s looking at you!” I turned my head to him and just like Luke had said, he was staring at me. He motioned to one of his guards and pointed at me. “You should run,” Luke suggested.
“No. I want to see where this is going,” I waved to the guard seeing if Luke and I were right with our suspicions.
He waved back.
“Did he just wave at you?” Luke didn’t bother hiding his timidity.
The guard strutted over to me slowly seeing if I had any weapons. “Lia Delen?” his voice was low and muffled.
“Yes?” Why me? Does he know about the Rebels? Did he-
“I’m going to need you to come with me,” I stopped thinking and looked around trying to find the news crew again. The News lady, Amy Mishell, talking loudly into a microphone.
What is she saying?
I looked at Luke and gave him a small smile. Hopefully fending him off so he wouldn’t punch the dude. I walked forward showing that I was ready to follow him. He stepped in front of me and made his way back to the governor. “Lia!” the governor gave me a bear hug, probably for the news crew. “Let’s go inside shall we?” his breath reeked of eggs and bacon.
“Sounds great!” I lied. I looked for the news team again trying to hear what they were saying. The muffled shouts of the riot kept me from hearing most of it but I did hear the only thing I needed to, “New governor.”
The guard held open the school’s glass door giving me a warm smile, “Thank you.” The man nodded and let go of the door standing outside to secure the area. We walked down the abandoned halls where the posters drooped and the detention chairs were neatly stacked.
“Umm, if you don’t mind me asking, where are we going exactly?” I couldn’t keep my curiosity from peeping out.
“Why we are going to the library dear,” he held out his hand showing me the way. I stared at the open Library doors two chairs were set out facing each other. A guards nodded towards the Governor giving him the all clear. “Now Lia we have been watching you for some time now,” He sat down motioning me to sit across from him. “And I have got to say you have outstanding academics in school.” I muffled a sigh. I don’t want anyone to know that.
“Thank you very much sir.”
“This civilization,” he spits while he talks, “needs someone else to look up too. A more pleasing image than myself.” He tapped his head suggesting that his greys represented that he was too old. “Now Lia I’m going to ask you a very big question.”
I know where this is going.
“Sir! We have a security breach in Sector C! You need to get out of here.” The guard yelled. “We think it’s them.”
The rebels...
“Lia, will you do me the honors and be the next Governor?” His voice pushed the words out too fast. “I’ll take that as a yes!” the man hugged me again his grey hair poking my eyes.
“Oh,” I wanted to scream at him tell him no but I couldn’t I was wordless. A loud bang echoed near my ear.
Four guards had showed up waiting to have a bloodbath.
One fell, three to go.
Bang!
Two fell, two to go.
Bang! Bang!
The governor fell. Lia to go.
“Stop!” I yelled. “Please I am one of you!” I closed my eyes waiting something, anything.
“Lia!” Luke yelled. I opened my eyes, “Hello Miss Lia Delen, the new 2048’s Governor. “So, what rule first?”
I have three moms.

It wasn’t your typical wedding. Instead of a floral dress, the rustling of my bedazzled jeans drowned out the piano as I scampered down the aisle. Once I joined my brother in the front pew, my procession concluded and the real one began. My mother entered, but it wasn’t my dad by her side. It was Carla.

Carla was always “my mom’s friend.” That label usually sufficed. However, I knew quite differently, but the world around me wasn’t ready to embrace their lesbian relationship.

Several years before the wedding, we moved into Carla’s house, unexplained and unquestioned. I remember the first time I saw them kiss within those creaky walls. The sound echoed. It was simple, yet felt like a secret I wasn’t supposed to know. My mom never exactly explained it.

Since my parents’ divorce, Jordan and I hadn’t kept track of our father’s dating life. That is, until Cheryl came along. When she tiptoed through the yellow grass by his side, it was not her curvaceous body or wide smile which stood out most, but her chocolate skin. For some reason, this widened my own smile. Though my middle school exuded diversity, interracial couples were a rare sight to my nine year-old eyes. She sealed our friendship with a handshake and a simple question: “So, I hear you’re a chocoholic too?”

As a child, I took everything personally. So, when the sixth grade boys began interchanging the word “gay” for “bad,” I was left speechless. When I consulted my mom about their commentary, her explanation left me without any real answers.

“But why would they think something like that?”

“I don’t know, baby doll. I don’t know,” she responded, shaking her head.

Despite how much I wanted to fight back, my puny, “you shouldn’t say that” comments only went so far. However, the more I argued, the more I realized my mom never did. She and Carla never protested. They never seemed to care about the prevalent gay marriage rejection surrounding them in good old conservative Missouri.

However, when I entered my Catholic high school, the internal battle continued with each mention of the church’s rejection. During my Catholic social justice class, sophomore year, I finally snapped. The topic arose and so did my hand. Out spilled every bullet point I unconsciously compiled over the years for my pro-gay marriage argument. My views were obvious, and I didn’t care. What I did care about was acceptance. Even then, I didn’t know I was fighting for it. Only later did I realize, all the arguing was for my mom. I fought because she wasn’t different from other parents at my volleyball games, not even when Carla watched beside her. I fought because “different” doesn’t mean better or worse. I fought because not even my mother, the strongest person I know, could be honest with her conservative Egyptian father. He died without knowing her true sexuality. That was difficult enough, so I fought for her.

After years of debating, I know now acceptance isn’t gained like respect. For the most part, you receive it, or you don’t. However, the issue isn’t outside approval. Fortunately, I have not only experienced, but lived with the type of acceptance that truly matters.

When my graduation arrives and I scan the sea of proud parents, three women will rise for me, as I have for them. Diploma in hand, I will smile back knowing each awarded me more than a piece of paper ever could.
Gabriella Thompson arrives at school every day with a little more than just books weighing her down. Behind her smile, plastered on her face each day, lies a tattered, grieving soul. A soul which has never died, yet has already been through hell three times. A soul which has experienced more than her share of cruel, undeserved hardships. A young soul that is only sixteen years old.

Only Thompson knows the burdened journey and the tough turns it has taken. She wasn’t just born to it. She lived it.

Of course, people don’t know of this journey, the nagging weight. They can’t see it. What they can’t see, is the six year old girl, who helplessly watched her mother die, before her very eyes.

They can’t see the guilt she continuously carries over not pushing three simple numbers. If she had, she might still have a mom.

What they can’t see, is the small child molested and abused to an extent in which it became normal. They can’t see the great mistrust she developed that formed the thick wall that she continues to hide behind.

What they can’t see are the scars left from the deaths of the two women she finally learned to trust. How both of Thompson’s guardian angels drifted from her side within four months. They just can’t see the loneliness that led to a diagnosis of severe depression.

And they can’t see what built up to it.

Although Thompson is growing reasons to smile naturally instead of painfully turning the corners of her lips up each day, the past is still very active in her life.

On the inside she knows she’s still not okay.

This is why, when she is finished unloading her books into her locker each day, Thompson continues to feel the same weight dragging her down. She’s still not okay.
A swipe of gold eye shadow, three coats of mascara, a slather of red lipstick. People don't just use it to cover a blemish or brighten their eyes anymore. People, maybe, but the media? No way. What used to be a natural beauty enhancer has altered into a beauty transformation tool. However, makeup isn't all the media uses to create those beautifully supernatural ads with the glowing, gorgeous women we envy. Photoshop plays a key role in the new standard of beauty the media convinces us is “correct.” Now, not only are models caked with makeup, covering and shaping their natural beauty into countenances that aren't their own, but they're further altered with a few clicks of the mouse. The pictures in magazines, the photo shoots for ads, of course are beautiful, but they're unrealistic. The face, the body of those models isn't even their own after the grueling process of makeup and retouches. They've been colored, resized and shifted into what the media believes to be beautiful. They're made to be perfect. How does an average girl feel beautiful when supermodels, paid to look a certain way, aren't even cutting it? Women across the world suffer from this nonsensical standard. Females struggle to feel good about their natural beauty because what they see in the mirror isn't what they see on the TV. The thing they don't realize is, they don't need to look that way to be beautiful.

What do these standards, ads, and stereotyping of beauty have to do with me? The real question is, what doesn't it? The media's influence, no matter how much we believe or realize it, affects everyone. Although we all see the same glorified ads, we take them in differently. For me, I believed them. The commercials displayed that beauty had to be a certain way, and I didn't exactly look like that. I didn't have colorful eyes, high cheekbones, and a narrow face. I wasn't thin and tall either. Did that mean I wasn't beautiful? I thought so. I wanted to be beautiful though, so I turned to makeup. I've always loved makeup. It's safe to say I'm as addicted to makeup as chocolate, but it was more than enhancing natural beauty. I depended on my eyeliner and blush. I became so accustomed to what I looked like with makeup, that I forgot what my truly bare face looked like. I wouldn't leave the house without at least a dash of mascara. I couldn't be seen in public without makeup, since I “wasn't pretty without it.” That's what I thought. I was convinced. Then I heard about Rebel, a program intended to uplift females confidence in their natural beauty and decline the media's unrealistic standards. I completely believed in their message, but I was a hypocrite because I didn't live it. My sophomore year, the first year Rebel came to my school, I didn't join. I had too much going on and I ultimately didn't believe I was strong enough to carry out their mission. Throughout the year, Rebel's school wide and small activities touched me, persuading me I was beautiful without makeup. When the application process (for Rebel) came around at the end of sophomore year, I knew I had to be a part of it. To my luck, I was admitted into the organization. Slowly but surely, over the summer and throughout my junior year as a new member of Rebel, I have learned to love my own beauty for what I have, instead of what I don't. When I look at myself in the mirror, I don't compare myself to the celebrities on the red carpet or the models on TV. When I put on makeup, I do it for myself because it's something I enjoy, not because I think I need it.

My state a few months ago, is a highly common mindset among women, especially teenage girls.

Although each person may have a different force driving this insecurity (a pageant queen mother, an abusive boyfriend, etc.), the media has an overwhelming effect. After all, the media is everywhere in our lives: the internet, the TV, phones, iPads, etc. Not only does the media show us what beauty should be, but it shows us what it's not. When was the last time you saw a beauty commercial with a woman over 30 (not playing a mother role)? What was the last fashion ad you saw with a girl over a size 3? The media attempts to target all ages and sizes with utilizing only one type of beauty. This one type becomes known as "the type." Slender, radiant skin, full lips, cleavage, that's "the type." Through the constant and consistent portrayal of beautiful women with only this look, "the type" has become the media's and the world's modern standard for what beauty looks like. Modeling agencies, casting directors, almost all professionals of the industry seem to be targeting and searching for girls of the “it” stature. Searching, not discovering because females with the “it” repertoire are rare to find. Even when such women are unveiled, they are masked in makeup and altered as the designer, photographer, or company wishes. The bottom line is that the size and stature the media displays as
beautiful is highly unrealistic. The large majority of women across the world don’t look that way, aren’t built so small, and are thought of as ugly because they don’t quite meet these marks. Jennifer Lawrence demonstrates “fat” according to Hollywood. Lawrence is about 130 pounds, 5’10”, and a size 6, small for even an average American (1). With such an enormous, belittling impact, it’s understandable why countless women across the world look down upon themselves, glaring down to where their confidence lies. At our latest Rebel meeting, we watched an Ellen interview with a model. Viewing beautiful pictures and runway footage of her, the woman revealed she was a plus model. All of the members looked around with questioning faces, as she was easily smaller than average size. At only a size 12, yet extremely tall nonetheless, the model revealed that she loved her body and accepted a long time ago she couldn’t be accepted in the fashion industry as skinny. It didn’t matter to her that she wasn’t considered as skinny as the Victoria’s Secret Angels because she loved her body and herself for what she was born with and encouraged others to feel the same. Her self-confidence was refreshing for any woman, especially one I such a difficult industry. She demonstrated the type of positive attitude about ourselves and our body that we should all strive for.

Who are these gleaming goddesses plastered on our computer screens and walking down runways on our TV? They’re models of course, but even they might not recognize themselves once their work airs. It’s no secret that companies are gravitating towards Photoshop, altering their ads even after hours of hair and makeup prior to the shoot, but no one is quite sure how much. Sources vary, throwing out different percentages of total ads Photoshopped. While many articles claim that 100 percent of advertisements have been retouched to some extent, no number can be for certain, but any percent is too much (2). Retouching a picture after hours of makeup and hair styling to get a skinnier or overly airbrushed model seems unnecessary when so much has already been done to enhance one’s natural beauty. According to a Medical News Today article, over 40 percent of models have some type of eating disorder (3). They’re starving and purging themselves to keep their tiny frame, yet taken into Photoshop to slim down none the less. It’s not only the typical American girl feeling the media’s pressure, but the industry’s hefty competition leads four out of every ten models to starve themselves to stay skinny or get skinnier. This just shows that even the models who we glorify as perfect have their own insecurities, everyone does, but we shouldn’t let them define who we are or what we look like. Instead we should embrace what we have and find what’s unique in what we don’t like. Overall, the standard of the media demonstrates that we should have high standards for ourselves. However, how can we achieve a type of beauty that is non-existent? How can teenage girls, middle aged women, and grandma’s reach society’s goals for them when there is no ladder high enough to get them there. There is no path to reach the “it type” simply because it’s artificial. After all, there’s no such thing as perfect.

The constant clamoring of flat stomachs over curves drives many women to an edge. Not only do countless females worldwide have poor body image and low self-confidence due to the unreachable standard of society, but many are developing negativities other than low self-confidence. A study from the National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated disorders reported that up to 3.7 percent of women are anorexic, while up to 4.2 are bulimic (4). The fact is that women compare themselves, they always have and always will. However, the effects are becoming treacherous towards female health both mentally and physically. With standards so high they’re in the fantasy of the clouds, women struggle to find an inner peace with what they have, seeing only what they lack. The task to reverse this cycle is immense considering how widespread and rapidly growing the issue is. After all, it touches every corner of the globe and almost every female, considering each and every person has insecurities about themselves. However, like Mrs. Hamilton’s Giving back the Basics program, it’s the little things that matter. There’s no need for huge budgets for billboards to advertise the issue, that’s not giving women what they need to beat the standard (by appreciating and loving the beauty they do have, without comparison to models), instead it’s the smallest reminders and confidence boosts like a brush or razor can be to the shelters. Rebel works towards boosting women’s self confidence in their true beauty and informing females that the media’s standard isn’t the only type of beauty and you don’t need to look that way to be beautiful. Everyone is beautiful just like everyone is different. However, the Rebel program is only so big, reaching so few in the larger scheme of things. Although it is expanding year to year, it’s truly up to you as women individually to spread the message, to rebel against the modern standards of beauty. It starts with yourself after all. Instead of looking into the mirror and pointing out your flaws, look at what you like about yourself. A few months ago, we were assigned to pick a spiritual practice from a long list of choices. The one I picked required me to smile at myself in a mirror until I reached a sense of inner peace. This practice can be duplicated in full at times when your confidence is low. As awkward
as it may sound, it may be helpful to look at your reflection and pick out what you love about yourself, setting aside what you dislike. Not only will this uplift your spirits, but make you aware of when you put yourself down. When you notice when you’re about to say something negative, you’re more likely to stop it or correct yourself. If you stay conscious of preventing self-put downs, you will notice it not only with yourself, but when others do it too. If you get in a habit of positive self-image, you will begin to spread it to your friends unconsciously. You may stop their “fat talk” or other self put downs, while advocating for their beauty even when they don’t know it themselves. If you take the initiative and make a strong, conscious effort to appreciate your own self beauty, the cycle will spread. It will expand throughout your school and onto other schools. It starts with you and me. I promise to practice positive self-confidence and self-body image if you do. Together we can spread the movement through schools and on, limiting fat talk and self-put downs.

Everyone is a victim of the media’s standards, but you don’t have to let yourself be victimized. Stand up to society’s standards by knowing and believing in your own beauty, and spread your confidence to others. It’s a difficult task to ask considering fat talk and self-put downs slip out consistently and unconsciously, but if you become aware of what you say, you will work towards reversing the cycle. You don’t need the eyeliner, mascara, or lipstick, and you certainly don’t need Photoshop to be beautiful. The girl on the front of the magazine isn’t the only one who’s beautiful, and just because your lips aren’t as full or legs as tall, doesn’t mean yours are wrong or take away from your own beauty. Don’t be the version of me from five months ago, and I promise I won’t be either.
“Go! Get out of here!” yelled my dad as meteorites hit the ground. The ground shook as I grabbed my little brothers hand and ran. I kept looking over my shoulder to see if dad was coming. A meteorite hit the ground behind us. The gust of wind from it knocked us off of our feet. I heard a scream and I knew it was my dad.

“Dad!” I called out. No answer came. Tears fell down my cheeks as I picked up my little brother and ran. He was crying into my shoulder. We had lost both of our parents now. I ran into a cave in the volcano hoping the cave will keep us safe. The volcano shook as meteorites hit it. I went to the very back of the cave and fell to the ground. I hugged my brother and we both cried.

We must have fallen asleep because I woke up and all was quiet. I woke up my brother up. We slowly walked out of the cave. Everything was destroyed. Giant holes covered the land. Rocks fell down from the volcano. We moved out of their way. We started walking hopping to see survivors. Suddenly a crack split open under her brother with lava at the bottom. I tried to grab my brother but missed his arm.

“No!” I yelled and was about to jump into the crack when I felt an arm wrap around my waist and pull me away from the edge.

“If you jump in you will die too” says a voice behind me. It sounded like a guy’s voice.

I turn around to see a guy my age. He has long dark brown that almost looked black hair pulled into a ponytail. I shove him away from me. “I don’t care if I die! All my family is dead anyways!” I yell.

“But for all we know we are the last people alive. We need a boy and a girl to repopulate” he says.

I felt my cheeks grow hot. “R-repopulate?” I stuttered.

“Yes repopulate” he says.

I punch him hard in the gut knocking him backwards. I turn and walk away from him.

Behind me I hear him following me. “What’s wrong? Did I say something I shouldn’t have?” he asked catching up to me and walking next to me.

“Don’t you dare say anything about repopulating again or I’ll kill you” I say sternly.

“Okay. I’m Thomas by the way. What’s your name?” he asked.

“Cheyenne” I say.

“Nice to meet you Cheyenne” he says holding out his hand for a handshake.

I look at his hand then back in front of me. “Nice to meet you, I guess” I mumbled and he slowly lowered his hand.

“Aaaawkwaard” he whispers. I look over at him. Now that I’m not as mad I notice he is actually kinda hot.

We keep walking not knowing exactly where to go. We saw pieces of destroyed houses and a few limbs here and there. Most of the meteorites were destroyed when they hit the ground but a few small ones were left every now and then. No one but us were alive and meteorites had destroyed everything. We had nowhere to go and no reason to live. It starts pouring and we go into a cave. The temperature drops below zero and the rain turns into a blizzard. We were both shivering and we kept close to each other to try and keep warm. Thomas hugged me to him my head resting on his chest. I knew we were going to die and earth will become a wasteland with nothing living on it. I grew tired and my eyes slowly closed. I remembered my family. I lost feeling in my body and slowly. I felt like I was being pulled into darkness as I drifted into an endless sleep.
Rachel Colligan  
Poetry: Perishable  
Park Hill South High School  
Idean Bindel, Teacher  

Perhaps  
Synapses crossed quickly  
and there appears a thought  
a word  
an idea  
perhaps even  
a sentence?  
But sentences are spoken  

And only the spoken  
can be heard  

So  
Sow the seed, see it grow.  
They say  
the plant holds more value  
that the seed is  
only an usher  
to tenfold greatness  
I hold my seeds so close  
they never leave my arms  
never come alive  

No exception  
As all things are,  
words, ideas  
are fallible because  
shelf life is limited:  
when hoarded they stagnate  
Becoming  
not only stagnant but  
irrelevant  
and that is worse because  
the seed  
ever  
even  
hits  
soil  

The exception  
Yes.  
this word  
these words  
and all words  
are perishable.  
except a word refrigerator  
has yet to be invented
so spend words
while they are still good

Spit them out
watch them bloom
Jorgia Cory
Poetry: Imagine a Room
Polo High School
Eric Williams, Teacher

That room is the bedroom of a teenage girl.
She’s lounged across her bed
Clutching an iPod as she is typing.
Her thoughts, her feelings,
Her soul, pouring into words across the small screen.

The world spins around her
Everything is changing
From the things she likes
To the people she loves
And she’s lost

She’s sick in a spinning world of people and pollution
She can’t stand under the pressure
The only thing she can cling to
Is the broken screen of her iPod
As she writes.
She writes about things that she thinks of
The things she sees
What she wishes she had

She writes about freedom
From judgment,
Embarrassment,
From the weight of her future

She’s being pushed,
Kicked,
Pulled from her childhood
And thrown into high school
Tossed into responsibility she isn’t ready for
Yanked into feelings she never planned on having

She’s thrown into a familiar world
Full of foreign feelings
And expected to understand

Expected to understand the hypotenuse of a right triangle
Because she’s going to need that to be a psychologist.

Expected to act like a lady,
To be polite

Expected to bloom where she’s planted
When she’s planted in beach sand

She’s expected to want a future
One that’s uncomfortably close
But miles away

She’s expected to want what adults call a “life,”
When all she sees are moping zombies

She’s expected to want something
That’s in the lost dreams of children
Among the unicorns and flying pigs

She’s expected to want tomorrow
To act like she knows what she’s doing

She’s expected to support the weight of responsibility on her shoulders
When she can barely handle eating right and homework

She’s clutching the one thing that doesn’t expect anything from her.
She’s clinging to the broken screen of her past and present.

She’s clinging to the one thing that’s stable.
The one thing that is always there for her
When the whole world is spinning her into the black hole of a future

She’s clinging to her soul,
Like its breath,
Because she doesn’t know when she’s going to take her last.
Beep! Beep! Beep! I hit the button to my alarm clock and squint at it to see the time. I sit up and thinks of reasons to not go to school, back to the source of my depression. But all I manage to produce is salty tears running down my cheeks. But I have no choice. All I can do is endure the countless teases and taunts being shot right at me. Like I am the target that the archer shoots his arrows at. But all I can hope is that those shots miss me, somehow I have got to prove that they shouldn’t mess with me. But who would listen to my countless attempts to stop them?

I throw my comforter off my bed and start the almost robotic process of getting ready. I would stand in the shower and let the water beat down on me, almost as if it was the chants of the bullies reigning down on me. I get out and dry myself with a towel and get dressed in my usual attire, a hoodie and jeans. I then look at myself in the mirror and wonder what I ever did to put a target on my back. But I can’t do anything to prevent it. I walk into my parents’ bathroom and then open the medicine cabinet, and grab a full bottle of prescription pills. I then hear the bus come to a roaring stop in front of my house and I open the door with a creak and step outside. My breath fogged in front of me. The frost on the grass reminds me of my life, frozen in time. I step on only to become what is the closest to a free for all. I walk directly to the back of the bus, not looking or paying attention to the words being thrown my way. I sat in the very back seat and put my head in the seat in front of me. All that I could do is let the salty tears run down my face, and down into my lap. I then looked up to see the red brick school, also known to my mind as a prison.

I walk outside from the bus to the school doors, and open them. I walk straight to my locker, and pull out my French folder and my math binder. It was December and I had been in school since August, so they were mangled and torn. Although I didn’t care, because why should I care about my grades if my teachers and supervisors fail to care enough to help me when all of the bullies hurt my feelings every single day. I walk outside to my French class, which just happened to be in a trailer, so I had to go outside into the cold weather. I open the doors to be greeted with a blast of frigid air, which made my eyes start to water. I then walk to my trailer, the faint crunching of fresh fallen snow at my feet, and met face to face with one of the bullies. He then push me into the snow and my folder and binder flew into the air, making it snow paper. They all flew to the ground, scattered everywhere, but I didn’t care.

I stood up, and ran back inside to my locker, and opened it. I rummage through my back pack to find medicine bottle and clenched it inside my fists. All I could think of at that moment was sheer hatred towards everyone and everything, so I ran to the bathroom. The pills shook up and down in the bottle as I ran, and it must have attracted the attention of a teacher. I step into the bathroom and into an empty stall. My hands tremble so terribly that I couldn’t open the bottle. The teacher burst in the bathroom and fought me for the pill bottle, until it burst and they all scatter on the floor. I lay on the cold tile crying hysterically, not believing what just happened. The teacher took me and brought me to the office. I sat in the office crying even more than before, and the salty tears started to burn my eyes. All I could do was lay there and be vulnerable.

Bullying may seem fully or harmless if you’re the one who shoots the arrows. But when you are the target, it hurts more than any other. Don’t become the murderer. Become the hero that blocks those bullets. So the next time that you witness or see bullying, put yourself in their shoes and imagine the pain they are enduring.
Eli Davidson
Poetry: Dearest Thought
Republic High School
Kathy Scales, Teacher

Oh thought, you lay untouched by all
with beauty seen by inward masses
yet you stand vexed, eyes wide
proclaiming invitation to airs residing

Oh thought as a rose before blossom
you live choked at the stem in which
vines laced with thorns ceaselessly
weave themselves around you

Each blossom good as withered,
for crimson petals unseen by those abiding
not smelt by those whom are deciding
whether to clip the rose from the bush providing

Oh thought, dear thought, why eyes so inquiring,
existing, only concealed to your conception,
for you long to be heard, felt, and further
find the occupant of you, thought

Oh thought, thirst that be unquenched
by ink that runs dry
hunger not fed by pen
too dull for its quarry

Yet you look down at the hand grasping your throat
down at the thorns around your stem,
only now to find that the vines
merely branch from your stalk

And the hand around your throat is your own.
She sat in her wicker chair, slowly rocking back and forth. The color was now faded, for years of use had worn it down. She was outside, on her porch, a chilled pitcher of lemonade sat by her side on her antique wooden side table. Condensation was dripping off her glass, creating a small ring on the table. It would easily be cleaned, but later. She didn’t want to miss being outside, not one moment, on such a glorious day.

Various birds of extravagant colors perched on the nearby branch of an oak tree. They sang sweetly—a perfect accompaniment to the beauty that was the day. Not a cloud was seen in the sky; the sun’s rays free to warm the earth. She stretched out her hand to catch one. The heat was pleasant, warmth spreading throughout.

Yet, she was cold.

She stood up, slowly. She was not as strong as she used to be. The years of smoking and arthritis were taking their toll. Now, smoking is known to be dangerous, that’s why she had stopped, but when she was young, it was cool, so she had done it. She shook her head, not really remembering why it was cool or how it made her feel. The memory was just as faded as her old wicker chair.

The boards creaked as she walked the weight of age finally settling in. The house was mainly open, the living room sharing space with the kitchen and the dining room. By the side of the couch was another table identical to her antique outside. They had been part of a set; a present given to her who knows how long ago...No memory could come to mind.

On the table sat one thing; a photograph.

She picked it up and smiled.

The acts of returning to her chair and sitting down were automatic; no thoughts were put into them. Her mind was elsewhere. Looking at the photograph brought back a flood of memories...

The arch, decorated with hundreds of white balloons, the pathway covered in a thick layer of rose petals.

It’s like she was there, reliving the magic all over again.

The ocean was heard in the background, the waves crashing onto the shore. The timing was perfect; the sun was setting in the horizon, the sky a multitude of colors. Seagulls flew by and their normally harsh cries were replaced by what could only be described as a song of love.

She carefully set the picture face down on her lap and closed her eyes. A single tear flowed down her cheek as she thought of everything that it meant to her and of everything that she had been through. It was this photograph that was kept by her husband’s bed ten years ago, as he battled cancer. These, and all the memories with it, were what kept him fighting for his life.

Her single tear was followed by another, and another, until there was a steady stream.

It was this photograph that kept her will to live after the battle was lost. She smiled as she remembered the joy of that moment...The laughter, the happiness that she felt from that kiss, the sound of the bells and the applause in the background. The end of that moment marked the beginning of her new life with the one that she loved.

The stream of sadness turned into a river of bliss; the longing in her heart was replaced by strength and warmth. It was this photograph that brought back all the memories that made life really worth living: her most wonderful and magical day, her true love; her happiness.

It was this photograph that she held as she slipped into a deep ocean of warmth. The sadness, the cold she had felt, had been washed away; the sorrowful song in her heart was replaced when the seagulls began to sing again.
I.

His foot taps impatiently. Since the start of the day, the sun has been slowly disappearing behind a large mass of clouds. Not the white ones one would be accustomed to; no, those don’t exist anymore. Whatever clouds are left are composed of sulfate, carbon dioxide and other pollutants. Needless to say, he did not want to be waiting outside in such grim conditions, especially for such little incentive. He peers around from behind the person in front of him to inspect the line and his gaze is met and returned with one of scorn by the man behind the counter. He quickly looks away, wanting to avoid any confrontation, and returns his focus to what little remainder of the sun is still visible.

“Next!”

He faintly hears through the thoughts swirling inside his head. This had been the first time in a while that he had actually contemplated about the world he lived in and how much he hated it. How much he hated the ignorance, the control, the indifference, the ---

“Next!”

He pushes his thoughts aside and returns to reality. It was his turn now, so he steps forward and holds his bag steady as a variety of items are poured into it.

“Nice to see you again, Mr. Daniels. How’s the wife?”

He ties a loose knot at the top of the bag before acknowledging the question.

“She’s doing all right, Bill.” He answers with only enough to provide for the idle chit-chat, nothing more.

“That’s good. I’ll see you next week, although the rations may not be as much next time.” He stops tying the knot and looks up at him, questioningly, as he continues.

“Yeah, the population has grown too much and the government just can’t keep up with the Choosing. Cutting down on distribution of resources until they get something figured out.”

He barely nods his head before walking away. As he does, he pulls out a list from his back pocket and quickly skims over its contents. With a small piece of lead, he sloppily crosses out the last thing on the list: collect rations. Sighing in relief, he tucks the note back into his pocket and continues on the journey. It’s a while until he gets back to his assigned house, and when he does, he opens the always unlocked door and slides into the small open space that contains the living room, dining room, and kitchen. Sitting at the table, he sees his wife, face in hands, crying silently. Dropping the bag of food, he runs over to her and takes her in his arms.

“Karen, what’s wrong? What’s happened?” His voice slowly rising in worry.

She simply hands him an envelope, not even returning his gaze. Taking it in shaking hands, he opens it slowly and takes out its contents.

“No, no, no, NO! This can’t be, there must be some mistake!” He drops the envelope and looks back at her. “Can you be sure?”

She nods her head, defeated.

“Please, say something! Anything!” He shouts, not being able to control his anger.

She looks up from her hands and merely shakes her head. “There’s nothing to say. It’s over.”

II.

“Welcome back, Mr. Daniels. Didn’t see you last week.” Bill pours more items into the currently empty bag, barely sparing a glance at him.

“No, I had some important business to attend to.”

“Business? What kind of business?” Again, not even a glance.

“My wife was Chosen, Bill.”

His eyes widen as he processes this information. “I’m so sorry. That’s quite unfortunate.”

“It is, isn’t it.” He takes his bag, tying the usual knot and proceeding to walk away.

“Don’t be so sad, Daniels. They’ll assign you another one in no time. You’ll forget about…”
“Karen.”
“That’s right. My bad. You’ll forget about Karen in no time. But until you do, I’m going to have to cut your rations down by half.”

He just nods and continues on his way. Two weeks. Two weeks had gone by since they Chose Karen. They had sent him the paperwork to have another wife assigned to him, but he didn’t fill it out. Instead, he had chosen an alternative form, one which he carried with him. As he passed a few small children on the streets, he handed them his bag.

“Mister, why are you giving this to us? It’s against the rules.”
“I don’t need it anymore. Just take it. I know they’re cutting down the food distribution and you children need to eat to grow big and strong.” He tussles the little boy’s hair and smiles at the girl before standing back up and walking. He hears them faintly laughing and running home, the mother’s voice calling out a thank you to him.

“One last difference to this world.” He mumbles quietly to himself.

Approaching the steps, he takes a deep breath before climbing them hurriedly and opening the doors.

“Do you have an appointment?”
“I do.” He hands her the forms the small opening in the glass window.

“One minute please.”

He takes a seat near the entrance, lightly humming a tune and tapping his knees. How long had it been since he had heard the sound of music? Too long. He was surprised he even remembered.

“Mr. Daniels?”

He looks up towards the motioning doctor, and stands up, stopping a moment and preparing himself.

“Yes.”

“Follow me please.”

The doctor leads him through a metal gray door and down a long, narrow hallway. Either side of the hallway was a pale gray color, no other doors or windows visible except the one at the end of the hall.

The doctor opens the door and leads him inside.

“I’ll be back. I need to get the supplies.”

She closes the door behind her and leaves him sitting in a plastic chair in the middle of the room, a small metallic table placed just to the left. He leans back in his chair and closes his eyes.

This is it. He thinks to himself.

This world. It was done, anyway. He takes this opportunity to remember. To think back. About everything.

Two hundred years ago, there was a new scientific breakthrough: they had found the key to immortality. But at what cost? Two hundred years later and where were we? Overpopulation had become such a problem—now that no one was dying anymore—that the world’s resources quickly depleted, being consumed at a rate much faster than could be replenished. Nature paid the price; all of it had been destroyed to make room for all of the people, slowly vanishing forever. Come to think of it… I think the oceans disappeared some fifty, maybe sixty years ago. I know my plot is over some part of what used to be the Pacific. I hadn’t seen a real cloud in a while either. All weather had become synthetic. Science had to adapt to find solutions to the problems it created. And what solution had they found for overpopulation? All of the people, never aging, but constantly reproducing. What other solution would there be? Only one: systematic killing. They chose whoever they felt represented the weakest link. Whoever could no longer serve a purpose in society? They had Chosen Karen.

He was jostled out of his thoughts by the doctor taking his arm.

“Are you ready?” Nodding slowly, and closing his eyes, remembering why he chose to do this in the first place.

“Now you’ll feel a small sting.”
He flinches slightly as the needle pierces his arm, slowly losing consciousness of the world around him.

“Thank you for participating in the Choosing.”
Christian Dixon  
Poetry: The Dream  
Penney High School  
Renae Wattenbarger, Teacher

What if there was a dream?  
A dream so faint that it could be hidden by the slightest shadow,  
A dream so soft-spoken that it would compete with whispers just to be heard,  
A dream so elusive that it hovered just over our heads,  
A dream so frail that the slightest of breezes would send it staggering,  
A dream so unlike all the others that it would be cast aside,  
Would anyone dream that dream?

Maybe this dream is not for just any person.  
Maybe this faint dream is for someone who has no hope left,  
And this dream is what they hold onto.

Maybe this soft-spoken and quiet dream is not for the bold and outgoing.  
Maybe this quiet dream is for the person who has no perception of what lies in the future,  
And this dream is what echoes through their mind every day,  
And this dream drives them forward.

Maybe this illusive dream is not for the practical and logical.  
Maybe this far-fetched dream is for the idealists,  
That this dream will someday come true,  
That their lives will turn out okay.

Maybe this frail dream isn't for the strong in body and in will,  
Maybe this frail dream is for a frail person.  
That they may use this weak and pitiable dream to be their strength,  
That they may protect that dream with everything they have.

Maybe is irregular dream is not fit for those that cast it aside.  
Maybe this irregular dream is for those who have been deemed anomalies by society.  
Maybe the irregular dream is for those who want to rise above this broken world,  
Who wish to remain undefined by their rejection by the world.

So maybe this faint dream hidden in the shadows is not so faint,  
Maybe this dream is just not bold enough for those seeking boldness?  
So maybe this soft-spoken dream drown out by whispers is not that,  
But in fact this dream is screaming out loud to be heard,  
And only those who choose to hear it actually do?

So maybe this illusive dream hovering over our heads is in fact not illusive.  
But this dream is just too complex for simple minds to contemplate,  
And those simple minds glare at it with frustration?

So maybe this frail dream tossed in the wind is not frail,  
But is too powerful for those who claim to have strength?

So maybe this irregular dream cast aside is not so different,  
But the dreams deemed normal are too strange for this one?  
Maybe this dream is not even a dream at all,  
But it is reality and reality is a dream?
I’ve always been told that there is an angel and a devil on each shoulder. The angel tries to change your decisions and convince everyone that you are “okay.” It tries to get you to think everything is perfect and not to worry your little head, because everything will be fine. The angel stays on my shoulder and talks right into my ear: calming me, telling me how to live, and how to perfect myself for others. The devil left my shoulder long ago, and made a home in my head. He has taken over my conscience and changed my viewpoint on things. He has traded my soul for a crooked understanding of life. It’s left me with fathomed thoughts of being consumed whole by the black mass labeled as depression. It sucks me deeper and deeper until I can’t breathe and I’m trapped inside my own head. When I resurface from my own thoughts, I’m terrified that all the spindly black fingers will reach out for me again.

I become skittish and scared of shadows. Because the shadows, once dark, enclose everything and come alive. They laugh at me and pull my hair. They tease me in my classmate’s voices until I sob. I began to devote my life to changing what the voices said about me. In an attempt to changing all this, I isolate myself so no one can ask me if I’m “okay” or if I’m “sick.” When I do get involved in conversations, I keep what I say to a minimum and try to just listen. Sometimes, when someone will say something happy or cute, I will just respond with “same.” But every time I say that it reminds me of the word “sane.” And god knows I will never be sane again. Maybe someday the angel will come inside and get the devil to leave. Maybe the devil will be gone for a short period and I can be happy. I might even make a few friends or go to school looking forward to learning. But every time the devil comes back. Maybe this time he will try to trade my sanity, but he will see it’s already diminished. He will just fill the hole where it used to resign with more voices of old friends whispering secrets I told them long ago. Every time the thoughts leave me clenching my stomach because it’s uneasy from all the discontent and regret. At the time when I would share my secrets I had no defense; I was confident and I trusted people. Secrets are now what fuel the devil in my head. He convinces them that I am unsocial and hate people. When in reality I’m just a young girl who is being haunted my misconceived thoughts.

The voices would keep me awake at night, which resulted in sleep deprivation, lack of motivation to do anything but attempt to rest, and being labeled as an insomniac. Every night I would intake different types of sleep inducers that would hopefully get me into a peaceful sleep. All the pills did was make the voices louder and the uneasiness in my stomach grow. My vision becomes fuzzy as I fall into an uneasy sleep. My dreams are filled with different petrifying scenes of life...there are gruesome deaths of my loved ones and terrifying torture scenes. When the medicine starts to wear off the dreams are still terrifying but ghastly realistic in a twisted way. They are always high anxiety situations where in it I either make a huge mistake or an event happens that leaves me embarrassed. Sometimes it’s adults or total strangers in the nightmares. But sadly, normally it’s my classmates. I see their faces five days a week and I can image them in vivid detail laughing at me or whispering in earshot about me. Sometimes it’s just them stealing disgusted looks at me as if I was a caged animal with a matted coat of hair and abnormally large teeth. But the animal in the cage is just me, in normal school clothes, and in the cage.

They are insulting me in monotone voices. I curl into a ball in the middle of the cage and try to deny the insults; even though they are true (worthless, failure, disgusting, ugly, fat, waste of space, rude, weird, fake, freak, unsocial, try hard, scary, suicidal, whore, hot mess, hideous, slut, offensive, suicidal, threatening, nasty). The bell rings, and the class starts to filter out. I plead and cry for them to let me out. They laugh as the next class walks in. I’m fully exposed to their comments. Even the teacher joins the insulting. They all laugh at his comment and pull out their phones and start to video tape and take photos of me. I try to shield my face but when I do they call me a coward. They open the cage and claw at my arms until they have tied my arms to the bars on the top of the cage. The scratches on my arms are oozing blood; one by one with a razor blade they write an insult into my skin. Soon I can’t see the words anymore because the blood is flowing and there are so many of them. They changed me into a big white tee shirt and the hems are stained red. The blood is pooling on the floor from the cuts on my legs. They start to punch and kick me until I can’t feel my limbs. The cage is now gone and I’m just lying on the classroom floor. When I feel as if I can’t take it anymore, I wake up.
Missouri Youth Write 2015

Myra Dotzel

Personal Essay/Memoir: The Animal Within
Parkway Central High School
Jason Lovera, Teacher

It was a chilly night, that night so long ago: the night where the trees shivered in the frigid February breeze; the night where dew drops petrified the branches of the old oak tree; the night where the wretched, moaning melody of the wind echoed through the hissing trees, sending goose bumps across my skin.

“Mom, do I really have to do this? I don’t understand why I have to do this while my friends get to spend their weekend at home, eating food,” I whined.

“Oh don’t fuss. You know that the thirty-hour-famine is a highly favored event for a teenager to participate in… at least in the eyes of the Deacons. You, especially, need all the brownie-points you can get,” my mom countered.

As always, she was right. Recently, I was confirmed as a new member of the congregation, and I certainly did not want to sully my reputation early on. Furthermore, I did not want to appear as a spoiled, selfish teenager, just like all the other eighth grade stereotypes. So, as we approached church, I exited the vehicle and made my way in, just as the heavy brass doors shut me out of the world I had forever known and into one where I had no experience, no friends, and no food.

Once I entered the threshold of the recreational center, I joined my twenty or thirty peers for social time until the famine began. First, we were assigned “tribes” which were to be our families/teams for the following thirty hours of hell. I did not know any of the four girls in my tribe, so I would just have to make do. After the tribe-naming, we filled a small theater where we watched a movie about hunger in Africa. I guess that the cruel idea behind showing this movie first was to stimulate our hunger before two hours were even up. If that was the intention, I can sincerely say that it failed royally. My stomach was still full and content with the processed cheeseburger I had enjoyed for lunch.

“No, I will not get hungry,” I thought silently to myself. “While everyone else starves I will smile triumphantly”.

I checked my watch: 10:42. The movie had finished about twenty minutes ago, and we returned to the gym for water and to socialize with friends. I had done both: gotten a drink of water and gone to socialize with friends… or at least tried to. When I say that I tried, I mean that I approached a couple girls from my “tribe” and attempted to make conversation, which they rejected and immediately rejoined their cliques. After that adventure, I left the arena and sat down on the awkward stage that the Deacons randomly chose to keep in the gym for Christmas pageants, luncheons, and whatever other events for which it was needed. Sitting there, twiddling my thumbs, I began to feel an emptiness.

I knew that I would have to spend the next twenty-some hours without a friend, and I was okay with that; after all (let’s get real here), I had nothing in common with any of the youth at my church, and I had somehow grown to accept that a long time ago. However, I felt a different kind of void, one which I had never felt before. My stomach felt a little vacant as the last of the cheeseburger particles were slowly dissolved by the water I had used to quench an aching thirst. Something began to gnaw at my stomach. It was playful for the moment, but a little sharp and I subconsciously feared this foreign feeling down in the depths of my heart. But it was time for bed, so I made my way to the sleeping area and forgot my fears in a sweet night’s bliss.

I checked my watch: 6:34. Time to get up. Today, we were supposed to volunteer at a homeless shelter, but I did not want to. I had never gone to bed without dinner, and now I felt sick. Whatever demon had taken form inside my stomach was thrashing around and growling at me for something to eat, but I knew I could not. I got up, got dressed, and despite the pain, carried on with my day, substituting the idea of the demon for the idea of charity. Once everyone was ready, we hit the road.

I checked my watch: 3:58. Only three more hours to go, but these three hours would probably be the three toughest hours in my entire life. We had just returned from making breakfast and lunch at the homeless shelter and were back to socializing time. Whatever demon had developed in the time I had ignored my hunger now possessed my body. The demon, the animal, the monster, whatever it was, gave off a terrible roar that rippled through my ribs, as it clawed and tore through my rib cages for a way out, perhaps to wreak havoc on the world. I began to grow ill with anxiety for my next meal, so I made a trip to the bathroom.
When I was washing my hands, I looked into the mirror to catch a glimpse of myself, but what was pictured in the sheet of glass did not represent my current self at all. Instead, my evil twin sister gazed back at me with a devilish gleam in her eye, her face as pale as snow and her collarbone visible through her thin, wan skin. I smiled a little and she smiled back, only to reveal a toothy, crooked smile. I yelped and dashed out of the bathroom, my heart nearly escaping from my chest. I hunted down a quiet corner away from the world and let the tears of sorrow and remorse trickle down my cheeks and wash my face afresh.

It must have been at least ten minutes that I had not returned to the gym that my “tribe” began to wonder to where I had deserted. I heard footsteps approaching but remained tucked in a ball, hidden in shadows, for I did not know what the footsteps would bring. The shuffling sound of shoes brushing across carpet stopped and I assumed that they had arrived at their destination. The walker crouched down beside me, her long bronze hair sweeping my fingertips. It was my tribe leader, Anna. She spoke of her experiences at the famine in earlier years and told me of a story similar to mine, only where she could not stop crying and the director had to call her mom to pick her up before the famine had even finished.

After she recounted her stories, there was a long pause, her large chocolate eyes glistening in silent reflection. I slowly rubbed away my tears as she offered me a tissue to blow my nose. Once I looked presentable, we re-entered the gym where the director had commissioned one last game: Malaria. The goal was to find and assemble all parts of a flashlight which were hidden all around the gym without being stung by the “malaria mosquito.” At first I did not see the point, but later, as the game developed, I began to feel a sense of sympathy for the less fortunate, as they neither knew what to expect on the next day nor when their next meal was to come. I finally began to understand how the people battling these conditions must cope with the reality of everyday survival and began to appreciate the most simplistic offerings of life.

After the game, I immediately went for a drink of water, slowly quenching the fire inside of me. It’s truly amazing how so little can do so much.

I checked my watch: 7:02. I made it. It was over and time to eat. I saw my family members enter the church and embraced each of them. With the food placed on the banquet table and everyone in their seats, the reverend gave a prayer: “Dear Lord, we thank you graciously for the food you place before us and the joy you put in our hearts. Lord, we thank you for giving our youth the strength in will and ability to fast for these thirty hours. With these words, Lord, bless our food and in God’s name we pray, Amen.” With that, I took a sip of cool water, slowly letting the fluid enchant my taste buds.

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Ever since that experience, I have made a conscious effort to engage myself in various community service projects. Now, I am an onsite volunteer at a local VA medical center and have most recently finished my Girl Scout Gold Award project to support their cause. However, it is not their cause anymore. Instead, it is my cause; the cause that I have made a distinct connection with and one that has shaped my life.

To this day, I am thankful that the animal that once possessed my heart had died down so long ago and given me a chance to live my life with conviction and spirit. As I sit here, typing these final words on my keyboard, I take a sip of cool water and let my lips slowly, but voluntarily, fold into a smile while reminiscing with my very own large, brown eyes about what had been and what is now no more. Amen.
Rachel Edidin
Poetry: Be Okay
West Junior High School
Jake Giessman, Teacher

I think we are more than the sum of our parts.
we are more than the score on the test and our time in the race and the price of our clothes.
we are made of sunshine and laughter and light and smiles and sadness and love.
we are made of memories and hope.
we are late nights we are early mornings we are rainfall and we are sun.
and sometimes it gets to be too much
and we shut our eyes.
and yes living is easy when we're not looking
but then we miss the laughter
the happiness
and the love.
and yes we're all broken
but we're learning how to be whole again.
we're learning how to be okay again.
and crying is okay.
being sad is okay.
because we can all change.
we can all forgive.
we can all forget.
we can all be happy again.
even if it may not seem like it
we can be okay.
Bailey Fisli  
Writing Portfolio & Short Story: Descent  
The Barstow School  
Kelly Finn, Teacher

She traced the edges of the wine glass with her index finger, staring intently at the crimson liquid within its deep basin. Every so often her finger would slip, submerging itself into the goblet. Slowly she pulled it out, sucked the wine off of her finger, and pursed her rich, dark cranberry lips as she deliberately removed her finger from her mouth. After five minutes of exchanged glances punctuated by the smooth jazz record playing behind her, she carefully pulled her raven hair behind her back and shifted her gaze to Kit, who was across the bar. He sat there in a pinstripe suit, each stripe shimmering like polished silver bars. The woman’s eyes were drawn to a small stain slightly off center in his lapel in the shape of a keyhole above his heart. His fingers absentmindedly tapped at the stain, attempting to unlock the darkness within.

Consciously Kit stared, intrigued, at the woman, running his eyes across the curvatures of her body. The right corner of her mouth crawled itself higher up her cheek, as she sneered back at the man. He carefully pushed himself back in the chair and walked around it, his left hand dancing on the polished wood of the seat. As he made his way towards her, she leisurely ran her finger down her lips. Once he arrived, the woman poured him a glass of the red wine. Rivers of it gushed from the bottle. The liquid tempted the man, prickling at his primal pleasure centers. Somehow, he barely held his desire to drink at bay, instead pulling out the seat facing her and placing himself within it. After pulling a small photograph from his right breast pocket, he glanced briefly at its image, and then slowly rolled his eyes up to meet hers. Finally he asked, “What’s your name, sweetheart?”

She placed her hands on the table, leaning in towards the man. “Luna, Luna Miranda Cerno,” she stated coolly, tongue caressing each syllable. He then glanced back down at the photograph. His eyebrows furrowed slightly, but quickly sank back into their natural position.

“Well, you are far more attractive in person, my dear,” he said. ”The woman in this photograph is quite hard on the eyes.” She quickly reached over and grabbed the photograph from the man’s hand, and upon looking at it threw her head back in a fit of laughter. Her face lit up in a moment of pure hysteria and amusement. After she finished cackling, she adjusted herself to look back at Kit.

She grinned evilly and responded, “The man who photographed me that day was incredibly biased. You cannot always believe what you see.”

He frowned, and after watching her tear the photograph in two, asked, “And how exactly can a photograph have bias? It’s reality.”

“Well, you certainly have a rigid view of the world.”

He continued to frown as he took the pieces of the photograph from her grasp. He held the left and the right pieces together. It was certainly true that the woman in the photograph and the woman in front of him looked nothing alike. Luna’s caramel fingers wrapped around his shoulders, jolting him back to reality from the depths of his thoughts. She laughed, voice cutting like a knife. He winced in pain, rubbing his right temple. She examined her reflection in the wine glass, reapplying her lipstick. “Why so silent, Kit?” The man whipped his head up and glared into her eyes.

She smiled as he yelled, “How the hell did you know my name?” The noise in the bar died down as the remaining patrons turned to stare at him. Kit was standing by this point, his hands pressed into the mahogany. Beads of sweat accumulated on his face, falling to their inevitable extinction on the pub’s floor. Jazz notes echoed throughout the bar, each seemingly converging upon Luna. As his nerves spilled from his pores a woman’s voice sang out: “Just give in….” The record in the background skipped.

Kit sat on a dirty mattress, leaning over the edge, peering down at the shoelaces he was carefully tying into perfect knots. Sirens blazed by outside, the lights casting blue and red hues across his body. It seemed as though the noise would never pass. The whirring alarms set Kit’s heart racing. He clutched his chest, feeling his heart pounding beneath his skin, beneath the stain on his jacket. The pain felt unbearable, tearing at his sinewy flesh. Only after the sirens faded did Luna find her way into his reality. She was balanced delicately on the windowsill, breathing in the night and dangling her left foot over the edge. Luna epitomized beauty, an
attractiveness painted by the creators of the universe themselves. Yet, somehow, Kit felt uneasy watching her. Confusion entangled his mind with its tendrils of mist. He couldn’t remember how he got to this hotel room or why he had come. Somehow, he suppressed his urge to ask. Instead, he begged, “Come away from the window, dear, you could hurt yourself.”

“Come now, Kit, instead of worrying about me, why don’t you join me on the edge?”

“I don’t enjoy putting my life at risk for a cheap thrill!”

“Oh, I assure you, this is no cheap thrill. I may be dangerous at heart, but my motives are quite reasonable.” She licked her lips and then reached her hand out towards him. Several thin golden bracelets dangled from her dainty wrist. Where did she get those? Kit wondered to himself. As if to answer his unspoken question, Luna continued, “I love these bracelets. You really know how to treat a woman, Kit.”

“I got those for you?” he asked, finding himself walking towards her, as though by a gravitational pull, rather than free will. Somehow, he found himself sitting beside her. A warm yet uncomfortable sensation radiated through his body as Luna wrapped her arms around him.

“Why, don’t you remember? It was only last month. You told me you could get me anything in the world. Do you remember that?” Kit looked down at the glass of red wine in his hands. He paused. When did I get this drink? A tiny droplet of crimson cascaded down the rim. Luna leaned over and licked the wine off the edge. The desire to do the same welled within his mouth. Noticing his resistance, Luna whispered, “Just give in.” Feeling a lump form inside of his throat, Kit put his hand over his face, rubbing his eye to distract himself.

“No…” Kit finally said. He glanced up towards the ceiling and then closed his eyes. Sighing deeply, he continued, “I don’t drink.”

“Hold out your palm,” Luna ordered. When he didn’t respond, she grabbed his hand and pulled it towards her. After she pried his fingers open, she removed one of her bracelets and placed it in his hand. One by one she carefully wrapped his fingers around it. Finally she placed his hand, with the bracelet, inside of hers. “You will.” He shook free from her, throwing the bracelet to the floor. Luna looked upon him with disgust as the golden loop rolled down the room, finally crashing against the tattered wall.

“You look exactly like your photo? Woman? Just tell me where I got you the damn bracelet. Why is it even important?” The shrieking noise of her laughter echoed throughout the space. He hated the sound of her laughter. Why couldn’t she stop laughing at him? He grabbed her wrist and threw her against a wall. The wood paneling splintered beneath her weight, the impact pushing her to the floor. She didn’t attempt to stand, but instead looked back up at him and laughed. From his angle, he could swear her eyes were glowing red as she screeched. Dropping to his knees, covering his ears, he sobbed. “Shut up! Shut up, you despicable woman!”

Despite his pleas, she continued to mock him, laugh at him.

“You’re so indecisive. Do you love me or hate me? Or… perhaps… you hate that you love me?” Luna hissed. Kit sobbed, now curled into the fetal position. She crawled over to him, still making no attempt to stand. Upon reaching him, she pressed her lips against his cheek and then whispered into his ear. “Something wrong, my darling Kit?” His voice quivered erratically as he pointed at her and yelled,

“You look exactly like your photo!” She finally pushed herself onto her knees, and pulled Kit to her chest. Her hands pressed against his head as she ran her fingers through his hair, pulling apart the knots and tangles. Gently, yet eerily, she sang to him:

“Bound forever in my temptress grasp, one man stands in the flames and ash… crumbling slowly, descending towards death… he will find me by his side, Hades’ grip never subsides…. Desire and greed will consume us, until you can see your own madness… specters haunt us and whisper in our ear… promise… promise… promises… Shackles binding, slaving, waiting, glisten with the wine, until… you’re… mine…..”

Tormenting lullabies swirled through Kit’s mind as Luna continued to repeat her song over and over, each word grasping at his innermost thoughts.

Shaking horribly, he refused to look at her, but once again began yelling, “You look exactly like your photo. You look exactly like your photo!”

Finally her agonizing siren’s song ceased, but instead her voice reverberated through his mind, her lips fastened shut, “Yes, I have been told that occasionally.” Silence filled the room. After about five minutes Luna stood again. Screams of pain left Kit’s mouth as he felt the heel of Luna’s shoe pressing into his spine. He begged for mercy.
“Stop!” he yelled, ”Please stop torturing me... I'll do anything...” Smiling, she removed her boot from his back. She knelt beside him and whispered,

“Promise to stay by my side forever. You shall be mine for all eternity.” He nodded, completely defeated. After pulling him to his feet, Luna turned away from him. All emotion drained from her voice as she said, “Now go clean yourself up, darling, you look a mess tonight.” Kit stood up slowly, and then walked to the bathroom without saying another word. He ran a comb through his hair and brushed the dirt off his clothing. He noticed lipstick on his cheek. Despite how hard he rubbed, the rose tint refused to leave his skin.

Luna was beautiful again, at least at first glance. Kit couldn’t remember any of his previous encounters with her clearly. He racked his brain, desperately trying to remember why out of the corner of his eye, Luna was ugly. Her eyes glowed with the fire of Satan, her skin taut against her reedy bones. Teeth protruded from her mouth in odd angles, coming to dangerous points barely poking their way outside from between her rouge lips. The only way he could stand to look at her was straight on, when she appeared the way she had when he had first met her. Otherwise, he could swear he was being followed by a monster. Whenever he found himself alone with friends, he would beg them to answer whether Luna was gorgeous or hideous. They never satisfied. Upon viewing her photograph -taped back together by Kit- they looked upon him with concern and confusion. All of them said that same line, over and over. “Please, don’t do it, it doesn’t pay.” But what did that even mean? Perhaps there was no simple answer. In the same way that he both hated and loved her, she was both disgusting and awe-inspiring. With Luna, nothing was ever clear-cut. Well, one thing was. No matter her physical or intellectual or emotional characteristics, Kit knew he was hers forever. He constantly found himself touching his cheek, outlining her lip marks on his skin. He wasn’t sure how long it had been since he had received the devil’s contract. Weeks? Months? Years? He wasn’t sure of anything. Time faded away around her. It didn’t exist.

Sometimes Kit would come across others with his marking. They were never friendly or kind. Often times they held their heads low and shoved their fingers in their pockets, refusing to acknowledge anyone. They kept one eye constantly peering behind them, at some invisible blue and red specter that haunted their paranoid souls. They were weary, and so too was he.

Kit’s hands rested upon Luna’s waist, as he spun her around the moonlit dance floor with ease. She was wearing a dress the same color as her lipstick. Only now did he notice that her lips and clothing were both the same color as the red wine she was constantly drinking, begging him to drink. Her wine tempted him so, its deep crimson depths calling his name. Yet, he resisted its lure, refusing to accept Luna’s drink. She smiled at him, and pulled him closer as they tangoed across the ballroom. Kit tried to see her in the negative light he was once capable of casting upon her figure, but it became harder as time passed. Her faults faded away before his eyes. She appeared as though her figure were outlined in thick, white chalk. The vinyl record in the background only accentuated her mysterious allure. The music, the lighting, everything, seemed to make her more attractive. No longer did he feel forced to be in her presence, rather, he lusted to be her partner. Yet, she was the lead in their duet. Nothing could change that she was in control.

The song ended, and he stood there alone. Kit perused the ballroom, wondering where Luna and the other couples had gone. Nothing was left. He stood in utter darkness, surrounded by encroaching blackness. Where did it all go? An invisible presence circled him, reaching around his shoulders. Luna’s voice echoed throughout the space, “Don’t worry about them Kit, just give in, they’ll never catch up to us.” His voice lurked beneath the surface of her soprano. He stopped questioning, stopped resisting, closed his eyes, and let himself fall into her ethereal arms. Together they fell, and fell, and fell.

How much time had passed now? Once again Kit found himself at the foot of a dirty mattress in a rundown motel. He examined the room. Somewhere in the back of his mind he remembered this place. Luna was perched on the windowsill, holding a bottle of Merlot. She was licking the burgundy droplets from its edge. When she noticed Kit had awoken, she raised her hand and curled her finger back and forth, beckoning him come to her. He obliged. Instinctively he reached out towards her neck, and felt the sharpness of diamonds underneath his fingertips. She was wearing a necklace. He didn’t remember it. It was beautiful. She smiled at him, and placed her hand on his face, softly. “Do you like my necklace sweetheart?”

“Very much so, where did you get it?”
“Why, my dear, you obtained it for me, along with my bracelets, rings, and earrings.” Kit frowned.
“I don’t remember getting these things for you. I remember your bracelets... but I don't remember getting them for you.” He leaned his head back, and closed his eyes. She kissed his forehead and said,
“You never remember, do you?”
“No, I can’t say that I do.”
“Then, I suppose, you can’t be blamed. It isn’t your fault, no jury could convict you.” He opened his eyes and looked at her. His expression was uncomprehending.
“What do you mean, Luna?”
“Oh, you shall come to understand soon enough, my love.”
“When will I understand?”
“Now. Now that I need more jewelry, you will understand.” She pulled out a tall wine goblet and poured the Merlot into the glass. After placing it in front of him, she twirled her fingers around the chalice, circling around and around, inviting him in. “Just give in Kit... Just give in...”
“I'll do anything for you,” Kit said.
“You'll do anything for yourself.”
He was holding her jewelry. She was holding a knife. He finally took a sip of the red wine.
Laurel Foderberg
Writing Portfolio & Poetry: On Target
Blue Valley Northwest High School
Theodore Fabiano, Teacher

The twenty year old backboard with
A hundred BB sized holes
Compresses two street lamp lights
Into a galaxy of fifty watt schoolyard stars
And it reminds me of the fifty lead-filled holes
In twenty different students
From my twelve gauge shotgun
And their blood seeps through like water from a strainer filled with that night's dinner.
The white painted lines on the blacktop court make me think of the
Seven strips of light on the girls face from the accordion blinds they pulled to hide from me
The cracks in the court remind me of the fractured pieces of her skull.
The sirens bounce off the quiet neighborhood houses whose doors are locked in fear
The police have rolled pass here many times
But now they're here for me.
And I think of the years I spent playing on this court
And watching the older kids
And I couldn't wait to be like the older kids and have an audience of seven-year-olds.
I'm finally one of those older kids.
The attention was all on me
My aim was perfect
My shots were all on target.
I pulled out the pills. I pulled out the razor. It was my time to go. It all started two months ago with one stupid picture. One picture that changed my life. One picture that turned into something big. One picture that made the whole school turn against me. And that one pathetic, gorgeous, popular girl who helped it happen. I looked into the mirror with disgust. I started to see why everyone hated me, because I started to hate me too.

Two months ago...

It was first hour and I was already tired. I pulled out my phone and checked Instagram.

“Bri, give me your phone,” Mr. Hamilton demanded.

“Class hasn’t even started! That’s not fair!”

“No phones in class, you know the rules! Now hand it over.”

Brooklyn was sitting next to me, just giving me that smirk. She was the popular girl in the ninth grade, the girl that every guy wanted. Brooklyn turned against me in the sixth grade when I stole her “boyfriend.” She didn’t even tell me she liked him, so it wasn’t my fault. But ever since then she has despised me. She had beautiful, long, blonde hair, and blue eyes that you can get lost in. She wasn’t that tall, but her 5’3 frame consisted of pure perfection.

We met eye to eye for only a few seconds; I couldn’t stand looking into her eyes that long. After class was over I saw Brooklyn go up to Mr. Hamilton’s desk. He left the room for a few seconds and I saw her get into the draw where my phone was. I wasn’t sure what she was doing but I had to find out. When I walk up to the desk, she was sending one of my disgusting old fifth grade photos to herself. One of those old selfies you didn’t want anyone to see, everything about me at the time was chubby and ugly. By the time I grabbed the phone it already delivered. I didn’t know how I should feel. Should I cry, should I just leave the room, should I go off on her? I decided to be the bigger person and just walk away. I didn’t want to tell Mr. Hamilton, because he wouldn’t care anyways. I grabbed my phone and walked away.

After I got home from school, I made some pizza rolls and went up to my room to study for my English test I had the next day. When I sat down on my bed, I saw my phone light up. It was an Instagram notification: “@Brooklyn.Stoner tagged you in a photo.” My heart stopped. I was scared to check. I opened my phone and there it was. That horrifying picture just staring at me. I wouldn’t have been as mad if she didn’t have over 6,000 followers and didn’t get over 2,000 likes per picture. By the time I refreshed the page she already had 400 likes and 67 comments. My heart dropped.

All of the comments told me I was ugly and that I should kill myself. I just sat there staring at the screen in amazement. How could anyone say that to me? I mean, it was a stupid picture when I was in fifth grade. That was four years ago. Numbness coursed through my body as my fingers dropped on the screen of my phone, “That picture was four years ago, get a life and grow up.”

That only made things worse for me. Of course, everyone agreed with Brooklyn, why wouldn’t they? She ruled the school. She had everyone in her power. If she hated me... everyone hated me. I decided to just turn off my phone and just go downstairs and spend time with my family. We ate dinner and played a couple of board games. I couldn’t let my parents know that my life was falling apart by the minute.

When 8:30 rolled around, I told my family I was going to bed, which wasn’t a lie, I was going to bed, but I also needed to check Instagram and see if things cooled down. I hopped into bed and pulled the covers up to my shoulders. My phone was taking, for what felt like, a million years to turn on. When it finally turned on, my fingers slid across the glass to open Instagram. It didn’t cool down, it didn’t cool down at all, things actually got worse. I read maybe half of the hateful comments then I got tired of it. I just laid in my bed, locked my phone, and cried. I cried myself to sleep. I didn’t know what it was like to actually cry yourself to sleep. But now I knew. I knew it was the most horrible thing ever. Something you can’t really explain you just have to do. And what I was crying over was something even worse. I had no friends, no one to stand by me, no one to back me up, and no one to comfort me. It was just me. Me alone in this world.
The next day at school all the kids stared at me. I would look over and a group of people would be whispering and talking about me. I tried to ignore them but it only got worse throughout the day. Do you know how hard it is to be at school when everyone makes fun of you? When wherever you look you get horrible looks and hateful comments. Each night Brooklyn would post something about me saying I need to die and I shouldn’t be here. It lasted for two months, each night, I would just cry myself to sleep. I would look in the mirror and wonder why I’m even here. Each day at school things got worse and worse. And finally they pushed me to my breaking point.

I took out the pills, I took out the razor. My heart was pounding; my stomach felt weak. I was really about to do it. I was about to take my own life away. I was going to be out of this world forever, just like everyone wanted. I made a few cuts on my arm, then my leg, then my stomach. Blood was dripping from my cold pale skin. I could hear my mom screaming through the door begging me to stop. But of course I wasn’t going to listen. As I tried to open the bottle of pills, the door busted down and my dad and mom came running in. My dad took the razor and the pills and my mom cried and held me tightly. Held me so tight that it felt like an hour till she let go. I was bawling my eyes out asking why the heck this is happening to me. Why are people bullying me? I haven’t done anything to anyone. It’s all Brooklyn’s fault.

Four months later...

To this day, I still remember the moment I wanted to kill myself and I wanted my whole life to end. But kids at my school are treating me better; in fact, I have more best friends than I did. I learned a lesson through my experience. Whatever anyone has to say isn’t true, because remember, they took time out of their life to talk to you and hate on you. They took time out of their life to put you down and make them feel better about themselves. But let them know it’s not going to work, because you’re stronger and better than them.
Emily Francis
Poetry: The Monster
Bernard Middle School
Elizabeth Ette, Teacher

There is a beast that dwells within
In the heart
In the mind
In the body
In the soul

The beast grows into something more
A monster that destroys everything in sight
Its icy fingers grip the throat within
Choking so that nothing escapes
No single breath or word may pass

Thoughts fuel the monster that lurks
Words are weapons
Built to defend or destroy
But the game is rigged
No words can pierce the monster's armor

It changes your perception of the world
Judgmental glares replace the smiles found in everyone's eyes
Vivid blues and greens of life begin to fade
Leaving behind a bleak world of gray
Like the sky before the rain

It's easy to forget
That colors do exist
That joyful music still plays
That laughter can be heard
When your senses are dulled by an internal monster

It has a voice
A whisper equivalent to a lion's roar
It says:
Don't speak, don't do, and don't even spare a glance
Listen to my words and forget the truth

Thump, thump, thump
The steady beating of a heart
Tick, tick, tick
The even ticking of a bomb
There is little difference any more

Stop believing, stop thinking
Fight the pain
Breathe
Scream
Don't let it win
Sunlight begins to peek through the dismal clouds
    But there is still a monster inside
    One that never truly goes away
    You can’t ignore it
For how do you escape something inside of you?
Every night and every day, the surging, hopeless pain always stays
No one can rely on love
No one can truly handle its sins against one's life
No one can truly take forth the adequacy of its pain
Those who try only fail their innocent minds
She whom perceived this a little too late
assimilated the intriguing pain
Her face falling deep in the shadows as it takes a sharp sword and heaves it slowly through her warm body
Blood casing her innocent face as the sparkle in her eyes falls vague
Her lips going cold and the breath within them falling short
Her body slowly disintegrating into the ground beneath her
Her mind growing less sane with each deflated breath
The ignorance of the one she loves withdrawing her soul
Dragging her through hell by the deepened sword that encases all within her
He says he loves her.
He says he couldn’t live without her passion and beautiful touch
But how can anyone love the demon himself?
Only in the eyes of death would anyone love such a vile soul
And only then did he realize what he never could
Love...
Isn’t always pure.
It was pitch black. It was as if the world became nothing. There was no opening for light. As if I was enclosed in a locked box. I try to yell out but nothing came out. Not even a whisper came through my lips. But then my cold body became warm. I open my eyes and when I do, there was a speck of light up above. The light shone down and reaches my cheek. That light warms my face and somehow my body is warmed by the speck of light. I close my eyes and absorb the warmth. Then I open my eyes once again and reach out to the light. I extend my arm to the light as far I can but I still can't reach the light. I feel around to see if I can climb on anything to get to the light. But there is nothing. Nothing to get to the light.

I reach for the light once again but knowing it useless. But as I reach for the light something grabs my leg. I somehow scream like I have never have before. I try to pull away from the hand that has grabbed my ankle, but another one grabs my other ankle. I scream once again even though no one can hear me. But I thought wrong. Someone did hear me. I stand there in surprise that someone is here with me. That person grabs my wrist and pulls me away from the ground. I look down to the ground to see that the hand are pulling themselves back into the ground. Then I look at the person's feet to see that there are no hands after them. I then look at the face of the person to find a man with a scar over his eye. I try to speak but no words came out. I sadly look away from the man. But as I look away he speaks.

“Madeline, you have been alone for a long time haven’t you?” he says.
I look at him, surprised that he knows my name. Then I nod.

“It’s sad, you’ve been alone so long you have forgotten how to speak,” he says sadly, “At least you still have emotion. If nothing else you still know your name.”

“Madeline.” I say with a bit of rasp in my voice as if it was the first word I have spoken, ever. And it was.
“I’d like to bite the night sky like a California plum,” he whispers. He is every curve in the word poet. His words stir in the deepest pits of meaning, every syllable meticulously chosen.

For now, he is only a temporary manifestation of human, his true form the slender disc of a dove, his true arms satin wings, his true mouth the needle tip of a beak. “Must you go?” I ask.

His time allotted in man’s skin is limited, the ending like a flame dancing on the last bit of a dynamite string. Goodbye is the trickle of saliva I have never wished to interrupt our kiss. “My dear, don’t forget what I’ve told you.”

His porcelain fingertips have evaluated every fold and sea-green vein of my hand. On our backs, under the stars like some awful cliché, we make love with our hearts. The moon trembles above, reflecting the sorrowful shivers of one mind on the verge of dissection.

“God made the universe in triangles.”

Our faces shift to watch the other’s yearning, searching eyes, seeking solace in a glance that lasts to infinity. I inhale his anodyne breath, the warmth like midnight chocolate. “Triangles—every system with two forces at the base, united at one single vertex. Like the moon, the earth and its ocean—two separate entities merge in unison as puppeteers of the sea.”

His jawline is a knife; so sharp and defined I could prickle myself with the point of his chin. “Like the fisherman, his fish, and satisfied stomachs—the worker and his prize link arms to reach an ultimate goal.”

A broken lock off his golden head spirals to the terracotta bed on which we rest. We lie not on green pastures and daisy fields; the suffering of farewell would not suit that atmosphere. “Like the sun’s heat, a soupy puddle, and the clouds above—two raw presences adjoin to produce a more gentle offspring.”

But now, his shoulders lose their broad edges and grow soft. His legs retract; his toes extend. “Not yet! It is too soon!” I cry.

Our hands slip apart. “Like God’s triangles is our love—you and I divided by distance, but fused at a point of forever.”

No longer is his nose crooked and familiar; it morphs into a gentle slope careening off a whip cream forehead. He whispers my name, an act so intimate and enticing, passion floods out of a figurative wound on my body. How I hope God really does mold things in triangles.

There are no goodbyes as his body shrinks in my arms, as the banging in his chest becomes a tapping on my palm. Vacancy beckons, and my little dove is gone. An orb of celestial whiteness floats overhead. He ascends, forming vertices of his own triangle in a California plum sky.
Michel Ge

Poetry: Missing Things and The Tutoring Room
Mary Institute & St. Louis County Day School
Lynn Mittler, Teacher

Missing Things

Something has fallen from my
Pocket
and sleeps on sticky tiles.

A file
left open; a paper
uncollected.
The classroom evacuated but still
I look back.
Settled.
Neat.

Something has fallen
Elastic ropes perhaps,
Gum stretching while I march away
march slower
march in place then
pulling
pulling
pulling
thinning and tearing and holes in cheese until
snap!
I break free.
Perhaps my students—
scheming little devils—
now sit cheek into bus window
or packaged into winter coat
watching their glassy apparitions
scroll by,
hands moist and meaty
around the things I left behind.

The Tutoring Room

Saturday mornings a bubble happens
Around us—me with my pen hand
—they with their wide open faces
that need to understand algebra—
Low voices in the liquid noise
Of papers fluttering,
And is shadowed by the bone hand,
The dark figure materializing
in the periphery, watching,
hag of a woman,
and then like a talon tapping:
Write it like this. Do it
This way.
—And she walks off,
And leaves me to wonder,
What was the classroom,
The rows and rows of straight-backed sunbaked faces,
The instructor dictating with the chalkboard pointer,
The Oriental sunrise as she walked to school each morning
That backlit her?
“Shosh, I am going to the hospital, tonight,” my father informed me before he left for the night. It was 6:00 pm and my grandmother, my dad’s mother, was in the hospital because she was unresponsive. When my grandfather tapped her shoulder, her eyes remained unfocused and glassy.

“Are you sure everything is okay? Should I come?”

“No, you do not need to come. You need to go to bed. We will talk in the morning.”

He innocently kissed me goodbye. How was he supposed to know that that was my grandmother’s last night alive?

Three days later, at 5:30 pm on Friday night, surrounded by my aunts, uncles, cousins, and parents, we gathered in my Rabbi’s office. Scattered about the walls were pictures of his family; reminding me of my own comfortable home, but there was no comfort in hearing my Rabbi discuss my grandmother’s upcoming funeral.

My grandmother had Alzheimer’s disease for ten years prior to when she died. She outlived the doctors’ predictions but her heart stopped pumping the blood she needed to survive.

That Friday was the day when our Rabbi prepared us for her funeral on Sunday.

“I think it would be best for the children to give their speeches from youngest to oldest,” my Rabbi calmly expressed to us, “but have the grandchildren speak before them.” His soothing voice carried on with praise and love for my grandmother. Upon hearing his words of wisdom, my emotions took control of me and without warning, tears spilled down my face.

“I did not mean to make you cry, Shoshi! I just wanted to prepare you for what the day will look like,” exclaimed my Rabbi as my aunt drew me into a bear hug. The tissues were passed over to me and I dabbed my eyes, trying desperately to exert power over my feelings.

Shaking from the tears, I subtly glanced at the clock, hoping I had ten more minutes for the meeting. Unfortunately, I did not; even though I wanted to be at both places at once, and my belief that family comes before a job, I had to put my job first. That night, I made my stage managing debut in my middle school’s musical, Annie.

As I left the synagogue, amidst the tumbling rain drops, my tears persisted to stream down my cheeks. On the way to the play, my dad soothingly rubbed my back, attempting to stifle the tears. Dashing into the parking lot, I wiped my face off and kissed my dad goodbye. I sprung out of the car and hurriedly ran through the rain.

I found myself amid frantic actors scampering around; light technicians hoisting their spotlights onto the platforms; and my co-stage managers trouble-shooting at every turn. Frazzled by the action, I scrambled to the backstage bathroom to see how far along the actors’ preparations were coming.

As I arrived at the girls’ bathroom, I entered a cloud of hair spray and heat. Coming from the flat irons, I could feel the hair on my arms slowly being singed off. The sea of scattered brushes and makeup containers among the overly-full counter soothed me: preparations were going well.

I sprinted out of the bathroom and into the drama room; eagerly grabbing my awaiting headset, I joined this organized chaos. I flung myself into helping the technicians and the actors; hoping that if I kept myself busy, my mind would not drift to unwelcome thoughts about my grandmother, the meeting, or the upcoming funeral. Luckily for me, play preparations attracted my mind and kept my thoughts preoccupied.

Preparations finished, 7:00 pm rolled around, and I took my place in the back of the atrium. I observed the audience members occupying their seats, and as the room washed into darkness, I shook with nervousness. I knew what my next step was, but for some reason I hesitated.

Three days later, before the funeral officially started, my family was given the chance to view the casket and see my grandmother one last time. Bathed in white, with her eyes closed, she looked utterly peaceful. As I spoke my final words to her, one of my tears dripped down onto her face as a final goodbye.

An hour later, after hundreds arrived, we sat down: my brother to my right, and my cousin to the left. My Rabbi provided a few introductory remarks; then it was our turn to speak about our grandmother.
We softly walked up the stairs and formed a clump around the podium. We introduced ourselves in order from oldest to youngest. I, being the youngest, spoke last; my sniffling tone muffled my voice.

I gazed at the audience and barely audibly stated my line, “G is for Games. Grandma always loved to play games with us.”

My cousins followed my lead, finishing the acrostic poem to the word “grandma” with different descriptions of her.

Once we finished, we sat back down in our seats and my father approached the podium. As he commenced his eulogy, silent tears streaked down my face. As I sat leaning against the back of my chair, I reflected upon my experiences that past Friday night, right before the show started. The accomplishments my father eloquently spoke about caused me to remember that I accomplished something new, too.

Before the show began, amidst the darkness, waiting for my heart to stop rapidly beating and for my ragged breathing to quiet down, I trembled. I thought to myself, “how can I be here, stage managing this show, and not with my family, grieving for my grandmother’s loss?” I closed my eyes to stop the trembling, but instead, I saw my grandmother’s face. Her twinkling blue eyes amidst her perfect, picturesque face reassured me.

Relieved that my grandmother approved, I knew that sitting in the dark, with my headset around my ears was where I needed to be that night. No longer trembling, I sat as erect and silent as a statue, but with the poise of a queen.

Without closing my eyes, I brought my grandmother’s face back up into view. After recalling her face back into my memory just once, my subconscious spoke a few wise words: “Tonight is not the final time you will see your grandmother’s face, Shoshi; there will be more times in the future.” As my subconscious cleared up my final reluctance to be here, I no longer hesitated; I knew what my next step was.

Quiet as a mouse, I turned my headset on, and whispered my most important line of the show: “Lights up.”
Alexandria Golding

Personal Essay/Memoir: The Mother Who Left at Six
Platte City Middle School
Kelly Miller, Teacher

Once upon a time, long long ago, a girl was born into the arms of Angie, a drug user, a manipulator, a woman who had lines and lines of habits. You thought this was going to be a fairy tale didn't you? It's so far from that. Far away from the dream I had of a mother and what a mother should be like.

Angie would use all of her boyfriend’s money to buy toxic and poison, making her lungs just as bad. The girl who she named Alexandria was small and frail. She had black curls that'd fall into her dark brown eyes, and caramel colored skin. As she looks back at all of her pictures, she notices she resembles a tiny monkey. Her hands and feet small in size, perfect enough for her grandmother, Audrey, to hold them in her, then smooth, hands.

Audrey fought with Angie for what felt like years, checking in on the six month old girl. As nicotine and the smell of alcohol filled the infants body, Audrey brought the fight to court. The girl’s father was absolutely no help where they were. He was fighting with the people of Iran, protecting the people of America. His mother would call every now and then, always worried about her son’s well-being. She explained that they were in the middle of war themselves: Golding VS D’Antonio, a war that would last a short while. Audrey walked into the courtroom, sighing. Her heels clicked on the aluminum tiles as she walked to her husband. A quick kiss on both her husband, her daughter, and her grandchild's cheeks, clicking all the way to the podium. She cleared her throat, ready for a long lasting fight. Or so she thought. No one was standing at the opposing sides podium. Not even Angie’s family. The opposite podium was barren, as if the crowd behind Audrey and herself was early.

The podium stayed empty, along with Caspar’s audience as the judge reached the stand. He widened his eyes, looking at Audrey as she tried to rub off her migraine.

“Case closed… Custody to Golding.” He boomed, pounding his almighty podium as the crowd stood, walking out in disappointment while the infant cried. Audrey and Bancroft got custody easily, their enemy not even close to the battlefield. Now, Shema, the infants aunt, swooped the girl up into her arms. She stayed like this all the way back to Junction City, Kansas. A cold and lonely infant in the warm arms of a family member.

Let us skip a few years in the girls life. She is now four, waddling up and down, side to side. She now chewed with the numerous amounts of toys her grandparents spoiled her with, already gurgling words. The opposite family always sent her gifts, random and useless stuff that just went straight to the storage room. Even to this day, they’re lost somewhere, probably given to the people who need them most. The girl always called her father who was on the battlefield, and he'd always answered her. She had family across the globe that cared for her more than her own mother did.

Let’s skip once more, one last time, now to late 2014. She sits in a classroom, typing this into a google docs paper, listening to music while she tries to remember every little detail her grandmother told her. Her mother called her once, telling her happy birthday late July. The girl just smiled, telling her thank you while know her birthday was indeed not in July, but five months ago. She felt the fierce fire flood within her as she connected the house phone back to its charger, brushing off all of the complete and utter lies that muttered from her mother’s mouth.

From, “I was sick on the day of the trial,” to “I love you even now.” It’s come across the girl multiple times that if her mother was sick, why wasn’t the rest of the audience there, and why after failing to take care of her, she has 3 other siblings. It’s a strange thing that happens to us people, the fact that even though it’s possible the victim knows the truth, the other seems to build up more and more lies, then continues to ice the cake while it’s still warm. Whether it’s vanilla or chocolate, pink or blue, the icing melts away, and the cake over all is disgusting and soggy.

All though she is grateful to her useless mother, and realizes that “useless” is a strong word, doesn’t ever say thank you. She knows that her current three kids are almost her age, and that they haven’t ever been able to experience the true pain that she felt when told this. They will never experience only having their dad for many years while her stepmother is off in Europe, or experiencing having the smallest feelings. Being tucked in at night while the rest of the apartment they lived in was quiet, the warm eyes when their worried and troubled dad checked up on them. How even though stress overflows their parents, they still have the time to
say the three simple words that she yells every morning even though there’s no one home, hoping they’d echo back to her. The three simple words that somehow are only muttered to her family dog and her stepmother, and haven’t been told to her since she was twelve. Three simple words that seem so easy to slip off the tongue but are never heard.

The realized then that maybe, just maybe, like how her mother left her, her dad will vanish one day, leaving her alone in an echoey house, by herself. Even though she used to hear the screams that’d be tossed around the house while she was “sleeping”, she knows that her dad and current mother are exchanging warm hugs and warm words without her notice.

She looks to her dog for warm hugs, and even though it’s painful when he scratches her after a while, she thinks of them as scars filled with love. The only thing she’d feel until the wretched year 2019 comes across and she’d leave. Leaving an emotionally empty house to her eyes into the hands of her father. walking out in the nice breeze until reality slaps her in the face and she realizes an empty house awaits her as she walks away from her old empty house. How misguiding life is, and how absolutely pitiful I am, to be thinking of this while typing a memoir for class.

Even though I type no tears come out, just the words I lip while listening to blaring music, as a bass guitar calms me. Hopefully a bass guitar and the lovely sound of the drums is filled with the 3 letters she doesn’t have in her vocabulary, but faintly remembers. Maybe the bass guitar will fill her heart while the sound of sticks on soulless drums warms her mind. My words are filled with no emotion, just like the words I never hear. I’ll type them out for you, to where you know the numerous amounts emotions running through me in this moment I’m too sick of to express.

“I love you.”
Connor Green  
Personal Essay/Memoir: *Tic Tock Like a Clock*  
Platte City Middle School  
Kelly Miller, Teacher

**Chapter 1**

I all started when I was six. It’s the disease that has changed my life. It’s the disease that I may never be cured from.

That day was burned in my memory forever. I remember every detail. I was over at my friend Ethan’s house when I twitched and the ball hit me square in the face. As I started to pick it up, I noticed Ethan was looking at me strangely then I heard him talking to me puzzled as he was backing away.

“H-h-h-ey, wh-wh-wh-what’s the m-m-m-matter?”

He backed farther away from me.

I had no idea what was happening.

“What are you doing?”

He started to go back inside. Being a six year old, I chased after him. Luckily, without meaning to, I ended up turning the monster inside me into the normal kid I was. That moment was the first of many.

**Chapter Two**

It was the summer before first grade. That day was the disappointment that would haunt me to this day. I went downtown to a place named Children's Mercy. My mom and I went up to the third level to the Developmental and Behavioral Department. I will ride that elevator to that level countless times after today. Sitting in that waiting room and in that chair for ten minutes was impossible for me.

They finally called my name. Once I was in, the doctor kept asking me questions. I was hooked up to a EKG. Every time I answered, the machine beeped. The data came in about a minute later. While the specialists analyzed it, I waited another forever and a half.

“What is Tourette Syndrome?” my mom asks with hesitation.

“It’s a muscle spasm that uncontrollably makes quick movements or sounds. It looks as though Connor may have had it for a while but it’s getting progressively advanced.”

“I will slap you” look, then we boarded the plane.

**Chapter 3**

I was bombarded by the sounds of slot machines. A funny thing about Vegas is that gambling is everywhere: between the airport and hotels, and also in restaurants. I can’t tell you how many times I thought it was an arcade. The “surprise” my parents had in mind was that I was in Vegas for a doctor’s appointment.
In my hotel, there was a mini-theme park and the one ride that stood out to me was the Detonator. My dad bought two tickets. I didn't really want to ride because I was scared. I didn't want to disappoint my dad either. I knew what happened inside my head when I was scared.

Tick. Tock. Tock. Tock. Tock. Tock. I couldn't make it stop. I gritted my teeth, sat on the silicone seat and waited to be catapulted in the air.

Tick. Tock. Tock. Tock. Tock. Louder and louder and louder. I screamed in agony, not from the ride but from what my brain was doing. Out of control. I couldn't stop it.

Chapter 5

I woke up the next morning and mom told me to get dressed. She laid out some pretty nice clothes so I knew I didn't have to endure any more theme parks. We piled into the rental car and drove to a long, low-lying building. Puzzled I asked what we were doing here. “We are going to see the doctor.” I sighed. I was signed in, and the waiting game continues.

“Connor Bean.”

Millions of thoughts raced through my head as I walked into the door. There were more questions than before. And they were all about me -- asked by the doctor, answered by mom.

“Alright hold on to this. Good job now just relax.”

I wasn't sure what this thing was, but of course the doctor's always right, so I gripped it as if my life depended on it. There was a little surge. This was repeated a couple more times. After it was over I went out to the waiting room again. I waited about another forever. So many emotions flooded me, it was like the mental Hoover Dam had just shattered. My name was called again. I guess I was ticking so much the receptionist asked if I was ok. Then I was in the room again.

“Alright Mr. Green I will have to take some blood”. As soon as I heard that sentence I was climbing Mt. Everest. Tick. Tock. Tock. Tock. Tock. Tock. Tock. Tock.

Chapter 6

“I think I need to call Dr. Batterson. Pack your bags we are going down town.” Mom was giving orders again and I ran to get my bags.

I ran upstairs to grab my stuff it wasn't ten minutes until we hopped in the Jeep and took off. When we got to the drab, nondescript building, we walked in, walked to the elevator and I pushed level three. There was no wait. I was in immediately.

I was in my “room” for a sleep study. I was shown around the room for the night although there was nothing to show. There was a bed, a dresser, and a big mirror in the room. An assistant told me I could pick out a movie -- this wasn't so bad after all. He put in the movie and I watched it while he put some wires on my body and head. Before I went to sleep, the doctor talked to me a little about what they were looking for.

They woke me up in the morning about an hour earlier than when I usually get up. I heard the words you should never hear when no one is around.

“Hey Good morning I will be there in a couple minutes to get everything off.” Yikes.

Chapter 7

They put me in the room to speak with the doctor.

“Connor the results are back. You have high Iron.”

I wondered what she was talking about. I looked at mom who, nodding intently, holding on to every word.

“Tonight you have to take these iron pills and good news, you will eat more red meat.”

I continued playing COD Zombies on my Nintendo as she left. I lost because of the talk and I had to pay attention to her. She could have told me later. Round three on easy, too. Dang.

Chapter 8
I haven’t talked about what this disease has cost me socially. I guess I really don’t want to talk about it too much because at first, it was unbelievably hard. Unbearable in fact. I had to explain to almost everyone why my head shook, why I chewed my tongue, why my body would act out as if it had a mind of its own. Trying living in a small town and being “different.” It sucks -- big time.

It was the start of fifth grade. I liked and was liked by almost everyone. Almost. There was a kid, Tyrone, who was big. A whole lot bigger than me. What I forgot to tell you is that I’m not too big -- I’m probably on the small side for a guy of my age. This makes it easy to become a victim. I sometimes wish that God had made all of us about six feet tall. It really would level the playing field for most of us small kids.

This one kid was a much bigger boy. His name was Tyrone. We both despised each other. So when it was finally time to tell everyone about my Tourettes, he used it against me. The idea was to answer questions and not get made fun of. Yeah, right. Who thought up this game? No wonder we all kinda hate school counselors.

About a week later, when we were in school, I was not doing what Tyrone wanted. He wanted me to get in a fight with his so-called “friend.” I kept on saying no and asking why. I never fight someone for no reason. I usually have a high tolerance with anger but when I snap, well let’s say that’s a story for a later date. It came time for recess. Tyrone was following me around pointing his hands like a clock. while going. “Tick tock tick tock, like a clock.”

I hauled off and let him have it. After recess I told my teacher. I didn’t get it in trouble, but Tyrone got called in to the principal’s office. They must have done a number on him because luckily it stopped right there. I don’t have it bad like the other kids that I’ve seen at the hospital. Some have it better. Some worse. Some get bullied more. Some have not told anyone about their Tourettes. Every day I wake up I’m just glad to be here. Glad to be alive. I was handed a diagnosis that no one really wants, but I know that I am strong and that I’ve made the best of it. I don’t complain because I know that I was given this for a reason. I am the better man.
Dear Troy,

Why would you do this to me? You put me in so much pain, knowing if I try to get away you will hurt me even more. You either love me, or you don’t. You can’t just hit me because you feel insecure, or whatever you are mad about. I did love you, but I stopped. The first time you hit me I thought it was a mistake, maybe a joke. I didn’t think it would go on for 9 months. Is that all you wanted? To hurt me? Well, now I’m gone, and it’s mostly your fault. I don’t miss you. I believed everything you said when we met. I now can’t feel anything. I’m safe, from you.

Whitney

I stood there, looking at the reflection of me. Cuts and bruises cover my whole body. How could he do this to me? A deep cut covered the inside of my arm from the knife he pulled on me last night. I’m afraid of him, but parts of me still love him. I grab a sweater and pull it over my head. The long sleeves hide my scars and cuts from him. I grab dark skinny jeans that cover all my bruises from him throwing me. The hardest part is to cover my face. I grab my makeup bag, and put concealer on my face. I put on layer after layer so it’s not noticeable. I run down the stairs knowing if I am late he is going to hurt me.

My dad says goodbye to me. He doesn’t really care about me, though. All my dad cares about is his work. He never talks to me, he used to care so much when my mom was around, but she left us when I was 10. It’s been four years without ever seeing her, she doesn’t even try to contact me. I wish I could tell my dad everything about him, but if I did he wouldn’t care. I hear a loud honk outside, I run out without getting breakfast hoping he won’t hit me today.

I walk up hesitantly, wondering if he was in a good mood.

He rolled down his window, he starts talking to me, telling me how good I look today. I never know if he’s lying or not. His hair falls perfect in brown locks, he’s wearing a sweater and khaki pants, he’s perfectly imperfect. I open the car door, and look in the back seats, two high school girls are in the car. He touches my shoulder as I sit down, and pulls my hair behind my ear, his eyes sparkle when he looks at me, it makes me fall in love with him again and again.

I glance back at the two girls awkwardly sitting there. He explains that they needed a “ride”. The girl behind him puts her hand on his shoulder and gives him a light squeeze. Who are they? I think to myself, mentally noting to ask him later. He drops the unknown girls off before me. He turns around and starts driving to the Middle School. I ask him, who they are and he returns my question to a loud shut up, the pain of the “shut up” went through my whole body, and shatters my heart. I ask him another time, his muscular hand, takes a strike to my face, I cried out with a yelp. He quickly apologizes, but I sit there, speechless. This side of him makes me hate him so much. I honestly don’t know what to do anymore, thoughts of suicide have streamed my brain before, but I was never going to do it.

He pulls up to the Middle School and I jump out, not even looking back. He tells me he loves me. I don’t respond, I don’t believe it. He gets out of his car, and yells at me. I was used to it, he did this at least once a week, but this time was different, he yelled louder, and everyone was staring. “What’s your problem?” I asked foolishly, knowing it was a mistake.

Then everything went black.

All I can remember is him pushing me down on the floor, and his hulky fist into my face. I wake up still on the cold hard cement ground outside of my school, I see his Camaro driving off in the distance. I think hard about all my options, I want the pain to stop, I love him, but I can’t go on with this any longer. A face appears right above me, it was my only friend, I look at my arm and my sleeve is pushed up so you can see my cut.

“Again?” she asks. I slid my sleeve down to cover the cut, and nod my head. She helps me up, and asks if I’m okay. I explain what happened, and told her what my thoughts were, tears stream down her face, screaming at me, saying to change my mind, but I was set on the idea.
The day flashed like my life will, short. It was a good last day. At least my dad won’t have to pretend to care about me anymore, he can just live his life without me. My mom she won’t even know about it, at least I’ll be away from him. I will miss her, she was the only one that really cared about me.

I was done with him, done with my life. How could my life be much better? I am suffering, no one ever cared about me, I was all alone. I walk into the house, it was vacant, only me. I liked it that way.

My phone buzzed, “We should hang out tonight.”

It was him, I put phone down and I run up to my room, pacing it back and forth. I sit there tracing different letters into a note, for him. I needed to tell him, that he is the reason. I was physically stabbed by him. He did nothing but hurt me over and over.

I start crying, the thought of not breathing anymore made my mind blow up with questions. I lay on my bed, so frustrated, my face starts tingling, and it starts to burn. I can’t do this, but I can. No you can’t. You’ll be safe, from everything. I searched my house for some knife, this was happening. I walk downstairs to the garage, and find a knife, I think it was the my dad got on the trip to Colorado. The knife was brown, with the sharpest edge on the top. I run my fingers back and forth, on the knives handle, making sure this was the right choice. I walk to the main entrance of my house and set the knife down on the table next to the door.

I heard a knock at my door, I ignore it, and I go upstairs and run to my room. I glance down to the front door and I see it open with a crash. It was him.

“Do you think you can get rid of me this easy?” he yells. His eyes glare at the knife on the table and run over and grabs it, then he starts sprinting up the stairs. I stare at him, and he walks right to me. He holds out the knife right in front of me. He’s going to kill me.

“Why are you doing this to me?” I cry.

“I’m doing this because I love you.” he replies angrily. This is not love, he doesn’t love me. He pins me down with the blade to my throat. I start to choke, tears form and spill over onto my cheeks. He doesn’t care. He leans in and kisses me on my cheek, and then I feel skin ripping from my neck. Pain, all I feel is pain. My vision is turning blurry, I blink for the last time.

Darkness thankfully envelopes me.
I grab my running shoes, and head outside for my morning jog; it was 5:30, still dark outside. As I trot outside I trip over my own feet, which was strange because I am not clumsy at all. I jog down the cement stairs that lead from the sidewalk from my old town house that was older than my grandma. As I reach the end of the stairs, I trip again. I was really tired this morning; maybe I’m tripping because of that? I walk down the street to get to the stop sign, where I start my daily mile. As I reach the stop sign, I start to jog; I jog around 7th Street, and turn onto Auburn Lane, as usual.

Immediately, as I turn I feel my left leg start to tingle; is my foot asleep? I keep on jogging to wake up my leg. I turn onto Hampton Street, and keep on jogging. This was the street I sprinted on; I pick up my energy and start sprinting. My left foot starts tingling in my toes, what is wrong with my leg? It works up my foot, and suddenly my whole leg feels like little tiny needles are poking it; my leg went numb. I couldn’t feel anything in my leg. My leg felt like, nothing. I collapsed, I didn’t have the strength to hold myself up, as much as I tried and tried, I couldn’t feel any part of my leg. My vision; it’s blurry, I hardly can’t see anything, and then all I see is black.

My eyes start blinking; there’s a face hovering above me, the blurriness, starts to focus, I realize it’s my mother, her eyes have tears descending down her cheeks, “Mom, what’s wrong?” I ask, she responds with a sober. Reaching up with my hands to hug her, I wrap my arms tightly around her, I hate seeing my mom cry, and it makes me want to cry. I pull away from her, and I lay back down. I’m in a room, the painting is white, and I’m in a hospital. As I turn my head to the right, a doctor walks through. He glances at me and writes something on his clipboard. “We’ve run some tests on your disease—” I cut him off.

“Disease? What disease?” I ask.
"You have ALS." he responds with sorrow in his voice.
"What is ALS? It can be cured, right?"
"ALS, is a disease where the muscles slowly atrophy. Sadly, it cannot be cured, at the best, you could live 5 years.” He responds with sorrow in his voice.
“W-what’s the worst.” I say with a sob.
“Six months.” He says quietly.
“What are the results of the test?” I spit out of my mouth, full out sobbing.
“Well, your left leg is already paralyzed, which means you have had ALS for at least two months, we will need to put you in a wheelchair. The results say, that you have less then,” he quiets down and says, “four months, or less to live.” The room quiets down and the doctor steps out of the room, my mom sobs broke the silence. My eyes fill up with water, then they rain out, tears stream down my face, one by one quickly down my face.

My life was perfect, was. This disease will ruin my life. I was homecoming queen freshman year, I started varsity as a freshman, on the undefeated state winning volleyball team. I had so many friends; I was always the main attention, but not anymore.

The doctor comes back into the room, pushing a wheelchair, for me. “You are free to go, but you will have a check-up every two weeks. You can go to school, until further notice.” he states. My mom lifts me up and puts me in the wheelchair. She strolls me out of the hospital into the car, I get up on one leg and pop into the front seat, it felt weird, I only could feel one leg, it’s like the other leg has been cut off or disappeared. My mom mopes to the driver seat as the tears keep on coming down her face. The drive is quiet, no talking.

As my mom strolls me into the living room, I tell her, “I don’t want to tell anyone, not even dad, if we even know where he is. I don’t want anyone to treat me different because I am going to die.”

“You can’t hide something as big as this from everyone. How are you going to explain the wheelchair?” She responds.

“I broke my leg”, please mom, this is the only thing I want from you, you have me for what, four months? Please just don’t bring anything up, or talk about it. I really don’t want to hear that I am dying because, I know I
I want to die, happy at least.” Tears stream down my eyes, it was the truth, and I didn’t want anyone to treat me any different.

“Okay, if that’s what you really want.” I nod my head as she comes over and hugs me.

Suddenly I jerk awake and glance at my alarm clock, it’s 5:54, I’m supposed to get up in six minutes. Then I feel it, the pain, the needles poking my right leg. I start to panic, I try to get up and move my cover, but I can’t get up. My waist down is paralyzed, can’t move anything. They are all dead, and once all of my body is dead, I am dead. It’s been a month since I’ve been diagnosed with ALS, and I’m dying faster than I thought I would. I can’t die.

“Mom, help! Please! Mom!” I scream at the top of my lungs. It was silent, until I hear my mom’s footsteps running up the stairs. She runs in breathing for air, I wish I could still run. She sees me, in pain, I can’t imagine how she’s going through with this, seeing your own daughter die. Tears stroll down her eyes, I sob. “What happened?” She cries.

“I can’t get up mom, I’m paralyzed.” She cries and grabs the phone. I can’t tell who she is calling, the doctor, or school. She dials a number; I adamantly know it’s the school. She tells Ms. White, the front desk lady that I will no longer be able to go to school. I freak out, and start shaking and whimpering, I am going to die.

It was almost two weeks ago, I now know, I’m paralyzed from waist down, and soon, neck down, actually in not much longer I won’t be able to breath. My friends have no clue what’s going on, they just think I’m really sick, well I am. I honestly haven’t heard from them since I went to school. I’m now home-schooled by my mom, but there is really no point to it, I’m half dead, it’s not like I could become a millionaire in weeks, for getting a good education, and a good job. Really I’m not learning anything, just that my mom cries every time she looks at me, it’s depressing, I feel like, I did something horrible. I hardly have enough strength to push myself in the wheelchair. It has really been terrifying; I’ve realized I have been dying my whole life, not just the past 5 months.

I rolled into the kitchen using all my strength, which was the first time I have had enough strength to do anything, really. I actually thought I might be cured, which was a stupid thought considering this is incurable. All the doctors do is check up and see what my progress is. They do nothing to help.

I start eating my Cocoa Pebbles, my usual breakfast, right as I start to swallow, I feel the tingling, the needles, in the only part of my body I was alive in, and it goes numb, can’t feel anything. I can’t swallow my Cocoa Pebbles; it’s lodged in my throat. I start coughing trying to lean over, but I can’t. My head starts getting dizzy “Help!” I yell, I could only see black and red dots flashing through my eyes, then I see a light, and it’s moving closer and closer to me.

I gasp for air, waking up, I was in Doctor Crag’s room. It was where I usually saw my progress. Was I dreaming? Is this whole thing a dream? Do I really have ALS? So many thoughts ran through my brain, “She’s awake!” It’s my mom’s voice. “Honey, are you okay how do you feel? You choked, and,” she pauses, and tears streams down her cheek, again. Oh help me, how much water could be in her?

“You are, completely paralyzed.” Dr. Crag interrupts her. I freeze in shock, how could I die? I’m only 15, how could this happen to me? The whole room is silent. I can hardly feel anything, but the only thing I can feel is my breath, I’m hardly breathing, it’s hard. I can’t have much longer, my mom and Doctor Crag step out of the room, to give me some time alone, but really I don’t want time alone, I want my mom right next to my side.

My mom walks back into the room, it felt like minutes, but really hours. I was hardly breathing, “Maybe I could’ve done something to help prevent this, and it’s all my fault. How could I let my daughter die, without doing anything to help. I’m so sorry, I love you, Ashley.” She sobs, she probably doesn’t know if I can hear her.

“I love you too.” I finally get out. I gasp for air, knowing it was my last breath. Pictures flash through my brain, of my life, and then it went dark. Until I see a small light, it’s getting closer, and soon, all I see is that light.
“Starving artist,” she called out, leaning dramatically over the sink. Her gaze flicked back at me, ascertaining with a nod that I paid attention. Her pointed grimace sharpened when I rolled my eyes.

“I know mom,” I said for the umpteenth time. “I’m not going to become an artist! I just like to draw! Okay?”

She shrugged her shoulders as she filed more dishes into the sink. “You wouldn’t make any money, sweetie! I don’t want you to have debt!”

Sigh. I hunched over my plate and speared a hunk of watermelon. Starving artist, huh? Well, if they’re that hungry, can’t they just eat their pasta shells? You know what I’m talking about. The bag of dried macaroni that lounges in the pantry of every artist known to man. Sometimes they whip it out with an inspirational flourish and make a necklace or two.

“Writers make good money; if they can sell their books. And you’ll definitely make it! You’re a good writer!”

I shoved a cube of watermelon into my gaping mouth and sank my teeth into its flesh. Sometimes I liked to pretend that with each chew, my saliva dissolved another one of the obstacles blocking the easel. Crappy pay. Chew. Supplies are outrageously expensive. Chew. Artists never get famous until after they die. Chew. Well, a lot of writers don’t either. Chew. The watermelon exploded with blasts of water that I gulped up with gluttony. I didn’t understand how someone too lazy to refill their cup of water could ever make a career writing, but if my characteristically critical mom thought I could do it... Then I had to stand a chance.

“Thanks,” I replied without swallowing. Mom glanced at me mournfully but just shook her head. “Do you need any help? I’m going upstairs.”

“No, I’ve got it. But tell your sister to play with the dog, okay? She’s always running off.”

“Uh huh.” I raced upstairs before mother decided to pin me with the task of chasing Lucy underneath the dining room table instead of my sister.

“Hey, mom said that you need to play with Lucy!” I found my sister lounging on her bed with cords twisting out of her ears and into her ferociously guarded iPod. “What are you watching?”

“Nothing!” She jammed her thumb against the power button and set the iPod on her nightstand. “Can you look at my drawings?”

“Uhm.” I walked towards her bed, mentally debating. “Really quick.”

She jumped up with an increasingly rare “Yay!” and darted to her desk. “See? I can’t get the eyes right! They look really bad. And this one is the worst.” My sister pointed at the slightly deformed anime caricature on the right side of her notebook page. The heavily drawn eyes took up over half of the poor girl’s face, and I immediately noticed her unfortunate lack of eyebrows.

“It doesn’t look that bad,” I told her. “Better than I could do at your age.”

“Really? How much better? Better than you when you were a grade above me?” She asked, requiring justification. That’s my sister. There has to be a reason to every decision I make, and she’s always coaxing it out of me. Mom had already imposed the “starving artist” discussion upon her just a short while after she noticed that I was spending more time doodling and less time writing. Fortunately, my lil’ sis didn’t mind, and she didn’t even have a remote interest in becoming an artist. She just wanted to draw like sissy. So thus my mother and my sister mutually agreed that a career path in mental or occupational therapy could utilize her people skills and her uncanny ability to come up with ways to combat drama. Neither of which I was born with. Yay me.

I thought for a moment, too lazy to explain my artistic ability when I was her age in detail. “Well, I don’t know about that. But you’re definitely better than me when at your age. All of my heads looked like turnips.”

“Hey! Someone needs to come play with Lucy!” my mom hollered.

“You do it.” I vanished into our Jack-and-Jill bathroom before she had the time to protest. I meandered around my cluttered room, turning on lamps, pulling the curtains on my window aside, and flipped on the light switch. My laptop fired up with its familiar cacophony of groans and churns, as though it was having a rather
tragic case of indigestion. All of my YouTube and Deviantart tabs were still running, remnants of last time I wasted hours browsing the interweb. I refreshed them all and grabbed my sketchbook, ready to work.

Seeing your drawing dance to life is an unexplainable sensation that rushes up from your gut. It comes in layers as you add the pieces onto the paper. First, the guidelines, which unconsciously bring your eyebrows to knit together, and then you start fleshing out your figure, the feeling warming your cheeks as you see curves come together to form a body. Then you add the details that twist your mouth into a smile. Their hair, their eyes, their clothes, the grin pulling up their cheeks: all of the individual things that help make the figure no longer just a human. It makes them a person. It makes them not a something, but a someone. That’s a wonderful feeling. It whips your breath away and rewards you with a sense of accomplishment. You created something. You formed it out of a simple sheet of paper and 0.7 lead.

In those halcyon moments, I understand why those starving artists don’t give a fig if there’s no food on the table. Because it’s the closest thing to magic that we’ll ever have in our drab, disappointing world.

I suppose that writing is the same way, for some people. Honestly, it infuriates me more than enchants. I can never seem to get the words to flow right unless I’m heavily inspired. Unless I remain in the zone, uninterrupted and carefree of my results. Because honestly, every time I sit down at my desk with the mission to pump out something great, I just sit there. Stumped. And when inspiration does flow from my fingertips, it seldom lasts for long. As soon as someone barges into my room, (no matter how worthy the intrusion), I always have to re-read the entire story to get back into the gist of my writing. And even then, I’m nagging myself, sometimes glowering at my desk in silence because I can’t think of how to phrase a particular sentence.

Drawing… Is different. There’s no one pushing me to draw, no one expecting me to draw a masterpiece because everyone knows I can’t. That kind of freedom, the feeling of doing something you love for yourself, is invigorating. I have to fight for perfection in every line, and my drawings still always lack. But in a way, it’s a satisfying kind of sucking. The kind of losing that doesn’t feel like losing because you know you can never win. There will always be so much to learn and improve on that the idea of perfection is laughable. Truly, it was never really a fair match to begin with. You tell yourself that you’ll practice and do better next time so you can get closer to scoring that win. The periods of production where you churn out more junk than treasure don’t seem like wasted hours when you do something you love. It becomes an enjoyable breed of practice. You gain experience by doing. Even looking back on heavily flawed sketches and failed shading doesn’t make you cringe. The improvements shine just as brightly as your mistakes blemish it. And tinkering the mistakes out of your next sketch is its own reward. You complete a drawing, you see what you did wrong, and you try to tackle it the next time.

And you spend hours combing over three or more different artist channels on YouTube, soaking up their advice because everyone in the comments says using this method to draw poses, or using that method for shading, works.

Writing isn’t like that. Nobody writes the same way. Some people write in bulk, rushing out run-on sentences and not even caring, because they can go back and edit it later. But then other writers pause as they work, retracing their steps and rephrasing whatever doesn’t sound right as they form it. There are a few how-to-write videos on the tube, but most of them tell me things I already know. Powerful verbs best adjectives, passive is your greatest enemy, bla da bla da bla...

But I keep on drawing. And I keep on writing, trying to love each just as much as the other. One is my passion, how I communicate and express my ideas. The other, my hobby, the friend I turn to when things get just a little over-heated with Google Docs. Art is my way to calm down and give time for the ideas to flow on in.

In short, my mom does not have to worry about me becoming a starving artist. She doesn’t have to fret about me begging my neighbors to have pity on the poor girl who thought she could support herself with a career of drawing circles on canvases and stamping prices on the corners. Because, honestly, I know what my passion is.

Just sometimes, I forget. And it takes another way of creating, of sweeping lines and splashes of color instead of the usual array of typeset and letters to call me back. That’s the wonderful thing about being a writer. You have the freedom to find inspiration in anything.

I learned that today, trying to explain to my mother why art means so much to me. And each day that I lose sight of my inspiration and reclaim it once more, I will learn it again. The starving artists and their macaroni legacy are truly watching out for me. And I truly am glad.
Madelyne Hartleroad  
*Poetry: Voyages to a Better World*  
Platte County High School  
Angela Perkins, Teacher

The world would be a better place  
if galaxies were weaved of dreams  
and we could fashion a spacecraft out of stardust and tears  
to soar away from all our deepest fears  
and take refuge inside the swirling purple lights

I would lead them all there  
the lost, dispirited souls who believe they cry alone  
to the haven of love, light, and stars  
I’d whisper that the journey isn’t far  
they only need to close their eyes and let me lead the way

I see them where you expect to find them least  
in the quick snap, the rushing tides of the everyday  
while others absently swim in the golden caresses of life and the sun  
or cut through the waves as though life’s a race they need to run  
the hollow hearted are drowning, spiraling down, as if they’re filled with weights

They’re slashed at with the darkest of shadows until they’re robbed of all air  
told words dripping with lies until they can’t bear to hear  
told to hate themselves until they can’t bear to breathe  
neglected, teased, shunned, ostracized, sucked down into the sea  
while the other swimmers glide on overhead, leaving passing shadows in the deep

You know they’re out there, just as plentiful and miserable as stars are bright  
if someone took even a second out of their halcyonic day  
to pause and stretch out their shimmering fingers like the sun’s golden rays  
and touch their faces, warm their hearts, whisper kind words  
call them back to the light

The world would be a better place  
if only they could be whisked away in my shuttle of dreams  
to a reality where pain and hate has no power and they can rediscover love  
to a luminescent galaxy shifting somewhere far above  
yet we all know that such a fantasy does not exist here on earth

But something else does  
you are here, you are as bright and as beautiful as any star  
you have the power to swim, to dive, to fly  
you can save lives  
if only you reach out your hand  
and dream of making the world a better place
The day he moved in was a game changer. My mom fixed up the spare room and we got lessons on how to properly feed him through a feeding tube.

Grandpa had lived on his own for many years after Grandma died. After Grandma's brain tumor took her from this world Grandpa was broken, he had lost his only son years before from the same thing, and now my mom was the only immediate family he had left. So, when he fell and broke his hip, had skin cancer, and stopped eating, my mom insisted that he move in with us so that we could keep an eye on him.

A couple years before he had his throat stretched and as a result he couldn’t eat solid food, eating only soup, mashed food, or liquid protein shakes. But, when he was in the nursing home for the broken hip he started refusing to eat the protein shakes and started losing weight rapidly. Mom started worrying about him and the doctor suggested a feeding tube. Grandpa was skeptical at first but eventually agreed. When he moved in my mom and I took over feeding him four times a day through the feeding tube.

Every day at seven in the morning he had his first feeding through the tube. He kept the tube stuck in the pocket of his shirt the other end of which led down to the incision point in his belly button. The tube after so many feedings often smelled rancid and protein shakes weren’t the best smelling either. The feeding tube led into the incision point in his belly button and sometimes the seal around the tube would leak, creating the rancid smell. He drank the protein shakes but had to lean to one side because half of his throat was paralyzed. As we fed him we would watch M*A*S*H*, Gunsmoke, Big Valley, or The Rifleman. He could sing all the theme songs and quote some of the lines in every show because he had seen them so many times.

Every day at three in the afternoon he would come out of his room with his cane or walker, which ever one he chose to use that day depending on how strong he felt, and get a mug of ice water filled to the brim with ice and a glass of Pepsi with only three ice cubes in it. I asked him once why it was always three and he said, “Because honey, that’s how many your grandma used to put in.” It was things like that, that made me tear up.

When I was little we would go to Grandpa’s for Christmas every year. After he stopped driving he began giving my mom money to buy us presents. When we would open them he would be as surprised as us at what we got. Sometimes he would play with us after the presents were open like he was a little kid again. One year we played bop-it and Wii bowling for hours. Christmas was my favorite part of the year because our whole family would prepare food the previous day and we would pack it and the presents up and drive to Grandpa’s for a day and just be together. I think it was his favorite day too, because for just one day we all came to visit him, and he wasn’t alone for a day. For just one day his whole family was there, just visiting with him.

Before he moved in with us, back when he lived alone, we would go down to Grandpa’s sometimes and he would be sitting on his front step with pecans in his hand and his “pet” squirrel would be eating from the palm of his hand. The squirrel wasn’t really a pet but more of a wild squirrel that Grandpa fed and halfway tamed. He loved that squirrel, so much that in the winter he would make dad go out and put corn on the fence in a place where the squirrel, also known as Frisky, could get to it. We asked mom why Grandpa had a pet squirrel and all she said was, “It gives him something to do besides read all day.”

Grandpa loved to read, anything and everything all the time. He read his Bible most of the time and if it wasn’t that it was anything my sisters would give him. He mostly read about angel stories and books that pastor’s had written about traumatic times in their lives and how they overcame those problems. He would always tell me that when he was done reading them that I had to read them next. However, usually the books were too difficult for me to read because they had words and dialect that were beyond my comprehension, but I respected him and attempted to read everything he funneled my way.

When he started getting sicker it was subtle at first; he started getting weaker, coughing harder, walking slower, but, when it started getting worse mom took him to the hospital and they admitted him for pneumonia. The pneumonia was attacking his lungs and since he was older and his immune system was already weaker because he had taken a fall in previous weeks, the pneumonia hit him even harder. He was in the hospital for several weeks and we weren’t sure if he would get better. He had to have breathing treatments and fluids administered through an IV. My mom was there every day and the rest of us were there.
after work or school each day. My sisters even took off work to come and stay with him to give my mom a break.

Grandpa's sisters came and visited him in the hospital; one even flew from Arizona just to see him. All the family members came to see him at least once to say their goodbyes. Most of the time he was unconscious from exhaustion and the medicine, but I think he knew that they were there anyways. We could sit there and hold his hand and talk to him but he had an oxygen mask on most of the time and couldn't talk to us even when he was awake.

The day Grandpa died we halfway expected it. He hadn't talked in a while; he wasn't squeezing our hands anymore or responding when we asked him questions. When the nurse came in and said he had stopped breathing, it wasn't really a surprise but it started to feel more real. Realizing that he would never watch Gunsmoke or Bonanza together again. He would never sing to us again, and we wouldn't get to talk while we fed him again. At that point I realized that a major part in my life had come to a close, a huge role model in my life was gone and I was going to have to live without him from now on.

The funeral was nice; he would've liked it. We sang his favorite songs and all his friends and family were there. His favorite preacher did the service and everyone cried during it. I skipped school that day and everyone else took off work. He was buried in the cemetery not that far from his house, and placed right next to Grandma. Everyone shook our hands and told us how sorry they were and how much he would be missed.

Looking back now most of the funeral is vague, I remember bits and pieces but the only thing I really remember is when my mom handed me a rose from the top of the casket and I knew an important chapter in my life had come to a close.
Liza Heeler

Poetry: Pavement, Bloodshed, and Hearth
Bode Middle School
Josie Clark, Teacher

Pavement
Feet pounding against dry the charcoal colored path
like a heartbeat
steady
even
endless
or so it seemed
because it took away me
even the little burn that caused me to slow
or the feeling you get when you make it all the way home
simply because you've never been that far
this disease has caused me to lose everything
peace
love
and especially my youth

But the worst part is I lost hope
it unites families
plants ideas that are just a little too far away
just because of the society we are in
but it's taught me to look at it from a different angle
because if you get just the slightest feeling of strength
it can save you

but not in my case
so my life remains shattered
like the glass they poke and prod me with
and no matter how many people
try to take care of me
they always end up taking me apart
deepening the crack
lessening the hope
and ruining the chance I have of putting me back together

Bloodshed
I trace beautiful patterns again and again
Until a spark of red trickles from my veins
I watch as it paints the sore train track
Covering my wrist like a bracelet
But this bracelet is one of many that carry up my arm

I tried counting the intersections once
And like a kid counting the lines of a cut down tree
I got lost in its beauty
I wear long sleeve shirts now
and have one fist open
one fist closed
only revealing part of the I’m fine
so I remind myself to believe it

I still engrave every piece of hate and sorrow I have upon my body
It stretches across my once strong collarbone
And tattoos my weak left arm
not deepening in anyone’s eyes but mine

People say we do this because we are depressed
But what really we are doing
Is seeing how long it takes a selfish peer to notice us
But we turn to ash before that happens
and we fall seven times
but don’t stand up eight

So next time you see a girl staring at her wrist
Entranced
Do not ignore her
Because she is simply trying to find a positive point in the human race

She is donating her mind
and health
So that others will learn the real meaning of sympathy
And realize it is more than a get-well card
With red flowers that only remind you of the blood you shed everyday
For another brutal and hated human

**Hearth**
Ashes dance around
creating the a dizzying hallucination
and the fire glows
creating a tribal theme reflecting off my red hair
my green eyes watch attentively
and burnt orange smiles in them
I lean back in my chair
and let it’s creaks not remind me of old and broken
but something that only needs a little love to be fixed
so tuck my legs underneath me
I let the peace around me
wish me to sleep
but as each ember dies
so does a small part of me
and slowly the peace dies away
and I find myself back in reality
not in the peace I believed was real
Missouri Youth Write 2015

Henry Heidger
Poetry: Morning of the Koi
De Smet Jesuit High School
Robert Hutchison, Teacher

A child’s hand reaches
through the rails of the Japanese Bridge,
as if to wave goodbye.

A garden is a departure and a return
to the vital green of plants.
The birds of paradise are blooming into song

this time of year. The child peeps
through rails to see the koi.
He tosses them fistfuls of pearls.

Their mouths gape drain-like.
The child mimics their glug-glugging
of water. The plants surround

the tea palace in the center of the lake.
It is a lonely structure, standing
like an island, a stone ornament.

Bells chime across the water
as the ceremony begins in Saturday morning wind.
Ripples bow their heads and caress

the array of grasses, of water
lilies and spider orchids.
Botanists study for years to remember

the language of flowers.
Henry Heidger  
Poetry: Slowly, Light is Quick  
De Smet Jesuit High School  
Robert Hutchison, Teacher  

Morning is newborn, but not tender  
like a child. It slips through curtains,  
illuminates a page of face.  

The light doesn’t know that it’s filled  
with particles of dust,  
an abstract noun—  

reality. The reminder of day is light.  
There’s truth in every ghost.  

Morning appears in the shape  
of a yellow strand of events:  
coffee stains, rings  

on napkins, a glint  
of sunlight on pavement.  
The sun rises slowly from her bed,  

but the light is quick.  
The windshield is curtainless—  
it only restrains gravel and insects.  

Light charges into the eyes.  
Cold glass waits for a handprint.
Henry Heidger

Poetry: Allegory of Spring
De Smet Jesuit High School
Robert Hutchison, Teacher

I. Daffodils

The tender shoots struggle in the soil.
What sprouts from the ashes
of the house that burned?
The pretty girls have vanished
into the air. The shoots work upwards
like foreign bodies beneath flesh.

They rise from the soil of March,
but April frost sneaks up their legs
and chokes them at the root.

II. Dampness

The foot
sinks into mud
in the inevitable thaw
of earth, frozen fingers
and the treasures winter hid.
The trowel, the shears, missing
since November under snow,
appear in rust red.

The air
is warm. The breeze returns
life to hardened ground.
First with the damp of snowmelt,
then with rain, drainpipes sound
of rushing water, cascading
from shingles into gutters.
The thaw is an exhibition, a reveal
of winter's takings.

The surprise
of green is a quick adjustment.
The sky was gray, but now
is blue. The earth was dead.
The green is bounding with delicate
buds and animals. They appear
into the warmth. Where were they
when winter was? They were waiting
for the thaw, the damp release.

III. Lichens

The wall has collapsed
in places after winter’s breath

cracked the stones like vertebrae,
uncovered in an excavation. Spring

soil can be tilled open
to expose a chit of pottery

or shoulder blade. The broken
bird’s egg is a skull.

The wall rises out of winter, born
with a crust of lichens.
Henry Heidger
Poetry: The Blue Hour
De Smet Jesuit High School
Robert Hutchison, Teacher

Blue comes and claims an hour as its own.
Each day sets aside the time
to die completely, to sacrifice clarity.

The hour between the burial of the sun and
its reappearance on the moon is a ritual—
land allows blue to simplify

and consecrate it’s folds. The color refracts
over us. The sky is silent. It doesn’t respond.
Sheet upon sheet, snow cascades

off a roof into a juniper hedge, blue
in this hour of taking. It is the time of day
when we can feel. The deepness of our

breath escapes from our lungs—colloidal,
heaving into the air until the end
of the blue hour, nightfall.
Carletta Hensley

Personal Essay/Memoir: Born on Earth to Bloom in Heaven

Platte City Middle School
Kelly Miller, Teacher

You are my sunshine. My only sunshine. You make me happy. When the skies are grey. You'll never know dear. How much I love you. So please don't take, my sunshine, away.

My mother blamed herself. My father said it was meant to be. The doctors comforted us. And our family grieved. But I, I wasn’t quite sure what to think. Of course I was only 4 at the time, but I can remember it like it was yesterday.

I was at Montessori school when they got the call. My dad was waiting outside. A strange emotion was radiating off of him. I wasn't sure if it was excitement or nervousness. And knowing him probably a little bit of both. We sped to the hospital, time was our enemy. Throughout the whole trip my dad attempted to explain what was going to happen and how and when and where and who was going to be there. I tried to act like I was listening but it all just went in one ear and out the other. I had a bad habit of ignoring people. This time though, I wasn’t ignoring him I was just straight out confused.

We flew around the corner and as soon as the hospital came into view my dad fell completely and utterly silent. He pulled into the parking lot and whipped into a parking space. He made me put on my winter coat, just like every morning before I left the house. The air was chilly, which wasn’t a big surprise considering it was late November. November 22nd 2003 to be exact.

We sat in the waiting room for about 5 minutes as my dad filled out paperwork. The nurses skimmed through the pages for another few minutes, then after they were accepted one of them led us into the heart of the hospital.

We were brought to room 210 in the delivery wing. My dad barged through the door. I started to foll but before I could slip in behind him he shut the door in my face.

“Sweetie I think it’s best if you wait out here for a while.” I turned around to find a lady dressed in a polka dot smock and matching pants. Obviously a nurse. So without an argument I let her lead me around the corner to a small room. “Okay darling, this is a room just for you and your family, now don't worry where your parents are they are perfectly fine. Trust me.” The nurses face was stern. Then out of nowhere her mood completely. Her face lifted and a bubbly smile spread across her face. “Oh I forgot, has your dad told you about what is happening?” I nodded in response. “Okay good! My name is Pauline, if you need anything at all just come and get me I’ll be right around the corner.” She gave me a huge smile then opened the door and waved me inside. And just like we had come she walked off and disappeared through double doors across the hall.

For a few seconds I just stood there trying to take all of this in. Familiar voices sounded from inside the room.

“Carol relax its fine.”
“Oh I know I’m just nervous, I’d be a terrible mother if I wasn’t.”
“Sammy can you get me a cup of coffee.”
“Sure dad.”
“Hey guys anyone need to use the bathroom, I gotta go.”
“Nah I’m good.” Footsteps thundered across the room and just as I was beginning to open the door it flew open revealing a dozen people.

“Carlil!” My nana exclaimed delighted.

The person who had opened the door was my Uncle Sam. There was about 8 other people waiting in the room. Grandpa Sam, Grandma Janet, Grandma Joyce, Grandpa Willy, Great Grandma Carletta, Aunt Cathy, and two other people I didn't recognize.

“Were you just waiting out there?” Grandpa Sam asks me. I nodded.

“Come here sweetie.” Nana waves me over and makes some room for me next to her. I plopped down on the bench and sat there silently listening to the adults conversations for nearly half an hour until Pauline came to bring me some toys to play with. She explained to all of us that it would another few hours. Which didn't make my them that happy. So for the next hour I found a comfortable place on the floor playing with the
Barbie dolls that Pauline had let me borrow and listened to the adults fret and complain about how long they had been waiting here. But then my nana would get onto them and say, “It takes time.”

A “few hours” turned into 6 hours and 30 minutes. Those six hours consisted of four bathroom breaks, 12 bags of colored goldfish, 2 naps, and 9 rounds of 20 questions with my uncle Sam. Everyone was beginning to get restless. Grandpa Sam had left to get all of us McDonalds, because he said that he was tired of the complaining. Pauline had let my nana and my grandpa Sam see my mom and dad in the room I wasn’t allowed to go into. Which I didn’t think was fair at all. But at the time it was okay because I was involved in an intense game of 20 questions. After my last bag of Goldfish and I had become bored out of my mind with playing with Barbie Dolls, I took a quick nap. Well at least I thought it was going to be.

I woke up to the smell of fries and hamburgers. I looked out the window and it was pitch black. “Nana, what time is it?” I asked, surprising everyone that I was awake. “Oh you’re up!”, she said happily, “It’s 12:15.” Then she went back to eating her chicken sandwich. I noticed that the two strangers had left and it was just the 8 of us.

Seconds later the moment we had all been waiting for had arrived. Pauline appeared in the doorway. Her face was sullen and her mood had completely changed since the last time we had seen her. “Who would like to go first?” She managed a weak fake smile. I looked around, everyone had confused looks on their faces.

“Carli and I will go if that’s okay with you all?” My nana piped up, hesitantly. “Ok then follow me.” Pauline whispered. My nana reached out to grab my hand and guided me out the door. We followed Pauline to the room where my parents had been the whole day. She pulled my nana to the side before we entered the room. “I’m gonna talk to your nana real quick darling. One second.”

They talked for around three minutes, while I just waited a few feet away. Both of them turned around at the same time. My nana wiped her eyes but you could still see the remains of tears. The cleared her throat, wrapping her arm around my shoulders. “I’m ready, let’s go.” She managed to say. With that Pauline swung open the door and motioned for us to enter. The first thing I saw was my dad sitting beside a bed with his head in his hands. As I walked further into the room, I could see my mom propped up in the bed with a small bundle in her arms. Her face was bright red and her eyes big and puffy. She had obviously been crying. My mom was the first one to see me. Although, she didn’t say a word, I could tell by her expression that she was pleased to see me. I was guided to the side of the bed next to my father. My nana positioned herself on the other side of the bed with a camera held to her face.

My mom was the first one to see me. Although, she didn’t say a word, I could tell by her expression that she was pleased to see me. I was guided to the side of the bed next to my father. My nana positioned herself on the other side of the bed with a camera held to her face. “Do you want to hold her?” My mother asked me. I had never held a baby before but, considering this was my sister we were talking about I think I could manage. I nodded hesitantly. My father moved so I could get closer to my mother for the handoff. As I reached my arms out in front of me my mother began explaining to me how to hold her. After she was finished explaining she transitioned her into my hands.

I brought her close to my body, holding her tight, but not too tight. I felt awkward just sitting there holding her. I wasn’t quite sure what to do. Sensing my nervousness my mom gave me a pointer. “Tell her a story.”

My nana was snapping pictures from across the bed of me and my sister. Memories that I would soon wish I could recreate. I then did what my mother suggested, I began to tell her a story. But it just didn’t feel quite right so I paused. Then suddenly the words began flowing out of my mouth. I sang the every word of the song “You are my Sunshine” right there on the spot with Sadie laying in my arms. The whole entire thing. When I was finished I eagerly glanced at my mother, expecting a compliment but all I saw was tears. They we coming from both my mother and father. Out of nowhere my mother flew off the bed and out the door. My dad took Sadie from my arms and I was escorted out the door. And that was the last time I got to see my baby sister.

The next day I asked my parents when Sadie would come home. My parents sat me down on the couch. They explained everything to me, except in the child version. Here’s a quick summary of their speech.

It had turned out while Sadie was in my mommy’s stomach something happened that the doctors hadn’t picked up on and she had gone to heaven. I asked how she had been alive when I held her, and they told me she hadn’t been alive at the time. They explained there was nothing that anyone could do about it. Then I asked my final question, Where was she now? That’s what got them. My mom got up and left the room crying. Just like the day before in the hospital. My dad told me that God thought it was her time and wanted her to
meet Grandpa Bill and Punkin. (Both had passed away years before) I didn’t ask anymore question and haven’t since.

Every year we celebrate her birthday by releasing balloons with a little note attached from each one of us. Hoping that at somewhere in their journey she will find them. Then the other night dear. As I lay sleeping. I dreamt I held her in my arms. But when I awoke dear. I was mistaken. And I hung my head, and I cried.
Kalista Hill
Flash Fiction: Ballerina
Platte County High School
Angela Perkins, Teacher

My heart was racing, my toes throbbed, I felt dizzy and faint. The curtain raised, blinding me in a bright ray of oppression. The tune filled my ears and mind, but not my heart. My body did what it was supposed to; it raised itself up on the flat wood and silk, causing not only my bones to creek, but my soul as well. My arms raised up over my head ignoring the screaming inside. My leg raised, my toe pointed, my arms twirled and whirled around my loose body. I could not see through the weight of the light, I could not hear anything but the screams of my instructor.

The song raised and so did my body, it climaxed with strength and willingness, but mine didn’t. No, it was raised by a force outside of my control. Clammy hands gripped my waist allowing my legs to split mid-air. The muscles pulled in resistance, but they split despite my revulsion. My legs raised around my body and the firm force behind me, around me, lifting me again. Will it never stop? The music got quiet and so did my mind. I went flat and my toes screamed at my mind to stop, to have mercy, but that could never happen. My soul did not get enough rest for the music pounded and yelled at me, repeating the things that bring me down. Remind me of where I really am, what really happened.

The force expectantly knocked my feet from under me, but caught me letting my spine bend deeply. I was dead, I had no more life in me, and it didn’t matter anymore, because it was over. The curtain fell enveloping me in darkness, but not silence, never silence. The clapping and whistles drew my mind back to the present and created a sense of crowding and suffocation. I couldn’t breathe, I couldn’t see but I could feel. I could feel the clammy hands around my waist, bleeding through my leotard.

Eventually the sound muffled and left me in complete and utter darkness.
Kalista Hill
Poetry: I Feel it
Platte County High School
Angela Perkins, Teacher

I feel it, the words
the letter flying off the pages
the deceit and betrayal
the love and connection
I feel it, the blossoming
the pain and agony
the beginning and end
the life and death
I feel it, the rough paper
the black ink across the page
the leather around the mystery
the heaviness of the finish
I feel it, when I read
I am consumed by...
Something else
Someone else
I am a new person
Deep in the forest
at the tallest tower
fighting dragons
I feel it, all of it
Deep in my heart
Deep in my soul
I feel it all
This is not one of those stories where the girl gets the guy, or anything else with a happily ever after. I've learned to put down those books and stop fantasizing about the life I want to have, and deal with the life I’m pretty much stuck with.

The perfect life would be having a normal family, with money, where everyone was healthy, and the parents paid attention to both their daughters. But that’s never going to happen.

Here’s the thing. My sister has cancer. Leukemia. We took her to the doctor after we noticed she was always tired, started bruising easily, and got more sick than she had ever been before. They had her go to the hospital and a few days later, after they had taken a few tests, she was diagnosed. Obviously, she requires a lot of attention, which means that in the eyes of my parents, I am nothing more than another mouth to feed.

I get it. The girl is dying, and it’s selfish of me to want more attention in those circumstances, and any other circumstance for that matter, but that doesn’t mean that I don’t feel like chopped liver.

Ava and I had never really gotten along, so my mom suggested that we try to “mend our friendship” while we can. I’m pretty sure she got that from a My Daughter Has Cancer booklet we got from the hospital when she was first diagnosed. She seems to think it can solve all of our problems, and when my dad tries to tell her that we should spend time with her instead of reading from a book that’s mostly towards helping the parent emotionally for when she did die, my mom still thought the best thing to do was to take what the doctor gave us and use it to our advantage. I guess it had been helping a little though, I can tell our relationship is getting stronger, even though we all know, because of that, it’s going to hurt even more when she’s gone.

Today, we were going to “mend our friendship” and “bond” by going to the movies, which would mean we would spend two hours, not even talking to each other, watching a movie that in no way would affect our lives, mom’s idea. We decided to ditch that idea and go to the park instead. It’s a bit of a cliché really, my dying sister and I walking around a park full with laughing kids who are probably going to grow up one day and actually get to live the rest of their lives, but what am I supposed to do, take her to a graveyard and pick out a plot for her?

After walking around for a while, we sat down on a bench that was facing the playground. But she had her body turned towards the lake facing away from me, and she had stopped talking.

“Are you okay, Ava? We can go home if you want.” She turned towards me and shook her head no, tear streaks lining her face.

After a few minutes, she wiped away her tears with her sleeve and finally spoke. “I’m sorry.” She said laughing a little. “I don’t mean to be all emotional on you.” I looked away from her.

“You have every right to be, it’s fine, I get it.” I replied.

“You know I’m going to die right? It would take a miracle by God’s own hand for me to live, let alone be cured. Maybe I was meant to die. Maybe this will help people in other ways. Mom could become a motivational speaker!” She said laughing. I rolled my eyes.

“Don’t get all deep and hopeful on me now.” I said.

About three days later, she was in the hospital again, this time we were pretty sure she would be staying for a while. My dad had taken her while I was at school so when I got home and found a note on the table saying she was there, I went into panic mode, thinking, if she’s dead I will kill someone for not pulling me out of school. I drove my car to the hospital, trying to get ahold of my dad, and when he didn’t answer, that made me worry even more.

When I finally got there, my dad was sitting in the waiting room. If mom was still at work, and he hadn’t called me during school, or not, that had to be a good sign.

“Please tell me she’s okay.” I said to dad.

He sighed, “I think she’s going to be in the hospital for a while now. She had a stroke.”

I didn’t know if this was good news, because she was alive, or bad news because she was now in even more pain, and could be trapped in a place with doctors poking around and endless tests. Probably the latter,
and I wished our places were reversed. As cliché as that sounds, I really did. I knew she was in pain, we knew she would die this way, yet she was an innocent person, with whom cancer decided to destroy.

The next few days led a series of tests, new medicines, and multiple doctors and nurses coming in and out. The buzz of heart monitors and shuffling feet deafened me, and I thought this is no place to die. I had told my dad this and asked him if she could come home for her last few days. I knew it wasn’t up to him, or Ava for that matter, but I felt like I had to say it, so it felt like I had at least tried to help even if just for emotional reasons.

Over the weekends, I stayed at the hospital, even though I slept in my car because of the minimal room for visitors. It was better than sleeping at home. I was closer so if anything happened I would be right there. It’s not like I had anything to do over the weekends anyway. My only friend was my sister, which was depressing because most teenage girls have at least two friends, both of which don’t include your dying sister.

I was lucky I was sleeping at the hospital. If I hadn’t been, I probably would have missed her. I got a call from my mom, who was sleeping in Ava’s hospital room, at about one in the morning, that I should come up. I hoped they would let me up even though it wasn’t visiting hours, if they didn’t let me, I would kill someone just to get to my sister on time.

I got in to see her. I was crying, but she wasn’t. How could she be stronger than me, when I was the one who was standing and breathing properly?

“Make light of this situation.” She said. I rolled my eyes, as she let out a small laugh. “Maybe mom will become a motivational speaker.” I smiled, remembering when she had first said that to me.

“I love you, sis.”

My sister died just minutes after. And still, three years later, the pain demands to be felt every single second of the day.
The night was cold, wet and dreary, and lights shined from all corners of the street despite the early hour of midnight. Lamb’s breath puffed out like smoke as she limped down the street, leaving tiny footprints in the newly fallen snow. The snow, piled up and waiting to melt back into the heavens, seemed to glitter in the lamp light. Every snow crystal had the magnificence of a crystal ball or the sparkle in the eye of a wondrous child. Lamb’s focus did not wander to the snow, however, as she stayed on nothing but the direction of her house until she passed her two favorite oases: the town club and the hospital.

As she gazed at the contrasting places, one alive with light and laughter, and the other solemn with the possibility of impending death, she felt like the two sides of her were being torn in two.

On one side of the street was her wild self that housed her social life, the side where she could escape from her mind and just let herself be. She could meet random strangers who would make her feel like she was more than what she was at home, but only for a night. Every time she went in and met someone, she could imagine herself spending a lot of time with, she pulled away much to the dismay of her few friends who wanted her to find someone who would finally treat her how she deserved to be treated after eighteen years of trying to be someone she was not. She could say and do anything she wanted, because she knew that she would just blend into the crowd of other people doing the exact same thing. To her, this was her place to cut loose. This was her place where she didn’t have to worry what her parents thought about her, or what other people were whispering as she walked by. The club was a refugee camp for people who didn’t belong: people like her.

On the other side of the street was her good side, where she could feel as if she was making a difference and could feel like she didn’t need to fake happiness. She volunteered in the pediatric ward where she met many children from all walks of life who were drawn together by a sad fact: they were all ill. Around the children, there was no reason to fake happiness, because they always had a way of making her feel better. She went every day and became more and more attached to the kids, more than was healthy. There she didn’t need to hide the scars or pretend to be something she wasn’t, because the kids didn’t care who she was as long as she played with them. Eventually the hospital became a reason she went to the club at night so she could have a reprieve from the memories of the children who passed. Every time she saw one of her companions pass away, she felt a piece of her die along with them.

The bar and the hospital were like her home away from home, which so happened to have been her school as well since she was old enough to even attend school; until a week ago. Her parents had kept her at home, sheltered from the rest of the world, until they thought she was old enough to deal with the cruelties of life and people. They wanted to keep her hidden, like the hunchback of Notre Dame, because they didn’t want to be ashamed that their daughter was the way she was. They wouldn’t want their high society friends to know what she was really like and didn’t want her mother’s other CEO friends to see what her mother and father had made.

Her eye caught on the school just down the road, and Lamb released an involuntary shudder. In the past, she could have seen herself attending that school, going to prom, meeting boys and even attending parties with her former boyfriend Troy. She would have been queen bee, would have joined the cheer squad, and would have been the most loved girl in the school. She would have, until he showed up.

She spotted the road that led to her house and sighed in relief: she was almost home. Just one obstacle stood in the way of her bed and her locked bedroom. Don’t look up she chanted in her head as she did her best to avoid the only thing that haunted her, the church. Don’t look up. The lights flooded the sidewalk in front of her as a door creaked open casting ominous shadows in front of her like demons, spilling out organ music and warmth as she kept her head down.

Don’t look- Someone stepped in front of her, stopping her thoughts abruptly. She looked up slightly to see dark dress shoes under pressed dress pants. The black shoes were like an impurity in stark contrast to the pure white of the snow, just like a soul being blackened by sin. An unforgivable sin that not even God would forgive, even with the most righteous praying.
“Hello Lamb,” a deep familiar voice said, causing her body to tense and her breath to hitch in fear. His voice was cold and formal, not how a father should talk to a daughter at all. His blond hair was styled into a typical reverend's cut, not a strand out of place as usual. His face was contorted into an angry scowl, but his eyes were bloodshot. Seeing them together, you wouldn’t be able to see that he was her father. His hair was a sweet honey blond with strips of gray from age, while she had dark black hair that was dull from not being taken care of. He was a thick, short man with rosy cheeks, while she was a scrawny pale girl who stood taller at five foot six than most girls her age. She frowned and opened her mouth; it was rare for her father to even acknowledge her, let alone to speak to her and use her name. He reached out to touch her, in a rather laughable excuse for fatherly worry, and let go of the little girl standing behind him. The poor girl couldn’t have been more than nine years old and to any observer she was a normal girl with a priest. Until you noticed the way her clothes were ruffled and a tiny bit torn and the fact that her blonde hair was sticking up in all directions. What bothered Lamb the most about the little girl was her eyes; blank and scared. Familiar eyes...

It was a dark night alone in her room, the lightning flashed with unrelenting force and the rain pounded against the roof for what felt like hours. Lamb lay in her bed trying to go to sleep despite all of the noise. Storms always seemed to bother her, she didn’t like to think that nature could be so harmful and loud in comparison to the beauty it usually held for her. The storm, and the fact that Lamb’s mother had taken her only sibling Rem with her to a business meeting for her company, added to Lamb’s feeling of unease and fear. Why did she have this terrible feeling of being watched? She opened her eyes and sat up. A flash of light flooded the room to illuminate a figure standing in the doorway swaying slightly. Lamb jumped in fear, and got ready to pull out her pocket knife from underneath her pillow, when another flash showed that it was her father watching her with enough intensity to make her squirm. She sighed in relief and laid back down. ‘He’s probably just checking on me’ she thought feeling slightly safer.

“Daddy?” She asked. Her voice was quiet in comparison to the roar of the thunder, but she knew he heard her. He stepped into her bedroom, sat at the side of her bed, and stroked her hair softly with such love. She smiled, and closed her eyes with contentment, feeling safe with her father.

After a while, the stroking stopped and she felt him stand up. She lay perfectly still and waited for the click of the door to announce his departure, but it never came. She felt a pressure on her bed as if someone was climbing in to lay next to her. She suddenly felt a hand cover her mouth forcefully and felt the covers being torn off her drowsy body. She felt hands feel her body with disgusting intent. Her entire body froze as she closed her eyes and prayed for it to be over, she prayed that he would get what he wanted from a few caresses and leave. Her hopes were dashed as she felt fingers touch her bare stomach and wander to the top of her sleep pants. Panic spread like wildfire to her every limb, as she got ready to release a scream to alert her dad. Her eyes flew open as she began to try to buck him off with her legs, she knew god would get her out of this. His breath smelled of vodka and bad beer, and his hair was all over the place. All she could see were her father’s bloodshot eyes, as he took the only thing she promised to save for God—

Lamb gasped in shock and stared at her father in alarm. She hoped what she saw was only a bad dream, but knew it was a bad memory. Her father stared back at her with a curious expression on his face and tried to stop her, but by then she was already half way down the street.

After running for so long, the houses started to bleed together into a sea of tans and browns, signs didn't seem to matter as she ran without direction to escape the memories. She kept running until she ran past her house and past the shops. She ran until she didn’t know where she was anymore. She stopped to catch her breath in front of a plain house that she knew was on the other side of town, and tried to figure out what to do. She knew she had to avoid the church; and home was out of the question. She began walking the long way around the house and the church through the outskirts of town with only one destination in mind. The hospital.

She stopped to catch her breath and stared at the hospital grounds. The white of the hospital walls seemed to bleed into the white of the snow, and red handprints lined the wall leading to the door. The handprints were a project that the children's ward had done, and were originally supposed to symbolize the presence of the children in the hospital, but to Lamb they looked more like bloody handprints than anything. The handprints gave the hospital an eerie feeling like a house of lost souls; Lamb felt right at home.

The sun peeked out above the hospital and was just now turning a warm red. The sunlight began streaking across the sky in hues of purple and oranges. The stars disappeared back into the heavens, and the clouds floated back within reach of man. As Lamb stared at the sky, she began to wonder if there was even a god.
Was there a big guy looking down at her and shaking his head in disgust at what she was? Or were we all alone in our world free to sin with no consequences at all? Was there no help for the little girls who were raped by their fathers? Was there no retribution for those who killed or hurt other people? She didn’t want a stereotypical Superman in tights, but a nice big hand of righteousness was better than no redemption or punishment for those who had done wrong.

Lamb’s eyes began to wander the hospital grounds taking it all in as she waited for visitor hours to begin. She didn’t want to notice or didn’t care about the stares she was receiving. What a sight she must have been: short brown hair tousled and messy from running and from being under her hood for so long. Her long baggy black pants hung off her hips loosely; you could tell they used to fit by the wear of the fabric, but now they were barely hanging on by a belt. Her baggy black hoody advertising her favorite band “Simple Plan,” hung off her so loosely, and was such a contrast against her pale skin, that she resembled a vampire. If you looked closely you could see the hollowness of her cheekbones, the dark circles under her eyes, and you could almost make bowls out of the dips of her collar bones. She was thick enough to not raise suspicion of the local authorities, but skinny enough for people to feel sorry for her, and she hated that. Her friends were jealous of her body, saying she looked fit enough to run a mile, but thin enough to not have to worry about sizes when it came to clothes. She hated when people asked about her diet with hopeful enthusiasm, but who would want to be anorexic?

By the time Lamb came out of her trance, she noticed that the sun was high in the sky, and the snow had started to melt enough to form puddles of slush in the street and on the sidewalks. People walked around her on the way to their boring repetitive jobs, in their normal untarnished lives. Mothers walked kids to school, business people hurried off to meetings, proprietors of shops and restaurants opened up their windows with smiles on their faces and turned their signs on in anticipation of today’s sales.

All around her people were too focused on their lives to notice one girl that was unimportant in the grand scheme of things, and yet she felt like all of their laughs were about her. All of the people who smirked or had silent conversations were looking at the freak and giggling about what she was. She didn't feel like she was able to be accepted as herself, or anything that she wanted to be. After years of bullying and abuse, the laughter and mocking still followed her everywhere she went. The bullying would never leave her, she would never feel safe or accepted as long as she behaved in what people would say is an "abnormal manner".

She looked back in the direction of the hospital and saw someone, someone that she spent every moment she had avoiding, next to a nearby wall. There he was.

Liam stared at her with such sadness and familiarity in his eyes that she had to look away a couple times. **He** was the reason she wasn’t normal **He** was the reason her parents were ashamed of her. All because she chose him. She felt her fist clench in anger as she stared at his face, the one that haunted her every thought, the one that was everywhere she went. She brought back her fist then slammed it into his beautiful sad eyes... and felt the satisfying crunch as his face disappeared, littering glass all over the ground. But Lamb knew, no matter what she did, she had chosen Liam. She had chosen to abandon everything feminine that she loved. All because of one sin. An unforgivable sin.
Colborn withdrew his sword from the wooden armor of the practice dummy and smiled slyly to himself. He had been training the majority of his life to be the greatest soldier that the world had ever known, and for the first time since he began his training as a young Norse boy, he felt as if he had truly reached a high enough level of skill to pass the Ordeal. In his village, the Ordeal was a test taken by all young Norse warriors looking to make a name for themselves and earn their titles to become official members of the army. Colborn along with nearly every other boy born in Scandinavia, dreamt since the day he learned how to hold a sword and shield of passing the Ordea. And so as he sheathed his blade and walked back toward the soldier’s tents he filled his mind with thoughts of becoming a hero remembered through time as well as being rich and powerful like a king. He turned down the path towards the captains’ tents and began his proud strut to the tent of the general. He burst in announcing loudly, “I am ready for the Ordeal!” General Einar looked up from the maps that he was studying and gave Colburn a surprised, yet proud look. “I always knew you would be the first of your class to make that proclamation,” he chuckled to himself, “I will begin preparations immediately. Tomorrow you will face your Ordeal.”

Colborn walked back to his quarters smiling confidently the whole way, but in the back of his mind he was quite nervous about the test he was going to have to face. The Ordeal was different for everyone. The officials of the military convened and discussed what they believed were the greatest weaknesses of the soldiers being tested, so that the Ordeal was the most difficult possible for each and every soldier. For most of the soldiers the trials of the Ordeal were easily predictable, as Colburn had watched his friend Felman take the Ordeal no more than a month ago. He was forced to do a myriad of horrifying tasks pertaining to spiders, as Felman had an awful case of arachnophobia, but even Colborn himself had no idea what the officials would think of for him to face in his Ordeal. He kept talking to himself trying to keep calm; “You’re the best that ever lived. This is easy!” He kept trying to control his nervous emotions, but the fear kept eating at him.

In his fit of anxiety, he ran into a man walking ahead of him. As he hastily went to apologize he found that it was his good friend, Ivar, so he quickly changed to false rudeness. “Watch where you are going you idiot!” he shouted. Ivar just threw his head back and laughed. “Come on. Let’s have a feast to get you ready for the Ordeal tomorrow, my friend!”

Throughout the night Colborn feasted with friends and enjoyed the night before his Ordeal. It was during this feast, as he looked around and scanned the faces of his happy friends, that he realized a possible trial of his Ordeal. He tried to assure himself that the officials would never require a trial so cruel, but in the back of his mind he knew that nothing could be put past the heartless minds of the military officials. Soon it was time to turn in, and Colborn slept lightly with his dreams filled of the possible events of the day to follow.

Colborn awakened to the sound of beating drums and men shouting loudly in a warlike chant. He clothed himself and hurried out of his tent to see that it was midday. His Ordeal was starting soon. He looked to his right to see Valerie standing there laughing at him. “You know the greatest in the world don’t oversleep on the day of their Ordeals, right?” “Warriors need their rest too!” he shouted as he rushed past her to the amphitheater in the middle of the village. He walked under the spectator seats to where those participating in the Ordeal were meant to enter.

Two soldiers approached him and presented a sword and shield as well as some armor. “We can’t say anything except that for your Ordeal, you are going to need these.” And with that, they turned and left. As Colborn suited up, he heard the drums quicken their beats. This was to signal that the Ordeal was about to begin, and as Colborn’s heartbeat matched the quick beats of the drums, he stepped out into the sight of his Ordeal.

The arena immediately deafened Colborn from the shouts of the many spectators that had shown up to watch the Ordeal. “They really all came to watch me?” he thought to himself as he surveyed the area in which he was standing. To his right stood two large cages suspended above a large hole filled with water, and to his
left was a large labyrinth-like structure with two paths in the back of it, leading to base of each cage. Colborn squinted to see what was trapped inside of the enclosures and to his dismay, in one cage was Ivar, and in the other was Valerie.

General Einar called from his position above on the balcony overlooking the arena, to explain the Ordeal. “In this Ordeal, our candidate Colborn will have his weakness of having strong friendships exposed!” he said as he gave Colborn a devilish look. “He will enter the deadly, puzzling labyrinth from the left, and at the end of the labyrinth he must choose a path, corresponding to which friend he chooses to save. It is possible to save both of them, but that would require jumping into the water after the one who is dropped. And that water has been infested with leeches hungry for human flesh!” General Einar then took a seat and raised his hand signaling that Colborn should begin his Ordeal.

With hesitance, Colborn entered the labyrinth’s first room, “What always runs but never walks; often murmurs never talks; has a bed but never sleeps; has a mouth but never eats?” is written on the far wall. “A river!” Colborn shouts loudly. “Seriously riddles?” he murmurs to himself as the door opens to the next room. He passed the chambers of the labyrinth so swiftly that he forgot this was his Ordeal, he solved puzzle after puzzle, until he reached the final room, and within the room stood a cloaked figure, who let out a loud, evil cackle as he entered. Colborn unsheathed his sword, finally ready for a challenge, and charged forward. Swift as the wind, the figure threw his cloak to the side revealing himself as a stout man with a mask over his face and green leather armor protecting his body. The stout man dove to the right and threw a glass bottle in the direction of Colborn who, in the middle of a full charge, avoided the toss only by throwing himself as hard as he could to the ground. The bottle collided with the ground behind Colborn and exploded, embedding glass shrapnel in his leg. As he suspected because of the short stature, the enemy before him was no doubt a dwarf.

Colborn studied his opponent carefully before making another charge, but as he closed the distance, the dwarf withdrew an axe from the sheathe on his back that Colborn had not seen on his and blocked the blow, deflecting Colborn’s sword upwards and then taking the opportunity to shove his axe handle into his stomach, before jumping backwards and readying another explosive bottle in hand. Colborn knew he was acting too quickly and had to analyze the situation.

Colborn surveyed the room; it was barren except for the torches posted on all four of the walls, but then he realized. Torches! He thought, as he readied his next charge. He knew he had to execute this well in order to defeat this volatile opponent. He charged forward again, but this time waited for the dwarf to go for the bag of explosive bottles that hung at his side. As the dwarf reached down, Colborn increased his speed closing the distance remarkably fast. The dwarf reacted quickly and pulled his axe around towards Colburn’s head. Colborn ducked and slammed his side into the dwarf, causing him to stumble backwards toward the wall. As he stumbled Colborn went for the finishing blow, diving forward and kicking the dwarf’s legs out from under him, sending him flying towards the mounted torch behind him, but as he flew, the dwarf took the bag of explosive bottles at his side and hurled them in the direction of Colborn. As the dwarf collided with the torch and burned in the flame, the bag smashed into the ground near Colborn. The room went black.

Colborn awoke with the room in black smoke and the defeated dwarf lying dead beside him. He pushed himself to his feet and a shooting pain went through his right leg. He looked down and saw that a large glass shard was protruding from his knee, but he had no time to stop now. He limped out of the door and arrived in the room in which he had to choose a friend to save.

Trusting in himself he went down the path leading to Valerie. He knew she couldn’t swim, so he was saving her first. He walked to the base of the cage, pushed it to the safety of the land, and looked up at the suspended Ivar. “I am going to save you too. Do not worry my friend!” he shouted and Ivar grinned responding, “If I die, I will haunt you for the rest of your life!” The cage was then released to the deadly waters below, and though Colborn was bleeding profusely from his wound, he leapt right into the depths of the water pit and swam down towards the cage.

As he arrived he unsheathed his sword and began chopping at the wooden cage door. He felt his legs tingle and looked down to see leeches attaching to him. He hurried along, and finally managed to hack the wooden beam locking the door away, ripping open the door and hoisting Ivar to the surface with leeches in tow. He flung Ivar onto the shore triumphantly, but as he was about to exit the water, something strong grabbed his ankle and dragged him back below the water’s surface.
Gasping for breath, Colborn’s vision began to blur, and then his eyes closed, accepting he wasn’t going to make it out of this. Yet suddenly, he could breathe once again, and when he opened his eyes, he was in a bright white room with a man on a throne seated in the middle.

“I am the god of the sea, Njoror, and I have summoned you here because of the valor and strength you have recently displayed, with a request for you,” he said. “Though the gods are aware, the humans are blind to the coming of Ragnarok within the next few days,” he said gravely. “Ragnarok is the ending of days, where our world will be destroyed in a war between the gods and the giants along with many of our other enemies. But there is a way to change the fate of this world, which is within you,” Njoror said as he looked Colborn in the eyes. “The gods and the world are in need of your help; will you rise to the occasion?” asked Njoror, but both parties knew the answer to that question already, so Njoror continued. “Then I present you with this specialized sword meant to deal with the thick skin of the giants. Use it well and for the sake of everyone fight well on Ragnarok, young Colborn.”

With that, the sea god returned him to the surface where his friends were relieved to see that Colborn was in fact, alive. He held the white gleaming sword in his hands, and slid it in the matching pearly white sheathe that had appeared on the other side of his body. For the first time in his life, he felt like a hero.

The ceremony for Colborn’s official induction into the military was a mere blur to him, as he was too focused on the thought of fighting alongside the gods during Ragnarok. Even in following feast, Colborn failed to concentrate and enjoy himself, despite the fact he had just accomplished the feat he had been working towards throughout his entire life. When it was time to return to the soldier’s tents, Colborn was excited, as it gave him time to go out and practice with his new sword. Colborn spun, jabbed, and slashed the practice dummies for what seemed like forever, until he felt a hand on his back. He turned to see Valerie, looking at him with concerned eyes.

“Are you ok?” she asked. He nodded a quick yes and turned back to his practice. It was then that it happened. From the horizon in front of him, Colborn saw a large, red, fiery boulder sailing towards the town. He turned and saw Valerie looking up in awe.

“Hurry! It is time we must warn the entire village! Ragnarok is here!” They ran around the village and told everyone of the impending danger, and when they were done, Colborn unsheathed his new sword and ran towards the location from which the fiery ball was thrown. The ball he had watched impacted behind him as he ran from his village, to do what he had been destined to do since he was born. He heard footsteps following his and turned to see Valerie and Ivar following closely behind him, he cautioned them to turn around, but they would not allow their friend to journey into the fray alone. And so, they set out to face the horrors that lie beyond the horizon in front of them.

As Colborn and his friends scaled the crest of the hill, they looked down to see the battlefield of gods, giants, and monsters. Thor, Odin, Loki, Frey, Tyr, the great gods of Asgard. Colborn could not believe his eyes as he looked around and recited each by name. His sword began to glow and shake in his hands and turned to point in the direction where Thor was battling the serpent Jormungander. Colborn motioned for his friends to follow him, and they dashed to the aid of the god of war. As they arrived, Jormungander sunk its fangs into Thor’s arm. Thor fell, without the strength to go on. Colborn charged and was quickly thrown to the ground; his weapon sliding down the hill further into the valley below. He looked up to see Jormungander striking towards him, but out the corner of his eye, he saw a blur moving towards him. Instinctively, Colborn reached for it and found that the object was none other than the hammer Mjolnir, the weapon of Thor himself.

Empowered with the weapon, Colborn struck upwards temporarily stunning Jormungander. The serpent began to strike again, but Colborn jumped up with great height, far above Jormungander. As the serpent looked up at him, he took the only opportunity that he could see. He hurled the hammer down into the serpent’s throat, as landed safely on the ground next to Jormungander. He watched as Jormungander twitched and roared, before disintegrating into a molten magma, leaving Mjolnir lying triumphantly on the ground. Colborn picked up the hammer and ran to Thor’s side, but it was too late to save Thor. With his last breath, Thor said “Loki….the….temple..”. And then he was gone, but Colborn knew what they had to do. He looked up at the temple overlooking the sea to his right far above him, and leapt.

Colborn landed and began searching for the trickster god Loki, who was a leader of the force destined to bring about the destruction of the gods in Ragnarok. Behind him Colborn heard soft crunching steps on the stone floor, and he caught Loki’s hand just as Loki was about to kill him from behind with a dagger. “Not today my friend” Colborn said as he brought Mjolnir around for the killing blow to the head of Loki. However, just
before the blow connected, Loki managed to chant a spell in an ancient tongue, which Colborn did not understand. One thing was certain though, Loki died instantly when Mjolinir connected, and he lay limply on the temple floor. But one should always know that the trickster god plays with a loaded deck.

Loki’s dead body blackened and then, it exploded violently, sending the temple and Colborn over the cliff nearby. Colborn accepted his death as he fell and closed his eyes, but suddenly he heard the flapping of wings and his falling slowed to a stop. He looked up to see Valerie with wings protruding from her back. “You’re.....a Valkyrie, the servants of the gods who take warriors to Valhalla!” said a surprised Colborn as he was lifted into the sky towards Valhalla.

Colborn and Valerie cleared the cloud level and Colborn was placed near a large white palace with enormous wooden doors in the front. He walked slowly forward, and the doors opened as if on cue. In the hall a feast was taking place, “Welcome Colborn, greatest of all heroes!” shouted Odin, king of the gods.

Colborn fell to his knees and looked up at Odin as well as the room around him. He had achieved more than he could imagine. He thanked Odin and sat down, to begin his eternal happiness as a hero.
It was a fine day in the kingdom of Wellington. The ground was springy under my step and I was approaching the kingdom’s entrance from my usual morning tour. The spring sun was just up over the horizon and the morning birds had come from their nightly hiding place, chirping to let the world know that all was well. As I breathed in the new, fresh air of the day, I thought I saw orange and red flames leap into the air. As I ran closer to the castle gate, I saw the flames. They climbed over the tower walls. When I ran into the common area, I saw more flames dance on the thatched cottage roofs. It was then that I saw it.

The beast was nothing like I had ever seen before. The scales were the color of blood and soot and the spikes down his back were as much of a weapon as the teeth he bared. He had the look of death and chaos in his eyes and his mouth seemed to be upturned as if he was enjoying the havoc he was spreading throughout the village. Although there were men who were attempting to stop the beast, I know that I would be called on for service for I am in a knight with the first and foremost duty of protecting the king. As the beast turned away from me, I ran to the entrance of the castle with the one single thought of protecting my king.

The flames danced in the streets as I ran to the castle. Once I reached the tower walls, I saw the gate was shut, and there was probably no one to open it. It was then that I saw that one of the tower walls had been crippled, and that I could get through that way. As I climbed I heard more screams, and I knew I had to hurry.

When I reached the keep it was a massacre. Dead people were scattered around the ground. I looked, and saw the Queen was among them. I said a prayer, and kept going. It was then I saw the dragon fly in. He circled the courtyard at first, then he dove and tore into the brick with his charcoal black claws. I sprinted and picked up a steel sword from a fallen knight and ran into the Great Hall. I walked slowly, not knowing what to expect. In an instant the dragon broke open the roof with its nasty claws. I ran fast, doing my best to dodge all the debris falling on me. Then the dragon sucked in a deep breath, and out of its mouth came a red inferno. It scorched the hall, and I ran for my life.

I ran to the open stone door with the fire at my heels, I reached it and slammed it shut. I could feel the heat radiate through the door, and I heard the dragon snarl at me. I knew the king and the princess should be up this staircase, and I knew I had to get to them before the dragon does. I sprinted up the steps, taking four at a time. Crash!

“Ahhhhhhh!” I knew that only the princess could make a scream that high pitched, so I doubled my pace. When I reached the room I kicked open the door, and what I saw horrified me. There were a dozen dead knights scattered about the room, and most of the were scorched. The king sat against the wall, a pool of blood around him. And through the gaping hole in the wall I saw the dragon carrying the princess in its hooked blood covered claws.

“Please help me!” called the princess. She called out right as the dragon soared away from the castle.

“I'm coming!” I called to her. But she was too far away to hear me. Then I looked at our king, he was a mess. His dark grey hair was matted to his face with sweat and dirt. His robes had huge gashes in them, and it looked like they were deep cuts. His stomach had piece of his blade in it, and it was pouring out blood.

“Are you ok my king?” I asked with concern.

Then with his dying breath he said to me “Please, save my daughter, it probably took her to Fort Hellgate. Please, she’s all I have left.’’ Then he died in my arms. At that moment I vowed to hunt down and kill that dragon, even if it was the last thing I ever did. So I geared up for my great journey to the dragon’s nest. I grabbed my long sword, my bow and arrow, and my chain armor. I leaped onto my steed, and I was off.

Along with me I bought 3 other knights, Sir Gallifrey, Sir Deuce, and Sir Ivey. They were part of the king’s elite guard, except they were on a quest when everything happened. But now they have returned. The town was a mess, but we will recover as we always have. But first we had to save the princess.

It was not an easy journey, we could take the long way around by following the road, but it would take us 3 days if we took that route. We decided that if we took that route the princess would be dead long before we
got there. So we decided to take the direct route, through the goblin camp of Zorlar. We figured if we went through at night we might be able to sneak through unseen. It took us three hours at a fast trot to get to where we could see the goblin camp. Then we waited an hour for night to fall upon us. We could see the torches lighting up their camp and hear their wretched laughter.

“I say we barge in there and give ‘em the old one two.” Said Deuce.

“To risky.” said Ivey. “We’d never get past their first line.”

“He’s right Deuce.” I said. “It’s not worth the risk, we need all the energy we have to fight the dragon.

“Fine, have it your way.” said Deuce.

We decided to sneak through on the side of the camp (since mountains were on both sides of the camp.

We had to leave our horses behind because they would draw too much attention.

“Ok guys, be very very quiet.” I whispered. I was leading us, Deuce was behind me, Ivey behind me, and Gallifrey at the back. Crack! Gallifrey just stepped on a twig!

“Oka-..” started Gallifrey.

“EEEE aaaaaaa!” screamed a goblin.

“Ahhhhh!” screamed Gallifrey. “It’s got me!”

“Everyone hit the ground!” I said. I peered around the corner and saw 20 or so goblins pummeling Gallifrey.

“We have to go back for him!” said Deuce.

“It’s too late for him, we have to get out while we can.” said Ivey.

But-”started Deuce.

“Deuce, we need to go so we can save the princess. We can’t save her if we’re dead.” said Ivey.

It took every ounce of self-control I had not to go out there and save Gallifrey, but I had leave him behind, he was already done for. We easily got away because the goblins were busy killing Gallifrey. The worst part was that the goblins were torturing him, and we could hear his screams as we left. It is the worst feeling knowing that you left someone behind.

After we got through the goblin camp it was smooth sailing. We didn’t come across any other creatures, and we even found the road again. We were right on schedule, other than the fact that we no longer had our horses. As we loomed closer to Hellgate Keep we could smell the ash in the air. Then we saw a tower of black smoke in the distance, when we got closer we saw the ruined castle of Hellgate. This keep used to be an outpost for the large kingdom of Dovale, but after being ravaged by war it is a shadow of its former self. The stone is crumbling in many places, arrows are still stuck in its walls, and there is a big gaping hole in the west side’s wall. And there were scorch marks everywhere, and the east wing was on fire.

“Are you ready to fight a dragon men?” I said.

“Let’s do this!” said Ivey.

“I’m gonna pummel him!” said Deuce.

We crept closer to the gate, not knowing what would happen next.

“Whoa!” Smack. Crash!

“You ok Deuce?” I asked.

“Yeah, just tripped on a rock is all.”

Then we heard the snarling. Roarrrrr! Crash! Boom! The dragon burst through the gate and the wall crumbled to dust behind it. Then it roared and came bundling towards us with its two feet behind it and its razor sharp hooks on its wings in front.

“Grrrraaahhhh!” it screeched. I pulled out my bow and launched three arrows at its face. They hit it in the lower jaw, but it didn’t even flinch. In fact, it just made it angrier. Then it lunged for Deuce.

“Ahhhhh!” yelled Deuce. “Let go of me you stupid dragon!” It had him in its clutches, I knew the only way I could reach him was to climb the tower and jump on him from above. So I ran to the tower.

“Deuce!” yelled Ivey. “I’m gonna flank it! Keep it occupied!”

“Go quick!” yelled Ivey.

I sprinted as fast as humanly possible through the gate and up the stairs. I started getting winded, but then I thought of Deuce, and I ran even faster. Once I reached the top I ran to the balcony and saw what was happening. It still had Deuce in its claws, and Ivey was hitting its leg with his long sword, but to no effect. Then the dragon kicked its foot at Ivey and he flew back a good ten feet.
“Ivey!” I screamed at the top of my lungs. “Are you ok!” When I looked at him his body wasn’t moving and it looked like his sword pierced his gut.

“I’m coming Deuce!” Then I said a silent prayer, and jumped off the balcony.

On my way down I pulled out my long sword and pointed it towards the dragon. But my angle was off, I was going to hit the ground. All of this for nothing. But then the dragon turned and walked right towards the spot I planned it to be in. I braced for impact, and THUD!

“Umph! Oh that hurt.” I said. “I think my arm’s out of socket.” But I knew I had to hurry. Luckily my sword pierced the dragon right between two scales, so it stuck good. But the dragon didn’t even flinch. I tried to heave my sword out of its scale, but to no avail. It was stuck. So I pulled out my dagger, and started climbing the beast.

I got to the head and I pulled out my dagger to stab the beast in the eye, but right when I was doing it the beast shook and I fell off. I hit the ground with a thud and the breath was knocked out of me. Then the dragon looked straight at me and sucked in all its breath.

“Oh no.” I thought.

Then the dragon unleashed an inferno on me. Flames were everywhere and I knew I had to run. I sprinted back dodging the flames as I ran. Then a big blast of fire hit me in the back. The pain was unbearable, and I quickly dropped to the ground to put out the flames. My muscles were screaming but I knew I couldn’t stop now. Ahead of me I saw a downed tower wall a hobbled over to it. I jumped over it and took cover right as another volley of fire went over. I laid there for what seemed like ages, and nothing happened. So I slowly peeked up out of my cover, and saw nothing. Then I heard the slow breathing behind me. And I could feel the hot breath on the back of my neck. I slowly turned around to face the beast head on.

I tried to avoid the beast’s razor sharp claws as the flew towards me, but the dragon was too fast. In an instant the dragon seared me with its three claws. Its upper claw grazed my forehead, its middle claw gashed my side, and its lower claw sliced at my leg. The cut in my leg was deep, and the gash in my side was gushing out blood. When the dragon attacked me I fell to the ground, but now I got up and ran. I got in the ruined castle and hid behind a low wall. I ripped off my shirt and tied it around the open wound to try to slow the bleeding. Then I turned and looked over the wall and I saw the dragon eating something on the ground. Then I looked closer and saw it was Deuce that was getting eaten. Then I looked to my left and I saw Ivey’s sword on the ground. I knew what I had to do.

I ran over and picked up Ivey’s broadsword. Right between me and the dragon was a large boulder, and if I ran right now I would be able to jump off of it onto the dragon and cut its throat. I knew the throat was the weak spot because my old training instructor always told me that the dragon’s throat was its weak point because it had very few scales there. So I sprinted over to the rock trying to ignore the gash in my side and my wounded leg. I knew I had to go fast because the only thing keeping me going was adrenaline, and I knew that once that ran out I’d be done for. I’d almost reached the rock but the dragon hadn’t noticed me yet because it was eating the remains of Deuce. The dragon had its back to me so as I reached the rock I yelled with all my might at the dragon. The dragon turned and looked at me, hatred radiated out of its eyes. While running I leaped off the rock and impaled the dragon in the upper throat with my broadsword. It gave out a defiant howl of pain. Then gravity took effect. I slid down the dragon’s neck, my sword cutting it all the way down. The dragon collapsed in pain, and fell to the ground.

I pulled out my sword from its neck. I was covered in blood from head to toe. Somehow the dragon was still alive, but just barely. So I walked over to its head and I stabbed my sword right through its brain. It was over, I had won. I started walking to the castle to reach the princess. But then my adrenaline started wearing off and I started feeling the extent of my injuries. I looked down at my side and saw my shirt was soaked with blood, and more blood was coming out. And my leg looked real bad, I’m surprised I’ve been able to walk on it this long. I knew I wouldn’t make it much longer, I’d lost too much blood. All I had to do now was reach the princess so I could finish my mission. So I limped over to the castle, my leg dragging behind me.

I opened the doors and I saw the princess on the floor. She was already dead.
A skirt and blouse to make a refined impression? Shorts and a t-shirt to prove I don’t care? Casual jean shorts and a cute tank top as a balance between the two? I stood in front of my mirror, wearing the fourth outfit of the day, unsure of what message I wanted to send. Anticipation twisted my stomach into a nervous knot. I had been visualizing all the possible ways the coming afternoon would play out, but my preparation had done nothing to quell my uncertainty and nervousness. Desperation finally drove me to uncaring apathy and I turned from the mirror, settled with my not-quite-polished skirt and graphic tee.

She won’t notice anyways, I lamented to myself. She’s only doing this so she can pretend to not be an evil stepmother when they get married.

The email that had popped up in my inbox the week before had taken me by surprise. I was content ignoring my dad’s girlfriend when she began to make frequent visits to our house, choosing instead to sulk in my room and mourn the loss of my mountain biking partner. I had no intention of getting to know the woman who had interrupted my weekend routine with my dad. But her open ended invitation to “spend some girl time together” prompted me to test the boundaries by requesting manicures, an “adult activity” usually denied to me. Her acquiescence shocked me, but at that point I couldn’t back out.

I pulled my hair back into a loose pony tail and tried not to dwell on the fourteen situations in my head that ended in tears. Once I suffer through this, I’ll have beautiful nails to show my friends and a crazy story to tell on Monday, I encouraged myself. It’ll be worth it.

“Celine!” My dad shouted up the stairs, interrupting my internal pep talk. “Katherine’s here! Don’t keep her waiting.”

“Coming!” I called back. I glanced one last time in the mirror to ensure that my laid-back outfit hid my tumultuous thoughts, and then descended.

“Hey Celine!” Katherine smiled at me. I slid into her car, perhaps slamming the door a little too hard. “How are you?”

“Fine,” I replied, intentionally not continuing with the reciprocal half of the conversation. She wore dress pants and a button up blouse, definitely work clothes. Too serious, I silently judged. Her smile is forced and her tone is condescending.

“The place we’re going to is my favorite. They do an amazing job there when I go each week. Where do you usually get your nails done?” she brightly continued, undeterred by my short response.

Glad I fit so well into your usual plans, I thought bitterly. “My dad never lets me,” I answered aloud. “I usually do them myself.” I curled my hands into fists, hiding the chipped dots of drugstore nail polish on my fingers.

As we drove in awkward silence, I filled in her life, envisioning extravagant amounts of time and money spent on the upkeep of her nails, hair and makeup. I couldn’t imagining her doing anything remotely adventurous, much less bike up a mountain. Why would Dad choose you? Her sophisticated lifestyle and ostensible shallowness did not fit with my image of my father.

“Do you enjoy school?” she grappled for something to say, unsure of how to bridge the age and lifestyle difference.

“For the most part,” I replied curtly, insulted by her patronizing question.

“I really enjoyed middle school. I had a few close girlfriends, and we would spend all of our time together.”

She gave up on me, filling my half of the conversation with a monologue about her life. As she rambled about nothing, the distance between us grew. College adventures, world travels, sophisticated cooking endeavors and career choices did not fill the gorge as she had hoped, but dug a deeper abyss of disparate experiences. I became lost in the unfamiliar names and places she mentioned and lapsed into a protective muteness.

I chose to interpret Katherine’s worried looks as annoyance at my silence, which continued for the rest of the car ride and throughout most of our time at the salon. I found the whole experience to be pretentious and incredibly uncomfortable. Katherine’s drawn out decision of which color she wanted, and her eventual selection of a matte nude frustrated me; the multi-step process of trimming, shaping, buffing and oiling my
nails seemed unnecessary. Upon its completion, I concluded that the whole production had the same effect as my DIY paint job, with four times the effort.

“How did your math test go?” She made one last effort as we exited the salon, glistening polish adorning our fingertips. “You seemed really stressed about it last time I came over.”

I glanced up at her, surprised that she had noticed my mood, let alone what I was studying. I had assumed that during her visits, her attention was always solely focused on my father, and that I was merely background noise. “I got an A,” I offered, unsure of whether or not I should expect, or desire, her praise.

“That’s awesome!” Her smile this time seemed genuine. “Your dad says you’re pretty good at math, and you seemed to know your stuff when you were helping your sister the other day.”

“I really like math,” I explained. Suddenly, my red skirt and the pink writing on my shirt seemed to clash. I should’ve worn a blue shirt, I silently scolded myself.

“Your dad tells me that you like coffee,” she continued, encouraged by my voluntary dialogue. “There’s a local shop nearby that my friends go to a lot. I’m more of a tea drinker myself, but I’m told that it’s pretty good. Would you like to go?”

“Sure,” I half mumbled, embarrassed by her selflessness. Unsure of what to say next, I pointed at the delicate string of hearts half hidden by her blouse. “I like your necklace.”

She glimpsed down, then at me. “It’s from your father,” she ventured cautiously into this new territory. “What do you think of his choice?”

I shrugged, not sure any more of my answer to the underlying question. Maybe I’ve been too hard on her, I considered. But good intentions couldn’t help me think of anything to say, and the prevailing silence reminded me again of the vast discrepancies between her world and mine. But somewhere along the way to the coffee shop, her impersonal clothing became her effort to spend time with me during her busy day. Maybe she had to rush from an important meeting.

When we returned home, coffee clutched in manicured hands, my dad intercepted us at the door, nervous expectation crinkling his brow. “How was it?” he asked. “You guys were gone for a lot longer than I expected.” Katherine gave him an unsure smile, allowing me to answer.

“It was fine,” I replied. “Katherine showed me this fun little coffee shop on the way back.” I held up my coffee as proof of the success of our afternoon.

My words soothed his worry and he relaxed, a smile spreading over his face. “I’m glad,” he affirmed.

My dad’s relief reminded me why Katherine had become a part of my life. Maybe our only common ground was our love for the man who had met us at the door, but that was enough for both of us. I looked again at Katherine’s mature attire and thoughtful attitude, but this time all I saw was exactly what my dad needed.
I sat, doodling on my desk, ignoring the threats and crumbled paper slicing through my unacknowledged appearance. They spit about my clothes, my appearance, everything. But they don’t know, they don’t know my story. The story that lies beneath me. My clothes, hair, everything. The bell rings, reminding me it’s almost time for my shift. At this point, I am the last to leave the school, it takes a while for the people to stop staring and making fun of me, but when everyone does leave, I take the opposite route, walking to my job. The holes in my shoes get larger with every food slide of my steps. I can almost feel the sediment crackling beneath me with the asphalt cold and hard.

The clouds start to pile up, and I am still walking, watching the snow float from the sky and landing on all my surroundings, seeping through my clothes. Behind me, two honks are heard, probably someone telling me to move, or bullies ready to attack.

“Hey! Do you need a ride?” an older woman approaches in her car with her window. The window glided down and a woman sat, glasses sitting at the top of her gold, blonde hair. The red lipstick matched her clothes, and the seats were made with leather, tan, darker than her skin. The heat from inside reaches me, giving me more warmth than my ratty clothes and more of a desire to entire. “Uhm.. Yes, please.” I reply with a shiver erupting from my spine.

I let the warm air take over, and she starts a conversation.

“Where you off to?” Her voice is kind and warm, filling me with joy. I give her the address to where I work and she says with sadness as we pull through the drive, “You work here?” It was a home..a home to clean. “This is where I have to clean today. But thanks for the ride. I appreciate it.” I slumped out of the car and the cold gusts of wind pressed up against me, making me regret coming out from the car.

I reach the door and lift my arm, fist clenched.

“Wait! Do you want a ride tomorrow? Where can I get you?” I was hoping she would ask that.

“Works High School.” I answered with confusion in my voice. Can I trust this woman?

“Alright. Here is my number. Call me if you need me,” she pulled out a little piece of paper and wrote, “and I will see you tomorrow.” I don’t know if I can trust her, but the thought of it got me excited. Maybe I’m actually making a friend. I ran back to the house, reaching for the key hidden under the mat. The sun reflects from the tile as I open the door and the only thing I can think about when I’m cleaning is tomorrow.

I breezed through all my assignments before anyone else, having no homework for while I’m with the her. I forget everything that was weighed on my shoulders, nothing could bring down my excitement and finally, when it was the end of the day, she actually showed up. She didn’t lie and run off like my dad. She isn’t sick like my mom. She actually thought of me. My eyes burned and I could feel the tears erupting.

“You’re here! I thought you wouldn’t show.” I had to be honest, I don’t even know if I trust this lady yet. “I would never leave! Now, let’s talk.” We drove through places that I missed while I walked, the town is so much more beautiful than I thought. “What’s your name?” she asked with joy in her tone.

“Jessie Storan.”

“That’s beautiful! Well, Jessie, can you tell me why you are walking outside alone with no protection?” Oh, no..

My voice was shaky when I tried to explain.

“Well, if you want to know, you’ll have to know the full story.” Let’s start the waterworks. “My mom and dad divorced when I was young, my dad actually took all our money. About two years ago, she was diagnosed with stage 3 cancer and we don’t have money to get treatment. We are barely paying off our bills.” I sniffl after, thinking of how much she deserves but doesn’t get.

“Sense we have no money, kids have obviously noticed that I am different.. so they bully me.” At this point I am in tears.

“Oh honey! I’m so so.”
“And I can’t do anything about it because we have no money for me or my mom to get help.” I kept ranting on, it all just fell out. I have never had someone to talk to. Tears fall like a waterfall, and I can’t stop what’s erupting in front me. I haven’t even noticed that we stopped at a coffee shop, “Hazels.”

“Wait here, okay? I’m going to grab some hot chocolate and then we will talk.”

She handed me some tissues then left me with my thoughts. I had never been in a place with such heat and comfort, I actually fell asleep. But when I awoke, she was walking back with two cups in her hand, both with steam rising.

“Okay, honey. Do you mind if I can see your mother? Her and I can talk?” I replied, still distraught and showed her the way to my home. It was the last resort of apartments. But it gave us shelter, kept us safe. When I opened the door, she was lying on the couch, pale and sweaty. “Mom? This is.. uhm..” I never learned her name! “Clarice Richards. Hello, Ms. Storan. I happened to be driving home yesterday and saw your daughter walking outside alone in the cold.” Mom started crying after that.

“Jessie, can I talk to Clarice alone, please?” her voice shakes and I obey. I walk out the door and sit outside, hearing laughs, hearing cries. I haven’t heard her laugh in a long time, it’s so good to hear.

“Jessie!” They both called at me and I ran back in. Smiles were on their faces when I came back in. “Come on, we are going to the hospital.” Clarice informed me while helping my mother off the coach. She had tears streaming down her face.

“What’s going on?”

“Love.” That’s all she said. I don’t know what happened, but things were changing. She helped. Because after we came from the hospital, we could afford her treatment. I could get helped. We could pay our bills.

I got new clothes, everything. Our life completely changed. I know what happened now. Love. I grabbed the slit of paper from my pocket and called her. She answered with love in her voice and tears began to fall. “I know what you did. And thank you so much. Mom is actually healthy, I have never seen stand for so long, walk, or talk. Thank you. I didn’t know a stranger could do so much.” She stayed quiet the whole time, and I knew she was crying.

“You needed help. And I was there.” I could tell there was a smile and on her face, and we both had the same expressions. “Honey, I want to invite you and your mother to dinner. How about I pick you up at seven?”

“Sure! And it’s on us.” The thought of saying that made me invincible. One act of love, changed my life, and I couldn’t be more thankful.
As the heavy and thick snow danced across the sky, a set of headlights had shined through the heavy bitter snow. Johnny and Billy were on their way home to their house from Johnny's girlfriend's 21st birthday party. Billy had reeked of liquor and vomit from earlier when he tried drinking a bottle of jack. Billy was starting to get light headed and had gotten a headache from all the drinking. But he still wanted to drive that way Johnny could get some rest. But then, Billy had started to drift onto the other side of the white covered road. Then when Billy had made a sharp right turn, the 2013 Chevy Silverado had started to roll after Billy drove onto a slick sheet of ice. Then as the airbags slowly start to crush Johnny's arm that had been leaning against the cold ice covered window. When the truck had come to a complete stop, Johnny had woken right up and crawled out of the totaled truck. His arms had been cut up from all of the broken glass and had been in so much shock from the car accident that he hadn't even realized that his right arm had been broken. When Johnny finally got up he had rushed over to Billy to make sure that he was alright and that nothing was wrong. But Billy had been screaming in pain and agony from the car wreck. His face had been cut up and bruised all over. When the airbags had deployed, the lower half of the airbags had broken Billy's left leg and made his right leg black and blue all over. Billy had started to hold his side and when Johnny had looked to see what was wrong, he had saw that there was 4 long and sharp pieces of glass piercing into Billy's cold and frail body. After a while the two friends grew cold and had started to get frost bite on their pink and bloody hands. The snow had been so cold that it had burned their bodies. Billy and Johnny had been shaking and had been blowing into their hands to keep them from losing feeling. After about twenty minutes of shivering in the cold, Johnny stood up and asks Billy,” What should we do? I mean I don't think becoming a human Popsicle is a very good option so I think we should try to find our way to town that way we can get to a hospital.” Billy replied,” I don't know man. For one I can’t even walk because my leg is broken. Also I think I can’t move at all because I’ve lost so much blood. But, I also think that I’m not going to make it and that you should just go on without me.” It was at that moment when Billy had realized, that was the first time that he had ever seen Johnny cry in front of him. Johnny wiped the tears from his eyes and replied,” Billy don’t you ever talk like that again! You are going to make it and we are going to get the help you need. But for right now I need you to be strong and stick through the pain and stay with me. Do you understand? Billy I don’t know if you realized it but you are my best friend and the brother that I never had. I can’t just lose you now when I really need.” Billy replied in a low but calm voice,” Ok Johnny, I understand.”

Later when Johnny had gone wandering around, he had noticed a set of paw prints in the snow. When he had gotten closer to observe the paw prints, he had heard a cry come from the sight of the wreck screaming,” Johnny! Um I need you to get over here right now.” The cries for help had come from Billy, who had just came in contact with a mountain lion. As the mountain lion lurked closer and closer to Billy, its stomach had begun to growl. When Johnny had gotten back to Billy the mountain lion had scratched Billy in the face causing him to get light headed and to bleed heavily. Then Johnny had screamed,” Get away from him!” Then Johnny had picked up a stray piece of metal that had come off of the wrecked truck, and had stabbed the mountain lion straight through the chest. Johnny had gotten blood all over his arms from the mountain lion. After he had wiped the blood into the snow, Johnny had gotten a bad feeling in his gut and then vomited next to the pool of blood, pouring out of the dead animal. The smell of puke swarmed around Johnny leaving a terrible taste in his mouth. Billy had been in rough condition from this night. Johnny didn't know if Billy was going to make it through. Billy had been spitting out blood into the once white fluffy snow. Billy looked at Johnny...mumbling,” Johnny, I think you’re going to have go own by yourself from now on. I think this is it buddy. Goodbye... Johnny...” Johnny sat there in tears, holding Billy's cold corpse that had just yesterday been in the happiest mood he would have ever been in.
Hannah Jones

Poetry: A Real Home
Olathe North Senior High School
Molly Runde, Teacher

They were a dangerous group, says the holes
And spikes where feet often land.
They were a boisterous people, says the ever neglected
Machine, assisting with sound.
Too much time was spent here, says scattered
Belongings and trash in every crevice-

Yet, not enough time was spent here, says the never ending
Conversations, inching out of the doorway;
They used their time wisely, with purpose,
Says the worn down tools contradicted by
Beautiful creations.
They didn’t want to leave, says the multiple
Cars, resting until the sun had long ago set.

The family secrets were safe, says the hidden
Corner spots and respected closed doors,
And the jokes lived on, generation to generation,
Says Fools, 12.8, memorial walls, and bathroom ghosts.
   And they were closer than a poem
Or any other papered description could capture
Says the noise made and the time spent
And the secrets shared and the jokes remembered
   And the traditions that lived on
In wood, rock, and paint.
Keegan Justis
Poetry: Fearful Villanelle
Park Hill South High School
Idean Bindel, Teacher

Do not implore the moonless night
Whose torpor veils each passing day.
You’ll hope for more; stay out of sight.

Still I cogitate and fight,
Despite knowing I’ve dues to pay.
Do not implore the moonless night.

Better just to await the light—
Allow yourself the chance of day.
You’ll hope for more; stay out of sight.

Yet we are (lacking any might)
Loafers in many a doorway.
Do not implore the moonless night.

Still-shimmering meteorite,
Brought burning down from space to stay:
You’ll hope for more; stay out of sight.

Felicity gives way to fright,
Strong men drown as weak minds parlay.
Do not implore the moonless night.
You’ll hope for more; stay out of sight.
Keegan Justis
Poetry: Night
Park Hill South High School
Idean Bindel, Teacher

Abyss and obscurity bathed
in thinnest quicksilver mist;
mercurial lunacy born
of distant sunbeams
sprinkled as sprayed flakes
of sun-turned-moonshine—
dust to coat the corpse of day
in lucent, ashen anodyne.
Disparities from dusk to dawn
transfigured in the marathon—
the march of the juggernaut
from nine to five to restless
sleep, however brief, then
back
again
not quite replete.
The beads will swing
the clouds will cloud
and the people will shackle the people
as the child ties his laces every morning.
Keegan Justis
Poetry: The Friend Ship Sails
Park Hill South High School
Idean Bindel, Teacher

It wasn't all too long ago
when that fog settled down,
veiling sharply in mirror sheen
all happenings in town.

Our town had more in store for us
than childhoods and public school.
Kudzu, rot-vine, thin-as-tar vapor,
strangled all those tree-bound fools.

And fools they were for seeking
hands to hold in place of hearts,
for ultimately, dirt and ash
were cleaner than their outer parts.

These truths might still be seen,
should the kudzu mists just clear
the view of all the imperfections
left in lungs and buildings here.

Commingling with smoke, the fog renews.
How could I clear the air?
What pesticide to use?
"What pests," the boys all muse.
Plants oft with their parasites fuse
Until consumer, producer, and exterminator
Are hopelessly confused.

The fat now trimmed, observe as the truth,
In its hole-filled wholeness, stands watch
Over me and my mosaic of shattered memories.
Joshua Kazdan
Poetry: Hug
John Burroughs School
Jackie Gross, Teacher

Hug?
No, I'm not a pervert-
I just want a hug-
and not one of those
1-2-3-now-it's-getting-awkward-because-we're-not-in-a-relationship hugs.
I want a long hug.
No, it's not because I want to feel your voluptuous body
pressed up against me
for the longest period
possible.
We can ignore the shape of your hips
and the mountains and valley
of your chest
articulated
onto my body.
And I wish I didn't have to
analyze all of the possible carnal benefits
that may exist in hugging you-
even though they definitely do exist
and dramatically improve the experience
for me
when we hug.
Chapter Fourteen, Year 2014
How did it get this far? How did I become... this? I started out so well, so promising. Where did things go wrong? If I messed up enough to become this defected... why am I still standing? When a toy breaks, you throw it away. Maybe it’s time that I get thrown away...
I glance down at my quivering hands holding a bottle of ibuprofen. Once I take these, I’ll be free. More like everyone on this planet will be free of me. My thoughts are interrupted by my mom calling for dinner. I reluctantly put up the bottle of pills on my bathroom sink and head upstairs. Why am I so weak? Why don’t I just end things? Why am I so selfish?

Chapter Fifteen, Year 2014
I flash back to reality in my English class. Everyone has a nose in their book, like we are supposed to, but obviously I was more concerned with other things. To this day I still can’t believe the things that have happened to me, things I wouldn’t change. Now I’m better, but still dumbfounded as to how it got to that point. I missed something in a previous chapter. I need to rack my brain for what happened and flip some pages.

Chapter Twelve, Year 2011
The internet, my only friend. Not only does he let me copy homework, but he’s also the best for advice. Lately I’ve been feeling... I don’t know the word for it. I’ve been trying to piece together the puzzle to no avail. Let’s look at the symptoms. Laughter is foreign to me, I have strange impulses and thoughts that jump from extreme to extreme on a daily basis and focus and motivation is fading. Maybe my best friend forever can help!

My body jumps off my bed and slides into my desk chair. Like a rehearsed dance, my hands flutter across the keyboard of my laptop to type “Why am I” into google. The search engine automatically finishes my sentence with “depressed?”
I squint at the bright screen. Depression... what is that?

Chapter Fifteen, Year 2014
The memory fades as I regain my thoughts. So that’s how it started. Wow, thanks internet. You preoccupy me, make my computer slow, and this?! Well... you help with my homework still. I guess a loyal employee can get by with some things.

But that still doesn’t answer my question. I need to find out how point A got to point B.

Chapter Fourteen, Year 2013
A new town, new family, new school, new... everything. This is so stereotypical, but my parents really ruined my life. They just uprooted me from my birth town, my friends from the crib, to this place. And right before freshman year!
People here talk weird. My step-dad is always working. My siblings always agitate my mom and she vents to me. High school is going to really suck.
The hardest thing about this move will be the lack of contact with my grandpa. Sure, there’s video chatting and texting, but it’s not the same as face to face. The man that raised me while my mom juggling school, work and being a single mom is now ten hours away.
“Hey!” A girl runs towards me as I enter the school building. “I’m Madilyn!”
Madilyn is way too cheery for seven in the morning. She also has a weird fashion sense and some... wandering eyes.
I respond with my fakest smile, “Hey, I’m Gabby! Uh... do you know where my next class is?”
Chapter Fifteen, Year 2014
Dang. Well, that’s one piece of the puzzle. This town is more diverse than the small southern town I was used to. Madilyn later that school year came out as a lesbian and was one of my closest friends. My depression riddled mind conned me into believing that her happiness was a product of her orientation, thus one of the first steps to last spring.

My class is getting louder as more students finish their reading assignment. And I only have ten more minutes! This process needs to go faster.

Chapter Twelve, Year 2012
The internet and I have a love-hate relationship. Sure, he answered my question a few months ago. But that opened a door to… things. I found this thing called suicide notes. To my understanding, before someone kills themselves, they write a note explaining the situation. I like the idea; it’s a lot more poetic than the stereotypical “die unconscious in a hospital”. The thing that gets me the most is how much the people make, or made, sense. They are kids just like me, and had logical reasons. Most are from being unable to bear the bullying. Others are from home abuse or just simply not wanting to live. It makes sense. There are seven billion of us, why does little me matter?

Chapter Fifteen, Year 2014
Seventh grade really was a bad year, and I’m not just talking about the acne. The picture is getting clearer. I was confused and emotionally troubled and discovered why. Digging deeper opened me to new, harmful ideas. Fast forward a couple years of torture, and I’m exposed to more things. Ignorance is bliss, right?

Chapter Thirteen, Year 2012
“One more. Just one more and I’ll stop.” I tell myself for the third time as the blade cuts along my inner thigh. I don’t have any more open space on my legs, stomach or arms, unless I want to risk getting caught. Stupid warm weather, I’m going to move up North.

The risk of getting caught outweighs the urge. Grimacing in pain, I hide my razor in my bathroom door. I clean the cuts with some water so I don’t get infected. The stories of teenagers caught in the act float through my mind. Psychologists, support groups, boarding school and parental discipline. Just a bunch of people thinking that they know what you go through. Funny part is that they have no clue.

Chapter Fifteen, Year 2014
Jack turns around and gives a concerned look. I’m so glad my best friend sits right in front of me in this class. He’s the kind of person that doesn’t need words or actions to show emotions. All he needs is the look in his eyes, the look of compassion that everyone should see in their lifetime.

“Gabby… what’s wrong? I’m here for you.” Jack consoles me.
I can’t tell him. He knows what I’ve been through, but not the gory details that I’m sifting through right now. The bell rings and we both start walking towards the busses.

Pulling that fake smile from last year, I reply, “Yeah, thanks. I’m just a little shook up about some tests I’ve got. Please text me on the bus.”

We share an embrace and head our separate ways. Now with some alone time on the bus, yet not as quiet, I resume the search for answers.

Chapter Thirteen, Year 2013
His glare sends shivers down my spine. This has happened for the past month in this engineering class, and I’m not enjoying it. That’s it, that guy is going to stop constantly looking at me right now!
Calmly, I walk over to my classmate and ask, “What the heck is your problem? Hot things are bright, and you’ll burn your eyes out looking at them.”

“Hey baby, I’m Henry.” The cocky teen replies, “I’ve been waiting for you to come over here.”
My face twists in disgust, “Ew. No. I just came to you to ask, no TELL, you to stop staring at me. It’s creepy and perverted.”

Henry smirks, “Oh yeah, you definitely CAME to ME!”
His friends chuckle as I walk away. Ew, what a pig.
Chapter Fifteen, Year 2014

And that’s how I met Henry. He’s the one that really exposed my innocence. Not only did Henry open me up to sex education in a very gruesome way, but he also opened more doors such as sexting and pornography. To make things worse, I thought those things were fine! That boyfriend squirmed his way into my life. He pushed my friends out, persuaded me to lose my faith and encouraged my suicidal thoughts. Henry had this… commanding tone. A way of talking that made anything he said believable. And out of all the people who influenced me, Henry did the most damage.

I snap out of my trance and get off the bus. The past hour has been torture. Sure, experiencing everything hurt. But looking back, re-experiencing the pain and seeing my mistakes is the worst part of a tragedy. But there’s still something major missing. Everything between seventh grade and now seems fine. Maybe it’s before I opened the internet that one fateful night.

Chapter Seven-Eleven, Years 2006-2010

FIRST DAY OF THIRD GRADE!!! YEAH!!!

I jump out of my bed and run into the kitchen of our small two bedroom home.

“Woah, slow down!” My grandpa scolds me lightheartedly with a grin.

He just doesn’t get it! I’m finally a third-grader! Sure, I’m nervous. Who wouldn’t be? Especially me, since I just skipped second grade. That’s right, I skipped an entire year of school! Less work for me! I just miss my friends. I’ll make new ones though!

My thoughts cease as my mom drags me back to my bedroom to put on my new outfit for school. Ew, mom! I don’t wanna wear a jacket!

Chapter Fifteen, Year 2014

Old people always tell kids to enjoy being young while it lasts. And they were right, because I miss my carefree childhood. But I don’t remember it. The classrooms and teachers I remember, and a few of my classmates that I interacted with on a daily basis. I just don’t remember any specific events after that first day of third grade. All I come up with are… emotions such as loneliness, resentment, sadness and hopelessness.

But most of all, I have an overall feeling of rejection throughout the rest of elementary school. I never made more friends or stayed in touch with the old ones. The girls didn’t accept my tomboy ways. The guys didn’t consider me “one of the guys”. I was known as “that one awkward-looking girl that plays sports and is smart”.

So, what started everything? How did I go from a bright, carefree girl to a broken teenager? A teenager that can’t accept herself, feels alone in a crowd, has anxiety attacks when alone in public, has no self-confidence or worth, loses her faith and moral values and just overall doesn’t care for her gift of life. Was it the rejection and lack of tolerance? Or getting in the wrong crowd? Or was it the access to information at too young of age?

No matter what, I wouldn’t change a thing. Since then, I’ve reconnected with my Lord and Savior. Any and all problems are now nonexistent. I am now a more understanding and compassionate person. Also, I’ve learned to not just make assumptions of people, you never know what they are going through. I’ve learned to not act on the impulses to cut or the voices telling me to end things. Yes, I still have bad days once every couple months, just not as severe or lasting. The constant feeling of being judged, in public and at sport practice, gives me anxiety attacks every other day. But those are my battle scars; they remind me of the war within I’ve survived.

Romans 5:3-5 “Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.” This verse, my favorite, is the only thing that keeps me going. It’s the only thing that convinces me that everything I’ve been through, was worth it. My suffering has changed me into the better person I now am, just like everyone else’s trials. Tougher challenges will come my way, and now I will be ready. Now I will face them head-on with my support group instead of beating around the bush alone.

Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai said, “I told myself, Malala, you have already faced death. This is your second life. Don’t be afraid – if you are afraid, you can’t move forward.” What this brave woman said
connects directly to me. I faced the death of my own hand. Now is my second chance, and I cannot, will not, be afraid of the past. I must to move on as the stronger person I now am to enjoy what time I have left. That is why I wouldn't change a thing.
I woke up at 6 AM in a shabby apartment on the other side of the planet. My crusty eyes and parched mouth irked me as I sat up on the layers of thin sheets that made the only barrier in between the hardwood floor and my skimpily body. My brother and my grandfather were still fast asleep, rhythmically creating gentle waves in their blankets. I discerned the slightly ajar door which revealed the ever-gray sky and dark-blue sea. Realizing my skin was covered in goose bumps, I crawled out of my make-shift bed and swiftly shut the door.

When I staggered to the main room, the small, knee-high table that we used for every meal was already set up. My grandmother, who was nimbly preparing to depart, had already set up my breakfast. I collapsed into the Indian lotus position and used my chopsticks to nibble on my ration of rice and various side dishes. As usual, my bowl was only half-empty when I trudged my way to our dingy bathroom. After scrubbing my baby teeth, I dressed up in a polo shirt with khakis. I bowed to my grandmother with a farewell and set out on a mile-long trek to school.

As I crossed the chilly parking lot, I heard a pleasant voice call out my name.

"??!

Instinctively, I froze and turned to face the speaker. I recognized the speaker as my classmate and crush, Naomi. She was the "perfect" student who was friends with almost every girl I knew and possessed all the characteristics that adults could ever want. Thousands of thoughts suddenly crowded my head. Looking back, I know I should have been natural and said something friendly, but I took the cowardly path and stood still as my thoughts disoriented themselves in an unintelligible manner comparable to the garbled static of a connection-less radio.

She did not seem to notice my paralysis and skipped up to me with a cheerful grin that, like mine, revealed some missing teeth. We proceeded to walk together awkwardly without speaking, but luckily plenty of cars swooshed by us, covering up the mutual silence.

"??" Naomi finally asked after a minute.

The question eased my anxiety. With some confidence, I replied that I was fine. Slowly, the undeveloped dialogue transformed into a lively chat about current events. About halfway through our journey, the topic of the conversation transitioned from her life to mine.

"?? not behaving in the ?!," she stated bluntly with a sudden serious tone. The way Naomi said it was almost as if she despised me.

"??! I blurted, quivering as a sudden tingle rushed up my spine and scalp.

"I mean, ?? ?? hopping over the ?? and making a commotion."

What she said was true. Becoming pensive, I reassessed my past, notable actions. I did not eat as much as my teacher wanted me to. I failed to pay attention in class. I inclined to rebel against the teacher. I got in two fights with the same student when the teacher was absent from the room.

Finally I replied, "??, I do."

"Seeing you get in trouble so often, ?? ?? ??," Naomi commented sadly.

"??"

"Think about all the benefits of behaving better!" she exclaimed with a smile.

Despite Naomi being the center of my admiration, her words were convoluted and unable to have a powerful effect on me other than to shock me. What she said defied my beliefs. What good things? How do I control myself? Why is she talking about this?

Thoughtlessly I replied, "Sure, I'll try."

When we arrived at school, everyone was hanging out casually in the hallways. Naomi joined her friends while I took off my shoes, put on my classroom "slippers" that kept the classroom floor clean, and blended in with my friends among the uniform rows of seats of the classroom.

I enjoyed myself in a typical boy conversation about events from the night before, trading cards, and soccer. Usually my friends and I would horseplay and jump over the desks like Naomi said, but that was only when we were exceptionally early to school. That day, we did not have time. Just moments later, I could
overhear the iconic clicking of the teacher's high heels coming from down the hall. The students frantically rushed to put on their slippers and dive for their seats. Sitting in the back and without looking up, I could tell that the teacher had entered the room by the brisk nature of the footsteps.

Our teacher was a stout, middle-aged woman, whose personality appalled me. Over the previous months, I had witnessed her organize her desk with meticulous care and vex over my classmates' blunders. For instance, she once whacked a student for not getting the "perfect" shade of pink after mixing white and red paint. Even worse, never once had I seen her compliment any of her students. I resented her.

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She commanded us to pull out our reading homework. We had been assigned to illustrate a scene from Treasure Island and write a synopsis. Drawing was my weakness in any assignment. I concentrated on the details and could never finish even a sketch of the whole drawing within the given timeframe.

Nevertheless, I pulled out the mostly white sheet of paper. The scene I chose was the apple barrel scene where Jim overhears a mutiny plot. Although I understood the scene clearly, my mind could not focus on what to draw. The teacher started with the front row and exhaustively checked each paper.

I sat in my seat in the far back of the room, staring at my interpretation of a ship's deck. Naomi's words drifted back into my brain and I knew that I should apologize to the teacher. However, old habits die hard. I took the other option of deceit and frantically started to write about Jim getting hungry for an apple.

While the teacher was working with the student preceding me, I finished the assignment. Although I was fidgety on the inside by guilt, I remained still and stared at my lap. The huntress snuck up quietly and examined my paper, leaning in to get a better view of my scrappy handwriting. The moment was too much to bear, and I knew that I should just tell her the truth. Suddenly, she straightened up and I realized it was too late. I tensed up my muscles as I prepared for a verbal punishment or a smack.

"Next time, draw the ?? so that I can understand it," she muttered. And like that, it was over. I could not believe that my bullshit had succeeded. Feeling proud of myself, I leaned back in my chair and dozed out, never once reflecting on my lack of integrity.

A little over a year later in the United States, I walked into Mrs. One's first grade classroom. I noticed that I was early as usual and none of my friends had arrived, so I quietly hung my backpack in the hallway and wandered the halls. I glanced at the drawings that higher grade classes hung up outside their classrooms. There were a variety of drawings, with the skill level from crude to beautiful, of scenery or epic battle scenes between dragons and knights. Some of these artists had the wildest imaginations and the skills to express them, which I genuinely admired.

After viewing a couple of classes, I ran into my friend, Bob, who also was drifting around.

"Hi," I greeted.

"Hi," he replied. I inquired how he was and I received the universally typical response of "good." The lame conversation died as soon as it began. Bob turned his head to survey some of the projects that were sparkling with glitter. After a few seconds, he reached out his hand towards one of them. Understanding how fragile those projects were, I quickly motioned him to stop. Grinning at my warning, Bob withdrew his hands and continued to stare at the shiny project.

"Let's go," I urged. The warning bell still had not rung but I felt that I was out a bit too long. We headed to our classroom.

A few hours later, I sat in a circle-formation doodling on the back of a worksheet as the spring sun shined into the room, lighting up the classroom atmosphere and my mood. I had finished all my schoolwork and nothing else was available. My English was still crappy, so sustaining an interesting conversation with my mates was out of the question. Mrs. One strolled in between the desk groups, stopping every few feet to assist a struggling student with his or her work.

I continued to express my imagination through a complex set of graphite lines as Mrs. Oraw closed in on me bit by bit. When her feet halted next to my chair, I glanced up. She was observing my masterpiece with a genuine smile.

"Toby, that's wonderful!" Mrs. Oraw exclaimed.

At that moment, an overwhelming rush of pride came over me. I wanted to express my gratitude to a degree in which a simple phrase of two words could not cover. However, being shy as I was, I could not force myself to do anything extreme. I simply nodded my head.

"Would you please help me hand out the class projects once you are done?" she requested.
“Yes ma’am,” I replied.

“Thank you, Toby,” Mrs. Oraw beamed.

As I followed my teacher to the display of art projects in the hall, I had a sudden flashback to the conversation with Naomi. I knew I was improving my behavior, but I finally understood the meaning of "benefits" and that half of the gratitude I felt just a minute earlier was due to her.

Quietly, I expressed my thanks verbally, “??? Naomi.”
It takes a certain rhythm, a tennis serve; it’s that critical combination of timing and flexibility and athleticism. It takes confidence. You have to know that when you lay it all on the line and make that final jump, you’re not going to miss. It’s your lungs, waiting to exhale while your feet hover in the air. In that split second, anything could happen.

I’d been playing tennis since I was six, but I was never top of the class. As I grew older, tennis evolved from a Saturday morning clinic with prizes and games and fifteen giggling kids crammed on one court to grueling daily clinics. Here, it was clear who belonged and who did not. The clinics produced the elite; uniform and disciplined, they played every day. They were competitive, athletic, aggressive, and extremely exclusive. Whenever I passed them on the courts, it was always quickly, eyes averted. Dead silence. Breathless.

Instead of playing in those daily clinics, I began attending a weekly private lesson with my coach. We met on the corner court, out of the way. I was comfortable. I was free to learn from my mistakes at my own pace and accomplish goals I set for myself. One day, as my hour-long private lesson began to wind down, I crossed the court to get in some serves before I would drag myself home, out of breath, red in the face, willing myself to make it up the final flight of stairs that led to the parking lot. But first, to serve.

My coach yelled at me to hurry along, and I shuffled towards him, scooping my racket up under my arm. Short, ragged breaths. A tired drooping smile.

After a few minutes, I heard the court partition slide open and raised voices approach. Although I could not see them, I knew who it would be. I had come to my lesson late, and was cutting into the following one, just a few minutes past the nine.

The elite had arrived.
They crossed the court in a pack, three girls and five boys, dressed in bright colors, tan, tall, athletic, their bursting bags on their backs and confidence in their stride; exclusive.

I absolutely fell apart.
I wasn’t even well put together to begin with. My socks were different colors. My hair, matted and soaked, was plastered to my forehead and my neck; my sweat an elaborate pattern on my shirt.

Any timing or rhythm I had mustered drained from my hands in the time it took them to walk onto the court. I knew I could perform. I knew I could compete, on a good day. But not in front of them. Not now.

My arm felt heavy at my side.
Dangling. Dead.
I could hear my pulse booming in my ears and could feel the blood rush to my face, hot and red, my brow furrowing into my forehead, forcing focus from the depths of discomfort.

I turned my gaze towards my coach, and I watched him read the nerves in my eyes. My embarrassment only grew as I realized the look that he returned was pity. He glanced at the elite, followed by a nod in my direction.

A half-hearted smile.
“You can pick up balls now,” he said evenly.
The tennis lesson was over. Or so I thought.

With averted eyes, I quickly moved from corner to corner picking up balls. With short, frantic spasms, I crossed the court anxiously. Darting. Uneasy. Eager to escape.

Right before I reached the partition, I heard my coach call my name, asking me to pause. I stopped harshly in my tracks, refusing to turn around. I could hear him pick up his pace as he jogged towards me. I was embarrassed, and angry with myself for being embarrassed all at once.

“Are you ok? What’s wrong?”
My eyes inadvertently darted towards the elite and then quickly back to my turned-in feet. They had begun warming up; quick, smooth, strong strokes across the courts. I longed to belong.

But now, now all I wanted was to turn and run and escape from his scrutiny. I struggled to hold his gaze.
“Never let anyone make you feel unworthy,” he said. “Don’t look down. Hold your head up high.”

I offered him a smile, then a curt nod.

And I turned and ran.

The following week, I was back in the club for my lesson, but I was not the same.

Throughout the week, it had come to my attention in just how many instances I allowed myself to bashfully retreat. With a relatively meek disposition, I was prone to subordination. I could easily talk myself into believing that someone was better than me at something. But the first time confrontation arose after that late Monday lesson, I heard my coach’s voice in my head.

“Hold your head up high.”

At first, it was a whisper, inviting and empowering; motivation to finally look up instead of constantly looking down. I realized that I liked the view.

Soon, I caught myself looking up more often and almost never gazing down. The soft empowering whisper grew into an easy mantra, flowing with security.

“Hold your head up high.”

It eventually evolved into an ode. It was a single exalted line that filled me with determination and will. I was testing my limits. Before, I would assume I couldn’t do something. The thought process ran along the lines of “I could probably do that… but what if I can’t? What if I fail? Better not get involved. I’ll just watch.”

“Hold your head up high!”

I would never let myself again feel so insignificant.

Every time I felt myself begin to crumple or feel the cracks and fissures surface on my face, those words would bring me salvation. They would fill the cracks and erase the fissures, and with five words, my coach transformed my entire demeanor. Within the week, I was more confident. It was almost inexplicable, but I realized that the “elite” in my life weren’t maliciously attacking me; it was my own insecurity that waged war, and I alone had the power to fight for myself. I wouldn’t always come out on top or win or prove successful, but in each attempt, I would come closer. With each attempt, I grew. Became stronger. Learned more, and was better equipped to try again the next time.

Walking into the club for my lesson that following Monday, I made eye contact with each person that passed me, and realized just how much I had missed. With each friendly smile and respectful nod I exchanged with the members of the club, I could hardly even remember why I looked down in the first place.

Those five words changed my life.

So it was only fitting that just a few more words could bring it crashing down.

Late last fall, almost a year after I began looking at the world with worthy eyes, I was scheduled to meet with my coach for our usual Monday night lesson. I had come to look forward to these sessions; tennis had become significantly more fun now that I wasn’t constantly preparing for embarrassment. I was motivated, more athletic, more competitive. On the courts I was more aggressive, more confident. I was able to perform more consistently, to measure up. More alive.

But that fall night my coach never called to confirm like he always did, and I never made it to the club. Instead, I spent the night with my family at dinner and my homework at my desk.

As I was slowly packing my things in my room, I could see the muted glow of the television against the walls through the open door. A dull murmur engulfed the house as we all prepared for bed. I ambled across the hall to turn off the TV, and in that exact moment, a familiar tan face flashed across the screen. The words below the picture were jarring, their meaning seeping into my mind and attacking my memories. Aggressive, violent words that stabbed me with each shocking letter.

He had been arrested.

Like water slowly seeping across a paper towel, the news spread comprehensively, leaving no one untouched.

This is someone I entrusted with my insecurities and aspirations. This is someone who isn’t meant to let me down, but instead someone to point me in the right direction, to serve as a guide. And now, to learn that he had no sense of direction was debilitating.

His words of wisdom were colored and polluted. The hours I had put in and the time we had spent shook and blurred in my vision; everything was tinged with unease and discomfort. My world was collapsing.

Everything I believed, everyone who I was supposed to look up to, everything that should not have happened, it was all running through my mind, bounding and leaping across delicate lines that I never even knew had
been drawn. Everything he had ever said to me, once so concrete and comfortable, lie like rubble at my feet. I was left to sort through the wreckage. My reality had come down around me in flakes and pieces, burning, a single phrase ringing in my ears and swimming past my eyes.

“Hold your head up high.”

A couple weeks later, my dad convinced me to go to the club and hit with him. I had desperately avoided this place, fabricating lavish excuses as to why I didn’t want to go back. I wasn’t ready to accept his betrayal as the truth.

When we pulled into the parking lot, I saw my coaches designated parking spot by the door, vacant. The lot was packed. As I got out of the car, a group of elite pulled up alongside us, music blaring through the tinted windows. I averted my gaze, awkwardly getting out of the way, not wanting to get caught underfoot. As I scrambled away from my car, I caught my reflection in one of their windows. It was my face looking back at me, but I couldn’t recognize the expression. The girl I saw was the scared runner from a year before. And in the exact moment that I saw her again for the first time in years, she disappeared.

I refused to let myself feel this way again. There was an angry determination in my eyes. I felt my head rise and my eyes narrow. With my shoulders held high, my bag draped across my chest, I turned on my heels and marched confidently into the club. Away from the elite, and away from the girl with the terrified eyes.

As I marched away, silently, valiantly, I realized I was angry. I was angry at my coach for violating my trust and angry at him for having such dark secrets to hide. But I accepted his advice. I promised to keep my head up, to prove that despite having shaken my stability, he could not take anything away from me. I did it for myself.

I do it for myself.
“What’s that?”
“Cigarette,” I said, sticking one between my teeth. “Don’t tell your mom.”
“Can I have one?”
“No. They’re yucky.”
It wasn’t really my job to mold the kid’s life or anything; I was just there to watch her for a few hours. I mean, if she was gonna smoke some day, she was gonna smoke; if she wasn’t, she wasn’t. And you know that if you tell a kid not to do something, they’re gonna wanna do it even more. At least that’s the outlook I have most of the time, but here, it felt a little more personal, like I owed it to her to...care, or something. I don’t know.
“Why do you have them, then?” Claire asked me, taking the pack in her hand and inspecting its contents. “I’m stressed. Give me that,” I said, grabbing a cigarette that was dangling out of her mouth. “That was the wrong end, anyway.”
“What do you got to be stressed about?”
I exhaled. “I don’t know. A Lot of stuff. Big kid stuff. Did you...bite down on this?”
“What’s twelve times twelve?”
She thought for a minute or two, staring at the ground as if she’d find her answer there. “See! You’re not a big kid at all,” I teased.
“Nu-uh! Book smarts don’t make you grown up.”
I smirked, pulling her onto my lap. “Maybe you’re bigger than I thought.”
She grunted in agreement. The two of us sat for a moment, watching the cars whip by on the highway. Her house was right there, on this big hill on the side of the interstate. It was nice, I guess. Maybe it made you feel more connected. But as I thought about the rumbling of eighteen wheelers at night and a little girl having to grow up one weathered chain link fence away from the beginning of an industrial wasteland, I came to the realization that it’s not really a place I’d like to live. That’s just me, though.
“So,” she said suddenly, twirling around to face me, “whatcha gotta be stressed about?”
I shrugged. “I dunno. School, and stuff. I just had a breakup, too.”
“Who?”
“This…” I hesitated. “...guy. Named Alex.”
The only boy I knew named Alex was a kid who stabbed me with a fork in second grade. The person I dated was still named Alex, but he was a she, and she was one of the worst things to ever happen to me. She had these brown eyes, and I mean, I don’t know. I’m not good with words. She was mean as hell, I know that much. If looks could kill, she’d be the last one on Earth. The way I’m describing her, it makes it sound like I was dating an ice queen or something, which wasn’t it at all. I mean, if you strip people down to their bare roots, of course you’re going to get a warped picture. If you get down to my main components, I’m a mediocre student with few interests and a problem with intimacy. It’s the details that paint the picture. For me, it was that her face only softened when she saw me, or that she sang with the radio a little too loudly, or what she’d say to me when she thought I was asleep. Until this point, I’d always thought that nothing lasts at seventeen, and if I didn’t understand that, I’d end up sitting at home as the girl who’d once been my high school sweetheart reheats her cup of coffee, but not mine. I never talked to my exes, because as far as I was concerned, they were just blips on the radar. With her, I wanted to try, but it just felt false. I couldn’t bring myself to make small talk, to politely read together, to forget I told her I loved her, and to pretend that what had died was only sleeping.
“What happened?”
I shook my head and pulled my sleeves over my hands, even though it hadn’t gotten any colder. I didn’t know why I cared when I never did. I didn’t know what had happened exactly, and I probably never would. But I had to move on; the world waits for no one, especially not me.
“Oh,” she said, and nothing else, which was okay. I didn’t expect a kindergartener to offer much insight on high school romance, anyway.

I’ll admit, though, I almost called her today, between the car and the wake. It was something stupid I saw that made me need to talk to someone, someone who knew me as well as she did. I think what pushed me over the edge was this little girl. I don’t usually blame small children for my mental instability, but she was wearing this little red dress just like one Claire had owned. It’s hard to put into words, because the feeling was more in the pit of my stomach than the front of my mind. But still, however vague the feeling was, I couldn’t help but think that here this girl was, naive and innocent as her curls bounced while she walked. Here this girl was living a life that Claire wasn’t because of me. I had my phone in hand, about to Alex’s number, when I stopped myself. If I heard her voice, steady and smooth, it would rip off the bandage I was trying so hard to keep on. I wasn’t getting reeled back in. So I sucked it up and went inside, pretending that I didn’t notice the daisies adorning the hall.

“What else is stressing you?” Claire asked after a minute.

“College, I guess. There’s a lot of prep stuff, and the more I look at it all, the more I realize that I have no idea what I want to do.” I paused. “I might not even go,” I said slowly before inhaling, the thought crossing my mind for the first time.

“You have to go to school. Mom said there are these turned officers—”

“Truant?”

“Huh?” she asked, glancing up from flower bed she’d decided needed some redecorating.

“Never mind,” I muttered. “Yeah, but you don’t really have to go to college. Or high school, really. A lot of people say you should. But technically, you don’t have to.” She stared at me, mouth agape, looking like she’d just been told her whole life was a lie.

“Don’t tell her I told you that,” I added quickly, but the seed had been planted.

“I wasn’t gonna,” she insisted, wiping the dirt on her dress and inspecting her shoes, white Mary Jane’s dotted with old scuff marks like old snow pushed to the side of the street. “Do I have to go, Kailey?”

I turned her around and brushed even more dirt off the back of her dress. “You got plenty of time to decide. Don’t worry.”

She smiled faintly, before handing me a fistful of daisies and collapsing into my lap.

“Bellis perennis,” I muttered, beginning to braid the flowers into her thick hair.

“Huh?”

“It’s daisy in Latin.”

“Do you speak Latin, Kailey?”

“No one really speaks it. It’s a dead language.”

“Oh.” She paused, mulling it over. “Why didn’t it die?”

“I’m not really sure. It changed into something new, I think. That happens to everything.” She nodded, as if I was reciting the gospel instead of what I’d grasped from the one time I’d actually paid attention in class.

“Why aren’t you going to college? You know a lot of stuff.”

“I’m not good at anything,” I said after a minute. Of course, that was oversimplifying it, but I wasn’t about to explain student loans to a kid who’d had snot on her face for a half hour and hadn’t noticed it. “I mean, I’m okay at some stuff,” I added. “I’m okay at a lot of stuff. But that’s the thing: I’m only okay.”

“Nuh uh. You’re good at a lot of stuff.” She tilted her head back to look at me. “Like...braiding hair. And saying tucking me in. And making sandwiches!”

I tied her hair with a ponytail and stood her up. “When I can get a degree in making sandwiches, give me a call,” I said, then after I figured she’d have no idea what I meant and that I was essentially making fun of a six year old for not understanding the flaws in the American education system, I smiled and added, “Thanks, though. That means a lot.”

She wasn’t listening, though. She’d already moved on, and was hugging a sunken basketball to her chest.

“You wanna play with that?”

She nodded, throwing it to me, and we played catch for a while. Every time she caught it, the force sent her back a bit, curls bouncing as she swayed. She got better, though. She started throwing it back harder, smirking a little whenever she almost hit me, so I threw it harder. Eventually, she missed, and the ball rolled down to the end of the hill, wedging itself between the hole in that shitty fence and the lawn.
“Go get that, Kobe.” I gave her a slight push on the back and watched her skip down the hill. It was windy that day, I remember that much. The both of us were built like oak trees, otherwise I’d be worried about blowing away. But really, I wasn’t anxious that day, and my regular, underlying concerns were unusually quiet. I don’t think anyone wishes to be anxious, to have worries so present that they’re always ringing in your ear like tinnitus. But I wish I was, at least for that day. Maybe if I was a little more nervous, a little more anxious, I would’ve paid closer attention. But I wasn’t, so I didn’t. With one final look at Claire, I turned my back away from the wind, and away from her, to light a cigarette.

I had to flick the thumbwheel three times before it sparked, but the lighter was cheap, so I didn’t really hold it to high standards. I pried the safety off with some girl’s car key about a month ago in some dimly lit basement full of strangers. She said that would make it easier to light. We smoked outside her car for a bit, and then hooked up in the backseat. It was okay. She gave me her number, but I think I lost it. I didn’t really bother to look. The lighter’s still not easier to use.

Anyway, the second I finally got the damn thing to work, there came this noise from the highway. The word ‘noise’ doesn’t really do it justice, but I don’t think a word exists to properly describe it. It was deafening, ringing in my ears like church bells and thick in the air. It was...unreal. Different than anything I’ve ever experienced. Never before have I heard a sound that made my stomach drop; absolute confusion and then dread, set in. Everything after that seemed like a dream. I put my things down and stumbled down the hill in a daze, screams and sunlight swirling around my head.

I got to the bottom of the hill.

There was a truck and a handful of cars pulled over to the side of the interstate, all gathered around something. I knew what it was, but I think some part of me thought that if I didn’t confirm it, it wouldn’t be true. So after I climbed through the hole in the fence she must’ve climbed through, I sat on the edge of the highway, my vision blocked by a wall of cars and my own legs that I hugged to my chest. Someone was calling the police, I think. A woman, wearing a black skirt and blouse. I tried to say something to her, but I swallowed the words along with the blood from chewing on the inside of my cheek.

After God knows how long, I finally began to process what people were saying.

“Does anyone have her parents’ number?”

“I do,” I choked out after a minute. “I do.”

“Will you go get it?” the man asked, kneeling beside me and putting a hand on my shoulder. I nodded, unfocused eyes peering past him and landing on a mass of limbs pinned under the truck, a single daisy floating in a sea of red. I nodded again and tore myself away from the scene. I ambled halfway up the hill before my legs gave out. I threw up on the lawn, between the neatly trimmed hedges and the tall oak tree. When I made it to the porch, the cigarette had gone out.
Everyone in life comes to the point where they feel giving up is the only option. Whether they are getting bullied, they don’t feel they are good enough, or they are tired of trying to be someone they aren’t because people don’t accept them for who they are.

Walking into school is like walking into a horror movie. You never know what’s going to happen or who’s going to be the next victim of the master minds. You never see it, you never hear it but you always know it’s happening. As I walk down the hallway I saw Scarlett, by the look on her face I knew it had happened again. I walked over there, she had taken one glance over at me and all I could see was her eyes drowning in tears.

“It happened, again...?” I asked in a low tone trying not to let anyone know what I was talking about.

“I have to go to class, meet me at the lake after school.” Scarlett said, walking right past me with no hesitation.

Seeing her like that killed me inside. Knowing what she was going through and to have the pressure of the whole school on her shoulders. It’s a lot to handle. Maybe a little too much.

The rock has always been our secret place since second grade when we became best friends. We go there if we need to talk about something serious or just a place to get away.

I went there right after school. Even though I was supposed to grab my books to study for my science test on Thursday, but I knew that could wait. I had to meet Scarlett there as soon as I could to find out what was going on, and what she wasn’t telling me.

There she was, I could tell something was wrong. The look on her face said it all, but I wanted to hear it from her.

“Every day used to seem like it was speeding by like a race car on the highway. Always going so fast and nothing to stop it. As time has come, every day feels like it never ends. Time is being wasted on helpless teenagers who want me gone, and school work that I can’t focus on because depression. I don’t know what to do anymore. I feel like I’m trapped in a strange world I have never been to and I can’t seem to find my way out.” Scarlett just let all of her thoughts flow out, like they have been trapped inside for a very long time. I was glad to be her shoulder, her anchor, her sounding board.

“I know how you feel Scarlett, but you can’t give up now. You have friends and family who are here for you through it all.”

“You have no idea how I feel. Have you ever had the whole school hating on you because they don’t like your outfit or the color of your skin?” Scarlett asked, sitting down slowly. Holding her knees close to her, she says “You and everyone else have no idea how hard it is to just be myself and then get picked on for it.”

“You’re right. I don’t.”

Scarlett walked away without saying a word. I felt like a horrible best friend, but what was I supposed to do? She never came to me about this stuff. She is the type of girl to hold it in because she doesn’t want pity from others. She doesn’t want people to feel bad for her, or treat her differently because she is hurting inside. Scarlett didn’t want my help. All she wanted to was to be left alone. So I just walked away without a goodbye.

Later that night I got a text from her. “I can’t take it anymore, the pain, the bullying, taking pills, the blades. I can’t handle it. It’s too much, everyone wants me gone. So why not make their dreams come true.”

I run to her house with no hesitation, everything I see is beginning to get blurry. My eyes start to water up like a storm of tears headed on my way. Could I be losing my best friend due to the jealous people at school? Had she taken her life because of selfish students? Or is this the end of her journey?

As I approach her house, I see the ambulance drive away. The red and blues are silent on top of the van. I was too late.
“Are we there yet?” I ask my Mom for the thousandth time.
“Sage, we will get there when we get there.” My mom said in an annoyed voice.
“Well then…” I said in a voice that only I could hear. “Somebody woke up on the wrong side of the bed.”

After that little “conversation” we had, I went back to just looking at myself in the window and mom was reading a book. It was silent. Then, the silence was broke.

The fate sound of sirens flooded my brain. The sound of screaming and crying followed the sirens. I didn’t know where I was. I didn’t know where my mom was and I sure didn’t know what happened. While I was trying to put all of the pieces together, I noticed a sharp pain in my head. My hand went up to my head and touched my forehead. When it came back down, it was covered in blood. A sudden burst of panic came over me. I was scared. I was really scared. I wanted my mom.


A women in a paramedics suit came rushing over to me.
“Hey, Sage is it? Sage Mckessy?” She asked me in a gentle voice.
“What happened? Where is my mom?”
“Sage, calm down. We have everything under control. I promise. Can you see how many fingers I’m holding up?”

“Four.” I said in an aggravated voice.
“Okay. Can you come with me please?” The paramedic asked me.
“Yeah. I guess. As long as you start answering my questions.”
“I will try the best I can. Now c’mon, let’s go over to the ambulance.”

I try to stand up. I can’t. My legs fell from under me. I become scared. What happened to me?
“Sage? Are you okay?” The paramedic said in a worried voice.
“I can’t stand up.” I told her.
“Oh no.” She said under her breath. I think she hoped that I couldn’t hear her. Well, I could. “Jack,” She shouted. “Jack need some help over here.”

A man named Jack came rushing over. “Hey Amanda what do you need help with?” He asked her.
“This is Sage Mckessy, and she is not doing well.”
“Wait. What.” I interrupted. “I’m not doing well? You told me that I was going to be fine.”
“Let’s just get her to the ambulance.” Jack says.
“You are not listening to me.” I yell in an uncontrolled voice. “You told that I was doing fine, and now you are telling this, stupid Jack, that I am not doing well at all. What the heck was that for?”

“Sage. Please calm down. You are going to be fine.” I cut her off.
“So now you tell me that I’m going to be fine? You tell Jack that I am not doing well and then you tell me that I am doing wonderful. Well, which one is it? Am I going to be fine or is there something wrong?” I ask rudely.

Amanda sighs.
“Miss. Mckessy, you are having heart failure and you are losing a lot of blood. Fast.” She informs me in a cautioned voice.

My stomach drops. My eyes start to tear up. And suddenly, I don’t feel good.

“Amanda.” I say in a depressed voice. “I’m sorry that I snapped. I know that you are just doing your job and trying to help me.”
“It’s fine. Just don’t flip out on us again. Deal?”
“Deal.”

Jack and Amanda begin to load me on the stretcher and into the ambulance. The whole ride to the hospital was pure torture. I had wires everywhere. No joke. I swear there was at least twenty different wires hooked to me. And if I closed my eyes, a loud beeping song went off. Apparently nobody wanted me to rest. If I don’t
rest, I will have another blow up. And honestly, I don’t want to do that again. I don’t think anyone what’s that to happen.

We pull into the hospital parking lot and make our way to the ambulance drop off spot. Jack and Amanda unload me and take me to my ER room. As I am laying there all I hear is more beeping and odd sounds that I have never heard. It is like all of these sounds are a tornado in my head. I am so confused. I closed my eyes hoping to just go to sleep, but that only made the sounds worse and I then felt like I was spinning. I opened my eyes and saw Amanda and another lady with short curly blonde hair wearing pink scrubs. The pink reminded me of the time my brother puked all over my dad after he had drank a pink Gatorade….Gross….now I really feel sick. As the lady in puke- pink is messing with machines Amanda sat down next to me.

“Hey Sage, how are you doing?”

“Well….I don’t know….I don’t think I feel very good and I am tired. Amanda, please tell me what is going on,” I said. At this point I can feel tears running down my face.

“Oh honey, it will be okay. Your heart rate is coming back to normal, but honey, you lost a lot of blood. That is why you don’t feel so good. You will be fine, but you are sure going to have a big scar on your forehead. The windshield shattered and cut you up pretty bad.”

Amanda seemed like she was trying to make this all sound okay. You know, like when your parents take you to the dentist and tell you it won’t hurt…RIGHT. I think Amanda had pretty eyes, but her makeup was weird. But when I just focused on her eyes, I could see that she felt sorry for me and things really weren’t going to be fine. And again, I didn’t feel like I was crying, but I could feel tears running down my face and dripping on the sides of my neck. I really wanted to wipe them, but they had needles in one arm and a blood pressure cuff on the other and I just couldn’t move. Then it was like Amanda knew what I was thinking and she softly wiped my face. Her hands were so cozy warm.

“Hey Amanda, can anyone tell me where my mom is? Please tell me she is okay. I just want my mom.”

“I wish I could, Sage. But honey, your mom is hurt pretty bad. The airbag didn’t open and your mom went through the windshield. Your dad is banged up, but he will be okay. He’s talking with the doctors now. I told him I would stay with you until he could get here.”

“M-my dad?” I said in a questioned voice. “My dad, Nick Mckessy, is actually here to see my mom and I?”

“Yes.” Amanda says in a concerned voice. Her straight hazelnut hair fell into her eyes. “Why wouldn’t he be here? You are his daughter and your mom is his wife.”

“My dad is what you call a work-a-holic. He is rarely home and when he is, his nose is always up his phone.”

“I can’t believe he even showed up.” I said in a low, whispered voice.

“What did you say Sage?” Amanda asked me.

“Oh, um. I am very surprised that my dad even showed up.”

“Why is that?” Amanda seems very suspiscious right now.

“Well, he is the reason that we got into the wreck. We were going to the bowling alley for a family bowling night. But, of course, he had to go by the office first. The office is the total opposite way from the bowling alley. It took forever to get there. Finally after dad was done doing whatever in the office, we were pulling into the bowling alley parking lot and, CRASH! The car crashed.” I paused.

“What is it Sage? What’s wrong?”

“The airbag. Dad made me turn the airbag in the passenger seat off when I rode up there the last time. I-I never turned it back on. Amanda, I am the reason that the airbag didn’t go off when we weaked. It’s all my fault.”

I am literally bawling at this point. I can’t believe that this was all of my fault. I am the reason that my mom is in a coma.

“Sage, honey, no don’t think that. If anything it is your dads fault for not taking the responsibility to turn the airbag on.”

“No. I should have reminded him to turn it off.”

“Sage, I think that you need to get some rest. you haven’t slept in about 24 hours. You really need to get some sleep.”

“Okay. I say without a fight. I will see you when I wake up.”

When I wake up, I am extremely confused. This is not where I fell asleep. This is not the hospital room.

“Mom! Mom? What are you doing? You are in a coma and where is dad? Dad should be on his phone standing in this room.” I scramble out of my mouth.
“Sage, honey. What are you talking about? I am fine. I was never in a coma.”
“Yes you were. We were both in the hospital. Amanda, my nurse, told me that you were in the coma.”
“Sorry sweetie, I was never in a coma.”
“What about dad? Where is he?” I ask in a frantic voice.
“Sweetheart, daddy died three years ago.”
His sweaty fist meets my right cheek. I can’t even feel it anymore. After the fourth or fifth time he’s beaten me, I’ve become completely numb. All I am is his ragdoll. I’m just there to be his punching bag; he can take all of his pain out on me as if I can’t feel him.

At the same time, I do feel bad for my father at times. My mother left him with me, a failure. And he’s always had a drinking problem so half of the time he’s completely oblivious to what he’s doing. I don’t think I’ll ever be enough for him. I’m like a lost puppy who nobody wants.

I think my mother was the only thing holding my father from abusing me. She was my burden and protector. I was too young to understand what was happening at the time. One day, she had vomited non-stop for an hour before forcing my father to drive her to the hospital. Her esophagus had collapsed. My parents could not afford the surgery necessary for it, so they let her go. Before she went into the hospital, they had their usual fight that money and alcohol. The money part was usually about me. My mother spent too much money on me. I’m pretty sure she tried to live through me. She had a lot of regrets growing up and having me at sixteen was a big one. She put me in All-Star Cheerleading, which is about five hundred dollars a month. We didn’t have a lot of money growing up, I knew this because I dressed strictly from garage sales. I probably would’ve dressed better if my mother didn’t spend so much on cheer.

After my mother left, my father went insane. I tried to calm him down, but it always led to abuse. I think my grandma knew what was going on and tried to get me out of the house as much as possible. But the last time I went over to her house, it changed everything.

My grandma and I were playing dress up one night, and she saw a bruise on my left thigh. I started bawling immediately. Before I knew it, her parenting instincts took over and she told me she would help me and immediately got on the phone. The thought of living with my grandmother was exciting, I thought. She would never abuse me like my father had.

Later, I had realized that my grandmother had called Child Protective Services on my father. I had gotten pulled from that house for a week while they investigated, and of course my father argued with them. Why can’t he let me go? If I was the only part of my mother he has left, why does he abuse me? I don’t understand the ways of this evil man. There’s no gray for him. Only black and white.

While I was at my grandmas, she asked what I’ve done. I told her about the really nice looking lady that asked me questions about my life at home and that I hadn’t lied and told the complete truth. Gran just nodded nonchalantly. She told me that someone would be joining us to discuss court dates.

Court? Why can’t I just stay at gran’s? I know if I lose then the beating would be more brutal, and longer. What questions will they ask me? What if I have to look in his eyes? Is he even going to be there? Would I get to stay with gran? What if nobody believes me?

The nice lady came back over to gran’s. She told me not to worry, that we have plenty of evidence. She also told me that we would be going to testify because he had been arrested for child abuse and he wanted to fight for justice; nonexistent justice. They explained that I would only go up and testify against him if he pleaded not guilty.

When we walked into the courtroom, I felt my whole body shudder. Do I even know this man? The first few minutes were calm and the judge seemed to believe my story. But once they asked my father what he pleaded, he muttered the words, “not guilty.”

They called him up to the stand, and the judge turned to him and said, "Place your hand on the Bible."
"Do you swear to tell the truth, nothing but the truth, so help you god?"
"I do."

The judge then asked, "How do you testify?"

My father looked around and tears began to slide down his cheeks, "She’s lying, and she’s lying about everything. She’s just going through a phase. Why would I hurt the only thing I have left?"

Why do you? He’s lying. He swore he wouldn’t.
My father then explained how my mother had died and how tough it’s been without her, the only things he forgot are his extreme drinking problem and the beatings.
The judge sighed and signaled my father to go back down to his table.
The nice lady looked at me, "We would like to call Julia to the stand".
Julia. She said it so full of hope, not the way my father does, though he's usually screaming my name.
I had to do the pledge also, except I would stick to it.
The nice lady said she's just going to ask me a few questions, so I agreed.
"Julia, is it true your mother had died when you were seven?"
"Yes."
"How's it been with just your father, without your mother?"
"Miserable, I miss her so much."
Then she just jumps right in, "Does your father brutally abuse you?"
I paused; this is the part that matters most. And it all poured out.

It was a Tuesday, a cold February, Tuesday. I had just gotten home from school, but my father wasn't home yet. I was starving. I drug myself over to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator to nothing but beer. Do I really have a choice? I got one out, slammed it against the counter as I've seen my father do thousands of times, and started drinking. Gross. But just as I went in for the second sip, my father walked in.
"What are you doing?!
"It's the only thing we had..."
He acted as if I was lying, like I hadn't said anything. He swiped away the cold beer that was still in my hand, and chugged it all. Then, he started towards me and pushed me up against the wall.
"You think you're smart? You think you're smarter than me? You were just a mistake."
The words smacked my face. A mistake? Was that all I was to him? A mistake? He kicked me. Hard. He pushed me up against the wall and stared at me as if I was an alien. He punched me, knee'd me, and threw me against the wall. It hurt me, but not as much as the words did. The only way he would stop is if I started crying, so I did. I've never really thought about it, but it is actually fairly sad for a 13 year old to be completely numb to pain. The biggest thing that made me on edge, so angry it made me cry, is the thought of the lord, who created me, who made me feel like I was meant to be here. But lord? If I was meant to be here, why would you try and push me out of your own world?

I finally come back to reality and looked around. There is not a dry eye anywhere in the jury and audience. It was silent for a second, not a word from either side of the courtroom. I asked to leave; I felt too exposed. I just told these people a big chunk of my life. It seems as if I can't control myself anymore and my stomach sat at my feet.
My grandmother and the social worker came outside the courtroom after what seems like an eternity. They looked down at me and sighed. My father had won. He won. I feel my insides disintegrate. What have I done? Now my father will not have to go to prison and I will have to live with that scumbag for the next five years of my life. There's no way. He going to be raging angry at me for bringing this to court and telling my grandma.
What have I done?
My grandma dropped me off after the court had said it was safe; however, I knew that house with that man in it was anything but safe.
“Honey, you know you can call me anytime, if that peckerhead touches you again,” my grandma said encouragingly. I smiled and she drove away.
“Gran, I need to get out of this place,” I whispered to myself.
As I walked back into my house, I heard the pounding of my father punching the wall. I wonder if he'll wait a little bit. I was wrong. I walked into the kitchen and the first thing he did was fling me across the room. Already?
“Who do you think you are!!?” he beamed.
“Do you think this is what goes on in a normal household? Because if you do, you have issues.” I struck back at him.
“I'm sorry, but I'm not gonna bake you pies every time you get butt hurt.”
“I’m not asking for pies! I’m asking for the beatings to stop! Don’t you get that? Don’t you get that for the past six years of my life I haven’t gotten any birthday or Christmas presents from you? That I’ve been your ragdoll every time you got angry? Why can’t you let me go with gran? Why can’t you just let me be happy?”

I can’t do this anymore. This is the end. I’m ending this right now. Going through court, the long talks with gran and the service lady, and the fact that my father was presumed innocent, I seemed to gain the courage I could never dig up from deep down before. I walked up to him, and smacked him straight across the face. He was in awe. We stood there for a few seconds trying to comprehend what just happened. Before he came back to reality, I tried to sprint out of the room but before I reached the door, he snatched my arm.

"Where do you think you’re going?"

"I-I..." I couldn’t finish my sentence.

Without thinking, I just started screaming. I screamed until I couldn’t scream anymore. I felt weightless; numb. He was pushing and hitting me, I just couldn’t feel it. Eventually he stopped, my voice being too penetrating, I imagine.

Suddenly, there were a few soft knocks at the door. My father stung my back, and told me to stay there. Did he think I was dumb? A neighbor obviously heard my screams. I ran as fast as I could, so he couldn’t get me. I opened the door as I knew my father could no longer hurt me with company. I took another look forward. It was Mr. Sutter, the sweet old man next door.

Mr. Sutter had always been a quiet man. He never really tried to make a strong relationship with me, but we weren't strangers. A few winters after my mother had died, I'd wanted to go outside and build a snowman. My father had just beaten me that day, so I didn't have the nerve to ask him. I just went outside by myself. Mr. Sutter was taking his dog, Bear, out to pee. He saw me alone and had asked what I was doing.

"I'm gonna build a nice big snowman!"

"Ah, I see. All by yourself?"

I nodded nervously. Then he smiled, and simply said he would help me. After that, we didn’t talk much. Just a simple wave here and there, when we happened to be getting the mail at the same time.

He saw my swollen arm, and quickly glared at my father. He stared down at me and had asked what the big ruckus was about. My father stepped forward and told him it wasn't any of his business. Do it, Julia. Speak up.

"I was screaming because he was hurting me!" I blurted out.

"Oh dear lord," Mr. Sutter mumbled before grabbing a firm hold of my arm.

My father had tried to grab me back, but eventually gave up. I am still in awe at Mr. Sutter, I cannot believe that he has gone out of his way to come check up on me. I am so amazed that somebody could actually care about me.

Two months later

I was relieved to finally walk into my grandmother’s house with suitcase in hand and see her smiling face. My neighbor, Mr. Sutter, had taken me back to child protective services. And this time they did not want to assign me a court date and let me decide who I would be living with. I also finally had learned my social workers name, Tina. She was very nice about it and was very good about rarely bringing up the subject of my father, and when she did, she was very gentle about it. It took a couple of months for my father to finally sign the papers to hand me over to my grandmother, and in the meantime, I had gotten the opportunity to stay with a very nice family, the Williams. I was told it would only be for a little while until they could officially assign me to my grandmother’s home.

My father had been sent to court, but this time without me. My grandmother had told me he had been sentenced five years in prison. Something I had never felt in my entire life shot through my body. Closure. My father is finally in prison. I am now safe from that horrid man. I could now experience life without abuse. And I thank God every day for my second chance.
A man once said, “War is a series of catastrophes which result in victory.” Clearly he was delusional. The only victor of war is Death himself, his coffers brimming with the souls of our sons. This I see before me as my comrades perish; ripped from their worldly existence and doomed to till the fields of the Hereafter forevermore.

A nameless authority figure calls an order in my direction, and I am pulled from my reverie and plunged back into the present. Panicked men run amok about me, the tattered threads of their ashen uniforms only just clinging to their mangled bodies. I fancy them quite mad for so foolishly delving headlong into this god-awful conflict.

I often marvel at the concept that I, the one they called “manic”, am but alone among the sane. I am convinced that it is my writing that has kept me lucid throughout the course of this war. I often write poetry and have rather extensive discussions about politics and the like late at night with myself. I find that my mental superiority inhibits me from talking to the other soldiers, so I am forced to converse solely with myself. Of course, this does not deem me mad; no, I am merely resourceful in finding companions.

Even before this whole bloody mess started, I was alone. I lived alone in a small house in Virginia, with no one to speak to but the walls and myself, much like my current situation. I shall never forget the day I received the draft notice in the post. Upon reading it, I felt but as empty as the very home I resided in, for war is merely glorified sibling rivalry, the choice of lesser creatures, and this war is no exception. I was being drawn into the very affairs I had sworn to neglect, and the concept of this made my stomach contract.

Now here I stand, in the very center of it all, surely one of the hundreds destined to die here in a town called Gettysburg in southern Pennsylvania, deep in enemy territory. My body will be found by some nameless Yankee and surely discarded into some river, forced to spend eternity alone once more with the condemned. The chilling thought sends newly found adrenaline coursing through my veins, and I begin to crawl forward through the mass of bodies and hot lead. “Surely I am mad,” I think to myself, but onward I push into the din until I come to the blessed sanctuary of a dilapidated barn.

I begin to hear the shouts of blue-clad men and shock starts to set in as I fully realize now what I have done. Yes, I may have made it to the safety of the barn, but now, Union troops are beginning to surround it as I speak. Ironically, my own dire situation brings to mind a poem. “Two roads diverged in a yellow wood...” I muse to myself, for clearly, I am in the exact scenario Robert Frost himself was. One road, standing to fight the enemy, is of course the nobler path, but will surely end in my most untimely demise; the other, hiding, may be considered dishonorable, but is obviously the rational path. The soldiers are now firing their rifles at me, but how can I do anything but chuckle at my own situation? It is as if I am Frost, staring down the paths myself. Some would think this mad, but I find it simply humorous.

I choose the latter path, and the soldiers now begin to jeer at me, calling out expletives at my fleeing back, saying I am a coward, and begin to give chase. “Sticks and bones may break my bones,” I shout, “but words will never hurt me.” Again, you may think me mad to sing at such a time, but why would song condemn one to madness?

Now men in grey come forth to fire upon the men in blue. Encouraged by this, I raise my own rifle and fire a shot at my nearest pursuer; it strikes him, burying itself in his left temple. I turn and scurry into a corner to take cover from the massacre.

As I huddle here, it strikes me now that Robert Frost once wrote about a soldier, dying for his country. I shudder at the prospect that it could very well be me. I might end up the fallen lance, rusted, beaten, dead. At this thought, terror fills my heart, gripping it like a stone cold vice. I begin to see the battle with different eyes. The blood streaming down my cheek. The horrible, primal screams of the wounded. The merciless, animal look in the eyes of the men, their weapons hungering for the blood of their countrymen, their brothers. I am sickened. Sickened by man, and it’s cruel drive to slaughter those different from them. Sickened by its refusal of anything but killing as a method of resolution. Sickened by myself for being a part of it, for killing another man, something I swore never to do.
I look into the eyes of the man I shot, and the world slows down. For the first time I take him in. His curly blond hair now matted with congealed blood. His mischievous, boyish green eyes are beginning to dim. As I survey what I have done, his mouth opens slowly, closes, and he shudders and dies. I am overwhelmed with grief and anguish at my horrible deed. I have cut down my own countryman in his prime. He could have had a family, a fiancé that really believed he would come home. Maybe he had children. What will they think when they hear their father was murdered in cold blood? The title rings in my ears. Murderer. Murderer. Murderer. It is what I have become. As I begin to weep for the nameless young man amongst the chaos and fighting, another poem comes to mind, again by Robert Frost.

“Whose woods these are I think I know...” You slaughtered him. You killed him. “My little horse must think it queer...” I recite a bit louder now, to drown out the accusations in my head. He is dead because of you. “He gives his harness bells a shake...” through my pain my eyes fall upon my rifle, gleaming beautifully upon the barn floor, cold steel glinting marvelously. His family will mourn him; miss him, all because of you. You are a murderer. “The woods are lovely, dark, and deep...” and once these words leave my mouth, a sense of tranquility sweeps through my very soul, because I know that there is a third path that Robert Frost neglected to take that day, but I shall travel it. Slowly, I reach down to my weapon. It strikes me as such a crude but effective way of bringing Death to your foes. However, its inelegance is no matter to me, for I am merely interested in its effectiveness. Screaming and blood surround me, but they do not concern me, for I am clearly doing the intellectual thing. I pick up the gun.

No more will I be alone in this world. I place a single, perfect sphere of lead into the chamber.
No more will they call me mad. I slowly pull back the hammer until it softly clicks into place.
Surely I am not mad; obviously I am sane for choosing a third path. I place the barrel to my temple in the same place I shot the man.
You do not think me mad, do you? I place my finger on the trigger.
No, I am not the mad one.
And with that, I enter the woods.
It's hard to believe it took me three years to notice him, and yet he would end up being my best friend. But, in my defense he was one of those people that most overlook. He tended to stay to himself, but was not so shy that he avoided conversation. That took half a semester for us to accomplish, and only because we were assigned a science project, in which we were fatefully drawn as partners. I had told him to meet me at the coffee shop to study, but as I left work at the library I was skeptical that he would even show up. As I coasted into the parking lot and chained my bike to the rack, I started to search the faces through the window and sure enough, he was there, sitting in a shady corner seat. With a little sigh of relief, I untied the books I had balanced precariously on the seat and made my way into the shop. I was greeted with a hearty welcome from the barista, with whom I had been friends since fifth grade.

"Hey! Long time no see!"
"What's happening?" I replied, shifting my copious amount of books to fish out a five from my pocket.
"Not much, what can I get ya?"
"Um, a sweet tea." He disappeared only a moment before he returned with my beverage in hand.
"Thanks." I said leaving him with the tip.
"No problem. See ya, Stokes!" I know, Stokes is a weird nickname, but I hardly ever go by my first name. Not among friends at least.

"Hi, Dylan." The voice came from the corner seat. As I approached him, I got my first really good look. I guess I hadn't notice how perfect he was. Not trying to sound all girly or anything, but it seemed like he had been genetically modified to be in a boy band. His sandy brown hair was perfect, his crystal blue eyes were perfect, even his complexion, which should have been marred with acne, was flawless.

"Hey, Chris, why didn't you save us a window seat? I've been at work over at the library all day and they keep it in the single digits," I said, setting my drink down in the next booth over, one bathed in warm sunlight.
"Sorry, I forgot." He picked up is laptop and moved into the sun. He was wearing a hoodie and jeans, as always. Though it was odd, considering it was a record hot August day.

"I brought some books that might help. Let's get to work." And work we did. For the next hour, I had my nose in a book, feeding him information, while he typed on his laptop. Suddenly he looked up at me.
"I'm going to get a water. Do you want anything?" His voice wavered a bit, but at the time I mistook it for puberty, if that sort of thing even affected him.
"Nah, I'm good. Thanks." I said. He was gone no less than a minute, but when he came back he had a whole new air to him. He went to grab his laptop, his face riddled with worry.
"Sorry, Dylan. I need to go. I'm not feeling too well. I think it's probably the heat."
"Well, you've got a hoodie on, genius. We can move in the shade," I stood up and started to scoot out from the booth, when my arm brushed his. It was like I had touched a hot stove. I slapped the back of my hand to his forehead, and simultaneously jerked it back. His face was hot to the touch. "Oh my gosh!"
"Why did you have to do that? Are you okay?" He leaned down to take a look at my hand.
"Don't worry about me, worry about you! You're on fire!"
"Where?!" He took that quite literally.
"You're really hot, not on fire. Either way, we need to get you to a hospital."
"No, I'm fine, I need to go." Laptop in hand, he hurried out of the shop. I followed suit and chased after him as he made his way down the street. He ignored my demands of his hospitalization and kept trying to lose me down alleys until we reached an old, run-down service garage. He opened one of the doors and stumbled inside. I followed closely behind. "Where are you." I cut off mid-sentence when I walked in and saw him rummaging around frantically on a work table, he had already shed his shirt and hoodie and had what looked like tattoos all over his back. "Wait, why is the shirt off?"
"Just help me find a screw driver."
"Now's not the time to be working on som-"
"Just FIND ONE!" That was the first time I had ever heard him raise his voice, and it was quite intimidating. "What kind?"

"Philips." I quickly located one and brought it to him. He took it and thrust it into one of what I had previously thought to be tattoos on his chest. One after another, screws fell to the floor. After he had finished removing the screws, he took both hands and pried opened a compartment in his chest, releasing steam and smoke into the room. I had been staring at him the entire time these events were unfolding, my mouth probably grazing the floor. He laid down on what looked like a glorified dentist chair that sat near the work table.

"Will you quit gawking and help me out?" He gasped, his breathing labored. "I need you to reach in here and find the thermocontrol, it will look like an SD card but a little bigger. It will be flashing red and smoking."

"You want me to what?"

"I need you to find that thermocontrol. It's right by a motherboard. Once you find it, pull it out." I cautiously approached the chair and hesitantly put my hand into the metal chasm where his lungs should have been. I just sat there staring. I felt like a complete imbecile. "IT'S FLASHING RED AND SMOKING, HOW HARD CAN IT BE TO FIND?!?!?"

"Sorry, I think I found it," I replied, pulling out the burnt, smoking thermocontrol. The second it disconnected, he inhaled deeply.

"There should be another in the tool box on the table, hurry please." I searched the toolbox as Chris gasped for air behind me. I finally dug out a spare and replaced it, taking a step backward when I was done. He laid his head back, closed his eyes, and took a few exhausted, shaky breaths before speaking. "Sorry you had to see that." He had begun to breathe normally now, I on the other hand seemed to be having a heart attack.

"I'm not exactly sure what I saw. Care to explain?" I just stood and watched as he sat up and closed his chest compartment. The worry had returned to his face, and he began placing the screws on the floor into their proper spots. He was muttering to himself as he did so, apparently forgetting I was still standing there trying to make sense of what I had just witnessed.

"I'm a Complex Humanoid Rational Intelligence System, Chris for short," he started reluctantly, "I'm an experiment from a top secret laboratory the president doesn't even know about called the Artificial Intelligence Unit. Please, don't tell anyone about what you just saw. I've been trying to stay under the radar my whole life and I would be dead if you blew my cover."

The next few months went by in a flash. I kept Chris's secret. He told me that it was nice to have someone that knew what he was, to share his secret with, and to be able to wear a short sleeve t-shirt every once in a while without worrying about the questions about the screws in his arms. But what he said that he liked most of all was to be able to get to know someone and for someone to know him. To have a true friend. Looking back, remembering the first day we met and the awkward greeting at the coffee shop where he called me Dylan instead of Stokes, seemed like so long ago. Thinking that back then, I didn't even have the slightest clue that we would make so many memories together or laugh so many laughs, that we would grow so close to each other. But as the weather changed so did Chris. I noticed that as the days got colder, so did he. He was irritable and would get annoyed when I asked him questions. He treated me as if I were below him. He was always on the phone or the computer, mumbling on about "unlimited possibilities" and some doctor he had to meet. He hardly made time for hanging out any more. I was about at my breaking point when I got a call from a blocked number. I usually didn't answer calls like that, but that day, I really didn't care if some stupid telemarketer was on the other line.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Miss Dylan Stokes?"

"Who is this?" I questioned. The voice on the other line was a man's voice, very official.

"I'm Professor Goodman, co-founder of the C.H.R.I.S project. Is Chris there with you?"

"How do you- Why are you calling me?"

"I have been keeping track of Chris since he first left to live on his own, and a recent data check has worried me. I know you know about Chris and have for months now. I would like to ask you a few questions."

"Why should I tell you anything?"

"I know you are the closest person to Chris, and I didn't want to have to contact you, but I couldn't avoid it." I peered over my shoulder to see that Chris was still watching the computer screen intently. I quietly left the garage and stood outside under the dripping awning as rain fell around me. "Alright. I'm ready."
"Has Chris had any malfunctions recently? Any glitches he’s told you about?"
"No, none that I’m aware of."
"Has he been powering down more than usual."
"Nope."
"What about his attitude? Any mood swings or aggressive behavior?"
"Actually, now that you mention it, he has been very angry, quick to get frustrated. He’s been treating everyone else as if they’re below him. All he does is work on the computer and when I try to ask what he’s doing he snaps at me. It’s not like him at all." I wondered what could possibly be wrong, and a surge of hope shot through me when I thought that this could simply be a glitch that could be fixed."
"That’s just what I was worried about. I don’t suppose he’s mentioned any names?"
"He talks about some doctor he has to meet. Professor, what’s going on?"
"Chris has a virus. It was planted by my partner, Dr. Strife. I’ve been suspicious of him for some time and found strange files on his computer the other day that looked an awful lot like the virus Chris has."
"What does it do? Just make him grumpy? It can be fixed right?" I panicked, hoping, praying that there was a quick fix that would bring my friend back.
"This virus is very severe. It is in the process of erasing the conscience program that we installed to help Chris tell right from wrong. That’s why he’s treating you the way he is. But, it’s also downloading a list of commands, missions more like."
"Missions? You don’t mean -"
"Yes Miss Stokes. When Chris was first created my colleague wanted to use him as the next revolution in soldiers. He’s turning Chris into a machine of war. But I can’t tell you everything now. I will meet you in person soon enough. But whatever you do you must keep Chris there. Don’t let him leave."
"Um, there’s going to be a slight problem with that. He just walked out, and he’s moving fast." I watched, a wave of panic rushing over me as he stormed off into the rain, not looking back.
"Stay where you are, I’m coming to pick you up." Then the line went dead. I stood there, watching Chris walk further and further away. Something inside me pulled toward him wanting to follow, instead I was bound to the porch, watching as my best friend left me for who knows-what going who knows-where. It wasn’t long before a black Suburban with tinted windows and a government emblem on the side, rendered unreadable by the sheets of rain, pulled up. A man stepped out of the car. He was in a lab coat with a pair of glasses in the pocket. The stereotypical scientist. He ran over to me and held his hand out for me to take. Going against every stranger danger lesson I had been taught as a kid, I took it. He led me over to the car and opened the door, closing it behind me.
"Sorry for the rush, Miss Stokes, but this is urgent. I need you to tell me exactly which direction Chris was going." The Professor’s eyes were creased with worry. I could tell, no matter how hard he tried to conceal it, that he was frightened for Chris. Not like I was, but like a parent would be, if it were their son lost in this downpour.

As we drove through town, scanning the streets for Chris, the Professor explained the details of the situation. Apparently this virus was in its final stage. Soon, Chris wouldn’t be himself, he would be a killing machine. Professor Goodman pulled out a USB drive from his pocket, telling me that on it was the code that would terminate the virus. If the code succeeded, it would terminate the entire C.H.R.I.S. project. In other words, my friend would be dead. Tears came to my eyes and fear welled in my chest making it hard to breath. Panic constricted my throat as I thought about the fact that I would never see my friend again. I would never get to tell him goodbye. But we had no choice. I wouldn’t let him become a killer. It was growing darker as we finally gave up and returned to the lab, but the second we pulled in the parking lot the Professor raised his finger to his lips.
"They’re here," he whispered. We got out of the car, quietly closing the car doors. Then, opening the main doors of the lab, we snuck down the low-ceilinged hall. Professor Goodman stopped right before a door, and signaled that they were in there. I heard voices and recognized Chris’s immediately. I nodded and we entered the room.
"Dr. Strife, what have you done?" A tall slender man stood abruptly from a computer, from which a cable ran to a port in Chris’s arm.
"Stokes? Why are you here?" Chris asked.
"Strife, listen to me," Professor Goodman pleaded, "You know that this will not end well. I don't think you understand the capabilities of this monster you've created."

"No, partner, it's you who doesn't understand. This project was meant for so much more than you could imagine, and your lack of vision was all that's kept us from releasing Chris's full potential until now."

"That stupid conscience, always nagging at me, that program weakened me. But now that the program's been deleted, you're all that's left between me and greatness. And we can't have that now can we?" Chris took a few strides forward and grabbed Professor Goodman by the throat, hoisting him into the air, leaving him struggling, gasping for breath. I stood there horror struck.

"Chris! Stop!" Dr. Strife lurched forward.

"NO! We both know this man has been nothing but a hindrance. Or is your conscience bugging you? You're either with me, Dr., or dead." Dr. Strife sunk back toward the wall. I looked up at the poor Professor, struggling and gasping for air. In that moment we locked eyes. And then, after one final attempt at freedom, he hung limp, his hand opening and onto the floor dropped the USB. Without thinking about what I was doing, I grabbed it and raced to the computer where Chris was plugged in. I pushed Dr. Strife aside and inserted the USB. Immediately Chris turned on me, then his eyes started scrolling as if he were reading a book.

"WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?!" He ran over to the computer, shoving me to the ground. "NO! NO!" He grasped his head in his hands. Then his eyes stopped scanning and he turned to me. "Stokes? What happened? Is that?" He had caught sight of the Professor's body. He fell onto his knees, touching it as if to see if he were alive. "What happened? Why is he dead?" He was grief stricken, oblivious to what he had done. Then his eyes started to scroll again. Afraid I was hurting him, I ran to the computer and looked at the screen. A banner at the top read, "termination in process", while below images, conversations, memories of our friendship appeared and were quickly deleted. Every once in a while Chris snapped out of his trance, confused. It was like he was reliving our friendship, all of the good times. It was torture. But what hurt worst of all was the last banner that came up on the screen, "C.H.R.I.S. Project Terminated" and I heard him utter one last word.

"Dylan?" The light left his eyes, and his body fell to the ground with a sickening thud. I hurried forward, bawling and begging him to wake up, hoping that he would open his eyes. I held his head in my hands, caressed his perfect face, and admired his perfect eyes. All the while his last word ran through my head.

"Dylan?"
“I woke up to my right ankle shackled to a concrete wall, and I couldn’t feel anything from my knee down. From what the robot-man said, I can only assume that I had been hunted for years upon years upon years, and they finally found me after searching for more than two decades. But after I had escaped from my cell, I found out that they didn’t want to fix me- they wanted me dead.”

Today, I thought that I would wake up to a snowy landscape that had an icy glow to it. I thought that the trees would be white and the small pond next to my bedroom window would sparkle from the sunlight reflecting off of the snowy ice. I couldn’t have been more wrong.

When I woke up, I was cold. Shivering. Teeth chattering. Chilled to the bone. I felt for my plush gray blanket, but only felt a thin sheet on top of my legs.

I sat up quickly, receiving a small headache in turn. I gasp, and whip my head back and forth, completely shocked to not see my warm yellow walls, but instead, slate gray concrete in their place.

I swing my legs over the side of my bed- or maybe not my bed- my right leg gets caught on something and my chin slams onto the metal bedframe.

"AAH! Ow, ow, ow!" I scream at the top of my lungs, and burst into tears, turning angrily to scowl at my caught leg.

I quickly sober up, though, because my leg isn’t caught in the sheets- my ankle is shackled to the wall.

I tug and pull and scream again and again as a try to break free of the wall, but the chain just won’t bust. I start to cry hystically, but my ears perk up as the faint sound of footsteps start to become heavier.

I scramble onto the bed and lay there unmoving with my face stuffed into the suffocating pillow.

Four booming knocks echo throughout the concrete walls, and an equally terrifying voice repeats over and over in my head as it talks.

“Miss Scott, wake up if you have not already. It is time for you to eat,” The low voice sends shivers down my neck.

“I’m n-not h… hu… hun.” I try to say while hurriedly wiping away stray tears, but my stomach rumbles against my will, causing my heartbeat to increase by two-thousand, and my anger towards my speech doesn’t help.

The voice chuckles, “I beg a differ, Miss. I am coming in.” A second later, I twist my head around to where the sound of concrete rubbing emits. “Hello, Miss. Hungry?” The man smirks slightly, and sets a tray of steaming egg whites and toast onto the edge of my bed.

“Uh, th-tha-thank you,” I manage to say with determination, and refrain from grabbing the eggs with my bare hands to stuff my mouth. "Why a-am I h-her-here?" I ask, while scowling slightly at him and my speech.

“It is no problem, Miss,” the man, a pretty handsome man for that matter says, completely ignoring my question. "Please finish in five minutes; I will be back and then we will take a walk,” He then turns around sharply, and before I can even reply, the concrete slab is already back into its place in the wall. I put my fork down, and think hard about what he said. A walk? Why didn’t he answer me? Does he have selective hearing? Well, I'm just not going to eat, then, I think, I don't take orders from him. But once again, my stomach defies my brain, and I mutter a couple incoherent words before sliding the plate onto my lap and angrily eat the no-longer- steaming eggs. Once I clean my plate, I take my time to inspect my clothes. Last night I was in dark red and bright green fuzzy pants and a plain green t-shirt, but I was now wearing a slate gray long-sleeve shirt with black leggings and black ankle socks on. I also feel my hair, which is now in a low ponytail over my left shoulder.

My heartbeat increases significantly at the thought of being taken away and having my hair and clothes messed with. How could I not of thought of this sooner? Before I could think any more about my appearance, the awful screeching concrete noise erupts again, causing me to jump and have a mini heart attack.

"I see that you finished your breakfast. Good. Let's go on a walk, hm?" The now-creepy man says while walking towards the edge of my bed.

"N-no. Not until I get a-a-an-ans-answers," I say firmly, while pulling my chained leg as far up towards my chest as it would go. Damn that.
The man stops in his tracks. "I do not believe I have told you my name," he says while boring his gaze into my eyes. "I am Experiment Number 16.2.1, one of the properly functioning robots. We've been searching for you for quite some time, Miss."

"R-Robot?" I swallow. Searching for me?

Experiment Number 16.2.1 smiles darkly, "Yes, robot. Now please, stop inquiring so many questions, they could very well earn you much trouble." My breathing hitches and my eyes widen to the size of Saturn, and Experiment Number 16.2.1 finishes the distance between himself and the edge of my bed. He reaches into a deep pocket on the left side of his pant leg and fishes out a shining silver pair of pliers.

"If you fight against me, I will not hesitate to hurt you," Experiment Number 16.2.1 warns while eyeing the very sharp tips of the pliers, and my eyes widen even more. He could cut my ankle, I think, absolutely terrified. He hooks the razor-sharp tips of the pliers around one of the chain links and pulls not-so-gently on the stubborn chain link, and I grit my teeth so I won't scream.

"Ah, see, now that wasn't so bad, Miss Scott, was it?" Experiment Number 16.2.1 asks me while smiling smugly, and I glare with all my might while trying not to let the tears that had welled up in my eyes fall. He slides the pliers back into his pocket.

"Go to hell," I spit out while actually spitting on him, which I was proud of. Experiment Number 16.2.1 is stunned for a short moment before reacting quickly by wiping off the small, wet glob on his cheek and glaring at me with all his... heart?

"You should not have done that," he growls before reaching for the pliers again. I cry out determination as he tries to stab the needle-sharp pliers in my left eye, but I successfully kick Experiment Number 16.2.1 where the sun doesn't shine, causing him to stumble back with a groan.

I realize quickly that I can escape but there's a potentially large chance that I could get caught. Before I can even think about it, the shackles are in my right hand with the chain dangling menacingly. I launch at the so-called robot and swing with all my heart at his head and a crushing metallic sound emits from the contact. The gash is now dripping a whole lot of blood- dark purple blood. I gasp and shuffle back hurriedly away from the disgusting thing while trying to wrap my head around what had just happened.

Purple blood? I try to push down the urge to throw up. A second later I was emptying my stomach of the breakfast I was given earlier. After a minute of pure hell- I really hate throwing up- I wipe away the spit that was on the corners of my lips. When I glance at my sleeve, I don't see the expected yellow color. It was black and silver.

Oh my god, I think, what's happening? I look around the room again, eyeing the thing to see any movement from it, and I then notice the concrete isn't completely wedged into the wall. I get up slowly, but jump when I hear a groan coming from him, and decide that I really don't want to mess with that anymore. I grab the shackles again and hit him again.

Satisfied with my work. I slowly get off my knees and take note of the throbbing pain in my right ankle, which causes me to stumble back to the bed. I sit down on the crumpled white sheets for a couple minutes before thinking about what the robot had said. They had been searching for me?

Why? I gulp loudly and momentarily stop breathing. Am I a robot? I clutch my chest as my left arm starts to spasm, hitting my neck, face, and legs, but I don't feel pain. I grab my left wrist with my right hand and press it down into the bed as hard as I could to stop it from moving. Taking a deep breath, I think calm thoughts of Thanksgiving dinner and my younger brother. I have to get out of here, I think, and nod along with my thoughts before getting up slowly and peeking through the crack between the wall and cement door.

Nothing, all clear. I slip myself through the opening, thankful that I didn't have to push it open- I'm probably not strong enough. I turn left and head towards a metal door with a padlock securing it to the wall, but take small, cautious steps so I won't be heard. As I get closer to the door, I start to wonder why nobody else is here. I mean, surely other people know about me- duh- but why wouldn't alarms have gone off by now?

I finished the distance but stopped mid-step when I noticed a small label that was shimmering on the door. My breath caught in my throat as I read the almost transparent words:

NOT AN EXIT.

"Where can I going to go?" I wail before I can stop myself, but gasp and cover my mouth. I look around frantically but see no one, so I take a deep, deep breath to calm myself down. But before I could even pick up my foot to take a step towards the door to read the label again, my vision suddenly goes dead. I feel my head...
being snapped to the left side- but I don't really know for sure which direction, and the entire left half of my body went limp just one second before my right. I collapse on the concrete floor, blacking out completely, the strong smell of latex swirling throughout my non-existent dreams.
Ryan Lett
Personal Essay/Memoir: The Story of the Pipes
Platte City Middle School
Kelly Miller, Teacher

It all started in the fall of 2012. My dad and I loved AC-DC’s song Long Way to the Top. We heard it all the time on our favorite station, 101 the Fox. The song featured the lead singer, Bon Scott (who would later die of over drinking and choking on his own puke just four years later). The song accompanied a group called the Rats of Tobruk and Scott himself on the Highland pipes, deafening listeners and threatening to blow the speakers out of every car and radio that dare play it on full volume. At the age of eleven, after hearing the song millions of times on the old 1998 radio in our Chevy truck, I finally decided that was it, I wanted a piece of this.

“I want to play the bagpipes,” I said facing my dad.

“Wait. What?” he replied, staring at me, baffled and in shock.

“I want to learn how to play like those guys on the radio,” I repeated.

“OK, I’ll do some research on people who teach it.”

When we got home, Dad walked in and told Mom the news right away. She gave me the same look as Dad had in the car. She told me how hard it would be to learn the rare instrument and how we’d be lucky if we could even find a tutor some place close. I hardly knew how the bagpipes worked, none the less, play them.

The thought didn’t come up for another two weeks. I begged my dad to search where we could learn the magnificent instrument. I hassled him over and over to just type in the words “Where can you learn to play bagpipes”. After two more months of procrastinating, he finally searched the web.

The first thing that came up was a tutor in Oregon. Next was Cleveland. How could there be no one around here that could teach the pipes? Finally, after hours of searching we found something that caught our eye. St. Andrews Episcopal Church. Free bagpipe lessons. Kansas City, Missouri.

“It says here that it’s in downtown KC. A place called Brookside,” he stated.

“Where’s that at?”

“Near the plaza, it’s about 45 minutes away from here.”

A new class didn’t until January and it was still November. Two months dragged on like a ten year old that was forced to go to clothes shopping. As the new year broke in, there was only 5 days till piping lessons started. We had bought the chanter (thing that you start out on and learn notes and songs until you’re good enough to wear big boy pants and upgrade to the real pipes) back in December. We got there at 5:30 and strolled on though the side entrance where the church choir people would enter for a rehearsal. As we walked down the creaky steps, I could hear a high pitched, nasally sound from the room up ahead. I walked in unsurely to see people blasting away on their chanters like pros. I realized there was a group that wasn’t doing anything so I realized that was probably where we needed to go. I took my seat and examined the odd group. There was only two other people. A woman in her early 30’s and another woman in her 60’s. I was only 11 at the time.

We all told each other our names (which and can’t remember now) and why we were here. The first woman said because she wanted to learn because of her heritage. Same thing with the other lady. I told them of my heritage and how I loved the song Long way to the Top and how that inspired me. The teacher came few minutes later and apologized for her absence. She was an old lady named Dorothy. She could have been older than the second woman in our group. The first night, we didn’t even play. She just taught us how to hold the chanter and how the notes are played. From now on this was how my Tuesday nights would be spent.

The next week, we played and I was the best in the class. Both women couldn’t quite figure out the notes but I got it right away. Already being able to play the trumpet from the school, I had a huge advantage in rhythms and pitches. Neither of the ladies had a lick of experience with music. I advanced quickly out of that class and under the wing of a new tutor.

Her name was Tammy. She was by far the worst teacher of all. She didn’t even really help. There were three others in the new group who hadn’t been there long. When I got there, they were still on the basics. Tammy didn’t help me improve at all. She congratulated me on simple things that I had done a thousand times before. She was too busy telling us good job to focus on the things that need improvement. After about two months, I had had enough. I needed a new teacher.
This was my third and current teacher. Griffin Hall. A 13 year old kid (currently 15 as I’m writing this story). He was the hot shot that sat in the corner playing jigs, dances and other tunes as if his life depended on it. He was a prodigy. People envied him for his skill fluency of his fingertips. It was with this young man that I would learn how to play most of my tunes and upgrade to the real pipes to kick start my piping career.

Late September

The Veteran’s Day assembly was in 3 weeks. If I was going to play in front of the whole school, I was going to need some practice. I hadn’t been to bagpipe practice since the beginning of the school year, due to football. Now I had less than a month to master (and by that I mean wing it enough that people think I’m good) the pipes. However, the practicing didn’t start till two weeks out from Veteran’s Day.

November

Ten days until the my first performance. I practiced like crazy the last five days. I practiced Amazing Grace 50 times over the weekend and 40 times on Monday (the day before the assembly). When Tuesday morning rolled around my dad was more nervous than I was. He was wiping sweat off of his head for fear that I might mess up in front of the whole school and he would forever be known as the father of the kid that sucks at bagpipes. I practiced in the band room as sixth, seventh and eighth graders piled in to put away their instruments and marvel at the eerie sound of this exotic device. Many kids wondered how it worked and how long I’d been playing. I answered all of their questions flawlessly until they were all out of thoughts.

When the principal poked his head in and told me it was show time. As I walked pass the empty cafeteria, where the Veteran’s Day breakfast was held, the school counselor asked if she could take a picture of me and my father for the school website. After the snapshots, we rushed off to the gym. I stood behind the bleachers, trying to keep my drones (big tall sticks on the top of the pipes, as some people call them) from hitting the walls behind me. My peers gawked at the marvelous sight of African black wood, accompanied by pure nickel and a black, corduroy bag that held air and fueled the contraption to produce the unique and deafening sound that rang through the halls, long after the owner hushed the wild beast.

After the “higher intelligence” kids announced their Why-I’m-Thankful-for Veteran’s story that we did in English class a few weeks ago, I was on. All eyes were on me. And I know what you’re thinking. No skirt? It’s a kilt. Get it right, anyway. Phone cameras were whipped out (including my mother’s) and the photography club kneeled down to get a steady picture for a juicy school newspaper. I ran through the first verse. No problems. Second verse, not so much. I fumbled the notes for a second but got it under control and finished up quick. The gym roared with the sound of two slabs of meat on the palm of human beings, beating each other senseless until they felt it was necessary to stop. Grown men, wiped away their tears, remembering fallen members in combat and the loss of their best friends, lost to the man of a foreign land.

Before anyone could stand up to congratulate me on my performance, I bolted out and headed for the band room to fold the pipes away and pack them neatly into their case. Throughout the day, “Good job” and “You play bagpipes?” filled the halls as I walked by. All the teachers were amazed and the my history teacher asked more questions than any of the teachers. He wanted to know what inspired me and tons of other small questions that I had answered 50 times before.

Since both my parents had the day off, they went to the 4th and 5th grade building and stopped in on my old teacher Mrs. B (I don’t know how to spell her last name) and her 4th grade class. Mrs. B is also the wife of my middle school music teacher who got me into music. My parents peeked inside the classroom and asked Mrs. B to step outside in the hall for a minute. My dad told her the whole story. After my mom played the video and Mrs. B wiped away the tears, they left.

The video must’ve been played about a thousand times by my dad. Showing everyone we visited. He gave the whole story to them just like all the rest. They asked the same questions just like everyone else. After several weeks passed by, practice still went on and I waited for the next gig to arrive.
Jenna Liu

Poetry: Even the Stars, Shutter Click, and Mrs. Welch’s Electric Blanket
Rock Bridge Senior High School
Kathryn Fishman, Teacher

Even the Stars

She was a lonely girl
Drifting through time on the wing of chance
Little did she know she was waiting for a boy
A boy who never asked for a dance

He lived like a star
A skinny boy with elephant dreams
Brightness burning shadowed scars
He spoke the words of the lucky ones
A diagnosis with nothing to lose
Drunk on life with no such fate
He was many things
But he was not afraid

When the only choice is the poison pill
A life must be lived full in four seasons
A sharp scythe slicing time still
He gave it all for one final year
And what a year it was
Yes

What a year he lived

She had parents who hovered and hugged
Parents who loved a dying love
But he made her feel
He was the one
A journey for an answer that would never come
Searching for the halfway
He found it

He found it

How different were their worlds
How alike were their souls
Two beings reaching to shake Death’s hand
Two children waiting for the dice to roll
What thoughts are born when an angel strokes your hair?
They knew

They knew

The curiosities of the universe are infinite
None more so than them
A girl and a boy who found a boy and a girl
Sailing away on Charon's ship
Was it too early to close the show?
    Take a bow
    She knew

    She knows

Maybe they were too much for this world
    Too bright
    Too special
    Too young
    Yes
How young was their time
    How quickly it did pass
    They were stolen
    They were given
Stars among the faceless
    But yes
Even the stars must fall

A lonely girl and a special boy
Two pieces of a broken heart
Father is merciful to those he betrays
Snatched away without a noise
Fortuna spares no prey
Ironic losers of an unwinnable race
Waiting for directions to below or above
    They are laughing at us
    We who dare to fall in love

They were the special ones
The stars we thought would stay
    One did
    The other left
Even the brightest covered by rain

There will always be another
    Another him
    Another her
    They are us
    We are them
    We will die
    We will live

Even the stars will go away
Even the stars will leave someday

Shutter Click

It captured us one day but
not the spiteful slap of UV rays on cowering retinas and
ragged lips stretched flatter than the prairie on which a little house was built or
the ache of your bumpy molars ground together with force to storm a thousand bastilles with fingers clasped in a forbidden embrace just snatched the pale silhouettes still suspended in the 123 seconds after we ran And locked us in a wooden frame

Locked us in a wooden frame and missed the sticky snowflakes of popsicle blood sweet and stinging in a symphony of summer that stayed long past wishing wells on June mornings enamel dressed in chipped green armor reaching to hold a memory close yet you slipped away faded converse pounding molten asphalt until you baked legs carrying for miles but still holding the energy to scream with the curse of youth still running until all I can see is a hazy smile soft around the edges until it’s going going gone
But it captured us one day

Mrs. Welch’s Electric Blanket

For her, because otherwise she would be alone

The heavy pencil drew two furrows down her life Three uneven parts of equally insignificant value None caused the heavens to shake and flood the streets with shimmering pieces of a guarded existence Pitted grains of wistful dreams The trio was in quick succession, a parade of casual walking and talking Pathetic wisdom in a hollow world as the snowball rolled into limbo A silent Blythe Welch glided on the back of another’s soliloquy Foolish tears never fell She crept down a neutral street, stepping once more towards death In a blue bin lay a yellow blanket taken selfishly for her miserable cats Elegant creatures with discerning minds forced it across a lonely bed With a patchwork quilt embossed by her children’s names like the broken blocks of a forgotten life Prongs that struggled into smiles and caused a delicious warmth to spread It reminded her of moments gone opaque in thought and seconds prayers could not conjure A baffling reality far from the empty apartment with silent corners and silent screams Those mustard fibers became her one and only, the lover to which whispered secrets would fall upon Cloudy memories ripped away by a reluctantly cozy pretense of faithful company Until a cup of tea was spilt and a fragrant drop kissed a copper wire She should have unplugged the blanket
Olivia Long

Poetry: Voyage
John Burroughs School
Shannon Koropchak, Teacher

Gentle dewdrops cascade from milky down,
Into the murmuring bubbles of stream,
Stringing crystal beads on silken web.
The fragrant whisper of petals
Lace the air—a feather, cloud white, drifts down,
Alighting upon translucent aqua,
She is swept away, spinning on the playful waters.
Softly, it hums a lullaby and

Flows—through distant lands, to where
Granite heavens thrust open Aeolus’s gift.
The ocean, blinded by perpetual thirst,
Unsheathes claws of deepest black,
Traps, and spits white.
Her wings matted and gray, She flickers against the extinguished waters,
Thrown and tossed by callous hands
until She is seen
No more.
Yet still, on and on, it

Flows – into the silence of a shallow brook,
through the fallen night,
A shroud of permeating ink.
Rocked by the dark rush, She materializes from around the bend, afloat.
The moon, a beacon
Illuminating Her.
The sighs of the creek, the whippoorwill’s lonesome cry,
Commiserating, fading into the raw cold air.
Past toothy rocks, past drowning pools,
The mercurial water buoys Her transient solitude and

Flows – into a mirror of sky.
Shimmers, golden under dying rays,
Like smiling gems, free from crowns,
A separate majesty.
Pearly stars immortalized in honey, a million feathers dot the water’s surface,
Each, a completed journey.

From the small rivulet, She glides into the wide expanse
Of Immobility.

And there, She
Floats.

Note: The pronouns "she" and "it" are used intentionally to refer to the feather and the water respectively.
Society is defined by cultural beliefs that can be confining to human nature. However, it is difficult to challenge the existing norms. Literary works often pioneer the effort in societal reform. The novel *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne is unmistakably rooted in the Puritan culture, but also clearly challenges its doctrines. Although Hawthorne accepts the Puritan view that sins cannot go unpunished, he believes that humans are capable of self-redemption, a principle that the Puritans harshly fail to advocate.

Hawthorne believes that the consequences of sin are inescapable, a view in harmony with Puritan perspectives. The Puritan stance on the fates of sinners is manifest in the work of Jonathan Edwards, an ardent Puritan and theologian. In “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” Edwards discusses the condemned lives of sinners. He states that “when that due time, or appointed time comes, their [the sinners’] foot shall slide”[i]. Edwards’ use of the phrase “due time” implies that each sinner has a destined moment at which he will suffer the consequences of his sin. In other words, Edwards is advocating the inevitability of punishment. Hawthorne expresses the same view through the character of Dimmesdale. During the clandestine forest conversation in which Hester reveals to Dimmesdale the true identity of Chillingworth, she urges Dimmesdale to “begin all anew” by returning to England[ii]. This phrase implies leaving everything behind. Instead of objecting to this idea, Dimmesdale expresses concern for doing it alone. Therefore, it can be inferred that Dimmesdale tacitly supports Hester’s idea, demonstrating Dimmesdale’s belief that he can avoid the consequences of his sin. Yet, the day before his scheduled escape, Dimmesdale climbs the scaffold and reveals his secret to all of New England. Shortly after, he collapses and dies. By making Dimmesdale’s revelation his last act before his death, it is clear that Hawthorne kept Dimmesdale alive just long enough for him to reveal his sin. By keeping Dimmesdale alive, Hawthorne is suggesting that nothing will prevent a sinner from facing the consequences of his sin, not even death. This demonstrates Hawthorne’s Puritanical belief that sins cannot go unpunished.

On the other hand, Hawthorne often portrays the Puritans as being intolerant of social taboos and painfully oppressive. A case in point is Hester Prynne’s extramarital pregnancy. As she advances into the late stages of her pregnancy, Hester Prynne is convicted of adultery. On the day of publicizing her sin, the Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony gather outside of the prison door to spew their condemnation. One woman violently denounces Hester and says that “this woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die”[iii]. In believing that death is an adequate punishment for Hester’s sin, this woman epitomizes the society’s intolerance of social digressions. She further exclaims: “Is there not a law for it? Truly there is, both in the Scripture and the statute-book”[iv]. Here, Hawthorne directly links the Puritan religion to the woman’s harsh criticism. This further substantiates Hawthorne’s view of the oppressive nature of Puritanism.

Hawthorne’s most direct depiction of the oppressive nature of the Puritan society lies in Dimmesdale. Many years after committing the sin of adultery with Hester, Dimmesdale still has to live with “the agony with which this public veneration tortured him”[v]. Here, the word “public” is an unveiled reference to the Puritan society. Dimmesdale is also “venerated,” implying that he has acquired a respected status in that society. While in his own house, conversing with Chillingworth, Dimmesdale states that “guilty as they [the sinners] may be, retaining, nevertheless, a zeal for God’s glory and man’s welfare, they shrink from displaying themselves black and filthy in the view of men”[vi]. The word “shrink” implies fear, while the words “black” and “filthy” suggest contempt and vilenes. Therefore, it is implied that Dimmesdale himself, as the sinner, is concealing his sin out of fear of appearing contemptible in society. Having to conceal his sin, Dimmesdale clearly feels oppressed by the high expectations that Puritan society places on him, especially being so well-respected. Through the character of Dimmesdale, Hawthorne effectively illustrates the oppressive nature of Puritan society.

The negative light shed on the Puritans stems from Hawthorne’s conflicting belief in the power of the individual to achieve salvation, reflected in Hester’s actions after she is condemned for her sin. Several years after her acquisition of the scarlet letter, Hester establishes herself as the town’s altruist, giving to the poor and tending to the sick. Hester’s attempt to achieve salvation through her own actions conflicts with tenets of Puritanism, as evidenced in Edwards’ writing. In “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” Edwards addresses the sinner and asserts that “nothing that you have ever done, nothing that you can do, to induce God to spare
you one moment”[vii]. Hawthorne, on the other hand, clearly believes that the individual has the power for redemption from his or her sin. After Hester had encouraged Dimmesdale to forget the past and his sin, she “undid the clasp that that fastened the scarlet letter, and, taking it from her bosom, throw it to a distance among the withered leaves”[viii]. Since Hester is the one who tears off the scarlet letter, the symbol of her sin, Hawthorne is suggesting that only the sinner himself is able to redeem himself of his sin. God is not the only one who controls whether the sinner is saved or not, as Edwards suggests; the sinner also exerts control and is capable of personal salvation.

Not only does Hawthorne advocate personal salvation, but he also ventures further by contending that the sinner has the power to define the influence of the sin in his life, evidenced through the evolution of the symbolic “A.” In his work, Edwards states that “wickedness makes you [the sinner] as it were heavy as lead, and to tend downwards with great weight and pressure towards hell”[ix]. Here, the phrase “wickedness makes you” implies that the sinner becomes the embodiment of the sin and therefore, the sin takes precedence over all other aspects of the sinner. Edwards then compares sin to “lead,” a heavy burden that can be made no lighter. However, Hawthorne presents a different view of sin. When it is first bestowed on Hester, the scarlet letter “A” is rumored to be “red-hot with infernal fire”[x]. The use of the word “infernal” indicates that the Puritans initially associated the “A” with the Devil and Hell. As time passes, the meaning of the “A” gradually begins to morph as a result of Hester’s aforementioned altruism. The Puritans soon “refused to interpret the scarlet ‘A’ by its original signification... They said that it meant ‘Able’”[xi]. The word “able” carries a positive connotation and implies an admirable capacity to do work. This suggests that society shifted focus from Hester’s past, sinful actions to her current, laudable actions. Therefore, not only does the “A” cease to become a token of sin, but it also becomes a symbol of good. Since the “A” represents her sin, Hester essentially diminishes the importance of her sin, allowing her altruistic actions and generosity to outweigh the sin. This serves as Hawthorne’s direct rejection of Edward’s statement and of the Puritan stance on sin. The sin does not, in fact, define the sinner; the sinner defines the sin. Hester’s ability to alter the significance of the scarlet letter affirms Hawthorne’s belief in the important role of the individual in the quest for salvation.

In The Scarlet Letter, it is clear that Hawthorne believes that the Puritans are unforgiving of social digressions to the point of oppression. Although he accepts the Puritan view that the punishment of sin is inescapable, he advocates the sinner’s power to control the importance of the sin in his or her life. Ultimately, through The Scarlet Letter, Hawthorne formally challenges the Puritan belief system, confirming the literary work as an “imagined” Puritan novel.

Works Cited

[iii] Hawthorne 49.
[iv] Hawthorne 49.
[v] Hawthorne 134.
[ix] Edwards 199.
[x] Hawthorne 83.
[xi] Hawthorne 152.
I tried to forget yesterday like it had never happened. As I slid my foot into my worn cleats, I could hear the chant of the crowd outside the locker room doors. Coach hated that the administration had the booster club line the path to the field, but after they paid for our new uniforms it wasn’t like he had any choice in the matter. I tightened up the laces, looked up, and saw the look of consternation on the face of Coach Hoegel. I stared at him for a minute and then gave him a quizzical look that opened the door for him to say something to me.

“Martinez, you know this is your chance, right?”

“Yeah, I’m really trying to forget that and focus on the game.”

“Don’t ever forget it, Martinez. You can’t. This is the game that will get you out of the projects.”

Coach spoke to me as if I hadn’t been thinking that every second of every day since I started playing on Varsity my freshman year. Raised by a single mom, I was the by-product of a night of passion and a lifelong commitment by my mom. My dad has never been a part of our lives. Sacrifice and the end-of-your-dreams, your table is waiting. Walking out of the locker room hearing the roar of the crowd. Seeing the polished purple of the panthers helmets on the opposite side of the field. If we win today we will secure a spot to the playoffs. This should be a game that we should win without a sweat.

The whistle blows for the kickoff. Panthers have the ball first so I’m not on. I don’t play defense. The coach comes walking over to me calm as still water.

“Remember what I told you, this is your time. get ready you’re almost on.”

We stop them pretty quick. Our d-line destroying them putting pressure. Time for me to go out. All eyes are on me and so is the pressure. I’m supposed to be the star running back. I’m supposed to get a scholarship to a D1 school. I run to the huddle and our quarter back Tony Escobar is there waiting for me. He’s a pretty good football player too. made all conference. “Martinez, first play of offence it’s going to you. You ready?”

“You know I’m always ready man.” I say with a grin.

I get the ball and run like I never run before. Running like a pack of wolfs are trying to eat me. “Gain of 6 yards.” the announcer says.

The game `goes on like this. Me averaging 5 yards a carry. us stopping the panthers. coach yelling at us. Crowd cheering. Half Time rolls around and were winning 21-0. Everyone’s getting cocky and I am a little because were about to go to the playoffs. Our coach gives us a big speech I don’t really pay attention because I’m too busy thinking about how good I need to do in this game.

Were all sitting around the locker room waiting when my running back coach walks up to me. I like him he’s like the dad I never had. He’s part of the reason I am who I am today.

“Martinez.. you’re doing good but you need to do better. You need to be the best of the best. Better than better.”

“I know.’ I say.

“I want to see you later in the future make it big. I want to see your dream come true kid. You have this one last game and you’re out of here just remember that. How are you going to make your last game here at Platte county?”

And with that he walked away.

3rd quarter comes. First play we have the Tony Escobar throws an interception. They score in the first play a bomb for 81 yards.

“Shake it off Tony it’s alright its 1 mistake.” We all told him to shake it off.

I could tell we weren’t in the game this second half. 21-7. I go on the field my time to shine. I get the ball and I’m running as fast as I can. I get hit on my blindside and the ball goes flying and so do I. I flip in the air and land right on my head. I can hear the crowd booing and cheering. I try to get up but when I look down my leg is twisted in an angle it shouldn’t be in. I can’t feel my back. It’s weird I think I don’t even feel the pain. Nothings real right now I feel like I’m in a dream. Then the pain starts everything comes back to me. my feelings my senses everything. It feels like I just got shot in the leg and stabbed in the back with a thousand syringes and I
can't move it. I'm crying out in pain. Finally the ambulance gets on the field and comes to me. They put me on the gurney and put me in the back of the truck.

All I hear is my mom’s sobs and the ambulance speeding through the traffic. “Mom I’m going to be alright it’s just a broken leg.”

“No you also broke a 2 ribs and tore up your knee pretty bad. Dad’s on his way in the pickup he will be there when we get there.”

“You..You think I will be able to play football the same again?”

“Idk we just have to wait and see.” My mom says in between sobs.

We get to the hospital and the rush me into a room. They said they are going to have to operate on me as soon as they can and try and fix my knee and my leg. I also have a concussion and a broken neck. I got hit pretty good I thought. They put me on some medicine and it feels like the world is floating around me. I lose concentration and it’s like everything isn't real. Finally my eyelids get heavy and I fall asleep without knowing it.

I wake up to the sound of doctors voices talking to each other. A girl and a guy I notice. They are talking about the operation. I overhear them saying something about football. I try and concentrate harder but whatever I’m on makes me feel woozy and is hard to concentrate on things. I finally manage to make out a few words. “This injury’s going to be a lifelong injury to him.. His leg will never be the same and he's always going to have to watch it.” The guy said.

“What are we going to tell the boy and his parents.. I hear he’s a major football star and he's not going to like it when we tell him no more football for probably the rest of his life.” The girl says back.

“It’s now or never and I want it to be now we have to go tell his parents and when he wakes up we have to tell him.”

Finally my parents come in my room their eyes bloodshot like they have been crying. “Hey buddy.” my dad says.

“H-Hey” I manage to say not really knowing why he's here when he was never in my life.

“The doctor says you have lost all feelings in your leg.. And.. football.. you're not going to be able to play for the rest of your life.

now that hit me. It felt like I just got hit by a car.

“What do you mean I can't play football?”

“You can't move you're practically paralyzed.” My dad says.

“The doctor says there’s a chance you might get feeling back hopefully!” My mom says but I knew they didn't believe it. I didn't think my life would be the same.

I remember every detail of those last few moments of football I had. The ambulance sirens. The crowds cheers. Everything. But here I am head coach for a college football team. The Texas Tech Red Raiders. Everybody thought my football career was over. I showed them that it wasn't. Only how I would kill to be on the field with these kids right now. There's this one kid I know will make it big if he keeps on his path. His name is Ronald Willie. We call him greaser cause of his hair. Championship games today and I’m just sitting in the stadium remembering what had happened to me. Ronald Willie came walking behind me he’s always here early preparing.

“Hey Greaser.” I say.

“Hey Coach.” he says back.

“This is your time. I want to see your dreams come true and you make it big,” it’s weird I thought my coach told me the same thing when I was young.

The day goes on us preparing and finally 7 o’clock comes. game time. Every time it's game time I remember back in my years when I used to be on the field.

“Come on run don't just stand there!” I yell out to the field rolling my wheelchair. halftime comes and its 21-0. Weird I thought. “I know we're winning everyone but don't get cocky. I know what happens when teams get cocky and they lose. Don't let this be you. now just rest up for a minute until we go back on.” I say.

The teams still cocky. We go out on the field and start the game again. It’s a bad start and its 21-21. Its 4th quarter down at the 20. 5 minutes left. Ronald Willie gets the ball and is running like he’s never ran before. He gets hit from the blind side.

He’s not getting up.

Oh no. Please God, no.
In the traditional story of the three little pigs, it is indisputable who the villain is, but as we’ve all learned there are two sides to every story, even in the case of storybook “villains.” If we look at the tale of The Three Little Pigs, we see only one side of the story.

Once upon a time, on a humble ranch in Texas, there lived a respectable wolf. One day a group of overzealous animal rights activists from PETA, captured three of his best porkers. The wolf’s plans for taking them to market were ruined, without those pigs he would be unable to sustain his family… the bills don’t pay themselves.

This is where the story really begins to go astray from the original. From what we all assume, the three pigs built their own houses, but how in the world would a little pig, who walks on four legs, build a house? Well in all actuality, the houses were built by the animal rights activists in an attempt to hide the pigs from their rightful owner. So, what’s a wolf to do?

After searching high and low the wolf finds the first pig in some straw shanty, some may call a house. Here, all he had to do was breathe deeply and he got back what was rightfully his to begin with. Frustrated, he did get a little “huffy” and he did “blow” the straw down, but straw, really, who builds houses out of straw anyway? After it was blown down, the little pig scurried to the stick hut a little ways away.

Two of his three most prized possessions, were now stuck behind a wall of sticks, further proof that this little “pig-napping” scheme was not well thought out. The wolf then, blew down that house, if you could call it that, making himself yet another mess to clean up. He didn’t even get the pigs for his troubles; they scuttled away to the brick house. As anyone who has ever chased a pig can attest, pigs are not easy to catch.

Finally, the wolf arrived at the brick structure. Unlike the popular fable would have us believe, he did not try to blow it down, who in their right mind would believe they could blow down, even a shoddy brick structure. Quite upset at this point, the wolf began some breathing exercises, that years before he learned in California, which may have appeared to be huffing and puffing.

As a result of these exercises he reached a Zen-like state. In this state he had an entrepreneurial epiphany, realizing there was money to be made there. He gathered up the sticks and the straw, and started a fire around the brick house or should we say brick “smoker”.

We were led to believe that the pigs escaped the wolf and lived happily ever after, most likely by the animal rights activists. In truth the wolf was the one who lived happily ever after, serving up some of the best smoked pulled pork sandwiches in the state of Texas, at the new Big Bad Wolf Brick Smokehouse.
My fingers delicately lifted off the piano keys as I played the last note. Applause erupted in the audience and I scooted the bench back to stand up and bow. I had just finished my performance at the annual year-end student recital. From the stage, I looked out at my family and fellow students clapping with their programs clutched in one hand and smirked. They would hardly suspect that the artfully performed piano piece they heard me play wasn’t the Mendelssohn song I was supposed to have practiced for months.

Truthfully, the second I sat down at the piano, I had stared blankly at the keys. A cloud of uncertainty obscured the mental picture of the sheet music in my mind’s eye. Unable to play my assigned song, I improvised my entire program on the spot, adding flourishes to each phrase. The thrill of the notes flying beneath my fingers overshadowed the lingering doubts in the back of my mind which feared my private teacher’s likely criticism.

For weeks I had gotten by with minimal progress, practicing just a short hour before each weekly piano lesson. I barely even learned the notes by the deadline to perform in the concert. After one particularly grueling lesson, my teacher let me off with a warning.

“You only benefit from what you put into this art form,” she had sternly cautioned while staring me down through her reading glasses.

Easier said than done, I had thought to myself, freeing my eyes from her gaze. Tension rippled between us and I shifted self-consciously where I sat. My teacher silently wrote down next week’s lesson plan in her notebook, clearly unaware that a completely different set of notes was running through my mind. I opened my mouth to speak, yet quickly reconsidered. My instructor noticed and peered at me curiously, prompting me to explain. I shrugged my shoulders. There was absolutely no way was I going to open up while under such intense scrutiny. Her persistent prodding let me know that she was invested in me, but I didn’t have the courage to tell her I preferred playing my own songs rather than traditional piano songs.

Usually after a few minutes of working on my assigned pieces at home, I strayed from the practice agenda and constructed my own emotion-filled melodies. I enjoyed the music while I was in the moment, and more importantly, I discovered I truly loved creating my own music.

I blinked back at the audience and cautiously descended the stairs off the stage in my black heels. Pleased with myself, I settled into my seat and thanked the students beside me for their whispered compliments. I did it! Nobody suspects a thing!

The remaining students’ performances passed in a blur as I replayed how I constructed a song intricate enough to equal Mendelssohn. No, I was greater than Mendelssohn. I came up with the genius plan to compose my song instead of failing miserably on the other one. Playing and coming up with my music onstage had been exhilarating and different. The energy from my spontaneous improvisation still buzzed inside me, extending down to my tapping foot.

Once all the students performed, my teacher came up for her final comments and invited everyone to the reception in the next room. Seeing her jarred me back to reality and I sucked in a small breath. Sooner or later I would have to talk to my teacher and she would not be pleased at all. In fact, my instructor was the only person in the audience who realized I had completely blanked on my song! Unfortunately, that meant she was also the least likely to be supportive of my split-second decision to forgo my prearranged song.

I trudged into the reception room and glanced at cookies and lemonade waiting. I don’t deserve these now, I thought glumly. Besides, my stomach was tight with uneasiness and I didn’t feel like eating anyway. I tried to calm down, but internally I was a wreck. My legs seemed to be overcome by inertia and my strides were clipped short. An invisible snake constricted my chest into a compressed bundle of anxiety. I desperately wanted to believe I had succeeded, but as I feebly thanked the string of people who sincerely congratulated me, my pride quickly turned into guilt. I forced my lips to form a passable smile, but my cheeks twitched with resistance.
Just then, a girl a few years younger than me tapped me on the shoulder. She loved the melody so much that she wanted to know name of the song. My cheeks burned with nervousness, but I ended up telling her a random name that sounded like it might be a title.

Overwhelmed, I walked across to the room toward the exit, about to escape to the restroom, when my teacher caught my eye and began to approach me. I froze. My heart thumped against my chest. My instructor’s past words swirled in my mind. I swallowed, attempting to keep my throat from closing up entirely. I had to breathe or else this conversation would end horrifically. With a grimace, I imagined myself unable to speak or to explain myself while my teacher looked on, displeased and angry. Readjusting my stance, I decided to take control. Instead of hiding in the corner like I wanted to, I bolstered my courage and walked to meet her.

As much as I tried to convince myself I was the only person hurt by my improvisation, I saw the disappointment in my instructor’s features. Her forehead was creased with lines and her formerly piercing gaze was slightly strained. After we exchanged a brief hello, words quickly tumbled out of my mouth.

“I understand I let you down and I’m also upset with myself because I still can’t play the Mendelssohn song.” I bit the inside of my cheek momentarily, but I continued with a last spark of enthusiasm, “While I avoided the classical song, I realized I was actually really interested in Improvising. I guess I could have spoken up at any time before, but I was just too scared.” I finally admitted.

Breathless and exasperated from my rushed explanation, I let my shoulders slump down. Fortunately, my former stress somehow didn’t return.

My teacher said simply, “You don’t have to be intimidated to let me know what you’re thinking.” After a short pause and a click of her tongue, she suggested, “Perhaps we could showcase your composition next recital instead of trying to pass it off as a Mendelssohn’s.”

This was the opportunity I was waiting for! I may have disrespected my teacher, but I knew how to make up for it. I could show her some of my other songs. Tentatively, I asked, “Can I play something else for you?”

She raised her eyebrows in surprise. We walked into the adjoining room and I sat down at the nearest piano. As I chose the first notes I could feel her strong gaze burning on my back, but pressed on, creating a flowing harmony with my left hand. I turned it up a notch by crossing my left hand over my right while continuing to play the melody that had been stuck in my mind for the past few weeks. It was so much more familiar than the dusty piece I was supposed to play for recital. My body relaxed with each note and my apprehension receded. I repeated the same phrase, but this time an octave higher for emphasis. My teacher waited patiently beside me until the final low notes.

“That’s definitely something we can work on,” she said lightly.

I sensed her eagerness to help and recognized that she would guide me as long as I worked with her. I looked up at my instructor, smiling sincerely. Sharing my composition with her outright was unbelievably more satisfying than keeping it to myself. I didn’t need to fool her—she was willing to support me.

For the first time in months, talking to my teacher was effortless. We avidly discussed the music and she offered several suggestions. I was finally comfortable enough to share my true thoughts. She assured me that my improvisations should be more than private contemplations. I happily thanked my teacher for her encouragement and stood up. I couldn’t help but smile as I breathed a sigh of relief. As we re-entered the reception room, I was confident that the immense rift between us was replaced by a burgeoning connection.
“I’m sorry, but…. I’m in love with someone else,” she pierced me, three days before. I know I should be over her, over Athena, but I loved her. As I lay here, in my shack, I realize that she didn’t feel the same. She didn’t love me like I did her, like I do. Now, it’s too late. I can’t even look at Athena without my already broken heart shattering into smaller and smaller pieces. I don’t know how much longer I can last. This pain overflows me, controls me and it’s just too much.

Rising from off the floor, I painfully toss on my snow boots, jacket, and gloves. I swing the front door open and slam it shut, suddenly bombarded by a freezing wind that seems to match my emotions, cold and bitter. Snow falls down landing in my eyelashes and on the already frozen ground. My eyes wander around the very small and poor neighborhood. There are only a few people out shoveling the small driveways. They barely notice me as I walk past them and towards the only place that could calm me. The Forest looks comforting in its dark format. The way the trees shield the sun and tower over all that would lie beneath its bare branches. Its presence comforts me, caresses me, and calls to me. I step into the forest without a second thought, without fear or doubt, completely consumed by my emotions.

I walk slowly, taking my time and placing my feet carefully on the forest floor. My mind wanders with each step, falling deeper and deeper in thought and depression. She left me for someone else. For a stupid blood sucker who has no respect and acts emo all the time. When I was head over heels for her! He probably doesn’t even appreciate her like I did! As I pass a tree, I slam my fist onto its hard bark, roaring with the anger that flows throughout my body and clouds my mind from intelligent thoughts. Not that my thoughts are that intelligent anyway. What does he have that I don’t? Besides his height, muscles, intelligence, and overall attractiveness…. That’s actually a really long list.

A sigh escapes my lips. As I calm, depression finds its way into me. I just don’t understand what I did to make Athena leave. I stop suddenly and stare up at the cloudy filled sky. The snow falls continuously, landing on my face, and expressing my never ending feeling of despair, of pain. I just want it to end!

Then a thought smacks me in the face. Why don’t I? No one likes me anyway. Just, how will I do it?

***

About half an hour later it’s decided. I will be dead by Friday.

Hours later, I stand and look out the window on the door. The sun is setting, making the sky turn a orange-ish color. No one is outside and the snow has stopped. The snow has stopped... The end of my suffering.
I find my way into the kitchen and search the drawers for a knife. Finding a newly sharpened one, I place it on the table and go into the cupboard. I pull out a pack of sticky notes. Pealing one off, I grab a pen and write a note. Then I wrap my fingers around the knife again and hold it out from my chest. This is it. The end of my pain, my despair, my love. I thrust the knife into my chest. Everything goes black.

Emerald

I run into the small shack I saw Jackson enter. Scanning the room for him, I couldn't find anything until I turn the corner. Jackson is lying on the floor a knife in his chest. Dashing to him I drop to my knees and pull his limp body into my lap.

“Jackson! Don't die!” I shout to him, unsure of weather he can hear me or not. I hold him close and a tear drop falls on his cheek.

“I was just getting to know you! I actually like you!” My voice drops to a whisper, “I love you.” I stare at his lifeless body and cry for what seems like forever until I notice a small piece of paper in his hand. Unwrapping his fingers from the yellow sticky note, I hold it up and read out loud: “This is it. The end of my pain, my despair, my love.”

A tear escapes as anger flows through my body. Crumpling the small paper, I throw it to the ground and scream, “You can't just leave me!”

I summon earth to help me drag Jackson’s body out of the house and into the forest. I stifle another bout of sadness as I leave his limp body into my arms. Using borrowed strength, I carry him to the forest, and, upon reaching it, gently lay him down. I drop down to my knees, my sadness overwhelming. Leaning over, I cover my eyes and bury my face into his chest. Why? I thought, What would drive a person to do this to themselves. To take their own life. Looking up at his lifeless face made my tears flow faster. His eyes closed, as if they were intended to never see anything again. His mouth set in a firm line, as if he thought dying was the only solution, but an unknown one. Hope suddenly fills me as I think of the note he left, my love, he had said. He thought it was the end of it, but maybe it was just the beginning. Wiping my eyes, I began to pray to anything, anyone that could hear me and would be willing to help.

“Please,” I whisper. “Help me bring this young boy back to life, back to me. He took his own life because of the pain and confusion he felt. Blocking every other emotion except depression and accepting no one’s help or... or...” I stopped, unable to say that one powerful word again until he was here. “Please, just give him a second chance at life a full one where he can grow old with the one he truly cares about.” Over and over again I repeat these words in my head. Please give him a second chance. Please give him a second chance. Please... Just when the tears started welling up in my eyes and I felt all hope was lost, a figure appeared out of nowhere. She was wearing a beautiful green dress, the color of leaves in the summer, that complimented her tan complexion. Her wavy auburn hair reached barely past her shoulder blades and hung over one shoulder. I gleam into her gentle hazel eyes finding love and understanding in their depths. My eyes widen as she walks to me and helps me stand.

“My daughter,” she starts. “Today you have faced a misfortunate and terrible tragedy. For that, you have my sympathy. You have also been shown that not all things can be seen with just the eyes, but felt with the heart and filled with belief.” I stare in disbelief as she turns and kneels by Jackson’s unconscious body, placing a hand on his blood covered chest where his heart lay.

“What are you going to do to him?” I asked, uncertainty and defensiveness tainting my voice.

“You need not worry of my actions. I am not here to cause anyone harm.” The women tells me, facing Jackson’s body again. His wound began to glow green under her hand and the air smelled like the mowed grass in the summer. I watched, unable to take my eyes off of what was happening in front of me. What is she doing? I wondered, a little worried. As she lifts her hand the green glow fades and disappears. I drop to my knees beside him. Examining him, I move the hole in his shirt to find that his wound was completely healed. There wasn't even a scar.

Looking up, I say with tears in my eyes, “Thank you.” I discover the women is gone and scan the area, finding no sign of her. Then I hear a big gasping breath. My eyes dart to Jackson. He was coughing and holding
his chest. When his coughing ceased, his green eyes met my blue ones. A huge smile spreads on my face and I hug him tightly.


“I had a little help... H-how are you feeling?” I ask as I help him to his feet. He stumbles a bit and holds on to my shoulder until he balances himself.

“Really confused, but otherwise ok, I guess,” he says as he takes his hand away and continues, “Why were you... uh... crying and stuff?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” I look down and smirk. Knowing why and imagining the shocked that would probably appear on his face if I told him he was the reason.

“Try me,” he says.

“Umm... well...... I,” stumbling over my words, I look into his eyes and blush, suddenly feeling self-conscious.

“What are you trying to say?” He crosses his arms.

“Well... this is harder than you think and-”

“And what? Spit it out!”

“YOU!” I shout. The force in my voice noks Jackson onto his back, and a surprised expression takes hold. I start to back up, slowly shaking my head. “Can’t you see that?” I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

“Me? What do you mean?” He gets up from the ground and brushes the dirt from his jeans.

“How is it not obvious!” I yell, exasperated.

“Em, calm down. I’m sorry, I just don’t get what you’re saying. What do you mean, me?” All of the feelings rushing through my body were blurring together. The most prominent though, was the extreme sadness. Sadness that only happened when one’s soul was on the verge of heartbreak, of loneliness. Trembling, I slowly turn around and walk over to a near-by willow tree. I sit by it’s trunk, cover my face and quietly start to weep.

“Oh my god! Emerald!” He walked over and plopped down next to me. Wrapping his arms around me, he says, “Whatever I did, I’m sorry.” I lean into him, putting my head onto his chest, and letting my tears soak into his shirt. He rubbed my back and cooed, “Em, it’s alright, everything is alright.” He pauses for a moment, then continues, “You know, I’m starting to understand what you were saying.” I could hear the smirk in his voice.

Lifting my head off his chest, I look into his eyes, seeming to get lost within them. For the longest time, we seemed to stay that way. Lost in each other’s gazes, until he leans in, closer to my face, I cast my glance down, embarrassed to look at him. He reaches up and wipes the tears from my face. Then slowly puts his hand under my chin and tilts my head up so that I was forced to look at him. He gently plans his lips on mine. I lean into the kiss enjoying every second of it, of the closeness, of the passion. He ends it before I want it to be over. As he pulls back he laughs and shakes his head.

“Is that what you meant?” He was smirking. “cause I can relate.” I shake his head, grinning, and nudge him away. He chuckles and says, “Come on, you know you liked it.” He winks and helps me to my feet. I take his hand in mine and kiss him on the cheek, then start walking to the edge of the forest. A far away expression fixed on my face. Thoughts of Jackson and I dancing across my mind with loving joy. Suddenly, Jackson stops at the very edge. I give him a confused smile, wondering what he was doing.

“I love you, Emerald,” He admits to her, his face very intense.

“I love you, too,” I said, smiling, finally telling him how I feel. Then he bends down, kissing me passionately. Forever and always.
On November 24, a grand jury decided not to indict officer Darren Wilson in the death of unarmed teenager Michael Brown. This decision caused much uproar in the Ferguson community. Screaming, shouting, and cursing, angry citizens took to the streets in protest. While it is understandable why these protesters were angry, many failed to realize the negative repercussions of their actions. As a result of the riots, the town of Ferguson was devastated financially, structurally, and emotionally. Most important of all, these protests raised questions about race, justice, and police brutality.

Repairing the damage done in Ferguson will be an arduous and complicated process. Not only do city officials need to repair the structural damage, they must also work to regain support from citizens that have lost confidence in their government.

In an effort to rebuild Ferguson, I propose a plan composed of three steps:

1. Create new jobs and encourage local business owners.
2. Get citizens more involved in local government.
3. Develop better relations between citizens and the police department.

Economically speaking, the riots decimated the local community. An estimated $5 million in damage was done. Much of this debt can be attributed to vandalized stores and burnt down establishments. Unsurprisingly this has angered many local business owners. Shocked and outraged, they feel like their government abandoned them and left their investments vulnerable to mob riot. Despite promised protection by local and state government, their businesses were still destroyed. Many entrepreneurs will be reluctant of starting businesses in the area for fear of something similar happening.

Fixing this economic crisis will require step one of my plan to be implemented. By creating new jobs and encouraging business, economic activity in the area will be revitalized. This revitalization will generate more revenue for the local government. Generated revenue can then be used to pay the rebuilding costs for stores affected by the riots. Affected business owners that receive compensation will be more apt to place their trust in the local government and be more willing to invest capital to grow their businesses. Worries of prospective entrepreneurs will also be alleviated, they will be provided assurance that the government is concerned about local business owners and their investments. Once this happens eventually more stores in the area will open. These stores will provide job opportunities for citizens in the area and will further improve Ferguson’s financial situation.

Newly created jobs should be targeted towards teenagers living in Ferguson. Giving these jobs to teenagers will be most effective in the goal of rebuilding Ferguson. These jobs will instill a sense of responsibility and hard work in the Ferguson youth. Working will also occupy much of their time and may prevent them from engaging in activities that are detrimental to the community and their futures.

Step two of my plan involves citizens becoming actively engaged in local government. Several Ferguson citizens feel unrepresented and even misrepresented. This makes for a difficult relationship between government and those governed. If citizens feel they have no say in local government they will voice their opinions in other ways. The ways they express themselves can be peaceful as well as violent. Violent protests has led to local officials fearing their own citizens. This is regrettable. Government should not fear those who are governed. Officials cannot dismiss the protestors as misguided or ignore their concerns. They should take their opinions and ideas into consideration. Local government should work together with concerned citizens in an effort and with a common purpose in creating a better community.

The best way for citizens to have their opinions heard is by electing a government official that shares their views. The official can then act out their views. In order to do this more citizens must register to vote however the majority of Ferguson citizens aren’t registered to vote. In an effort to get citizens to register and vote, they should be encouraged through social media, letters, public speeches, and emails. Through these efforts citizens should also be told the benefits of voting and how it would let their voices be heard. Local government should also offer citizens assistance. They should have events set up to help residents register and inform them
about the candidates running. During these events candidates could use it as an opportunity to speak and share their views. This could further help registered voters make informed decisions.

The third step of my plan will involve developing better relations between citizens and the police department. In Ferguson many citizens feel resentment towards the police. They consider the police oppressive. Racial tension in the area is strong and apparent. Some African American citizens feel they are the victim of racism. They believe they receive unfair treatment because of their race. The death of Michael Brown only increased racial tension in the area. The relationship between police and citizens is contentious. Many citizens distrust the police, the force that is supposed to protect them.

This is a serious problem and it needs to be fixed. To fix this the Police Department should provide opportunities for teens to get involved in the police force. Similar to the military, teenagers should be able to enlist in the police force and then later be provided scholarships. The police department should also hire more African Americans. Only three of the 53 officers are African Americans. African Americans make up the majority of Ferguson’s population. Citizens may feel less racial tension if the police force is more diverse and composed of officers who truly represent the faces of Ferguson.

As a concerned Missouri citizen I want what is best for Ferguson. I want Ferguson to improve and flourish. Recently the local and state government have made efforts to rebuild Ferguson. These efforts are a step in the right direction, however, they have not made much of an impact. I strongly believe that if my plan is put into action it will make a difference, and it will be helpful in rebuilding efforts. Furthermore, if my plan is implemented it will revitalize Ferguson’s ailing economy and improve relations between citizens and their government. The city of Ferguson will prosper and grow into a well-functioning community.

Works Cited
A student walks down the hall in a camouflage uniform that reflects their future. Instead of blending into the crowds of Central students, the camouflage does just the opposite. A student who joins the military decides to stand out.
"When you wear your uniform to school, you feel different from everybody," Aviation Operations Specialist Dee Ray said. "You're doing something that not everyone wants to do or gets to do in their life."

Graduate students such as Rey, and current students such as seniors Angelica Deranleau and Christian Reda, have chosen this path of military service. Although family tradition and national pride has prompted them to join, the skills and benefits of military service have already created a career for these students.

With the addition of health benefits and college tuition, it's hard to disregard the military both for the unique chance to serve their country and for the educational benefits the military provides. For Deranleau, the Army National Guard was her personal pick.

"My whole family's been in the military," Deranleau said. "I wanted to make friends outside of school, and there are really good college benefits too, considering college is a pretty hard topic these days."

The National Guard also offers inexpensive health care through the TRICARE system. Through this system, service members are able to buy inexpensive health and life insurance for themselves and their families.

"There's great health insurance," National Guard Captain Chris Tompkins said. "It beats a lot of private health insurance because it's inexpensive."

Despite the addition of educational and health benefits, it is undeniable that the military has continued to attract students by inspiring patriotism and pride.

"I joined in 1998," Tompkins said. "I knew what I wanted to be since elementary school. I grew up with GI Joe. I had a sense of patriotism."

Sixteen years later, patriotism is still a driving force in military enrollment today. Reda has grown up with an admiration for the Marine Corps and their participation in some of history's defining moments. For him, joining the Marines was an attractive choice based upon the opportunity it gives him to serve his country. Before he ships off to basic training in June, Reda is excited for the challenges the Marine Corps offers.

"The military's a challenge, and I wanted to do something that not everyone else gets to do," Reda said. "The Marines are known for their challenges and toughness. I figured that would be the best fit for me. It's a once in a lifetime experience kind of thing, to serve my country."

While students join due to family tradition or national duty, each branch of the military also offers recruits a chance to improve their lives and plan for their futures.

When the National Guard recruitment table comes to Central each month, National Guard recruiter Jason Lannan finds time to advise students on the perks of serving. For him, the National Guard provided a chance to build his future in a positive direction.

"I knew that I needed to do something for my future," Lannan said. "I didn't want to be another kid working at McDonald's."

Each month, Lannan talks to a variety of students: both male and female. The military, being a historically male dominated field, has also extended its careers and benefits to females looking to join. In 2013, there were approximately 200,000 women in the active-duty military (about 14.5 percent of all active-duty forces.)

Apart from the physical hardships of basic training, the military also contains a newer set of challenges.

"There's sexism everywhere, but it's more pronounced in the military because you have different PT standards (the physical standards)," Deranleau said.

"You have different weight standards, height standards. I mean, for the most part you are treated the same, but there's a lot of times when you realize just how different you actually are."

As 2014 turns into 2015, the challenges still remain. Despite the gender gap that exists, all members (both male and female) face these obstacles when they choose to serve.

"Some people like to say that service is easier now," Tompkins said. "But I don't really agree with that. It's still the way it was when I joined."
As Deranleau and Reda approach graduation, they're leaving high school with a career path already picked out. As the National Guard describes it on their website: "A career in service is a path for personal betterment: To all who want to better themselves and the world around them by taking a path with purpose and being a part of something bigger, join the heroes who have taken the vow to rebuild the broken and defend the good. Welcome to the greatest cause of your lifetime. Your own."
Keaton O’Dell

Flash Fiction: Slave Mansion
Braymer High School
Terrance Sanders, Teacher

Cccrrreeekkk!!! When I opened the old crooked door bats, and rats, and rodents scattered the floor. Dylan, Robbie, and I rushed into the old plantation house; by old I mean ancient, boards everywhere, shingles falling, dust everywhere, and all of the windows were broken out. Right as we walk in I hear a noise. Eeeooeooeooo, it is growing louder and louder until I finally remembered the reason we were here. We had just robbed the Caldwell County bank. The sirens grew louder, and louder, we snuck farther and farther into the mansion. Then, Crack! Dylan fell through the floor. As I looked down into the hole Dylan had fallen into, he was lying on a hard concrete floor Dead!

Robbie and I slowly crept on we walked through the old must smelling kitchen and the old bathroom which smell of rotten eggs and old diarrhea. Then down the ancient wooden stairs, as we got closer to the basement floor the creeks and moans and scary noises got louder. Then, BOOM! The door slams shut. Robbie tries to turn his phone flashlight on but it’s dead. The noises grew louder I could hear footsteps getting closer and closer. Right as I got ready to burst up the stairs I hear a voice that says, “It’s your turn to be tortured now.” Robbie took one step back and with a snap of a finger he was gone, so now I intended not to move. I stood there for a while then a torch lit about 20 feet away from me. The dim light flickered off of the shadowy walls my body drew closer to it. I reached up to touch the cold hard concrete walls, and I realized that the wall was warm and splattered with thick red blood. I retracted my hand I wiped my blood onto my jeans, and took a step back. I slowly crept down the long hallway and the light blew out, then the noises came back and said, “You will pay for what you have done to us”. “I’m sorry, but I don’t know what I have done.” I say in fear.

I crept deeper and deeper into the musty darkness I could smell bodily fluids lining the walls, and the absence of life decaying underneath my feet. Then, SPLASH!! I fell into what I thought was a well, but what was really the sewer. Then as I was climbing up out of the sewer a big shadowy figure rose up from the darkness. The thing I saw was tall and had a medium size build; I could see the whites of his eyes, his old raggedy teeth, and his tattered shirt on his back. Then I realized I turned to run I remembered there’s a sewer creek behind me. Then I turned back around I realized I was trapped. So I started to charge the dark figure and when I got closer and closer, I realized there was nothing there the figure had disappeared. For some reason I kept running while I was thinking, then SMACK!! I slammed into the wall. I couldn’t tell what time it was but I knew it was late, and I was ready to get out of this place. Then, Burp! Robbie comes out of nowhere and says, “There’s an awesome snack bar upstairs!!” What?? I exclaimed. “Yeah this is a historic museum they play rolls over night for anyone who comes in.” What”, I say awkwardly. “I screamed my lungs out because of these guys and I think I might have peed my pants a little,” I thought to myself. Robbie guided me back the way we came from and showed me all of the props and the blood, and guess what. The blood stain on the wall was just warmed up ketchup. Once we got upstairs the lights were turned on and you could see the snack bar, and even Dylan was at it. I walked up to him and said, “How are you still alive?” “Well this was all kind of a joke on you.” He remarked. “What about the cops and the money?” “Nope that was all real,” Dylan said laughingly. But the real trick was on them!!!!!!
Jacob Olson  
Short Story: *Chains of Life*  
Braymer High School  
Terrance Sanders, Teacher

"The dead body lay in the middle of the floor with bloody footprints in an enclosed circle around it. There were numerous stab wounds in it. They couldn't believe it was there. There were also six stained knives stabbed into the floor, sticking straight up to the heavens. The stains on the knives were dry, crispy blood that engulfed the room in an aroma that revealed the idea of vomiting to anyone who smelled it."

"That's a lie", I told Hunter.

"No, that's the truth", Hunter defended himself. "The cops even said it was true."

"Fine we'll go take a look for ourselves then", I decided. "There's no way those stories are true."

It was a bitter night. The cold slashed our skin like a dagger's edge. The iridescent glow of the moon illuminated the eternal darkness. We were leaving our infinitesimal hometown, a mere dot on a map. It was a town that was so small if you blinked while driving through, you would miss the whole town. The faded green sign read: City Limit; Braymer. I was with my two best friends, Hunter and Dustin. Hunter was an average height, underweight teen. He had faint blue eyes and blonde hair speckled and patched with brown. Dustin was also underweight but he was also very short with soul piercing blue eyes and vibrant blonde hair. The world had forged them into people that were hateful to anyone that was not their friend; they were always skeptical. They had survived the daily routine of being bullied but they had not escaped unchanged. I was always the one who stood up for them. During high school, I was in one fight to stand up for myself, and sixteen because I was being their personal body guard, but I didn't mind. I was blessed with a build that allowed me to fight well and keep bullies off my back. Some people had questioned the reason we were friends, but it was always the same answer. We had all been friends for what felt like an eternity. We were basically raised together by my mother, and we had longed for that day. The day when the oldest of us would get their license and we could go to our own world. The day when we could leave behind the hatred and despair of the world and go have fun with basically the only people we cared about. It always felt like it was the three of us against the world, but we were fond of that feeling. So we were ready for the day when we could be freed from the chains of our parents and school and drama and ... life.

Hunter, Dustin, and I were wedged into my old truck. When I say old, I mean prehistoric. I remember every square inch of the truck. It was an old maroon color 1979 Ford pickup. It was “all jacked up” as I would brag to my friends. It had thirty eight inch tires, a custom flatbed, and some awesome chrome rims. It was a stick shift four speed with a brand new transmission in it. The best part was the engine. When I got the truck the first thing I did was replace the rust bucket beneath the hood they used to consider an engine. I installed a humongous engine than the truck. It was a roaring engine with six hundred and fifty horsepower. That truck was my baby. Despite the age, I cherished that truck, especially how expeditious it was, which I was boasting to my friends about that night.

“This truck will fly”, I exaggerated to my friends.

We zoomed down N highway. We were doing 70...80...90 miles per hour. I was just getting ready to drop it into fourth gear when I heard the noise. It was the most ill-favored sound in a driver’s life. It seemed to creep up on you and pounce on you when you least expected it. My friends begged me to pull over, but I had only had my license a month so I was not getting a ticket already. So I threw the truck into fourth gear and sped away. The cop persisted in his chase. I watched as he notified his dispatcher on the radio and requested for “back-up“.

“The engine works great in this truck...” I bragged.

The echo of the sirens closing in cut off my sentence before I could conclude it. I didn't know where to go, but I knew that the cop’s fellow officers would be there quickly. So I took a right at the next gravel road. We were only two miles from my house but I couldn't go home. Where would I go? It had to be somewhere I could get to quickly. I was almost out of gas.

“I've got it!” I exclaimed.

“Got what?” Hunter asked. The first thing he had said since he told me to pull over.

“I know where we will lose the cops”, I said. “Slave Mansion”
“NO!” Hunter and Dustin said in unison very sternly.
“We have no choice”, I said defensively.
The truck went silent. I took a left onto another gravel road, went over the next hill, and drifted into the dirt driveway. I hurriedly went and parked behind the house, and shut off the truck. That place made me shake with fear.

It was a decrepit plantation house built in the late 1820’s. The owner was said to be a vicious, cruel man. One day the slaves that worked for him had enough and they overran the mansion. They gained control of the mansion and lived in it for a month before anyone found out. Then an angry mob took the slaves captive and hung them all. It’s said that the slaves’ spirits still haunt the mansion, protecting it from everyone. So this was the last place I wanted to be, but I had no choice.

I watched from afar as the cops went past the house, and went straight through the intersection.
“Stupid pigs”, Dustin remarked.
“Yeah”, Hunter agreed.
“I’ll call Sarah in a minute to see if the cops have passed the house”, I said. “After all we’re only a mile from my house.”

Sarah is my older sister. She is sweet and mean at the same time. You can change her mood with one wrong word. She will turn on you instantaneously, except when she’s talking to me. We’re super close and we never argue.

That’s why she knew something was wrong when I called her.

“Have the cops passed the house yet?” I inquired.
“Yeah, what in the world…” Sarah said as I cut her off.
“I’ll explain everything when I get home”, I said. “I should be there in a min…” I said as my phone died.

We got back in the truck and it refused to start. I looked down at the dash. I was out of gas. We all got out and discussed our options. Then a deafening screech blared out from the house. I looked up and saw the dark silhouette of a man in the front doorway. Hunter, Dustin, and I were motionless. We were frozen with fear, as if we were statues. Then a frigid wind harshly threw dirt in our faces. It felt as if we were being shot by a million tiny bullets. We leapt into the field planning on using the tall grass as a makeshift form of armor.

We hit the ground, and it was concrete. It felt as though we had jumped off the Empire State Building, landed on a sidewalk, and survived with the pain of a thousand knives in our chests. We struggled to find our breath in the endless pit of our bodies. As we regained the ability to breathe, the wind began to restrain itself. It slowed to a slight breeze.

We looked back and the figure had vanished; so had Dustin. Hunter and I looked at each other and then toward the house.

“You don’t think he’s in there do you?” Hunter inquired.
Then as if the house was eavesdropping, we heard a demonic voice begin to laugh.
“I think that’s a yes”, I struggled to say, but Hunter understood.

We uneasily got up and began the unhurried walk to the house. We stepped inside, and the door shut by itself behind us, startling both Hunter and I. We crept through the house as supernatural sounds followed our every move. The entire house was engulfed in darkness, but it was barely illuminated so that we could see shadows on the walls dancing around us, taunting us. I could also see chains bolted on the wall. That made me want to find Dustin even more. It reminded me of the chains that Dustin, Hunter, and I would one day break. It reminded me of how we planned to get away from our small town, but we couldn’t do that without Dustin. We had to find him.

Then the shadows surrounded us and transformed into human shaped figures in black cloaks, shoes, and masks. The light shone just enough to reflect off the silver dagger in each of the figures hands. I knew it was the end.

“Goodbye” I whispered to Hunter.
He repeated the phrase to me with his eyes. Then Hunter closed his eyes and I closed mine. We sat waiting silently for the knives, but they didn’t come. I opened my eyes.

I was lying in my bed. The light shot pain through my eyes as if they had been shut for weeks. I stood up. I had never been so well rested, but there was a pain in my chest.

“I must have slept awkwardly”, I concluded. “So it was a dream”
I walked out of my room. Everything was precisely where I remembered it. The dream was so weird I had to tell someone about it, but my mother and Sarah were gone. So I got in my truck, and decided to go see Hunter. After all, he was in the dream and I needed to tell someone about how horrific it was. On the way there I decided to go by Slave Mansion. It felt as if I were a cop revisiting a crime scene. As I broke over the crest of the hill before Slave Mansion, my eyes filled with tears and I pushed the gas pedal to the floor because of the yellow tape around the house. I felt the chains tighten around my wrist because I could never get out of our small town by myself. Hunter and Dustin had to be alive.
August 19th, 2037
LAX, California

It was just an average day. I awoke to the constant sound of the alarm, loud and nagging. Swinging my sluggish arm in the air I slapped the alarm clock, stopping the alarm. I turned my head over to the right, looking at it. The time read 5:30AM. Time for work. I tried moving my legs out of bed but they felt as though they were filled with lead. I managed to slip one out from under the covers, using it to pull my other leg. Once I got my legs leaning over the bed, I sat there. It sucks to wake up I thought. When I found enough energy to stand, I turned to my husband who was still sound asleep and gave him a kiss. I wanted to lay there with him, to not go to work and just have a day to ourselves but I knew that wouldn't happen. That's not how the world works. I stood, walking over to the bathroom. My brown matted down hair and sunken eyes were there to greet me in the mirror.

"Oh... how I love mornings," I said sarcastically. Pushing my hair aside, I started to strip down. Everything came off with ease. I turned the shower knob to hot water and walked in. The warmth of the water on my cold, bumpy skin made me feel alive. What a wakeup call, I thought.

After finishing my shower, I reached out for red the towel my husband laid out for me. I smiled. He always knows to get the red towels. I wrapped the towel around my midsection, tucking it tight. I walked out through my master bedroom looking down at the bed as I went. The velvet sheets on the bed were still not made. As I walked into the closet, I noticed that my favorite red dress was on the floor. John must of did that. I picked it up, examining it for any blemishes in the fabric, and put it back on its hanger. I didn't know what I would wear. I turned my head towards the window to examine the sky. It looked nice out. I ran my hand over the hanging clothes; I only wanted the softest fabric today. When my hand landed on a soft one, I pulled on it. It was a soft, blue tank top with a white over shirt. That will do I thought. After I had slipped it on, I pulled out a skirt and a black pair of leggings in the back. I walked out of the closet and into the long, door filled hallway. One door slid open revealing my son Milo. He looked my way and smiled.

"Good Morning Mommy!" he said as he ran over to me.

"Hi buddy! Are you ready for breakfast?" I said as I lifted him into my arms. He nodded his little head and I walked us down the stairs. When we reached the bottom John was waiting for us, preparing a cup of coffee.

"Hi Honey" he said as he saw us. When I reached the table, I set Milo down in his booster seat and continued over to John. He turned and handed me a cup of freshly brewed coffee. I immediately felt the warmth of it as I took a sip. It was a good cup.

"How was your morning so far babe?" I asked before I took another sip.

"Good so far, but it is missing something." he said. I smiled.

"And what would that be?"

"This," he pulled me close and gave me a soft, warm kiss. I pulled closer and kissed back; relishing the time we had left before we split ways for the day. He was the one to pull away first, grinning at me.

"What?" I asked him and he seemed to grin even more.

"You look beautiful this morning, as always" I let out a warm smile to him. He always knew what to say.

"What do you have planned for lunch today babe?"

"Nothing planned yet, why?"

"I just wanted to know. Do you possibly want to eat out somewhere together?" I asked. He looked me straight in the eyes, love and compassion swirled inside his blue irises.

"Oh, of course I would honey, I love spending time together" He gave me a light kiss on the cheek causing me to blush.

"Ok then, Applebee's at 1, don't be late" he nodded and picked up his briefcase, starting towards the door. I followed and grabbed his shoulder before he started down the porch. He turned and I gave him a quick kiss to send him off.

"You can't forget about my goodbye kiss" I said smiling at him.
"I never will. Have a good day honey" He walked over to the black QuantumC and drove off. I waved as he exited the cul-de-sac.

"Mommy?" I heard Milo call. I snapped out of my stare and walked over to him.

"What is it Milo?"

"Can I have more milk please?" he asked. He gave me a begging look with his green eyes that no mother could resist.

"Yes," I chuckled "Of course you can" I started towards the refrigerator when my phone started buzzing uncontrollably. I wondered what it could be. I grabbed it and looked at the new notification but what I saw was something I never thought I would see. "US Governmental Alert: US power grid powering the Northeast and Southeast has been Cyber attacked. Other power grids are in danger of attack. Please stay in your homes and lock your doors." my heart sank Who could have done this? I put my phone and keys in my pocket and headed over to the closet. I reached for one of the flashlights on the top shelf. I closed my hand around one and tested to see if it had any charge left. None. I put it on the floor and reached for another one.

"What's wrong mommy?" Milo asked. I turned to him to see the confusion and curiosity in his eyes.

"Mommy is just grabbing a flashlight. We may need one later."

"Why?" he asked, even more curious now.

"Because we may lose power. The city is having troubles with it." He continued to look at me although he seemed to have understood what I meant. He turned back around to the small remnants of his once big breakfast and started poking at it. I looked at him a moment longer and went back to what I was doing. I grabbed another flashlight, hoping it would work. As I clicked in on the squishy black button all of the lights in the house busted, raining down sparks and hot, clear glass. I let out a scream as I felt hot pricks all over my tan skin. My hands instantly went to brush it off of me but it was no use. I fell to the floor, rolling around rampantly. I could faintly hear Milo calling my name and I wanted to go help him. To go over and pick him up, talking to him to calm him down. But I couldn't, I was almost helpless, laying on the floor in the dark. What kind of mother can't help her child I thought. I felt around me, looking for the flashlight and glass. Then my hands settled around a cool, circular item It must be the flashlight. I grabbed it and running my fingers around what I thought was the bottom until I found the button. I pressed it and the flashlight came to life. I got up from the floor and yelled for Milo.

"Milo! Milo where are you!?" Then his little head popped up from behind the kitchen island.

"Mommy?" he asked as he squinted in the newfound light.

"I'm coming Milo! Just stay right there." I started over to him, carefully avoiding the glass on the floor. I put my arm around him and gave him a tight hug.

"Mommy, what happened to the lights?"

"We lost power honey." He gave me a confused look. I knew he probably wouldn't understand, he was only 6. Boom. The house started to shake. Pans and glasses fell around me. I braced myself against the island for support and Milo began to whimper. It shook the house again and again, seeming to last for an eternity. When it ended I looked around the house eventually finding the door. I began to crawl towards it, dodging pieces of glass as I went. I opened the door and stepped outside revealing a site of chaos. I gasped and looked around. The sky was filled with rising black smoke.

LA was under attack.

Jets roared past the house, shaking the earth underneath us. I stumbled back and covered my ears until the sound ceased. As I removed my hands from my ears I looked out again. All of the buildings in the distance were completely dark and dotted with holes from oncoming jet fire. I had to get out of LA. I ran over to the garage and set milo and on the ground. I gave him the flashlight and started to tug on the door, it gave only a little at a time. When I got it to waist height I lowered myself under it and pushed it with all my might. The security latch gave way and it soared up into upward position. I walked back over to Milo and carried him the rear passenger door. I opened it and set him down into his blue car seat.

"Where are we going Mommy?" he asked.

"We were going to see grandma and grandpa. Now buckle yourself in." He did and I got into the driver's seat. I put the key fob in the console and pressed "Engine Start" button. The car hummed to life. I checked the fuel gauge and it read “Full”. Ok, here goes nothing I thought. I sped out of the cul-de-sac and made a right, heading away from the shore and towards the mainland. As we drove the ground began to shake us again. I swerved and tried to regain control but I couldn't in time. Our car ran into a stoplight and tipped over. I closed my eyes
and let out a scream as my sense of down changed. The car stopped with a thud. I opened my eyes and looked around. I was very dizzy but I could make out the car being upside down. Milo I thought I need to get Milo. I unbuckled my seatbelt and fell out of my seat and onto the roof of the car. Pain shot up my neck. I tried moving it but that only resulted in searing pain. A cool liquid slid down the back of my head and down my neck.

“Milo! Milo! Are you ok?” I didn't get an answer. I pushed myself to the back of the car while not moving my neck. Milo was hanging in his car seat and I couldn't tell if he was just unconscious or if he was dead. I unbuckled his car seat, catching him as he fell out. He was heavier than usual. I tried opening the back passenger door but it wouldn’t budge I don't have time for this I kicked the door and it flung open. I slowly crawled out of the car with Milo on my chest, sucking in my gut so Milo would fit through. When I got out I laid Milo out on the road. My hand went to my chest and to my surprise it was wet. I pulled it away and looked at it to see that it was blood red.

“Shit” I said.

I laid my hands down by my side and sat there looking around at LA. Explosions covered the coast and the air was filled with bursting jets. Everything went numb. I couldn't hear anything or feel anything, it felt like a dream. I saw one jet zoom by with what looked like a Chinese flag painted on the wing. It wasn't very long until another jet hit it out of the sky. I turned my head to the side and looked at the beach. I knew that this could be my last sight. I saw that the invaders were retreating. Maybe we will live I thought. I laid down next to Milo looking up at the sky. I would never get to say goodbye to my son or my Husband. I closed my eyes and everything went black.
At night, while lying in bed, you hold your phone above your head and scroll down the YouTube homepage, instead of sleeping. You are mesmerized by the miscellaneous assortment of videos before you. You quickly scan over labels such as: “Dear Kitten” and “Ten Things Only ______ Understand.” In the recommended category you see headings to more serious content such as: “Why the People in Ferguson Rioted” and “KKK is Ready for ‘War’ in Ferguson.” The riots happened months ago, on November 24th, when the grand jury announced its decision not to indict officer Wilson. That day you watched McCulloch release a statement announcing this outcome and then remained riveted to the screen as the riots unfolded. You witnessed cars and buildings set ablaze by people angered under a system of oppression and saw them gassed by those who benefit from this system. It was strange, because though Ferguson is located a mere13 miles from your home, at the time you felt no personal unrest. As time passed, however, you became increasingly aware that what happened in Ferguson was no isolated event, but rather an outbreak caused by a nation-wide problem.

Turning away from such grave topics, you settle on a three-minute clip entitled, “Things to Do When You Can’t Fall Asleep.” Once it starts, you notice how dry your eyes are and how exhausted you feel. But those hardships are easily ignored as the video guides you through easy-to-do tricks and leads you away from reality. The light and noise pass through your body, leaving a pleasant numbness. Then it ends. The silence that follows is foreign, though the pale glow of the screen still soothes. The welcome distraction of media is over, leaving you alone in the quiet house. It’s tempting to scroll down the page and begin again, but you fight the urge, and set down your phone onto its charging station.

You feel a momentary sensation of victory. You know you’ve made a significant step toward alleviating the exhaustion you feel. You turn away from the device and snuggle into your down comforter. Initially, it provides a sensation of contentment, until you realize that the blanket lacks the warmth you seek and that your feet feel as though they are wrapped in ice. You become aware of an unpleasant sensation creeping into your chest. It flares up around your heart. It threatens your breath. It intensifies as if it were bacteria multiplying within your body. You inhale deeply to dispel the invading pressure. It only works for as long as the action takes. You try more deep breaths. These focused efforts only neutralize the symptoms, but do nothing to cure the source of the unrest.

You try to distract yourself from this feeling. You begin to plan out the next day’s schedule, like a congressional committee might plan the future of the nation. You make a neat list in your head of things that need to get done, and then deliberate in detail what actions you will take to complete the tasks you’ve chosen. You take a mental step back and review the itinerary you have composed. Pleased, you momentarily relax and can ignore the invading sickness. The cells in your chest protest, remembering how the committees you gathered in your mind have never been able to solve the real pain that plagues the rest of your being. These carefully constructed plans only worked in the past as a mantra to be repeated, so that you can feel in control, so that you can feel secure in the face of deep uncertainty.

However, the turmoil within you will no longer be quelled by empty plans for the future. You now feel as if you are in a state of civil turmoil. Factions born of your own flesh clash within your body. But though the symptoms are physical, the cause is mental. The True Foe breeding this illness lurks deep within the recesses of your consciousness. It has grown from the seeds of lies sown in the very beginning of your creation. It has been fed by ignorance and fear of the “other” and has now grown into a hateful, thorny weed that drains the vitality of your soul. You don’t know what to do with the deadly mass, whose roots have spread far and wide within you. Part of you acknowledges the evil that the weed causes, and protests, another part ignores the weed, and another part fights desperately to protect it. After all, what else is there that holds you together? All suffer under a broken system.

Curing this disease will not be easy. The solution cannot be achieved overnight; it will take years of learning and years of healing, before the roots have deteriorated enough for their poisonous influence to be negligible. The only way to clear away the True Foe completely is through love. Love is what makes you strong, love
yourself and love those who are different from you. The love you have will hold you together; it will bind every particle of your being into one and resonate with those around you. Once the weed has been dispelled, to keep it gone requires love. Love will strengthen the soul against such hate. Love will free others from hate.

But it’s so much easier to let it be, because although sometimes you choke, you can still breathe.

You feel your ear being crushed under the weight of your head and your arm has fallen asleep. You shift in the bed, sit up, and remove your phone from its charging station. You turn your back on reality, and choose another YouTube video to watch. This one is titled, “Top Ten Signs You’re Procrastinating.”
Tiffany Pimentel
Poetry: Never Ending Pain
Polo High School
Eric Williams, Teacher

The days are long, the pain never ending.
The nights are dark, aiding to the pain.
I wrap my arms around myself,
Trying to hold myself together.

I can feel my heart cracking.
I can feel my soul breaking.
I’m told it’s just a phase.
I’m told to just get over it.

If you knew what goes on in my head,
You might understand the reason behind
The way I’ve put up barriers
Against the outside world.

They say to open your heart, let people in.
I say keep your guard, don’t trust too many.
I’ve trusted way too much, way too easily.
All that’s come of it is everlasting pain.

I will keep my shields around my heart,
walls around my breaking soul.
The pain will never leave me,
I have to find a way to cope.

The tears I bleed only show my strength,
Even though others say it’s a weakness.
The pain clouding my vision
Only makes me more sensitive.

The rest of my long life
Will be shrouded in pain.
But all I can say
Is just keep pushing forward.
Amudha Porchezhian
Short Story: **Picking up the Pieces**
Parkway Central High School
Jason Lovera, Teacher

**Piece 1: Aspirations**

Nov 17, 2004
Dear journal,

I can dance! I can leap! I can absolutely fly! The stage is my home. I just scored the lead in our next ballet performance, and I can hardly believe it. I thought I would be too young, but my teacher said that I my talent made up for my age. I am going to prove myself. Rehearsals start next week and I am almost too excited to wait for them.

There is nothing that makes me feel more alive than dance. I can’t imagine how some people go through life content to walk through it, without ever realizing how alive real motion can feel. Our bodies are art, and I get to paint the whole picture.

Jul 24, 2007
Dear journal,

Lately, my instructors have been encouraging me to apply to the Juilliard school. Just the idea takes my breath away. Through the years of dance classes that stretched to multiple hours six days a week, I realized that I wanted nothing more than to be a dancer. The certainty propels me forward. Dance is the only option I can even think of. Nothing else measures up to the wonder and excitement of it. Somehow, I feel like Juilliard could be mine.

Mar 4, 2008
Dear journal,

I can’t believe how far I’ve come. In these last months, I have danced more than I have slept or breathed. I am determined to be the best of the best. There is no way I won’t make it into Juilliard. One of those spots is waiting for me.

I’m going to learn with frenzy. I’m going to study choreography and interpretation and travel with dance companies and one day create my own Sylvia Hill School of Dance. I can see it so clearly. I know exactly how I’m going to spend my life. And it all starts when I sweep away the judges tomorrow.

Ahh, wish me good luck!

**Piece 2: An Untimely Meeting**

The girl was ecstatic. Her mind buzzed with triumph and a thousand other flitting thoughts. She strode down the sidewalk with a new confidence, oblivious to the angry sky and drizzle of rain. In fact, anyone who saw her might have mistaken the weather for sunny. The way she carried herself. The twinkle in her eyes. She was clearly not paying attention.

The man was irritated. Panic welled up, burning his throat as he pondered the momentary bleakness that seemed to stretch into eternity. He trudged down the street, cursing under his breath. He needed a drink. And another. The more he drank, the more he lost the need to stop. The alcohol burned his fears into delirium. His mind turned muddy and blurred his thoughts. By the time he got behind the wheel of the car, he was clearly not paying attention.

Two different stories, meeting in such a cruel way. The man swerved down a street. The girl walked across a street. But these two streets were doomed to be one and the same. For a moment, the two pairs of eyes met in shock as they realized what was about to happen. In an instant, two lives were changed forever.

**Piece 3: Regrets**

There was a girl who lost her life
More truly than if she’d really died
The girl who wondered every day
What could have happened differently
She was a girl who hurt so much
It hurt too much to heal
The girl who gave everything
To lose everything she had
I know a girl who once saw her blood
Washed away by the pouring rain
She is the only one who knows
What it means to be me

Piece 4: I can smile
I sat behind the desk in the lobby wearing a tight-lipped, forced smile that I hoped came off as cheerful. The best way to keep a job like this was to pretend I felt fine. Of course I was not hanging on by just a thread. I never had dreams to become a dancer. I was definitely not struggling to find my place in the world. I was just a perky, hardworking, happy-go-lucky hotel receptionist. I took a deep breath.
Phew, ok. This was easy.
A lady stepped through the sliding doors in crisp business attire, dragging a small suitcase alongside her.
Room #483.
A dad and a daughter wearing a blue sweater over a red ballet costume. They were probably here for some dance competition. Or maybe she just liked wearing tutus. I didn’t care anyway. Room #319.
It was alright, this job. I didn’t mind having to be cheerful. It was a job where I could sit through the whole day with no problems. I supposed I should be grateful for that.
A large group ranging from babies to elderly filled the lobby. The Stevensons. Maybe a family reunion or something? I don’t remember ever having a family reunion. Rooms #109, 110, 111, 112, and 113.
Then a young woman walked in. She had sparse bangs and a bold streak through the light brown hair that framed her face. Her light gray eyes were full of life. I have never noticed all of that, but she did something that not many people bother to do. She came right up to the desk, smiled broadly, looked me in the eye, and introduced herself.
“Hi, I’m Julia.” I was caught a little off guard by her upfront manner. I was mostly used to hotel customers acting nonchalant and preoccupied, looking up flight plans or sightseeing plans or just texting on their phones.
“Can I help you?” I asked flatly. She didn’t miss a beat.
“Yeah, that would be great. Last name’s Levy. I’ll be staying here for a month.” A month? For What? I wondered. Room #157. I noticed that she had an instrument case with her. Curious, I asked her about it. I found out that she played guitar and that she was here for a music convention. Music. Hmm. I gave her the key card and directed her to the elevators.
“Thanks so much,” She said sincerely, smiling again, this time catching my gaze. “I hope I see you again soon.”
An almost unfamiliar reflex fought to the surface. The corners of my mouth tugged in opposite directions as an earnest smile broke out on my face for the first time in a long time. “Sure,” I replied. “My name’s Sylvia, by the way.” But wasn’t I wearing a name tag?
I quickly looked down as the heat rose to my cheeks and shook myself, not watching Julia leave. That was weird. Sure, there had been a few others after I came out of major depression, but meeting people was difficult and awkward. To make matters worse, once they realized my problem, they tended to lose interest. Barely feeling whole myself, I had given up on filling the space with distractions.
Still... that smile lingered on my face.

Piece 5: Souls
Julia knew Sylvia from the moment they met. The face and the person were new and unfamiliar, yet she recognized something about her. They had never met before, but she was reunited. She saw straight through Sylvia’s eyes and never looked away again.
The more she learned about this woman, the more the layers started to take form. She memorized the jagged edges and the rips and tears. With every broken, twisted layer that was added, Julia somehow only saw the brightness at the center more clearly.
Every day, she realized, just as she had with that first smile on the first day, that the light inside Sylvia was the same as her own. So she took apart the layers, sewed them together piece by piece, and made them her own as well.

**Piece 6: Sunrise**

I wheeled myself through the door she was holding open. Why had I come here? As soon as I entered, I wanted to leave, but as I looked up, her smile pushed away any doubts I had.

She knew the story well now. I told her I was paralyzed from the waist down. She told me I was more beautiful than ever. I told her about the accident that had cost me my dreams. I never meant to let the broken pieces show, but when I did, she held me closer than before. The first time I admitted that losing dance had left me without a piece of myself, she softly replied, “You’re still a dancer, you know.”

That was a month ago. I spent the space of that month relearning how some tears can come from laughter.

So here I was at MusicFest. We sat together in the semi-illuminated hall and listened to the bands play, humming along, smiling, laughing, and talking. The song changed. A swinging, syncopated melody began to play. I felt the rhythms vibrate through me. I looked at Julia, who seemed to shine with contentment. I would hate myself if I ruined that smile, so when the single tear escaped from my closed eyes, I turned my head slightly away. Now more than ever, I wished I could dance.

Despite my efforts, Julia must have seen it, because she cupped my cheek and slightly brushed away the tear with her thumb. She must have heard my wish too, because the next thing I knew, I was being wheeled onto the floor. “Dance with me,” She suggested, her eyes lighting mine. My first impulse was to be angry that she was mocking me, but her firm, assuring voice melted my fears. What did she have in mind?

The music picked up to a wild speed. She spun my chair in a full circle, making me laugh. She took my hands in hers and swung them in time to the sound. I lost myself in our laughter as the music went on. I felt alive again! I took the lead. My mind danced and for once, my body danced with it. But could I still fly? As the song ended, she lifted me lightly out of my wheelchair, while I clung to her neck in shocked surprise, and spun me around in her strong arms. In the silence that followed, my heart danced wildly and I caught my breath. Resting my head against her shoulder, I savored the space of several seconds. “Thank you,” I mumbled into her neck. Pulling away, I met her eyes and we both lapsed into huge grins.

Years after losing my dreams to the soaking pavement, I find that I can dream again. I can still dance. I can still leap. I can absolutely fly.
Allison Porras
Poetry: The Unthinkables
St. Teresa's Academy
Carrie Jacquin, Teacher

So cruel and vague;
A world so hateful,
A person so empty,
And depressed.
Lonesome.

So much history
In a handful of years.
So much hurt
In months that passed on.
Time kept going.
The world didn't stop.
Her tears kept flowing,
Cascading down her beautiful face,
Releasing buckets of saltiness
Into her heart.
Scarring her inner depths.
Hurtng her.
Drowning her.
Nearly killing her.

Her world almost stopped.
She was prepared.
For the hurt to leave,
For the sadness to go away,
For her world to end.

So close.

Yet her worst enemy did not conquer her.
She did not let him.
She fought.
Pushed through.
Survived.

Her weary mind was finished
With the enigmatic earth she lived on.
With its horrid tricks.
But she survived.

The agonizing days were over.
She had been strong.
So strong.
With each light wisp of strength
Clawing at the despair
That had invaded her aching soul.
The months went by,
Pain came and went,
But she could bear it.
She had before.
Yet her heart raced,
Her lungs grew heavy,
Her head bent low
As she inhaled
And let out the tears yet again.
The tears she had held in for so long.
The sadness that had never really left her.

The pain she ejected through weeping
Left scars on her beauty.
Stung her eyes.
Vandalized her heart.
She faked a smile for too long;
She could not find that happiness again.
She could never see light
Because her vision
Was surrounded
By darkness.

Her smile then faded.
Her ghosts came back.
And she's falling.
Falling...
Falling...
Falling into the grasp of Death.
Again.
Sophia Porter
Poetry: *Perpetual*
*Hyman Brand Hebrew Academy*
*Claire Reagan, Teacher*

I am a Ferris wheel junkie.
Have you ever sucked a hard candy?
Smooth, ever-melting sun.
Cackling cyclone howls enthrall me like
Pinwheel moons and rounds of cheese.
Open-mouthed horses loop forever
On the merry-go-round at the mall,
But somehow forget how to prance.

*Pete Seeger was the best ballerina I ever saw* I whisper
But the wide-eyed horses just
Turn, turn, turn.
Do you know what it’s like to feel lonely? Not just lonely in the sense that you aren’t talking to anyone so you’re bored, but the loneliness that you feel when you don’t think anyone enjoys your presence. There comes a time when you feel so lonely that it doesn’t matter who you converse with or what you do, you still feel broken. You feel as if you don’t have a purpose, or you don’t have a life to live. Feeling true loneliness is the kind of thing that can shatter a person’s soul, can make them think differently. True loneliness can change your life, for both the good, and the bad.

The start of my loneliness began one year ago. At the beginning of my seventh grade year, I felt on top of the world. I was considered popular, and when you’re in middle school, that seems to be all that matters. I had friends who everyone was friends with, and even though I regret it now, I liked those friends. When you have friends who you trust, you trust them with everything. You trust them with all your secrets, from whom you have a crush on at the moment to the deepest, darkest details that make up your existence. I did exactly that.

Winter break seemed to be the start of the change that began my descent. I had one of those friends over at my house, where she managed to spend most of her weekends. I was texting another one of those friends when we got into a large argument. Being the seventh grade girls that we were, the friend who was at my house and I began to gossip about all that girl’s flaws. I realize now, that dissing someone isn’t a way to solve your problems, but when you’re desperate for revenge, it’s the easiest option.

By the end of January, one of my other friends managed to leave my “group” and became friends with the girl who we created a whole burn book on. I was crushed when the one girl who I considered to be my best friend joined the dark side, and just when it seemed to come to the calm of the storm, all of my friends began leaving me. It felt like every time one of them put her in their Instagram bio, a weight was being put on my shoulders until it felt like I would melt into the concrete.

The spring began a better time for me. I had gained one of my friends back, and we were closer than ever. It seemed as if life had turned up; that I was finally reaching the peak of the mountain, but after the peak of the mountain, you have to travel back downhill. After spring break, I didn’t feel the same. My life had gotten better, but at the same time, it had gotten worse. The girl who I began to argue with became best friends with a girl who has bullied me since kindergarten. I didn’t know what to do, how I would go to school, or what would happen the next year in eighth grade?

When the year ended, I was grateful. I didn’t have to see the girls who had been tormenting me. I was terrified to go anywhere near them and their disastrous ways. Finding out that they threw parties where they drank alcohol, did drugs, and had sex made them more qualified to be considered train wrecks. The seventh grade of my education made me nervous for the upcoming year. My grades weren’t as high as they had been the previous year because I was too focused on my social status.

The thing is, when you think something is over, more often than not, it’s just starting. I began to feel like nobody liked me. I felt like I was unwanted and I didn’t have a purpose. I started to get the feeling that I wouldn’t fit in the next year. I had the feeling that no one would talk to me and I began to worry about my appearance. In seventh grade, I wore sweatpants and hoodies every day. Now, in eighth grade, I feel like I have to live up to everyone else’s expectation. Now, you won’t see me wearing leggings and Ugg boots on a daily basis, but I feel as if I shouldn’t wear sweatpants or I’ll look like a homeless person. I hate living up to society’s expectations.

Every day, I feel like someone will point out the bad things about me. I feel like someone will say something about my appearance. I’m scared of my peers thanks to those girls. Instead of hanging out with my friends on the weekend, I spend more time listening to music that is way too loud and reading books that make people cry. I watch television shows that disturb normal human beings and I think about things that most kids shouldn’t. I’m scared of everything, and some would even call it anxiety. Still, every time my tormentors walk past me, or even stand ten feet away from me, I feel like I can’t breathe. I feel like the walls of the room I’m in are closing in and I’m slowly suffocating. I begin to point out every little flaw about my appearance and my personality the second those girls look my way.
I know it seems silly, to think about what a bunch of teenage “popular” girls think, but when you’re in middle school, all you want to be is liked. I never cared about my appearance or personality before, when I felt liked, but now that I feel like everyone hates me, I hate myself. When they walk past me, I feel like the air gets thicker. It feels like my lungs no longer want to uphold their occupations and I’m going to pass out. It’s tragic really, that a girl my age has started hating herself so soon, but when it comes to teenage tormentors, I’m extremely vulnerable.

Even now, it's been a whole year and I still feel affected by their ungodly crimes. For seemingly harmless girls, they managed to make me feel like I don’t belong anywhere; They made me feel damaged and unwanted. When it comes to trying to ignore the pain, I rely fully on music. Music is the kind of thing that cuts into your soul and really makes you feel something. It puts me in a careless form of nirvana that makes me feel like I belong somewhere. Knowing that people in the world have felt the same thing and continue to fight through the same form of torture that I am helps me to escape the moment and feel like I can continue into the disarranged world that we live in.

The one thing I still question is why someone would want to hurt someone like that. In the society that we live in, we should be standing together against nature. We should be living together in harmony instead of grinding each other into dust in order to gain power. Why do people like the girls I deal with feel the need to gain power? Why do they try to ruin other people so badly in order to be liked? I guess that is the real question though: Why do we feel the need to be liked? People like them feel like the only way to succeed is to break other people. That is exactly what I am: Broken.
*Author’s Note: The war in the European Theater ended officially on May 8, 1945. However, the so-called end of the war only marked the continuation of pain and suffering for hundreds of thousands of displaced persons across Europe. Many Jews did not return from the concentration camps. Those who did returned to a place they could no longer call home. Beyond this, the effects of the Second World War are still felt today.

10 July 1945
Dear Mr. Frank,

My name is Janny Brandes-Brilleslijper. I had recently received news that you are alive and it brings me great joy. That may sound odd coming from a stranger, but I was a prisoner at Bergen-Belsen until its liberation on 15 April. From the stories I had heard from Anne and Margot, I feel as if I have known you for years though we have never met. I do not know of your current situation or where this letter finds you, but regardless, there is no preferable place or situation when bad news delivers itself. I was unsure if you were previously informed, seeing as how the Red Cross is in a constant state of disarray with the number of displaced persons and such, so I thought it would be best to make sure you are aware. It is with the heaviest heart that I inform you of the death of both Margot and Anne at Bergen-Belsen. Given the diseased-infested state of the camp, it is unlikely that their exact causes of death can be known. Typhus and typhoid fever were rampant, so I assume both girls succumbed to one or the other. They died mere days apart and a few weeks before the camp’s liberation. Both believed you and Edith were dead. It seems after they accepted that, they lost the will to live. I believe that was more fatal than any disease they encountered.

As impossible as it may be, I wish not to make this letter solely about the deaths of your daughters. I instead hope to commemorate the lives of these two very special young women. Margot- a kind soul. Even in times of hardship, she handled herself with the utmost sophistication. Her intelligence and poise were striking, as well as her generosity and graciousness. And, of course, there are not adequate words to describe Anne. Her spritely soul carried many of us through the daily difficulties in the camp— myself included. Her wit and maturity reflected that of one far beyond her years. I pray you never forget her sense of humor. I know with the completest certainty that I will not. Anne found happiness even in the darkest of times because she was a light. Of course, you know all of this. Perhaps the knowledge of their deaths is better than the uncertainty that has strangled you for these couple years.

There are no words I can provide to you as consolation in this time of sorrow. I realize you have lost so much at the hands of this godforsaken war, but I pray G-d gives you the ability to continue your life as it was before the war. I am sure this seems near impossible in the current state of things, but I hope contentment reaches you wherever you may be.
Sincerely,
Janny Brandes-Brilleslijper

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A reluctant knock tapped the door.
“Miep?”
He seemed to have aged fifty years in the two years since they had last seen one another. They embraced and Otto’s bones met Miep’s skin. His eyes looked cold, lacking the burnt auburn that used to cradle his pupils. He seemed so different. Miep was dumbfounded; unaware of how to respond to his arrival. After not seeing him for what might as well have been an eternity, but fully aware of his experiences; what was she to say to him?

“The office, the annex, it’s all empty. I didn’t know where else to go…” Otto looked down.
“The office was cleared after everyone was taken…” Miep started. He frowned. Trying to make things better, she persisted, “...but never mind that. You’re always welcome here,” she reassured him, “I’ve missed you so much. I can’t believe you’re finally back. How long has it been? Oh, please, sit down. Can I get you some
tea? You must be freezing. Are you hungry? You look like you haven’t eaten in a coupl—... Oh, I’m so sorry. That sounded insensitive. Please forgive me, I just don’t know what to say. It’s been so long. So much has changed.”

Miep couldn’t stop talking; her rambling a product of anxiety and self-consciousness. He looked up and met her eyes, “It’s alright,” he started half-heartedly, “I understand. What can anyone say after the hell we’ve all been through?”

Miep nodded, “I suppose that’s true. You especially; Jan and I have been through nothing compared to you and the others. Any word on Edith or the girls? What about everyone else who was staying in the annex? Anne won’t be able to go on without Peter.” Miep finished with a chuckle.

The optimism in her voice appeared to have bothered Otto. His eyes left hers, seemingly glassier than before. His chin quivered. Still avoiding Miep’s eyes, he said, “I haven’t heard about anyone but Margot and Anne.”

Before Otto said it, Miep knew. “They...um... they’re gone.”

Miep gasped, took a step back, sat down, and started to cry. They weren’t her daughters, but she had felt as if they were. The entire Frank family brought light to her life. They needed her. They depended on her. Miep felt important for once. No longer was she a foster child, an irrelevant secretary; she was a lifeline. Miep did it all with the utmost care: not entering the hiding place during office hours, visiting several grocery markets a day and leaving each with only what one bag could hold, and only using the best counterfeited ration books. Despite her efforts, someone betrayed the Franks. Someone had betrayed her. Miep mourned for the girls, her girls, but also for Otto. Miep wept for the things he saw and for what was done to him. Miep wept for the victims. Otto’s face lay expressionless. Miep couldn’t imagine what it would be like to lose her family, her home, and everything most important. She didn’t want to imagine it. She was then able to understand why the color had drained from his eyes. Even after a few moments, Miep was unable to find the words to say to a man who had lost everything.

“Oh, my god. Otto, I’m so sorry. I... I don’t know what to say. Is there anything I can do for you?”

He didn’t respond. He stared at the floor, sitting motionless. They sat in silence for too long. Miep contained herself, got up, and walked to her desk in the other room. Her knees felt like failing. Miep spent the duration of the war knowing Anne and Margot could be dead, but confirmation of that hurt much more than she could have anticipated. She opened the bottom drawer, pulling out papers and photos and journals and all else she had grabbed before the authorities cleaned out the annex. Miep had briefly looked through them all when she found them, but what interested her most was Anne’s diary. Miep felt as if she shouldn’t have read it, but she did regardless. She found it intriguing. Anne’s depth of thought and maturity astounded Miep, who had viewed her as a child, of course, but reading Anne’s most personal thoughts made Miep realize how quickly one can mature. It is sad, truly, how fast Anne’s childhood – and life— were taken from her. Miep rubbed her fingers along the red plaid cover, unable to grasp that this truly was the last of her sweet Anne. All of her memories and thoughts — her entire life — compressed and abbreviated into a couple hundred pages.

Miep returned to the living room where Otto was sitting, “Otto, I have some things from the annex. Some papers and pictures and things of that nature. I think it is important that you have them.”

He looked up, “Thank you.” He said as Miep handed the pile to him. Otto remained straight-faced, his eyes rheumy and sunken. Perhaps the Nazis hadn’t taken his life, but they had most definitely taken the life from him.

“I think you’ll find this particularly interesting. I was holding it until Anne came back, but...” Miep let her voice trail off. His eyes met Miep’s again and she could tell Otto recognized it. His eyes swelled, a mix of anguish and comfort.

“Anne’s diary.”

“Yes, I think it’s something you need to read.”

He shook his head.

“You’ll understand what I mean when you read it.”

“I don’t want to read it. It isn’t right for a father to invade his daughter’s privacy. Anne would be embarrassed and angry if I read it.”

Miep rebutted, “I understand why you feel that way, but this very well may be the last you have of Anne. I think it could serve as consolation. It’s a story you need to hear. It’s a story the world needs to hear. In her diary, Anne said, ‘I want to go on living even after my death!’ Otto, you can fulfill this wish. You can teach entire
generations about the evil of human capabilities. More importantly though, you can teach them that the sharpest weapon is a kind and gentle spirit, and that is Anne.”

Otto got up from the couch and left without a word, taking Anne’s diary and the rest of the things from the annex with him. Miep did not try to stop him, knowing that he can do as he pleases. Miep thought maybe she sounded naive, stupid perhaps, but Anne’s account of her life in the annex brought humanity to the darkest period of mankind. Anne was not just a number; a tattoo on an arm. She was person, a spirit, a light.

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June 12, 2010
Dear Diary,

“It’s difficult in times like these: ideals, dreams and cherished hopes rise within us, only to be crushed by grim reality. It’s a wonder I haven’t abandoned all my ideals, they seem so absurd and impractical. Yet I cling to them because I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart.” - Anne Frank

It’s Saturday, so my family went to synagogue this morning. It’s also Anne Frank’s birthday so I wanted to include the quote above because it’s my favorite quote from her diary. Of course no one acknowledged that it was Anne’s birthday at synagogue. I’m not sure why; obviously the Holocaust isn’t something to celebrate, but I think Anne is important to the modern Jewish identity. I reminded my parents that it was Anne’s birthday and Mom dismissed it immediately. She had relatives in the concentration camps, so I understand her disdain, but I think it’s something to be talked about if we want to keep anything like it from happening again. Dad didn’t say anything until later when we were home and Mom was doing laundry downstairs. We talked a little about the Holocaust, but mostly about the people in the Secret Annex. I think he doesn’t resent talking about it because he only converted in order to marry Mom and he didn’t have Jewish family during WWII. I guess that gives him a different perspective, but Grandpa and I jokingly call him a fake Jew. I think he and I are a lot like Anne and her dad. In a lot of ways, I feel similar to Anne. She was 15 when she died and I’m 15 now. That’s actually horrifying to think about. In her diary, she wrote that she wanted to go on living after her death and I honestly feel like we all do. That’s why we cling to religion in the hopes of receiving eternal life. I wouldn’t be willing to sit through four hour bar/bat mitzvah services otherwise. Those are the reason I know what eternity feels like.

Anyway, everything today reminded me of when I first learned about the Holocaust. In fourth grade, my teacher was telling us about Dr. Mengele making lampshades out of human skin and Adolf Hitler trying to get rid of all the Jews in Europe. Horrified and unconvinced, I went home and asked Mom, who nodded her head instead of actually answering me. She didn’t say why she didn’t tell me about it before, but then again, she didn’t say much of anything in that moment. I didn’t ask any further questions because our apartment is next door to the public library and I assumed that would be more informative than she will ever be. Dad got home from work after I came back from the library and saw my books about the Holocaust. We talked about it, but without extreme detail. Adults think kids can’t handle the truth, but I think not learning the truth early enough is how people like the Nazis become so powerful.

One of the books I borrowed from the library was The Diary of Anne Frank. I think it was the most explanatory of all. It was easy to understand Anne because she was just an ordinary girl. The irony is that her single, seemingly meaningless death in comparison to the millions of others is what gave her life meaning, and allowed her story to be told to the whole world. I guess if her diary hadn’t been published, she would have become just another lost soul from the anonymous mass of victims, instead of becoming the face of the Holocaust. I don’t understand why us Jews are so reluctant to talk about Anne and the rest of the Holocaust. I know a lot of Jews, especially Mom, struggle with the question “Where was G-d? If we’re the chosen people, why was he indifferent during our slaughter?” I think the answer to that question is that it doesn’t matter where He was or where He wasn’t. What mattered was the neutrality of the people who said nothing and did nothing. One Holocaust survivor, Elie Wiesel, wrote in his autobiography, “Neutrality always helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.” I don’t think it was up to G-d to save us; I think it was the responsibility of everyone who wasn’t being persecuted. People think something like the Holocaust can’t happen again. I don’t think that’s true, but because us Jews survived a genocide, we’ll be the ones to stand up for others. We learned the lesson the world should have. Maybe that’s what makes us G-d’s chosen people.

Sincerely,
Sarah
My eyes flew open, awakened after a dream that I couldn’t remember. I tried to sit up, but was forced back in place. My eyes were the only things that could move, so I began taking inventory of my surroundings. Thin sliver vines secured most of my body. Around my wrists and ankles, thick bangles chafed into my pale but healthy skin like tourniquets. This made the areas ache and appear red. The room was so silent that my ears started ringing, desperate to have some sort of use in my time of need. Color was sparse throughout the strikingly white walls and matching tile floor. There were absolutely no windows, but what seemed unusual and even more terrifying was that there was no door. I was trapped in this cold, stiff room for a reason that evaded me. The blazing light that hung from above appeared to get brighter and brighter as I struggled against my restraints. Claustrophobia tightened into a knot in the pit of my stomach. Panic surged over me like a wave, destroying all logical thought processes and halting any helpful breaths. I inhaled and exhaled so fast that I sounded unhuman, and more like a machine. My forehead turned clammy even though the room was so cold that only seconds ago I had goose bumps. Realization hit me like a ton of bricks. I was being held here, and I knew that it wasn’t a good thing since I was strapped down to a chair. I tried to stifle a high pitched squeak, but failed. I held zero power in the terrifying situation. The thought didn’t help me calm down at all.

“Well, that seemed to do it,” exclaimed a thunderous voice from behind me. Surprise shocked me, so I was very still. All the blood drained out of my face, leaving me even paler. I felt like a ghost trapped in between dimensions, and probably looked like one. His boots hollowly paced directly in front of me without any hurry. I tried to conjure up my most intimidating scowl, but truthfully, it probably just made me look weaker. I was too frightened to arrange my face into a good mask. Feeling faint and slightly dizzy, I still sat up as rigid as stone.

What was going to happen to me? Why was I strapped down? Whoever wanted me here must have pretty bad things planned for me if they thought that I would try to escape. There was no logical reason why I was held there, locked up. Did I do something wrong? No, there was no way that I was imprisoned in the stale room because of my own fault. I was always a good, pure kid. This would have to be the work of something sinister and cruel. I was a completely average teenager, nothing more, nothing less. Why was I held here?

The man was staring at me, calculating. It was if he was trying to read my tangled thoughts when even I didn’t understand them myself. I carefully constructed my face into a detest glare successfully, assuring that all other confusion and emotion couldn’t escape.

I was still forced down and slouched in the stiff chair, contained in the feeble looking wires. They crisscrossed and overlapped so much of my body that it was obsessive. I was puzzled as the silence continued. I yearned for anything, a clock’s ticking, or maybe the sound the wind makes as it rustles through the lush leaves on a cool afternoon. Anything but the absolute silence could help delay the intense insanity that was quickly enveloping me.

“You can’t do this to me! Someone will come looking,” burst from me. My throat was as dry as sand and my voice cracked a bit.

“Will they now?” The man questioned. He relaxed his stiff posture.

I suddenly relaxed that the white that covered everything was tricksing my eyes, making the room look smaller than it really was. There was something else that was off, and I couldn’t put my finger on it...

The strange man who now stood in the middle of the room was older than I’d realized. His hair was very thin and pure white. There was none of it on the top of his shiny bald head. Soft furrows traveled across his face, clinging gently to the bones underneath. The man’s skin held little color, and sagged a bit around his jawline. He wore nothing in addition to a long scientist’s coat, faded blue jeans, and black dress shoes. This generic man was the perfect image of the common grandfather. He looked helpless and sincere, but I knew better than to truly believe that based upon my unfortunate position.

“Who will be searching for you?” His booming voice surprised me again. It was incompatible with his appearance. The man sat down in a chair that I somehow missed when I was surveying the scenery. Weird, I thought. I was sure that it hadn’t been there just a second ago.
I looked directly into his innocent brown eyes, and answered very directly. “My mom, dad, aunts, uncles, grandparents, friends, teachers, and anyone else who cares for me will look and will contact the authorities.” I sure hoped my teachers would care about my disappearance; I don’t think they liked me much... Anyone who looked would increase the likelihood of being found. “They’ll all be worried until I return home safely,” I put emphasis on the word safely, “and won’t stop looking until then.”

The man looked curious, and rested his head on this fist. It was no doubt part of his charade. “No siblings will look for you? Surely they would love you just as much as everyone else. No sibling rivalry could get in the way of your disappearance.” There was a meaning behind some of his words that I didn’t pick up on, but he was especially mysterious around the word ‘disappearance.’

“Of course they will!” I countered immediately, practically screeching. I would never forget… I drew a blank. What was his name, or was it her name? How could I forget…? What I found in my memories was disturbing. I couldn’t remember. Not only could I not recall my siblings’ names, but I then realized that I couldn’t remember anyone. I couldn’t even stop there. I couldn’t remember my age, phone number, home address, school, or anything about myself as easy as my name. Instantly, my world was filled with nothing. Even the back of my hand was now a stranger. Red-hot fury flooded through my vision. Years were gone, stolen from me. “What did you do to me?” I growled. Then, my hard fury washed entirely away into complete despair.

“Give me my memories back!” I wondered quietly if this was even possible. “Please, I’ll do anything!” I was sobbing. Tears fell from my face like a river, tarnishing my expensive looking shirt. I couldn’t dab them away since I was restrained, so the tears collected at my collar bones, and created a mini pool of sorrow.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself,” the mysterious man taunted with a tilt of his head, and an extra smooth inflection. “I didn’t take anything from you.”

He had to be lying, but I fell into the trap. “Then who did?” I croaked. The tears didn’t yield.

“No one is, my dear. Actually, contrary to your belief, I gave you life, and never took the past away from you.” He was just being cynical. What could he mean by that? They got rid of years of my already short life!

Something slammed unbelievably loud behind me. I recognized it as a door slamming, and was relieved that at least there was a door. Then, something hit me. My family must’ve found me! What would they think when I couldn’t remember them? But all my hopes were quashed when I caught a glimpse of our visitor.

He came in carrying two gun-like objects that I couldn’t quite determine exactly what they were. By the expression on the old man’s face, it couldn’t be good. In his eyes he was very afraid for himself, but it looked like he was also afraid for me. This intruder must be a threat to both of us so my rescue was at least delayed. I didn’t let myself think that they may never come. Already, sweat trickled down the from the old man’s forehead.

“Well, well, well,” the intruder chided, “What do we have here?” His face turned into a sly smile full of bitterness. He was very young looking compared to the old man. He had longish dark brown hair that fell into his eyes. I shivered, the intruder had his finger tight against the trigger and the bones in his finger were prominent against the strained skin. He kept taking relaxed steps toward the old man as if he was taking a leisurely stroll and not holding a gun up to an unarmed opponent.

The old man took troubled, shaky steps away. “Enchialrus, don’t…” He choked out, seeming like he wish he could say more. What a strange name. Enchialrus, was it? I was sure that I had no hope of pronouncing it right, even in my head. Where did the easy names like “Bob,” and “John” go?

The strange man made no attempt of responding, or even acknowledging that the old man had spoken. “If you want to keep seeing out of you pretty eyes, girlie, for another minute at least, I advise you to close ‘em.” I knew that he must be talking to me because I was the only girl around, but the back of his head was facing me. I shut my eyes tight just a second before a buzzing sound exploded. It filled the entire room with the striking light from the blast so completely that even through my eyelids, colors danced across my vision. The only sound I can compare it to is the singeing hiss of a bonfire hit by the sting of rain. I stayed like that, frozen.

“You can open your eyes now girlie.” The brilliance of the stark white room surprised me just as much as when I first woke. So many questions were zipping around in my head, and involuntarily one escaped through my lips.

“What’s that?” I asked staring at the gun-like device. The old man was gone. He didn’t go through the door behind me, I would have heard it. There was only one explanation and it was impossible.
“It’s something that I won’t explain. Listen girlie, you are in a new world that you know absolutely nothing about. This is the 23rd century. It is a cruel, lonesome century where no one cares about anyone, and especially, I’m sorry to say, someone like you. There is none of the “golden rule” crap, and I won’t tell you about it. You’re not even supposed to be awake, but old-fashioned Rabbledig had to mess it all up for you.” I wasn’t sane anymore. We were in the 23rd century? There was no way he’s telling the truth, I thought silently to myself. “I feel bad for you, I really do. Now because of the senile old man’s mess-up, you have to experience leaving this world only minutes after you arrived. I’m sorry, but not sorry enough to save you. That would get me in trouble, and we don’t need that.”

I didn’t give him any time to elaborate. It would just confuse me more, and also I didn’t like how the conversation was changing. We were talking about my death, and I had a feeling that if I let him continue, it would approach faster. I had no hope of stopping it myself, but maybe of delaying it. “Why would you get in trouble? Murder is probably the worst law out there to break. Leave this situation clean. If you take me back to my family, you will be a well-known hero. Stop torturing me with this ‘23rd century’ crap. Anyone you are working for won’t be able to touch you.” Absolute silence seemed to ring as loud as a bell. He appraised me with sad eyes.

“That is where you are wrong, girlie. I would get in trouble with the law if I saved you. You have no family, and this is the 23rd century. I have no way to explain it better.”

He took a deep breath and continued. He didn’t do it because he had to, but instead because he wanted to make things as right as he could. “Your kind is never supposed to awaken and especially never to converse. This is a world where everyone can know every single thought you think and mistake you ever do make. It makes some things easier for the government, but makes most things harder for the rest of the population. It is a fool-proof way to catch the bad guys, but also makes it impossible to do the right thing sometimes. Here I am, talking to you, which will get me in enough trouble by itself later. If I don’t kill you soon, they will come, and the only thing keeping them back is my thoughts that I will turn myself in once this is over. I promise you that I will be a lot more humane to you than they will.” His dark eyes met mine, and I saw an anger bubbling across the planes of his face, but it was mixed with sincerity and maybe a bit of insanity. “You are a creature genetically engineered to provide ‘spare parts’ to the other ‘real’ people. You have nothing to remember, and no one who will ever care for you. I am very sorry, but it is just the way the world is.” The world suddenly came crashing down on me, like my little cave of hope swiftly collapsed. My mouth didn’t dare ask any more questions because I was afraid of the answers.

“I am sorry to say goodbye to you, but I must before we both get killed.” No logical thoughts formed. My head was a hazy mess. There was no way… I had to stop kidding myself. This was the truth. Then, everything happened way to fast. I had no replay of my shortened life, and didn’t even form a coherent last thought or wish. The man pointed the gun-like device towards me and shook his head. The room filled with a blinding light millions of times brighter than the Sun I never saw, and my consciousness fell apart to absolute and final darkness.
Apoorva Puranik  
Personal Essay/Memoir: Laughing at Loneliness  
Parkway Central High School  
Jason Lovera, Teacher

The butterflies sprinted back and forth in my stomach, flying as if they would never get to flutter again. I held my dad’s hand and walked to the classroom, and wondered how he couldn’t hear my heart thumping like drums every step of the way. I looked with immense curiosity as I passed all the different parts of the school, intrigued as to where each mysterious door led to. As I realized that I was slowly getting closer to starting my first day at school, time felt as if it had paused, and I was walking on a never ending path to my new classroom.

Ever since I could remember I had been surrounded by people that I could call friends. I never had to be the “new girl.” As any typical eight year old girl, I didn’t understand what this meant. Not once did I realize how much I would miss my old friends and how our many amazing adventures would now turn into cherished memories, unable to be recreated.

All of a sudden, my bubble of thoughts was burst by an unfamiliar voice.

“Hi there!” an overly cheery voice said, “My name is Mrs. F. and I will be your third grade teacher this year! It’s so nice to meet you. What’s your name?”

I instantly felt as if I had forgotten my name, struggling to pull my thoughts together I managed to sputter out some words, “uh, um...hi.”

“Well this is where you will be sitting.” She directed me to my seat as I waved goodbye to my dad.

As I hung up my backpack and sat down in my chair, I looked around the room. A soft murmur spread across the room and the calm blue walls, and I started feeling more comfortable. The walls reminded me of the swish of the waves, which calmed the fluttering in my stomach. There were three other kids at my table, all incredibly focused on their coloring page as if it were rocket science.

“Hi,” I said assuming I would be able to break the awkward silence at the table.

I was wrong.

They each glanced up and went back to what they were doing not even acknowledging my presence. Soon the three kids all started conversing with each other, leaving me feeling as if I were the fly on the wall. I glanced up to see one of them laughing about a joke the other had cracked. I instantly felt rejected and unwanted, as if I had made huge mistake by opening my mouth.

I couldn’t help but wish that I were back at my old school, laughing about something stupid with my old friends. Feeling out of place and alone, I gave up hope in trying to find a friend. The previous moment had created a sudden fear, that of being an outcast or unwanted, crushing any confidence I once possessed.

I took out my crayons and stayed quiet for the rest of the time in fear that I would say something stupid again. I stayed under the impression that someone would eventually come talk to me, and everything would work itself out. If not, I decided I didn’t want to return to this school anymore. All hope of just being happy at school flooded out of me as fast as the butterflies in my stomach returned.

Soon after going over various things such as rules and regulations, the most dreaded point of the day arrived. Lunch. Typically I would have been excited for lunch and recess, for it meant I wouldn’t have to sit in a classroom and I would be able to talk, but I soon realized that at this lunch there was nobody to talk to and I would much rather be in a classroom.. I bought my lunch and quickly found a seat at the nearest table, in the corner of the cafeteria and ate my lunch in silence.

After taking two or three small bites of the bland sandwich, I lost my appetite and threw it away. As I sat by myself, my thoughts began to ramble, with negativity swamping my brain. All my life I never had difficulty talking to people, so why did I suddenly feel so isolated? Typically I was somebody who found positive aspects out of any situation, but my heart had deflated. I felt as if I had let some force inside me win, turning me into a loser. I knew I didn’t want to return to school tomorrow.

A sharp whistle rang throughout the cafeteria indicating for us to go to recess. Kids ran to recess excited to finally get to play with their friends. I walked slowly with my head held low. Suddenly everybody was dispersed and I was once again alone.
I walked in circles seeing all the kids on swings and slides, seeming as if they couldn’t have been happier. Eventually I spotted a basketball that nobody was using and ran to pick it up. I decided to shoot some hoops; I had been a good basketball player since I was fairly young.

I missed every shot.

As I flung the ball in the air with little strength I felt like I had, it missed the basket yet again and the ball went flying off the backboard. I ran to pick up the ball and saw a girl, whose hair reminded me of the summer sun, running towards the ball as well. The girl with the blonde hair picked up the ball, threw it to me and walked away with her head hanging low, and her eyes drooping as if they were about to spill with an ocean of tears. Her mouth slightly arched down.

As I kept missing baskets, I kept an eye on the girl with blonde hair. She wandered around the playground, looking lost and confused. I realized she and I were in the same situation. Alone. After walking around the entire playground, she eventually circulated back towards where I was still failing miserably at throwing the basketball into the basket.

My heart started beating. I didn’t want to have a reoccurrence of the mornings incidents. I kept quiet, hoping that I wouldn’t have to initiate any of the conversation. Every second I stayed silent I felt as if I were waiting for a bomb to go off. This internal bomb kept ticking, as if compelling me to approach this girl. Then something clicked. Although I was still terrified, without a thought, I walked up to the blonde-haired girl.

“Hey, would you like to play basketball with me?” I asked.

Suddenly her eyes lit up. There was enthusiasm in the nod of her head that instantly brought energy into the surrounding. She smiled so wide that someone would be able to count all of her white, pearly teeth. She smiled as if she had no cares in the world, as if it were her job. She smiled from the heart.

We began throwing the basketball around and soon began talking. She told me that she was a new student as well. We talked until we heard the sharp, piercing whistle echoing all across the playground. As recess came to end, so did our talks for that day. She ran to stand in line with her class just as I did. I had only known this girl for fifteen minutes, yet I felt my wish for a friend had been satisfied.

That day as I walked home I didn’t feel ecstatic or joyous, but each step I took was firm and unhesitant. I walked with my head held high and a small smile on my face. At that moment I could have taken down any force that had walked into my life and threatened to knock me down, all without losing my stance. I also didn’t go home crying, or wishing never to come back to school again. Slowly I began to adjust to my surroundings. Life wasn’t perfect, but it felt controllable.

That night at the dinner table my parents asked me how my first day of school went. At first I hesitated to answer, remembering the dreadful morning I had. But as I reflected on my day I realized that this girl had my day a whole lot better, not stopping to think about how.

“It was fine. I made a friend.” I replied acting as if it were no big deal.

The next day, I went into the class with a different step to my walk, and the butterflies had seemed to almost be gone. I approached class as I ran into someone I didn’t know.

“Oh! Sorry! What’s your name?”

That day sped by as fast as the speed of light, and without realizing it, I no longer feared talking to people. As this slow gradual change occurred, confidence built up inside of me, helping me realize that confidence isn’t handed to you, it must be built. If I had never initiated that first step to building confidence, I might have missed out on an incredibly large portion of smiles and laughs.

Shortly after my encounter with blonde-haired girl, she moved away. I continued with my life, but I kept in mind everything I had picked up from her one smile. I haven’t talked to her since the third grade and today, although I have forgotten her name, I will always remember her smile. The smile of a little girl that lit the a fire full of confidence in the heart of another little girl.
Acacia was bullied. Ever since 5th grade. She’s gone through a lot in her life. She deals with people threatening her, calling her names, and hitting her. Acacia a tall, skinny, pale white girl, long blonde hair. She’s the type of person who just puts herself out there. Even if she did look like a fool, she’s a straight A student. Even if she tries to act dumb, it just doesn’t work. Sometimes she’ll come home with bruises and cut marks all over her body.

Today when she got ready for school, she put on her combat boots, black leggings, and a red plaid T-shirt. Like every morning, she puts on her makeup, straightens her hair, and grabbed a quick snack to eat. As usual, she gets stuff thrown at her, so she would always sit up front by herself, listening to music. This time she forgot her phone at school. So she sat there, just wondering what has, been sent to her and what has been said. She freaks out about this all the time, like when she forgets her phone or gets it taken away, she sits there and panics. When she goes to school, the first thing she usually does is sit in the bathroom. But today she just was tired of hiding, she walks into the gym. People laugh and point at her; she wonders why everyone makes fun of her for being her.

The bell finally rang for 1st hour. She sits there till everyone leaves so she doesn’t have to be around anybody. As she arrived at her locker, number 237, she put in her combo, grabbed her social studies stuff and her phone and headed to class. She hates going to any of her classes because she has to sit in the back, so people don’t hit her with things. They started watching a movie about the British army. Acacia got her phone out next thing you know she had tears coming from her eyes. Acacia ran out of the room while people laughed and stared. She ran down the hall to the closest bathroom. As she walked in she paused...

She started backing away and then felt someone push her back in. She screamed and cried for help as the other girls hit her. Then one girl noticed something... her scars. She started pointing and laughing as laid there, watching them leave. Words began to taunt her; “kill yourself” “worthless” “useless” “unwanted” “tie a rope around your neck” It’s like everything you’ve ever been told stays there in your mind. Even if you only been called or told it once, it stays and never leaves. Especially when the words just keep repeating themselves; as you hear it so much and think about it so much that you start to believe it’s true.

Acacia had enough of it and decided to go home, she called her mom to come and pick her up. Within minutes her mom was there rushed Acacia home because she was already late for work. When she got home she gave her mom and hug and kiss goodbye; saying she hopes she has a good day at work. She opens the front door and slams it shut. She runs up the stairs. Acacia goes to her room... Just stops there, wondering, ‘why me?’ Even though she knew it wasn’t gonna help any, she kept looking at all the messages, replaying all the videos. She finally had enough, she goes in her bed and cuddles under all the blankets, and cries. Acacia was thinking so many things at once.. Her mind was racing. She didn’t understand because she always helped them other people. She sits there and blames herself when people does something harmful to themselves or others. She just didn’t get it; none of this made sense to her.

She has never felt so alone before, she never felt so unwanted, and she never knew she could hurt so bad. But it seems like no matter what she did, it still haunted her and people would still message her things- calling her names and sending videos. Her phone was blowing up with text messages and statuses about her; she couldn't help but to look and see what they were saying. She never once liked it when people talked about her and called her names. She gets so frustrated and throws her phone. She freaks out. It seems like no matter what the words won’t go away. They stay there. She never understood why.

Acacia stands up and screams. Next thing you knew, she was throwing things around her room. Things were breaking, things were falling; all of her memories were just gone. She felt like the world was just gonna end. She felt like no matter what happens, she doesn’t belong here. Her mind was racing. She wasn’t thinking straight.

Her mom finally came home... to her daughter on the floor. She calls 911, and things just went downhill from there. Her mom didn’t understand why her young beautiful daughter would take her own life. She sat...
there and cried, and thought "why would Acacia do this, she started blaming herself for all of this until Acacia’s phone went off.

She felt so terrible because she was never there for her daughter. Her mother was always busy with work. As she was reading all the messages and watching all the videos, she broke down in tears. She felt like she could have done something to stop Acacia from hurting herself. Her mom knew if she would have actually paid more attention to her daughter, there is a big chance she could have stayed... But that didn’t happen Things changed forever... She couldn’t live her life, she wouldn’t be able to have a future. Everything she had going for her is gone...
The cold wind whipped my light brown hair from side to side, each time hitting me in the face like little ice needles. I could feel the snow sticking to my face, a cold bite of pain for each delicate snowflake that hit me. High-pitched wind gusts filled my frostbitten ears, but over the raging screams of the wind, I could just faintly hear the constant flapping of my wings following me. I started to see my house light, like a beacon in the night saving me- a crashing boat. The ground slowly started to near me as the blizzard calmed down. My mahogany brown boots gently landed on the ground like a dancer after a graceful leap.

The dingy yellow lights momentarily blinded my blue eyes, for I had been used to only the pure light of the moon guiding me through the maze of a snowy night sky. Snowflakes fluttered all around me, collecting on my black leather jacket. I walked up to the door very lightly, as if walking on water was a daily task. My small hand gently brushed the golden door knob. The small click rang through the black night, and I swung open the door letting the heat from the warm house pull me forward with a forceful wrench. I gently walked past a drooling, snoring man on the couch watching a football game, my Uncle David. I tiptoed up the stairs and walked into the barren hallway. I reached the old door at the very end and fumbled with the light switch that lies inside. A bright white light flooded the room and blue walls the color of a blue bird popped back at me. Home.

“Hey, Rose!” Jace said. I jumped back and almost tumbled to my feet. I made sure that my wings were tightly tucked behind the thick fabric of my jacket.

“Hey, Jace. What are you doing here?” I asked, sucking in my lost breath and rubbing my hands together to try and keep my light purple fingers from falling off.

“What? A lifelong friend and boyfriend can’t stop by?” Jace asked, smirking at me. I flushed bright red; truth was I did like Jace.

“Boyfriend?” I asked, chuckling.

“I just came by to drop off your jacket you left at my house this morning,” he stated casually. Him being at my house was quite normal.

“Ok, thanks!” I said. “Hey, do you want to go down to the old tree house tomorrow?”. My heart started pumping.

“Yeah, I will be here around at 3,” Jace said.

“Ok, bye, Jace,” I said as he walked out of my room, his loud boots clomping. I heard his truck’s engine growl loudly, and I knew I was safe; my wings dropped from their tensed position on my back. I slid my jacket off, stood in front of my floor length mirror, and watched my jacket crumple as if in pain right next to my foot on the ground. My wings stretched out, they almost reached the opposite walls. Small pieces of snow trickled down from my wings to the floor; they almost blended in with the blinding white wings. The small feathers were drenched, so I took a small towel and went through and gently dried each of them with a gentle push.

How will Jace react to my wings? What if he tells his dad? News spreads fast in this tiny town. If he tells his dad, he could try and track me down; his dad is an FBI agent! Platte City can’t hold information like this without it getting everywhere. A million more questions piled on my head and rained through my mind. I took a deep breath and smelled the scent of old wood from the house, spices from last night’s chili, and the cold of the snow I carried in. As I looked in the mirror, I stared at my wings; they are long, white-they look like a million diamonds are encrusted into each feather. I moved my eyes to my head and saw a deathly pale face with small freckles scattered around looking back at me. A silvery white scar down my right cheek didn’t compliment my already abnormal body. The scar came from years ago when I was first learning to fly; I remember an arrow skimming my cheek and the warm pulse of blood flowing out. A hunter was later brought back to my house, I can’t remember what happened to him exactly, but I think Uncle David somehow brainwashed him. I remember when he left the house and saw a bird on the lawn and thought it was a dog. I sighed as I left the mirror and headed to the shower to wash away the cold from my night flight.

The next morning I woke up to a golden haired boy with beautiful green eyes staring at me through my window. I giggled as I skipped over to the window. My wings were tucked neatly under my thick sleeping
sweater. I opened my window and shivered; the cold wind setting my legs on fire with goose bumps. I quickly shut the window after Jace and crawled back under my blankets like a cat.

“Come on! Let’s go already its 2:30, Rose!” Jace said, ripping the warm covers off of me and letting the cold air slap me.

“Sorry, I was really tired last night, and I forgot to set an alarm.” I was flying for about 6 hours, and it takes a lot out of you. I shoo-ed Jace out of my room and changed into a soft purple long sleeve shirt, navy boot cut jeans, and white tennis shoes. I grabbed a rubber band and started to pull my very long hair into a ponytail, it’s a light brown with blond highlights from the sun. “Today is the day!” I whispered to myself. Today was the day when I finally was going to show my wings to Jace. The only other person that knows this secret is my Uncle David, so this is a very big risk. But I trust Jace. I think.

By the time Jace and I got to our old treehouse, my heart was pounding so loud I thought he could hear it. The snow from last night had melted away but it was still a chilly 38 degrees outside. We slowly climbed up the old, snowy ladder. I reached the top and crawled over to the dirty corner. This tree house was about 5 feet tall, covered in mud, and about to fall over, but I love it to pieces even now. Jace crawled over and sat in the corner next to me.

“So, what did you want to tell me, Rose?” Jace asked. He sounded excited and slightly scared for my answer. I slowly stood up and walked over to the gap in the wall that we used to pretend was a grand window. I turned around and slid off my jacket.

“Hey. Ok, what are you doing?” Jace asked, turning his face to the right slightly attempting to cover his eyes.

“Promise me you won’t tell anyone,” I said. My voice was high pitched and wavering.

“Ok?” Jace’s voice sounded nervous and kind of terrified. I took a deep breath out and stretched out my wings. The light bounced off each feather and sprayed the dirty room with crystal-like lights. Jace gasped, and his mouth fell open.

“Ok. So as you can tell I have wings. I was created as a science experiment in Rome to try and breed a new type of super human. But one day the lab was attacked. I was only three years old and still learning, like any other baby my age. My uncle David took me and hid with me here in America. For years the FBI has been looking for me, but David has hid me well.” I let the words flow out of my mouth like a river. Jace’s mouth closed, and he was silent. I tucked my wings behind my back and slid down the wall. They naturally lay out all over the ground as I put my head between my knees. I glanced up out from under my eyelashes after a few minutes to look at Jace. He was still looking at me like I was a species he had never seen before.

“I have to go. I am sorry Rose.” Jace gave me an apologetic look as he jumped out of the treehouse and ran. I sighed. I think I just lost my best and only friend. A hot tear slipped down my face as I leaned over and closed my eyes. I wrapped my soft wings around myself like a blanket to protect myself from the sudden cold that was filling the treehouse. I slowly felt more tears pour down my face as a wave of heavy darkness washed over me.

“ROSE! GET UP NOW!” my Uncle David yelled at me. I could see the stress lines on his forehead and heard a loud noise in the background like a… helicopter. My eyes flashed open and I shot up off the ground like an arrow. David pulled my arm nearly out of its socket as he yanked my down the ladder. I was about to hit the ground when I opened up my wings and caught myself.

“Uncle David, what is happening? What’s that noise?” I yelled, the noise getting louder as we ran through the damp forest. Small branches kept grazing my arms, and I felt a thorn bush leave a deep gash in my wing. I looked back and saw a bright red liquid oozing from the top of my wing, and I felt a sharp pain. I felt the adrenaline rush through my veins as I saw the old rusty pickup.

“Someone found out our location, and we have to leave.” he said. I could barely hear him over the loud chopping of the helicopter.

“Where are we going to go?” I asked, tears flowing down my face again and running off my frozen cheeks. I knew Jace told, but I couldn’t bring myself to believe that the kind, trustworthy boy I had known all my life betrayed me.

“We are going to Rome.”
If I were to ask you where the city of Nairobi was located, what would you say? Would you know? Here’s a hint: it’s the booming capital of a steadily-growing country.

No?
Well, what about Kenya?
See, that one you probably know: It’s somewhere in Africa, right?

Chances are, if you are like the majority of America, you’re not quite sure. Hearing it’s in Africa, you might be imagining a country full of small, ramshackle huts; impoverished, starving children; tribally-clad people with chocolate-colored skin; exotic languages filled with clicks and guttural sounds; probably a camel or two—and they’re all walking around with the sun beating down overhead. It’s probably, what? Ninety degrees? One-hundred?

Now what if I told you that you were totally wrong?

Well, I wouldn’t: I’d have to give you some credit. There is, in fact, a lot of poverty in Nairobi, Kenya; and a lot of ramshackle huts; and a fair number tribally-clad people.

And camels, can’t forget them.

But that’s just the half of it.

What if I told you that there is also a bustling city of 3.13 million people? Swanky high-rises; huge, air-conditioned homes in gated communities; billboards; colleges; malls; ATMs; KFCs; Shell petrol stations; English-speaking citizens clothed in skirts, button-downs, dress shoes, and heels; temperatures that never rise above 80 and never dip below 50.

Sound different?

Sound… kinda familiar?

The Nairobi International Airport is a dusty, air-conditioned cluster of buildings, constructed not unlike many other airports in the world. It has multiple terminals, check-in and check-out rooms, a baggage carousel, and many, many long hallways.

We arrived there in the evening of July 9th around 8:30pm, two eight-hour flights after our slightly delayed departure from Chicago. I was absolutely itching to get off the plane, see the world around me, experience a new culture. My eyes were wide: ready to pick up on every detail. Despite my mental preparations though, it wasn’t the people or the sights that I noticed first; it was the smell: Dusty.

Everything was covered in an invisible but omnipresent layer of dust: the floor; the air; the workers’ clothes; my clothes; other passengers’ clothes; the toilets (which I sorely regretted needing to use—there was only one working toilet and zero working stall doors); the luggage; the bodies of the random, homeless, rag-wearing chaps who had wandered into the airport in search of a place to camp out overnight. Everywhere.

I’d soon come to get used to the smell, the taste, the feeling of the dust, but it would constantly leave me little reminders of its presence: most notably in the pebble-sized boogers I would start to acquire after a few days.

Snot-Rocks, my aunt called them.

We were driven home from the airport in my uncle’s silver US embassy car: crammed together in the back seat, our luggage bouncing around in the trunk. It was dark out—too dim to see much of this new, exciting world other than the pothole-filled highway that lay ahead. Our eyes were guided only by the light of my uncle’s headlights and a lone, overturned car on the side of the rode: steadily burning away in the night.

You could feel the heat from five lanes over—flames danced meters into the sky.

Welcome to Kenya, my uncle said as we passed it quickly.

The next morning, I woke up in my cozy, twin bed, situated on the third floor of my uncle and aunt’s house. We had arrived late the night before, passing two Kenyan guards on our way in to the gated cluster of embassy housing. It had been too dark to see much of the homes’ exteriors, but inside I’d been welcomed by an airy floor-plan, clean walls painted in warm reds and yellows, three working bathrooms, four bedrooms, a dog, a baby, three cats—nothing incredible, nothing out of the ordinary. It was like your average, American home. In fact, the only thing to indicate that we were no longer in the states was the presence of a large, metal
contraption at the bottom of the stairs: floor-to-ceiling, cage-like doors that could be pulled shut and locked from the inside if anyone ever had the need to barricade themselves in on the second story.

I’ve only had to use them once, my uncle said.

I quickly rolled out of bed, listening to the garbled Kiswahili from the guard’s walkie-talkies. It floated in through the open window, mingling with putting matatu engines, high-pitched car horns, and melodic songs from birds I’d never heard in my life.

In the evening prior, we had decided to start our day with a stroll around the area—walking was welcome after 17 hours on a plane—so I quickly donned a t-shirt and jeans and made my way down to the main floor.

Our walk started down a broken, once-cemented roadway that ran in front of my uncle and aunt’s complex. High, concrete walls with sharp, metal spikes enclosed the lane on both sides, hiding the houses that lay beyond; thin streams of black, liquid tar trickled through the streets, splashing on our shoes; matatus rushed past, making their rounds filled with dangerous amounts of people.

My uncle and aunt lived in what could really be considered the suburbs of Nairobi—the mall and skyscrapers were a little farther north, so we didn’t see much of the city that morning. Nonetheless, people were everywhere: roadside stands, street corners, packed matatus (minibuses), busy sidewalks, semi-trucks, cars, mopeds, ditches, balconies. Everyone was busy; everyone was dusty, but they were all something else as well: Well-dressed.

Not a single pair of gym-shorts was seen on that walk—and maybe one stray pair of sneakers. Everyone was dressed for business: casual, but put-together. The women wore skirts, the men wore good pants and dress shoes. It was like a throwback to the American past—back when everyone still put thought into what they wore.

I was intrigued. Interested. Despite all of America’s wealth, our first-world status, our two-story homes and air-conditioning, I realized that we insist on presenting ourselves in the easiest, laziest, cheapest way possible. Despite the fact that we have the luxury of time, the luxury of money, it was this civilization that took the extra minute to lace up its shoes and brush its hair.

And I wondered, is our society really any better than theirs?

After our walk, we got home, ate breakfast (pancakes and yogurt), washed up, and quickly piled in to my uncle’s car once again. This time, we were headed a bit farther into Nairobi to a place known as Kibera: The largest urban slum of the entire African continent.

But getting there was easier said than done. Quickly, imagine for me the absolute worst traffic you have ever been in. Chances are, it goes something like this: You’re at a complete stand-still; cars are bumper to bumper in rows upon straight rows; it’s been ten minutes, twenty, an hour, and you’re still stuck in the very same lane; cars are honking, brake-lights flashing, semis constantly releasing plumes of toxic gas that catch the wind in just the right way, flooding your car with their awful stench each time they hit the air.

Sound about right? Good.

Now, triple that situation by ten-fold. You’ll start to get a small idea of what the traffic is like in Nairobi.

For starters, all traffic rules are thrown out the window. Stop lights? Forget it. Speed limits? Not a chance. Lanes are more like suggested paths; sidewalks are new, elevated matatu lanes; driving on the left side of the road is only done when necessary. Traffic circles—which are the preferred construction for controlling intersections—are complete disasters.

It’s absolute chaos.

Then there are the roads themselves: a mixture of packed dirt, cracked and crushed asphalt, and any form of trash you can imagine. I’m fairly certain that our car tires hit more potholes than actual street-top.

All that being said, however, I was impressed with how well my uncle dealt had adapted to it. One time during our drive, my father paused in his conversation, turning around to look out of the back window.

Wasn’t that a red light? he asked, a smile creeping up his face.

The side of my uncle’s mouth quirked up.

Yep, I guess it was, he responded.

We kept driving.

I got my first glance at Kibera from across a field of trash, which I guessed was where most of the residents dumped their used-up wastes. Upon first glance, it didn’t look so incredibly large. The homes—huts,
more like—were actually very small, no taller than the height of a man’s raised arms. They sat wall to wall, with small gaps every hundred meters or so that allowed you to look down onto an eroded dirt pathway, winding its way back into the slum. Their construction was haphazard to say the least. I saw shacks made from wood scraps, metal sheeting, cinder blocks, mud bricks, twisted wires, metal poles, and everything in between.

But first glances can be deceiving.
Kibera—which is Nubian for ‘jungle’—is absolutely massive.

We parked our car just outside a US embassy building where my uncle occasionally worked. Our mission for the day: To visit the Kibera School for Girls, which was founded in 2009 as the first free primary school for female students; we’d brought boxes full of supplies to drop off.

One of the school’s workers—an American college student named Jason—met us at the edge of the slum with a smile. You could tell he’d been working in Kibera for some time by the amount of dust his clothes had accumulated.

After a while, the brown hue no longer washes out.

Quickly, we wound our way down through the crooked, sludge-filled, labyrinth-like streets of the slum. There was no need to watch for cars—these roads were for pedestrians only—though the number of children running about was enough to keep you on your toes. Any time we’d pass a group, they’d smile excitedly—white teeth flashing against brown skin—and run up.

How are you? How are you? How are you? They’d ask repeatedly.
I’m well, thank you.
How are you?
I’m great, how are you?
They’d run off laughing.

Many of the adults sat outside their small shacks, working on whatever it was they did to make their livelihood. I saw shoe-shiners, potato-peelers, bakers, sewers, soda-vendors, ‘hotel’ owners. Often times, they were backdropped by bright-colored cloth, hung in their entryways as a sort of makeshift door.

As we continued on, I soon took notice of a network of thin, crisscrossing wires, running above the entire complex like a buzzing, metallic spider web.

The wires, my uncle explained, were the resident’s source of electricity, tapped from the main electrical wires and syphoned into their homes.

Which is illegal, I might add. Don’t try this at home, kids.

Water was accessed in much of the same way. Burst, city water-pipes provided access to a daily bucket of water to wash in, drink from, and do any other needed tasks.

They also provided first-rate access to water poisoning.

As we descended deeper into the slum, the roads began to get more and more thin and sporadic, and I was very thankful that Jason knew where he was going. Get lost in Kibera, and you may never get back out.

Finally, we stopped. Having passed through a particularly tight alleyway, the road had suddenly opened up, revealing to us the first substantial, concrete structure I’d seen in the entire place.

‘The Kibera School for Girls’ greeted us in large, white letters.

The two-story building was painted a deep, bright blue—a sharp contrast in color to the brown, dusty shacks surrounding it. The front door was a bright red, as were the windows, which perfectly matched the bright school uniforms worn by a cluster of girls playing just outside the wall. They had black shoes; red stockings; bright, blue dresses; and vivid, red sweaters to wear over top.

You got lucky, Jason said with a grin, it’s recess time.

The girls, the oldest of them in 4th grade, ran up with huge smiles, greeting Jason with joy.
Jambo! How are you? How are you? How are you? They asked, jumping around.
Jambo! I’m well, I’m fine, I’m great. Asante!

They went back to their games.

But that wasn’t nearly all of the girls.

After quickly dropping off our supplies in a small office, Jason led us to the roof, guiding us up a crooked, concrete stairway that constantly wound back on itself. You could hear the laughter and songs of the children echoing off the walls long before you laid eyes on them.

On the roof was the most colorful and innovative playground I have ever seen. Brightly-painted rubber tires had been paired with rope, scraps of wood, two old slides, metal bars, and blocks of concrete in order to
create swings, a see-saw, hula-hoops, a fireman’s pole, and monkey bars. Little girls of all shapes and sizes were running about: laughing, shrieking, singing—the equipment was basically dripping with bodies.

But the most impressive part of the school was the girls’ manners.

Somehow, among all the poverty, sickness, and decay, the parents of Kibera had accomplished something that few people in America have been able to achieve—they had raised their children with a sense of respect and kindness.

Everyone waited their turn. Everyone said ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ (or ‘asante,’ generally). Everyone shared willingly. They showed off their English; they sang us songs; they gave and received compliments.

Each one of them acted with a maturity that some of my peers still have yet to achieve.

And I wondered, is our society really any better than theirs?

Over the rest of my two-week stay in Africa (extended due to two of my family members’ unexpected contraction of Salmonella), I met some of the nicest, proudest, most intelligent people of my life: Masai warriors who guided us through the mara, allowing us to witness a cheetah kill first-hand; our room attendant at our resort in Amboseli national park, who went above and beyond when helping with my sick sister and mother; random people on the street, who greeted me and my aunt with a hearty ‘jambo!’ as we walked by.

Going in to the trip, I’d expected to leave with some amazing pictures, a journal packed with memories, and a book full of drawings that I’d look back at in two years and think ‘wow, I’m glad I’ve gotten better.’

But I realize now that I took away so much more.

I realize that, despite all the wealth and privileges we have here in the states, we are very truly limited. Limited in the way we view other counties, limited in the pride we have in ourselves and our community, limited in the respect we have for our peers, limited in our manners in general.

And I wonder, how much are we really that different, that better off, that much happier, than those bright little girls on that rooftop?
The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has just announced that they have begun the process of forming their own coin-based currency. The coins are intended to “destroy the United States economy by imposing the dollar as the sole currency for determining the price of oil,” as said in the statement released by the terrorist group. It would seem that hopes for the coin are high, but some say this is a risky move by ISIS, for the obvious reason; the currency will be available in coins only. Many people (none of whom would agree to an interview) are in opposition of this bold choice, saying that an all-coin currency will be “hard to establish as a legitimate means of conducting commerce,” and “fucking annoying.” Citizens are right to have concerns; carrying change is something an anonymous source has told us they “would not wish on their worst enemy.”

But those living under the ISIS regime have more to look forward to than this shitty minting business. ISIS recently announced that they would be releasing an abundance of merchandise in the upcoming year. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the group ISIS, made a statement last week about the new products, which should be available online as of January 1st, 2015. “We’re very excited about this,” al-Baghdadi told sources. “Now everyone can join ISIS in their own special way. Of course, we already have our t-shirts, but soon our supporters can purchase socks, key chains, ash trays, coffee tumblers... the list is endless. There’s something for the whole family.” In order to accommodate the new currency, ISIS will also be marketing its own official desktop computer, complete with a little slot where ISIS-approved coins can be inserted for purchase rather than using a sketchy third party like Visa or MasterCard to make online purchases. “We hope this will encourage our younger members to get involved as well,” al-Baghdadi says. “No credit card number is required, so even kids can feel free to support us, except not really, because we aren’t really giving them a choice in this whole thing.”

As for what is next for ISIS, the group is terrorizing humanity on unstable ground. In light of this new decision to release merchandise, The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria is thinking about shifting their mission elsewhere, into a more... musical direction. “The truth of the matter is, forcing people to adhere to your strict belief system through violence alone just isn’t the fashion anymore,” Amhad Abousamra says. “We’re not bad guys. Our mission is just grossly misunderstood. All we want is for everyone to believe what we believe, and brutally murder anyone who doesn’t. I hope, with some catchy lyrics and a nice beat, we can expound our goals in a more concise way that people can understand.”

Abousamra says the full-length album is still in the early production stage, but we can expect to hear the group’s first EP soon, featuring songs like “Geno, Geno, Genocide,” “I Want It That Way (And By That Way I Mean Racially Pure),” and “Subordination Is A Girl’s Best Friend.” It is clear that The Artists Formerly Known As ISIL is definitely a group to watch out for in the future. Literally.
Ross Reynolds  
Critical Essay: Hard Hits: The Youth Concussion Problem in America  
Pattonville Senior High School  
Janet Baldwin, Teacher

It is the fourth quarter of a high school football state championship game and the team wearing red uniforms team is winning by three points. The red team’s running back takes the ball and gets hit hard right away. At first glance, it just looks like any other hit, but the running back does not move for a few seconds and the medical team runs to his side. The running back suffered a mild concussion, but it is possible that it could have been worse. Luckily, the game was the final of the season, so the running back will not miss any games, but many times, athletes who suffer these head injuries must forfeit the entirety of their seasons. This, of course, is only true as long as an athlete’s coach decides to rush him or her back into playing, which can have extremely harmful effects. It may not be that surprising that the running back received a concussion, as one in every five high school athletes contract a concussion every season, sometimes more than once. Over the past few decades, traumatic brain injuries (TBI) have received more attention as the number of cases has increased. Researchers and scientists have looked extensively to find the answers to what might be done to prevent these types of injuries. The background information has helped support the argument that concussions and other head injuries are a serious problem in today’s sports culture, especially in youth athletes, and it also supports the argument that not enough is being done to prevent these injuries and stop the possible long-term effects that may occur.

Concussions and other traumatic brain injuries have been around for centuries, but only recently have they been discovered as a true problem to human growth and development. Concussion comes from the Latin word concutere, which means to shake, or be shaken (Hudson 8). This definition gives the truth most people do not know. Most people believe the only way for someone to get a concussion is if that person were to hit their head hard enough on the ground or on another object. This belief is actually incorrect. A concussion can occur from any hit or jolt that allows for the brain to move around violently inside the skull (“Brain 101: What’s A Concussion”). Hits like this can occur from sports, as well as non-athletic situations, such as tripping and falling. The brain is made up of fifty to one hundred billion brain cells, which are also known as neurons. Brain cells are connected by axons, which are threadlike fibers that transmit and send information from the neurons to the rest of the body. When the brain is rocked around, these axons can be stretched and cut which causes the communication between the cells to break down (Hudson 8). When this cell communication is not able to work properly, it causes other normal body functions not to work. This means basic everyday activities such as tying a shoe or brushing teeth become almost impossible. The brain’s sudden banging and rocking inside the skull may lead to intra-cerebral hematoma, or bleeding existing inside the brain caused by damage to a blood vessel.

The truth behind it all is that, determining whether or not someone might have a concussion is much easier than popular belief. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has made it easier to determine symptoms, and whatever category they fall. The first category is the thinking and remembering category, which includes symptoms such as difficulty trying to think clearly and difficulty trying to concentrate or remember things that the brain has learned. It also includes feelings of time being slowed down. The next symptom category is the physical effects. Many times it appears that the only physical effect needed to know a concussion has occurred is if the victim falls unconscious. This is not true, as there are numerous physical properties that can help a coach or any other adult suggest that an athlete or other youth may have a concussion. Headache, blurry vision, nausea, and even dizziness are indicators. Continuing with the CDC’s symptom groupings, the next group is the emotional and mood related effects. This encompasses the irritability and sadness that might come with a brain injury of this nature. Depression is one long-lasting effect that can be considered an emotional problem. The final grouping is sleep and the effects a concussion has on sleep patterns. Surprisingly, a person suffering from a concussion may sleep more than usual, but can also possibly sleep less than usual (“Concussion and Mild TBI”). Since a teenager’s brain is not fully developed, the teen becomes more vulnerable to brain injuries and concussions than adults (Washburn). This being the main reason that youth concussions are a major problem in the United States. Between the years 1997 and 2007, the number of eight-to thirteen-year-olds that went to the emergency room because of concussions doubled and was tripled among the next age group, fourteen to nineteen-year-olds (Hudson 10). The future of those teens
and children that suffer concussions may not look entirely bright, as brain injuries can lead to terrible long-term problems and issues.

Research has shown and proven that concussions can lead to serious long-term, life altering problems, ranging from post-concussion syndrome to severe depression. Although ninety percent of concussions do resolve quickly (Hudson 12), usually within three weeks (Washburn), the effects of a concussion on the brain never truly go away. Many times, long-term effects are caused because coaches push athletes to return quickly, resulting in what is called second-impact syndrome. Second-impact syndrome occurs when an athlete receives another concussion before completely recovering from an already existing concussion (Hudson 13). Second-impact syndrome does have a possibility of death, if the second concussion becomes severe enough. This is one of the biggest reasons that reform needs to happen in how concussed athletes are treated and what is required until they are completely recovered. Post-concussion syndrome is yet another long-lasting effect that can occur due to concussion. In post-concussion syndrome, some of the symptoms continue to last for weeks, possibly even multiple months to a year or more. According to researchers at the Mayo Clinic, “the risk of post-concussion does not appear to be associated with the severity of the initial injury” (Mayo Clinic). This shows that no matter how hard a hit or how severe a person’s reaction was to a concussion, the syndrome can occur.

The lasting effects of a concussion can become more than just a syndrome, but can also develop into learning and social disabilities. The things people do in life are ultimately affected and can cause extreme difficulty. A person’s social life may be affected, as the person may not be able to talk the same way to people or might grow a larger sense of anxiety and nervousness around people. It also strongly affects how the brain learns, and what the brain can learn. Schoolwork might become more difficult and grades may begin to slip (“Brain 101: What’s A Concussion”). The biggest issue surrounding concussions and how they may affect a person’s future is the threat of depression. The National Football League has already seen a number of terrible tragedies due to depression and concussions. In 2006, former Philadelphia Eagles defensive back Andre Waters committed suicide, at the age of forty-four. Doctors found that his depression and poor mental health was most likely caused by the large number of concussions he suffered during his time in the league (Kamberg). If this can happen to an adult playing in a professional league, then it can no doubt happen to a younger teen athlete, possibly with worse results. These reasons give strong support as to why more reform needs to be implemented.

Sports at the high school and middle school level will only get more competitive and risky and with more competition comes more risk of critical injuries. Although the threat of concussion and other head injuries is continually rising, many reforms and attempts at change have already occurred. The first reform is the possibility of creating a multi-disciplinary team that would be able to help the recovery process for when a student returns back to school after suffering a concussion (Toporek). The team would include a number of different groups that would each include a number of helpful adults. The first group would be the family team that would have the parents and other guardians, as well as the friends of the student, continually monitor what the student is doing. Another group would have a medical-based team, which would be the concussion specialists and other doctors, including a neurologist and a school nurse. These would be the people that would help if any medical or health related problems arose. The most important group would be the school physical activity team, which would consist of coaches, trainers, and physical education teachers. These are the people that will be present when the student takes part in the most physical activity, where most of the post-concussion problems might occur. The final group of members is the academic team, which would encompass all teachers, counselors, and other administrators. These are the adults that would help the student to continue to do well in school, and help keep their grades.

Another reform that has been created and accepted is one that would change the diagnosis system (Kamberg 37). The past diagnosis system was based on a set of three different degree levels. The first degree was known as Grade I and was considered a mild concussion and a player could return to action within fifteen minutes. The second degree was known as Grade II and was considered a moderate concussion. In this instance, a player could continue playing a sport in about a week. The final level was Grade III and was considered a severe concussion requiring a trip to the emergency room. The problems with this system were that it was not giving athletes enough time to recover. The 3rd International Conference on Concussion in Sport held in 2008 in Switzerland proposed a reform to the current system. The new system would be completely based on the individual athlete and would take a more personal approach. Questions such as what
symptoms and how long do they last would be asked so that a doctor could understand more how an athlete actually feels. The new system would include an extensive look into an athlete's concussion history, as well as medical history in general. Guidelines put in place in 2009 stated that any player that is under the age of nineteen who has suffered a head injury during play should not return to play the same day. Most sports programs have adopted this statement and stick true to it. The state of Washington became one of the first to create a law based on what to do in the case of a student athlete concussion. The law stated that any player who is younger than the age of eighteen now must receive a doctor's written consent before he or she can return to play after suffering a sports related head injury. The law's motto became when in doubt, sit them out. Many states have since taken deeper looks into what needs to be done in order to remedy the problems of youth concussions. Some of these states include California, Missouri, and Massachusetts. It is even possible that the United States Congress could pass a bill that would create national concussion guidelines. One of these possible national bills that could be passed would be the Concussion Treatment and Care Tools Act, also known as the ConTACT. The act would provide funds that would give concussion guidelines for all students.

The newest technology for concussion prevention is the ImPACT Evaluation Test (ImPACT Testing & Computerized Neurocognitive Assessment Tools). This study would allow for athletes to take a brain test at the beginning of the season that would take a look at a number of parts of the brain. This information would be used for if the athlete ever suffered a concussion. After suffering the concussion, the athlete would take the test again, and the information would be used to help determine how far along the athlete is in the recovery process.

Concussions will continue to be a problem for the near future. Even though that fact may be true, the amount of technologies and reforms that have been gaining ground will help to make the concussion problem in America subdued. There is still so much that can be done to help prevent and treat teenage athletes who have suffered such injuries.
I stood on the walls of The Base, looking out into the misty, cool night. My nine brothers and my twenty co-leader friends stood with me, scanning out into the darkness of the night. Earlier that day, one of my scouts had reported to have seen a large army approaching our city. I had alerted our 3 million troops to be on their guard for the next few weeks, just in case the army decided to attack soon. Looking down at the city, I felt a sharp pain in my heart. There were families with children down there. Even my ten year old brother, Justin. I turned to look at him, noticing the fearful look in his eyes. What was I thinking? I couldn't make him fight or put him in danger. “Justin... I want you to leave the base when the army attacks. I can't risk you being killed.”

Justin looked at me like I was crazy. “I won't leave you and our brothers to die... If...” He gulped, tears showing at the corners of his eyes. “If they do come... I'll fight to my last breath.” I didn't know what to say. All I did was hug the little guy.

“No matter what happens, don’t give in. Keep fighting until they retreat, or until your last breath.” My twin brother Sky said, fear shown clearly in his eyes.

We all became quiet, listening for the sounds of footsteps on leaves or chattering of voices. The only sounds came from the wind and animals in the forest. We were beginning to think that the attackers wouldn’t come at all, beginning to believe we were safe. Just as I turned to go back inside, I heard a rustle coming from the trees. Now, my brothers and I had been living in the woods for about two years before we established the Seriphix Armies, so I had learned to listen to see if the rustling was made by an animal or a human. This rustling was no animal.

An arrow suddenly shot through the air at tremendous speed and impaled my friend Jerome right in his forehead. He slumped to the ground, dropping his bow and arrows. Another arrow shot past my head and stuck to a post behind me. A yellow sheet of paper was stuck to the arrow, flapping in the wind. I tore it off, turning it around. A few hastily scrawled words were written on it.

It's time Seriphix...

Just then, the doors to the city exploded, sending all of us who were on the walls flying through the air. I crashed into a pile of wood and stone we had been using to repair the armory. Groaning, I stood up and brushed myself off. I grabbed a nearby sword and charged the attackers. When one turned to face me, I froze. His face was hideous! He had messy brown hair and piercing blue eyes, normal so far. His skin was white, but on his face, was a purplish blue squid attached to his head. Parts of his skin was blue, including half of his face. Vines covered the soaking wet boy from head to toe. I blocked his sword strike, not wanting to hurt him. The poor kid had no idea what was happening to him.

The humanoid squid suddenly froze, and a tip of a sword appeared in his stomach. He toppled over, revealing that my friend Shawn had stabbed him. “What's wrong with these guys?? They have squids on their-” He was cut short as two squids pushed him back into the crowd.

“Keep your ground! Stay together!” Sky shouted, fighting a female mutant. More and more of these creatures streamed through the gates, overwhelming most of the troops. I tried to block the screams of the poor troops, but they echoed through my mind.

“NO!!!!” A familiar voice screamed. I turned to see Tyson Striker, Shawn’s older brother, crouching by Shawn. He was dead. Fueled by rage, Tyson grabbed the sword from his fallen brother and charged at the squid that had killed his brother. I noticed a female squid perched on a broken house, aiming a bow at Tyson's head, ready to fire. “Tyson!!!” I yelled, trying to warn him. Too late. The arrow flew through the air and impaled him in the chest. Tyson toppled to the ground, his eyes going blank.

I noticed a flaming object falling from the sky. A flaming arrow. The target... a barrel of TNT. Riki and Davis Striker dashed to the barrel of TNT, trying to make sure it wouldn't blow up. Too late. The whole thing blew up, sending flaming pieces of wood flying through the air. I didn’t see the brothers where they had been, but I knew what had happened to them.

I had no time to grieve over my friends who had been killed. Too many mutants were in the city. A scream brought me back from thinking. Through the crowd, I saw a boy being held by a squid by the neck. When I
looked closer, I realized it was Justin! My other brother, Emerald was struggling to get out of a squid's grip to help him. I charged into a group of them, slashing and stabbing them as I tried to make my way through the crowd. When I finally got to the area they were in, the mutant stabbed Justin and threw him on the ground. Furious, I drew my bow and let it fly, killing the mutant.

When I got to Emerald, his armor had been removed, leaving him with his green shirt and blue jeans. His helmet was lying to the side, bits of blood dotted on it. His stomach was severely wounded and his left emerald green eye had been stabbed. Emerald was still alive, clearly in pain. “It hurts...” He cried, tears running down his face.

“Shh... Shh...” I shushed, stroking my hand against his cheek. “You'll be with Father and Mom soon... The pain will end...” Emerald smiled at me for the last time, and closed his eyes. My younger brother... dead...

I stood up, blinking back tears. When I turned to look at the battlefield, not many mutants, or many troops were left fighting. Most were on the ground, dead. If we won, how would I go on with the grief that I couldn’t save some of my brothers? Screams jolted me from my thoughts and I turned sharply to my left.

Grant was kneeling in front of one of our troops who was holding an axe stained with crimson blood. Grant cried out as the axe sliced through his skin again and again. Hexical and Stephan were not far away, defending each other’s backs while trying to get to poor Grant. Stephan went down, shot by a female squid right in his head. Grant finally stopped screaming and laid still, his forest green eyes staring blankly at the ground. Hexical’s blue eyes widened in shock as both of his brothers collapsed to the ground. He didn’t see the squid behind him who sliced his back open and he fell to the ground.

The only ones left were me, Lucas, and Sky. Lucas charged in the crowd of mutants, wanting to get revenge on them. His amber eyes were wide in fury, bloodshot and crazy. He had gone insane from the death around him. He dashed into the crowd of ten squids, but was thrown out again, his head hitting a wall. The moment that his skull hit the wall, it burst open and spilled blood down the wall.

Sky and I took our swords out and got ready to defend the base, which was nothing more than a pile of wood and stone now. Five mutants rushed forward and pushed Sky to the wall.

“Sapphire!” He screamed for me, flailing his arms around. I rushed to help him, but a mutant kicked me down and pushed his foot on my back to keep me on the ground. Sky’s screams became louder and desperate as the mutants slowly killed him, cutting his arteries open with their swords. I couldn't watch the scene. I couldn’t help him and tried to block out the sound, but the screams of my twin echoed in the dense air, through my ears and straight to the back of my brain.

When Sky’s screams finally came to a stop, they all backed away. The squid took his foot off of me and backed away. I managed to get up, and took my sword out. A sharp kick was placed in my abdomen, sending me flying across the base. I crashed into a broken piece of the wall where just an hour ago, I had been standing with my friends and family. My sword fell out of the sheath and skittered into the crowd of squids. The memories this place held.

Flashbacks came to me at all at once. The birthdays, the games, the holidays. All of that, celebrated here. I remembered when Sky and I were thirteen, we all left our home to start up the Seriphix Army to protect our country. All of those memories, buried in the rubble.

Tears came to my eyes as I remembered all of this. I looked up at the rest of the mutants, who were smiling at me, holding weapons. They were ready to kill. It was ten against one. I would never win. But if I did, I could never live with the grief. I snatched up a spare sword that was laying against the wall and charged in. I hissed in pain as a sword slashed right on my chest, getting pretty deep. Trying to shake it off, I slashed and jumped over sword swings, managing to kill almost all of them. The last one, was the leader of all of them. We were both in bad shape. I had a deep cut on my chest, many small cuts on my legs, a sprained ankle and a cut on my neck. He had a dislocated arm, broken wrist, and many deep cuts on his arms and legs.

We both charged and our swords collided, fighting for dominance. I noticed a weak spot in his defense and stabbed him, directly in his stomach. He gurgled and looked at me with hatred in his eyes burning like a thousand suns. He then collapsed to the ground, his eyes forever staring at the sky.

I dragged myself to the corpse of my brother and cried. I had survived, the last fighter of the Seriphix Army, but I wasn't happy. I was sad and angry. My brothers... My friends... Everybody I had cared about, gone.

I cried into my hands, angry at the mutants and myself. I could've done something to protect my brothers, but I didn’t do anything. My stomach suddenly lurched and everything I had eaten for dinner came up. My vision was dotted with blue spots and I felt very weak. I slipped my hand into Sky’s, sobbing violently. The pain
of losing my brothers was way too much for me to handle. I let myself slump against him, smiling at the moon. I could see faint spirits of my brothers and friends around me, their touch almost feeling like the breeze. I struggled to sit up but just fell back down. I was losing too much blood, making me feel very faint. I knew my time was here, God was calling for me. I closed my eyes, blackness overtaking my vision. The last thing I felt was the cool breeze blowing my hair in the wind.
Do you know what it feels like to be depressed? To feel like no one wants you? To feel worthless and unwanted? Well that’s how I feel, every day. My names Noah. I’m not like every teen, I like music more than anybody, I have no friends, and I tried to kill myself three times in the last year. You may consider me lucky, because my attempts failed and I’m still here, but to be honest, hell seems like a better place for me.

My dad, who’s a doctor, got a better job offer so guess where I got to move to, California. Dream come true, right? Wrong. The people here suck, except they don’t know about my “mishap” unlike the people at my old school. Back in Virginia, I was known as “the girl who tried to kill herself.” Even though that’s true, I rather just be called Noah. I’m a sophomore this year, the first day of school was two weeks ago and there’s already a girl who yells at me for every little thing I do. I was caught smoking in the bathroom so she pulled my cigarette out of my hand and flushed it down the toilet. “As the student body president, it is my job to help the stupid sophomores and guide them into better, healthier lives. No smoking on school grounds!” Then she’ll grab her pretty little hand bag and sway her hips out of there and act like nothing happened.

On Tuesday I was walking home, listening to music and staring down at my black combat boots when I could feel a car slowing down next to me. I walked another block and the car kept following me. I looked over my shoulder and saw the car was black. It looked old and beat up, like it ran through a couple dumpsters before getting here.

“What do you want?” I called out.

Carrie, the student body president, pulled out a bottle of beer and some cigarettes, “I just wanted to apologize for what happened in the bathroom. I didn’t realize you were new, I should have gave you a warning. Let’s go to my house and hang out!”

“You’re drunk, go home.” I told her, but then out of the corner of my eye, I saw people holding a black sack and they were running towards me from the alley. I ran the other way but ran into something, I turned to look back but it was too late, they threw the bag over me.

When the took off the bag, I was almost out of breath. I looked around, but it was pitch black, so I sat there, shaking. I heard someone spark a match so I looked over, then they lit a candle, and another one, and another one, till the room was filled with them. Carrie and her friends were now wearing hoodies so I couldn’t see their faces. The place smelt like a sewer. I was sitting in the middle of the floor, it was cold, and soft. They must have seen my face, because a deep but scratchy voice said, “Don’t be afraid.” Then the lights went off. I felt a cold hand touch my leg so I slapped it away but someone held me back, the cold hand was now on my leg moving further, and further. I was screaming and kicking, the hand was almost to my waist when a door slowly creaked open. Light entered the room and I saw the people circled around me, but they weren’t human.

I’ve been insisting that it was just a dream for two months now, but I know it wasn’t.
Zach had been staring across the cafeteria for the past twenty minutes and has barely touched his food. Becca is, understandably, very annoyed. “Zach,” she warns, “if you don’t get your butt out of this chair and make a move right now, we are going to have a serious problem. Do you understand me?” She slaps the boy upside his head for good measure.

“Becca,” Zach replies in a mockingly similar tone of voice, “I can’t just go over there and talk to him. He hates me.”

“I’m sure he doesn’t hate you. Besides, you’re Zach Hartley: Basketball Star.” She waves her arms for emphasis. “You can say two words to the loser you’ve been crushing on for three years.”

“Easy for you to say. Not so easy to do, though.”

Becca huffed and stood. “Fine.”

“What?”

“Watch the master at work.”

“Caleb, you’re drooling.”

Caleb wipes his face quickly and, upon realizing there is nothing there, glared over at the girl to his left.

“I’m sure someone, somewhere, thinks you’re funny Kyli.”

“He’s never going to notice you if you don’t talk to him,” the dark-skinned girl warns.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” replies Caleb. “And even if I did know, this person that will hypothetically not notice me isn’t going to notice me anyway, so what’s the point?”

“The point’ is that you’d have a chance with this hypothetical person if you just asked.”

“I don’t–,” Kyli cuts him off with a hand over his mouth. “Hmm– mmp– pff–.”

“Hush!” she orders. “Look.” Kyli turns Caleb’s head back in the direction it had been pointed for the majority of the lunch period.

“What the…?”

“Why the heck is Becca Badillo coming over here?”

“Becca! Becca, where are you going? Becca!” Zach takes off across the lunch room until he catches up with her about halfway to the other side. He stops her with a hand on her arm. “What are you doing?”

“What does it look like?”

“It looks like you’re going to go talk to Caleb, but you wouldn’t do that, would you?” He ends the question with an uncertain tone.

“Of course not,” says Becca reassuringly, patting Zach on his head, then she quickly turns and continues on in the direction of Caleb and Kyli.

Becca Badillo is intimidating, to say the least. Sporting short, spiky hair and a leather jacket, she looks like she could easily break Caleb in half, which is why he’s very worried to see her approaching his and Kyli’s table. He turns his head away for a minute, whispering to Kyli, “Is she still coming?”

Kyli nods. “She’s getting closer, closer, closer, and… She’s here. Hi, Becca! What’s up?” Kyli tries to act natural, even as she elbows Caleb in the ribs. Hard. A faint blush spreads across her cheeks.

Caleb shoots into an upright position from where he was hiding his face behind Kyli. “Yeah, hey, Becca! How’s it going?”

“You,” Becca points to Kyli, completely ignoring Caleb, “and me. Tonight. Sandy’s Diner, over on Third? What do you say?”

“L-like,” Kyli stutters, “like a date?”

“Exactly. You in?”

“Definitely. Pick me up at eight?”

Becca nods decisively. “See you then.” She turns and swaggers back to Zach, who is frozen in the middle of the cafeteria with a dumbfounded look on his face, mouth hanging open slightly. She reaches toward his face and gently pushes it closed for him. “And that’s how it’s done,” she tells him just as the bell signaling the end of the lunch period sounds.
Caleb finds Kyli at her locker the next morning. “How was your date with Becca?”

“It actually went really well. We went to Sandy’s like she said, and we had dinner and milkshakes, and she insisted on paying for everything. Then we went down to that old arcade over on 8th street,” Kyli said dreamily, as though she was reliving the night in her head.

“I didn’t even know that place was still open.”

“Me, either. Man, it was so great. We’re going out again on Friday, and…” she trails off, and looks at Caleb expectantly.

Caleb eyes her with suspicion. “What?” he asks.

“Well… we were thinking…” Kyli starts twirling her braids like she always does when she’s nervous.

“What? Come on, Caleb. It’s just one date. What could it hurt?”

“A lot of things Kyli. It could hurt a lot of things. I’m not going on a date with Zach Hartley, Kyli. Why do you hate me?”

“Caleb! One date wouldn’t be so bad. And Becca said Zach really likes you.”

“That last comment draws an obnoxious laugh from her companion. “Kyli, I said no, and that’s final. Got it?”

“Fine. Then do you at least still want to hang out tonight?”

“Yeah, sure, I guess. As long as there’s no mention of Zach Hartley or his apparently gigantic crush on me.”

“What’s got you all moody?” Becca asks Zach about fifteen minutes into their first hour class. Zach simply grunts unhappily. Becca sighs. “Well, my night was great. Thanks for asking. My date with Kyli went really well. We’re going on another date Friday, and you and Caleb are coming with—.”

“No.” Zach cuts her off.

“—We’ll go to that new Italian place, then we can—. Did you just say ‘no’?”

“Yep.”

“Why? Zach, you’ve practically been in love with him for three years now, and you’re turning down a date?”

“I’m not going to go on an awkward double date with someone who has made it abundantly clear that they do not feel the same way I do.” Zach’s head drops to his desk with a thump, and the students in the surrounding desks turn to stare at them for a few seconds, before going back to their work.

“What do you mean ‘made it clear’?” Becca whispers. “Zach Hartley, did you manage to make actual words at Caleb Sanders?”

Zach scoffs. “I didn’t have to ‘make actual words’ at him. I overheard Kyli telling him about your double date plan outside the orchestra room this morning. He said no, by the way. And when she told him that I liked him, thanks for that, by the way, he laughed. Loudly.”

Becca blanched. “Are you sure? Maybe you misheard?”

“Nope. It’s a very distinct laugh.”

Becca and Kyli meet up in the girls’ restroom as soon as first period is over. Kyli is clearly distressed. “What happened with Caleb?” Becca asks her.

Kyli sighs. “He’s an idiot. That’s what happened. Also, he said no.”

“Yeah, Zach overheard.”

Kyli buries her head in her hands. “This is a disaster,” she cries.

“Wait a minute. We may be able to fix this,” she says, her tone of voice prompting Kyli to look up.

Kyli smiles. “I like that look in your eye.Alright, what’s the plan?”

“Hey, so Becca might come over later. Is that alright?” Kyli asks, pulling a creepy looking foreign horror film off the shelf which holds her family’s large movie collection. She hands it to Caleb.

“Yeah, that’s fine. This movie looks awful.” He smiles. “It’s perfect.”

“Cool.” As if on cue, the doorbell rings. “I’ll get it!” Kyli jumps up like her seat is on fire. She re-enters the den a moment later, followed by Becca and… Zach Hartley.

“Hey, guys,” Caleb says slowly. Zach looks equally as uncomfortable on the other side of the room. “Kyli, can I talk to you in the kitchen for minute?” He walks into the kitchen, looking back only briefly to make sure
that Kyli is following. Shutting the door softly behind them, Caleb turns to Kyli and hisses, “What are you doing? Why would you invite him here?”

“Look, I wanted Becca to come. She was already hanging out with Zach, so I just invited them both. He’s not so bad.”


“I don’t hate you. I love you. That’s why I’m doing this for you,” their whispered argument continues.

“Why can’t you just talk to him?”

“I can talk to him just fine. He can’t talk to me. He looked like he was in actual physical pain when he walked in. And remember sophomore year, when we got paired up for that History project? I had to switch partners because anytime I tried to talk to him, he just stared at me.”

“I know, I know, but just… Caleb, please. I really like Becca, so I really need you to work on getting along with Zach. Please? For me?”

Caleb sighs, “I can try, I guess. You didn’t mention…?”

“You’re giant crush on my girlfriend’s best friend? No, you’re good. Zach doesn’t know.”

“Thank you.”

“Yeah, whatever. Now, let’s go. We’ve left them alone for too long.” The pair rejoin Becca and Zach in the den, Kyli grabbing a couple of bags of chips from the counter on the way out of the kitchen. “Hey, sorry that took so long. We were trying to find some food.” She holds out the chips like she thinks they’re going to question her excuse. “Now, who’s up for a movie?”

Kyli plops down on the far right side of the couch and pats the spot next to her, indicating to Becca that she should take it. This leaves Zach and Caleb to sit next to each other on the other side. They both sit down awkwardly, closing in on themselves and trying to put as much space between them as possible on a couch that was not built to hold more than three people.

Becca pulls out her phone just as Kyli is about to press play. She puts a hand on her girlfriend’s arm to stop her. “Hmm?” Kyli hums in question, finger on the play button.

“Ally Martinez just texted me. She and a bunch of other girls from the team are having a little get together tonight. You wanna come?”

Kyli smiles. “Yeah, sounds fun. Are you sure, though? I wouldn’t want to impose.”

“I’m absolutely sure. Come on, let’s go.” She and Kyli stand, and Zach begins to rise as well, a relieved look on his face, when Becca says to him, “Sorry, Z, girls only. Stay here and talk to Caleb.”

Zach looks shocked, but sits back down. The room is silent for at least two minutes after the girls leave. Eventually, Zach breaks the silence. “Becca was my ride home.”

Caleb cranes his neck to look at the hook by the front door. “Kyli took her keys with her.”

The pair falls back into awkward silence.

“Do you want to watch this movie?” Caleb asks at the same time Zach wonders aloud, “This was a setup, wasn’t it.”

Caleb flushes a dark red. “W-what do you mean?”

“Kyli and Becca. They set us up.” He sighs. “I’m sorry. I know you’re uncomfortable with this. I’ll talk to Becca tomorrow, tell her this was,” Zach shifts uncomfortably in his seat, huffs, “totally uncalled-for.”

Caleb says nothing. A thought occurs to him, though. Let it go, he thinks to himself, but he can’t. “What do you mean, I’m uncomfortable? What am I uncomfortable with?”

Zach glares. “You know what. Don’t make me say it.”

“I really don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I heard you talking to Kyli, when she asked you about her and Becca’s double date idea.”

“Okay…?” Caleb is incredibly confused. If anyone has a right to be uncomfortable, it’s Zach, being stuck in a house with a guy who had--.

“I know you know I like you.”

They both freeze. The tension in the room is palpable. “I--I didn’t--.”

“I heard Kyli telling you. And I just… I just wanted to apologize. I know you don’t like me, and I know that her telling you must have made you really uncomfortable, even more so now that we’re stuck here together, so... I’m sorry.”
“You’re... sorry? Zach? You hate me.” Caleb draws the words out, like he’s talking to a particularly slow toddler.

“What? No I don’t. If anything, you hate me.”

“What? Umm, remember sophomore year. History project?”

“Oh, yeah. You switched partners to get away from me.”

“I switched partners because any time I would try to say anything, or contribute at all, you just stared at me.”

“I stared at you because I couldn’t concentrate on anything else. And when Kyli told you I like you, you laughed. Loudly.”

“I laughed because I thought she was making it up to try and get me to go on that stupid double date. And what do you mean, you couldn’t concentrate on anything else?”

“You’re very distracting.”

“Distracting,” Caleb deadpans, panting a little from their non-stop back-and-forth.

“Yes.” Zach is blushing now, the tips of his ears glowing bright red. “Your eyes are... They’re very blue. And you have freckles all over your face. God, I sound so creepy right now.”

“You want to talk creepy? I go to every basketball game just to watch you.”

“I stare at you in English every day. And I take the most inconvenient route to three different classes, just so I can pass your locker.”

“Are you trying to out-creepy me?” Caleb jokes. “Because I will win. Don’t even try me.” The happy mood falls abruptly. “So... I like you... You like me... Where does that leave us?”

“Well,” Zach gestures around the room, “we’ve got food, and a movie. I’d say this has the makings of a first date.” He grabs Caleb’s hand nervously. “If you want...”

Caleb smiles. “I like that idea.”
My eyes opened to a cloudy sky. Colors presumably from neon lights painted it into different colors. It was a canvas of greens, blues and pinks. I sat upward; still groggy from the nap I had taken. I had been subject to a cryosleep that had lasted over 20 years. I sat on the roof of a skyscraper, and the city below stretched on for miles. My A.I. companion Ajax activated.

“Greetings, sir. Welcome to the year 2034,” he said. “Are you ready to make sure you are fully operational?”

“Yes I am,” I replied in a mechanical voice. I recoiled from the sound I had just produced. Why do I sound like a robot?

I calmed myself down, thinking it was a minor side effect of the cryosleep. After all, it was entirely impractical for me to speak that way as a human. I touched my face to feel…metal. I looked at my hand to notice pristine white limbs connected by black rotating spheres acting as joints. My forearm was a large and white, connected to a massive black roto-joint, which was my elbow. I looked at the reflective surface of the skyscraper’s roof to see a mechanical horror peering back at me. My eyes glowed an icy blue. I lacked a nose, and my ears were absent from the side of my head. I couldn’t see how my muscles were operated; the design on my face was absolutely seamless. I opened my mouth to see a mangle of wires inside, and my backbone was visible, going from the top of my computer chip brain, to presumably my pelvis.

I buckled over, my monstrosity of an appendage bracing my fall. I breathed heavily; sucking in air that I now doubted was necessary for me to live. Ajax came over the radio, a cautious tone on his voice, “Are you okay, sir?”

I didn’t reply, afraid to hear the distant voice protrude from my “mouth”. I had gone to sleep a human and awoken a monster. I mustered up the courage to speak to Ajax, “Why… why am I a… a robot?”

“During your cryosleep, a war raged in the United States. The building you were inhabiting was completely and utterly destroyed by a missile. The radiation held inside the building was killing you, and so were all four limbs you were missing. We had, no choice.” Silence hung in the air for only a moment, “We transmitted your brainwaves into the robotic exoskeleton.” Ajax continued, “We did it without your consent, because we thought never waking up would be a horrible way to die. You aren’t you anymore; you are Titus-13.”

I stood there for a while, letting his last sentence sink in. The reality and weight of what had happened settled in, and I was terrified. I doubted if I had reason still, if I was capable of making my own decisions. Could I be hacked? Controlled, without my consent? The endless possibilities ran through my head, haunting me. Ajax quickly chimed in,

“Sir, we have a high priority target at your 2 o’clock. He is highly armed and headed towards an armed SUV. E.T.A. two minutes.”

I looked down at the neon jungle below me, preparing my glide pack for the flight ahead. As I stared down at the ground below me, I became aware of a sound I was producing. Every time I blinked, it was if a camera shutter had snapped. The subtle click was barely audible but still noticeable. I hoisted myself onto the ledge of the skyscraper’s roof, feeling the wind pass by my robotic arm. I took in a large breath, steadying myself and preparing for the jump ahead of me. I closed my eyes, and dove headfirst off the building. My glide pack activated about halfway down allowing me to control my descent. I aimed for an alleyway about 500 feet away. I gradually entered the alleyway, landing adjacent to a dark green dumpster.

“The target will pass by us in 3 seconds!”

I quickly dove behind the dumpster, looking at the entranceway to the alley. A man in full body armor strolled by, looking at the signs... then he stopped. He turned towards the alleyway, staring right at the dumpster. Click. He sprinted away, and I ran after him in hot pursuit. My feet hit the ground hard, propelling me forward. He rounded the corner plowing through hordes of unsuspecting civilians, and I sprinting through its wake.

“The armored SUV is two blocks away! If you’re going to stop him do it now!” Ajax screamed.
A mechanical grunt came from my mouth as I pushed harder to keep up with the target. I leaped up onto boxes to the left of me, catching up and running alongside the target. I leaped towards him, grabbing him as I careened towards the ground. We hit the ground hard, rolling into an alleyway. I stood up, blocking the only exit to the alleyway, taking a defensive stance. He stood up, closing his fists. We stared at each other for a minute, the realization of what I was visible on his face. The target threw the first punch, and I watched it fly dangerously close to my face. My fist connected with his jaw, causing a crack that echoed throughout the alleyway. He clutched his jaw, blood oozing from his mouth. He lifted himself upward and stared past me. I turned around quickly, dodging a fist that veered past my antenna.

I picked up a pipe, swinging it like a bat at my second attacker. He ducked, and countered it with a punch. It connected with my jaw plate, and the force of his punch made me recoil a tad bit. He clutched his hand, now purple from the punch. I round-kicked him in the head, sending him sprawling into a trashcan. The target charged at me, and I punched him hard, sending him flying into a wall. He flew into it, causing a crater and knocking him unconscious. I sat down, catching my breath after the fight. Citizens scattered by, and some stood staring at me. A young boy’s jaw hanging slightly open.

“Hey…” I said to him as I stood up and walked by.

He scurried away. Red and Blue lights got gradually brighter and I slipped across the street, sirens blaring. I stood on the roof of a 75-floor apartment building. I stared at the cityscape not too far away, and wondered what else I’d have to do in this city. As I waited for my next assignment, I decided it was time to make small talk with Ajax.

“Hey AJ, where am I by the way?” It took Ajax a little while to answer, presumably because he was busy. While I was waiting, I picked up a loose pipe from the roof, and tossed it to myself. I watched it flip and twirl, seeing better than I remembered as a human. I had come to an acceptance of my new circumstances, though I could tell I wasn’t a common phenomenon. People stared at me; kids fled and whimpered at my presence.

“Sir, you are in New Tokyo. You are sitting in the place Sears Tower would be in Chicago.” Ajax said.

I recoiled. I used to live in Chicago. My house would have been 90 miles south. I stood up looking in the direction of my old home.

“Hey Ajax, want to go home?” I said to my friend.

“Sir, I merely go where you do.” He replied.

“Well then, let me show you my humble abode. What modes of transportation do I have at my disposal?”

“You have rocket boots. Would you like me to activate them?”

“Yes please,” I said giddily.

A red glow emitted from the boots, and the air began to taste metallic.

“Liftoff in 5, 4, 3, 2,” the air stood still for just a second, “1.” I shot into the air, fired like a bullet from a gun. I aimed myself to the south and flew towards it, my arms tight at my sides. It took just a few minutes to reach the old location of my house, and a lot had changed. Where a small two-story house used to be was now a sprawling hotel. I looked up, seeing the stories go up past the clouds. As I stared up into the sky, an alarm blared. I looked down to see ten men running away, each with a bag of money. I flew towards them at top speed. As I landed in front of them, cracks protruded from the spot, causing all ten to stop in their tracks. They dropped their bags at once and pulled out Tasers.

“You HAVE to dodge those or they will short circuit you!” Ajax yelled.

All of them charged me at the same time, their Tasers aimed at me. I punched one of them in the face, sending him flying back into his buddies. I dodged a Taser that veered passed my head and redirected another one to shock a man.

Two down, eight to go.

I ducked as two of the men stabbed at me, causing them to shock each other. One of them kicked me in the face, Proceeding to swing his Taser towards my gut. I slid to the side, punching him in the knee then throwing him at the hotel wall. He crashed through a window, disrupting a party in the ballroom. Leaping over the casualties, I ran towards one of them, sliding under him as he jumped at me with his Taser in hand. I grabbed the lid of a trashcan, hurling it at him. It hit him square in the gut, and his Taser fell on a man I hit earlier. As I proceeded to knock out the four remaining men, I noticed a man in a fancy trench coat followed by twenty men exit the hotel.

“That’s Marcus Leopold, the head of a terrorist agency.” Ajax commented.
I turned and ran, hearing the clatter of 42 footsteps in hot pursuit. I rounded the corner, grabbing a trashcan and spilling it on the ground. I continued to run from my pursuers; leaving any trap I could to stall them. As I ran, a man in a black mask with red glowing eyes stepped out from behind a wall. I darted past him and watched as he opened fire on the 21 men chasing me. I turned around, using my momentum to burst at the men, bulldozing them over and allowing a clearer shot for my ally.

As we eliminated targets, I realized that one of the targets was missing: Marcus. I immediately felt a searing pain shoot right through my abdomen, and looked down to see a fist sized hole missing. I turned around to see Marcus, a smug look on his face and a cigar in his mouth. My ally ran up to him, throwing a punch at his face. A brawl ensued, but I couldn’t focus because of my injury. The world was going black, and I couldn’t keep myself awake. Grunts and thuds were audible, and I knew this was my last shot. I picked up a pistol from the ground, and aimed it towards the location of the sound. As my vision went blurry, I fired. The last thing I heard was a body hit the ground.
Did you know falling from the roof of a two story building hurts? I’m talking like, really hurts, like several broken and fractured bones hurts! Well, now I know, and it’s only 11 a.m.! Now that I think about it, this might be a little confusing, so let me start from the beginning. My name is Jack Houston, and I’m a professional criminal. Well, I use the term “professional” very loosely. I don’t use the term to mean I’m a good criminal, but to mean that being a criminal is my profession. A lot of people get that confused. But, more to the point, I’m sure you’re wondering about the whole falling from a roof thing, but I’m getting to that, so stop whining and listen. It was a normal day for me and my crew: get our guns and masks, get in the van, drive to the bank, and rob the bank… our little procedure, ya know? Except when we ran into the bank, guns blazing and ready to make some money, do you know what we found? We found four dozen cops with guns pointed at us. “What did we do,” you might be asking. I’ll tell you what we did. We put our guns down is what we did. We might be bank robbers, but we’re not stupid. We know when to surrender. We got on our knees and put our hands behind our backs, The cops took us to the station, and that is where our story truly begins. Enjoy.

“What are we gonna do, Mike?” I asked as I sat on the prison bench with my face in my hands. “How should I know! I’m not the one who got us thrown in jail!” said Mike as he looked over at Thomas, our leader who had planned the job. Thomas looked over and frowned saying “You think I wanted us to get got? Don’t be an idiot, but you’re right. Someone did set us up/” “Wonderful observation McGruff. The real question is, who?” said sarcastic as ever Will from his corner of the holding cell. I looked up and said “Banshee can get us out, right Thomas? I mean doesn’t Overkill have the governor in its pocket?” Overkill is the organization we’re connected to by the way. They set us up with contacts and jobs in exchange for a cut of our profits. “No, it’ll look suspicious if the governor pardons us. At most, we could get a reduced sentence, but at least, we’re looking at twenty to life,” said Thomas. I lowered in my seat and sighed saying, “I can’t go to prison, Tom. It’s full of wild animals. I’m not ready”. Will looked up and barked a laugh “Should ‘a thought about that before you became a bank robber, kid. Don’t worry gentlemen, I can assure you there will be no need for prison”. We all turned to the prison door where a tall bald Russian man in a suit was standing with two guards behind him. “And who might you be, Ruskie?” asked Will as he stood up and walked towards the door to confront the bald man. He was immediately stopped by one of the guards who shoved him back on the floor. “Get back prisoner!” shouted the guard. “That’s not necessary officer. I’m sure he doesn’t want any trouble” suggested the Russian as he walked in front of the guard. The guard backed off hesitantly. I stood up towards him and asked “What’s this you said about not going to jail?” The Russian put his hand on my shoulder and said, “All in good time, my friend. All in good time.” “So, who are you? Some kinda gang boss looking to hire us?” asked Tom. “Da, I suppose I’m something like that”. “Stop being so cryptic man. If you’re gonna get us out, then tell us what we have to do!” exclaimed Will. “Very well my friend. My name is Vladimir; Vlad for short. I am in charge of the Washington D.C. branch of the Russian Mafia. I manage all Russian crime in D.C., trafficking, racketeering, extorting... you name it, my mob does it. Funny thing is, to run this large of an organization, you have to have some legitimate businesses, so I have pawn shops, supermarkets, and in case you didn’t know it, banks.”

We all shared a look, and I think we all knew what he was getting at. “That’s right, gentlemen” continued Vlad. “That bank you robbed earlier today was mine.” Will roared a laugh and exclaimed, “Looks like we screwed up big time guys! No need to worry gentlemen, I am a fellow agent of Overkill, and I believe we can work some way out for you to repay me.” “But first you must get out of here.” I was surprised at this and asked, “Wait, I thought that you said you could get us out of here”. “Well I can’t, but Banshee can” replied Vlad. At this, his phone started ringing. Vlad, looking as though he completely expected this, pulled the phone out and put it on speaker. As soon as he pressed the speaker phone, I immediately recognized that voice. “Looks like you boys got yourselves into some trouble, huh>” jabbed Banshee in her sarcastic voice, which easily outmatched Wills.

“Very funny, Banshee. Now, how are you gonna get us outta here?” asked Tom. “It’s not how I’m going to get you out. It’s how you’re going to get yourselves out.” I sighed and complained, “Why can’t you ever
grief, and his eyes grew as wide as saucers. “Oh, so you want me to let you rot in prison for 20 years while you figure out your own plan to get out? Honestly, it wouldn’t matter that much. You’ve all been more trouble than good, and I was thinking about dropping you!” We all winced at this, and Tom said, “Dang, Banshee. Chill! Just tell us what we have to do.” She calmed, and said “Fine, you’re going to have jump from the roof of the Station.” Will was nearly on the floor this time. “Are you serious? That’s the best you can come up with?” “Do you have a better idea, Will?” questioned Tom. “This is the best thing we got, and I know you don’t want to go back to jail again.” Will nodded in surrender and turned to Vlad to hear Banshee’s plan. “We all in agreement?” asked Banshee. “Good, now listen up. Vlad bribed these guards to let you out of the holding cell, but the rest is up to you. Let’s just say this is a sort of punishment for your failure.” We all looked down at that. The fact that we hadn’t known that the bank was owned by a member of Overkill is proof of our incompetence. “So, once you get out you’ll have to make your way up to the roof. Once there, we have a dump truck full of sand for you to jump in.” “Wait!” I said. “You want us to jump from the roof of a 2-story police station into a dump truck?”

“Yes, do you have a problem with that?” Banshee asked, suddenly getting angry. “No, just making sure I heard you correctly,” I replied. I was surprised at this. Banshee usually got annoyed with us, but it had never been this bad. I wondered what was wrong with her. Mike finally decided to comment on the situation, saying, “Well, if that’s it, let’s get to it then!” We nodded in agreement, and Banshee said, “Good luck, guys!” At this, Vlad closed the phone and walked out. The guards with him said, “Come on guys we don’t have all day.” Will pushed past him and replied, “Well, we better get going then, eh boys? Don’t wanna miss our ride, do we?” We all walked past the guards to the edge of the hallway with Tom at the lead. Tom crept up to the corner and peaked around it. He immediately jumped back and whispered, “There’s 4 cops down there, but I think I saw the roof access.” Mike pushed past him while saying, “Well this’ll be easier than I thought.” I called after him, “Will, what are you doing?” But, he didn’t pay any heed. He just walked towards the guards while we stayed back. Mike walked up to the surprised guards by the stairwell and casually called out, “Hey, can you guys help me get back to the lobby? I went to the bathroom, and I must have taken a wrong turn somewhere. Sorry about the inconvenience, fellas.” The guard at the front got over his shock and said, “It’s okay. We can help you get back.” As the guard turned his back to Mike to point down a hallway, I watched Mike pull a Taser out of his sock and walk up to the guards. It was over quickly with Mike moving elegantly through the guards and stunning them as fluidly as a ballerina. Mike grew up as a trapeze artist, or whatever those people that swing from bars are called in the circus anyway, and since Mike can move so quickly and silently, he has been delegated to handle the more quiet-like matters of our crew like picking locks, cracking safes, and generally being a sneaky guy, but any way.

Mike looked back at us as he put the Taser back in his sock and called out to us, “Come on guys. Let’s go.” We all moved into the stairwell and headed for the roof. When we got onto it, we looked over the edges, searching for our escape vehicle. I looked over the back edge of the station and saw a dump truck full of sand. I said, “I found it guys, let’s go.” I’m afraid of heights, and I was in no hurry to jump off that ledge, so I backed off and let the others go first. Tom was the last on the ledge, and he said to me, “Come on Jack, let’s go!” I sighed and stepped up on the ledge as Tom jumped down. I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and jumped. This, here, is the funny part. You see, when I closed my eyes, I must have misjudged the truck, because when I jumped, for one, the drop was longer, and two, when I looked down, I saw hard concrete rushing towards me.

I screamed as I rushed past my friends on the truck who were looking at me like I was crazy. Now, the collision is the best part. When I say the best part, I mean the excruciatingly painful part. The pain I felt before I blacked out on the pavement is impossible to describe, so just imagine having your toenails ripped off in one swift agonizing motion, like simultaneously crushing your arms and leg bones. This was the most harrowing moment of my life, before I blacked out that is. After that, it was pretty peaceful. I woke up in the safe house. Our safe house is the secret basement of an old Laundromat we bought on First Avenue in D.C. I recognized my room, but as I sat up, I felt a horrendous pain in my ribs. I sat down at the same time my door opened, and in came our on suite doctor, Lazlo. Lazlo is a nice old guy from Austria that used to unknowingly work for the German mob. Then, he saw something he wasn’t supposed to, and the Mob tried to kill him. Lucky for him, we had a quarrel of our own with the Germans and saved him while we were attacking
them. We need a doctor here at all times because, in our profession, you get pretty banged up on an average job.

“How are you feeling, Jack?” asked Lazlo as he went to sit by my bed and do some doctoral stuff. “How do I feel!?” I asked. “I feel like I fell off a roof, is how I feel!” Lazlo laughed at this and said, “Yes, but you should be feeling better. You have been sleeping for 3 days.” I paused at this, surprised that Tom had let me take that long of a break. Lazlo continued, “You are lucky. The others wanted to wait till you recovered to start planning, and today was the last day they planned to wait.” I nodded and tried to stand up, only to fall back down in pain. Lazlo steadied me and said, “You are a very lucky man, Jack. You broke 3 ribs, fractured 4, and bent your spine. Had you not been born with an extra rib, your chest may have collapsed in on itself. Fortunately, your colleagues were able to requisition a back brace from a local hospital. You will have to wear this for a few weeks, but it is small enough to fit under your clothes. The brace should also greatly alleviate the pain from your broken ribs.”

I forced myself to sit up with a grunt and grabbed the brace saying, “Yeah, yeah... now help me put this on so I can get out and help with the planning.” Lazlo looked worried, but he did as I asked. Through a very painful procedure, we removed my shirt, put on the back brace and put my shirt back on. After this, I hobbled into the main room and sat down by the others. Mike and Will were playing cards while Tom read a book. “Hey guys,” I groaned. “You miss me?” They looked at me in surprise and shouted my name all at once. Tom went over to me and said, “Long nap you had. Sure hope you’re ready to work again.”

Lazlo walked in and shook his head, “He is better, Thomas, but no strenuous labor for the next few weeks while his spine and ribs heal.” Thomas waved his hand and said, “Well at the least we can begin planning. That should give him something to do for a few weeks.” “I have been trying to contact Banshee while you were out to ask her what our options were, but she’s been silent.” Will rolled out the map of the Maleficent Bank and said something about how this was how we were making it up to Overkill for the jail break. When we stood up, we saw some men with guns rushing down the staircase. From them emerged a face we recognized all too well. Mike stood up and said, “Bismarck Clampshcktank. I thought we told you to stay out of D.C.” Bismarck stepped up to Mike and said, “I’m afraid that you have lost the authority to decide who stays in D.C. That privilege now belongs to me, as does all crime in D.C.”

I laughed at that and said, “You think you can rest control of D.C. from Overkill? We’re more powerful than you could ever be.” Then, it was Bismarck’s turn to laugh, and a voice came from the top of the stairwell, “Sorry guys, but you are no longer a part of Overkill.” I recognized that voice, but I thought it impossible that I was right. Unfortunately, I was. From the stairs walked down a slim woman in jeans and a biker jacket with a Bluetooth in her ear. Tom gasped at her and said, “Banshee. Is that you?” She walked to the side of Bismarck and said, “Yeah, it’s me Tom. I’m so sorry we had to meet face to face like this.” Will stepped up to lean on the table and said, “So you’re betraying us, Banshee? Why?” She replied, “The answer is simple. You’re no longer useful to me, but Bismarck is. While I did enjoy working with you, and I would like to keep you alive, you simply know too much. Lately, you’ve been more bad than good, and with you getting caught, I’m afraid that was the last straw.” With this, she turned to go upstairs with Bismarck and said, “Kill them!” I called after her, “Don’t do this, Banshee! Don’t do this!” She called back, “Sorry boys. It’s just business...simply business.”
For the first thirteen years of my life I felt invincible. No broken bones. No major cuts. No major injuries, mostly because I never put myself out there. By thirteen, most kids play sports or do other things they could easily get hurt doing. The only thing I really did was ride four-wheelers, but I rode cautiously. To this day, I have only been in two minor wrecks, both getting only a few scratches but nothing terribly painful.

May 12, 2013

As my mom waddled to the kitchen from our back yard, my grandpa picked up the pickle platter from the counter putting each back into the right jar and putting them back into the fridge. He left the zesty pickles on the top shelf, being that their slot was empty with only juice remaining. Finishing his task, he and my mom walked out back to finish picking up after her baby shower; my baby brother was due in June. I sat on my swing dreading the next day because after a day of fun, I had to go to school and leave my mom seeing as she was in pain with swollen feet and a back ache.

May 13, 2013

I woke up at five-thirty in the morning to get ready for the second to last Monday of my 6th grade year. After showering and putting on some gym shorts and my old navy t-shirt, I became very low on time. I sprinted to the kitchen and popped a pair of brown sugar cinnamon pop tarts in the toaster. I pulled a plate and knife out of the steamy dishwasher. I then rushed over to the fridge, glancing out the window, in just enough time to watch my bus pass by. I whipped the fridge open pulling the butter out, without noticing the glass of zesty pickles right in front of it on the top shelf. That moment of time slowed as I watched the jar tumble down the fridge. My feet felt like they were glued to the ground. I just stood there as it fell shattering on the bottom shelf.

Numbness engulfed my right thigh, and I lost all sense of pain. I urged myself to look, but only cautiously. Unfortunately, cautiously didn’t work. I had no time to think, I just screamed bloody murder and woke up my sister and neighbors. As soon as my eyes made contact with my leg, a searing pain shot up my spine and hot tears streamed down my cheeks, blurring my vision. I backed away from the fridge and hopped toward to my counter. I leaned my back against the lower cabinets and slowly slid down to the floor. My face now, was very hot and my mom came to me as fast as she could. She was on the phone with my step dad as she looked at my gash. I saw a few tears trickle down her face. I laid down and she inspected my cut. She hissed in disgust as she stared. It looked to be about an inch deep and an inch long. But to make things even worse, there were pepper flakes in it. I don’t like anything even remotely spicy, at all. Having peppers in my open wound created an unfathomable burning sensation. She grabbed a cotton ball and soaked it with water. She then let the ball drip and rinse my cut. With every drop, I gained feeling. The pepper juice mixed with water burned my cut. The next step was the most painful yet, she then got a dry ball and dabbed the water out. Little pieces of cotton stuck on the edges of the cut.

“I think I have done you enough harm why not go to the ER?” These were the first true words she had said to me in during the incident.

My stomach flipped in that second. I absolutely hate the ER. There are so many hurt or sick people there. I am always fearful that I may get sick too. That sounds really selfish but, I was one of them now. My mom helped me up from the couch and down to our garage. She lifted me into the car and I laid across the seat. I had about a fifteen minute car ride ahead of me. I leaned against the car door and kept my eyes on the road, I did not want to even look remotely close to my cut.

Once we were in the hospital room, the doctor told us that I would need stitches. I looked over at my mom and her face had a mix of emotion she was scared for me and she didn’t know if it would hurt or how it would feel, being that she had never had stitches. This only added to my nervousness. Before he started the stitches
he applied a numbing solution and after that a numbing shot which was surprisingly the most painful part of
the experience. He started the stitches and they had very peculiar feeling. It felt like he was tickling my thigh.

There were twelve stitches in all and I was excused from P.E. for the last two weeks of school. I couldn’t
do anything and was in pain for a week. I was left with two things, a scar that looks like a caterpillar and a
major fear of glass.
Joe Sheeks
Short Story: Dear Boss
Platte City Middle School
Lisa Miller, Teacher

Whitechapel District, London, Aug. 31, 1888. Mary Ann Nichols, my first victim. You think that I just picked her out of a hat, but that is where you are wrong. You see, my wife cannot have a baby, and Mary Ann chose to get an abortion. To kill that baby and break my wife’s heart. A person who doesn’t want a baby, doesn’t deserve to live.

I make my move. I’m a doctor, so I know exactly where to strike a quick blow to the left leg immobilizing her. With a scalpel, I slice her throat ear to ear. Blood spews everywhere and pours onto the cold, damp cobblestone streets. You probably fancy me mad. Hah! Would a mad man be one of the best surgeons in London? Would a mad man avenge his dead wife? My wife and I tried to have child, but she could not have a child but after my most recent surgery: the abortion of a young woman. I got home the next day to find her already there... at the end of a noose dangling from the ceiling.

I had not known what had happened until it was too late, and I had performed surgery on four other women. So the plan was formed that I would kill the five different women who I performed surgery on. I have to be quick if I want to get the message across. I took a deep breath and made the cut. I remove her heart, lungs, and all the other organs, and I spread them on the cold floor. Just as quickly as I came I vanished.

The next day I was performing surgery on a young man when two older men walked in “Mr. Vector, I presume. When you are finished, please meet with use in the hall” said the dumb looking one. Three hours later I was in the hospital hall with the dumb looking one (Mr. Andrews) and the tall one (Sir. Anderson). “There was a murder last night Mrs. Mary Ann Nichols” Said the dumb one. “Oh my. What happened?” I asked knowing clearly what had happened. “We would like you to do an autopsy on the victim.” Said the tall one I wasn’t scared of the police; I had left no trace, no one had seen me. “We would like his done fast so we can catch this scum bag and bring him to justice fast.” I said Since I didn’t want to sound suspicious I agreed to do the “autopsy” if that’s what you want to call it. There was not much to do; I had already cut her open. Like I said, not a trace.

Whitechapel District London sept. 8 1888 Annie Chapman, my second victim. Once again, the same strategy. Run up behind her an... *thoush* the drunk threw a blow to the right side of my head. Stunned I fell over to my side. Luckily she was too drunk to even notice me. I got back to the killing this time. I dodged the blow, but she knocked off my top hat. I had not noticed it until later, so I kept on with it.

Once she was dead, I did the same as I did with the last- took her organs. “Oh no!” said a random young man wandering about the streets as I sped away. “The killer strikes again. The killer strikes again”

This time I was waiting for the two men. They came up to me at noon the next day, and asked me to do the same thing: an autopsy. “The killer struck again last night, but this time we have his top hat! That fool didn’t bother to even pick it up!” said the dumb-looking one. “Good, let us hope that you catch him soon,” I said without a butterfly in my stomach. They could not possibly think it was mine; I had not left but a single clue.

After the autopsy, I went home for the day- back to my run down little apartment at the edge town. As I opened the front door, I was greeted by the pungent odor of rotting flesh. I saw my wife dangling as usual from the ceiling. The maggots eating at her and the blood rotting the floor and staining her cloths.

Whitechapel District London Sept. 30 1888 Elizabeth Stride, my third and one of my last. This time I will be more careful than I was last. This killing was no different than the other two, but this time I was more careful than the last. She would be on her guard; I needed to be on mine, too. I came running up behind her she did just as I expected her to and swung her handbag at me. I ducked the blow and made the cuts. Only this time I left a letter I had wrote this letter in red ink just to mock the police.

Dear Boss,

I keep on hearing the police have caught me but they won’t fix me just yet. I have laughed when they look so clever and talk about being on the right track. That joke about Leather Apron gave me real fits. I am down on whores and I shant quit ripping them till I do get buckled. Grand work the last job was. I gave the lady no time to squeal. How can they catch me now. I love my work and want to start again. You will soon hear of me.
with my funny little games. I saved some of the proper red stuff in a ginger beer bottle over the last job to write with but it went thick like glue and I can't use it. Red ink is fit enough I hope ha, ha. The next job I do I shall clip the lady's ears off and send to the police officers just for jolly wouldn't you. Keep this letter back till I do a bit more work, then give it out straight. My knife's so nice and sharp I want to get to work right away if I get a chance. Good Luck.

Yours truly
Jack the Ripper
Wesley Slawson  
Poetry & Writing Portfolio: The Birth of Venus  
Central High School  
Vickey Meyer, Teacher

Hello beautiful.  
Did I scare you away?  
With all my talk of savage,  
and salty lips.

Hello gorgeous.  
Did you fear me?  
When I said I killed a man  
because red is the prettiest color.

Cry, o sweet thing-  
Gather near, softskin.  
Step away from your periscope-  
Come, you flightless bird-  
Swim.  
Touch the water you so feared-  
It isn't as toxic  
as you once believed.

Know this:  
There's a hole in the heart  
of an old man  
who's done no wrong.  
And I've seen the shackles  
that plague the innocent.  
Dying frowns tell the story  
of a life spent pure.  
Indeed,  
Heaven teems with men who saw beauty  
in muddy shoes and skinned knees.

Man's blood  
was born to boil,  
and I'd be ashamed to still it.

Hello beautiful.  
Meet a life untethered,  
you are free.
Wesley Slawson
Poetry & Writing Portfolio: Under the Blood Moon and Heavy Sleeper
Central High School
Vickey Meyer, Teacher

Under The Blood Moon

It was that warm summer
that dried my eyes.
That smile splashed upon shriveled canvas.
The unrivaled warmth that came
with a circle around a fire;
hearts transparent under the blood moon;
ash passed hand-to-hand;
a brush of skin,
while our eyes lit.

What unparalleled happiness-
What great contendedness-
What perfection.

And each night
I come home
and place this gun to my head.
"It can’t get better than this."

Heavy Sleeper

Dream.
And of those who do not act,
dream on, o whisperer of lies,
destroyer of worlds.
Abigail Smith
Poetry: Loneliness
Fort Zumwalt South High School
Amanda Bramley, Teacher

It is the sound of roaring silence,
straining to hear your lightweight footsteps that never come home,
the hollow echo of a long-forgotten clock dragging the seconds by,
deep exahles every morning as I remember,
of soft pit-pats of chilled rain, seeping into your abandoned garden.

It is the taste of bitterness, sour and spoiled,
burning liquor cascading down my throat, raw with tears,
stale cigarette smoke drifting in silky threads,
and wafting away to fill the empty space you used to occupy,
of morning breath and cold, flat black coffee.

It is the sight of emptiness,
the deep and eerie black between twinkling stars,
empty shoes and vacant chairs and deserted makeup on the dresser,
looking but not truly seeing where I'm going, what I'm doing,
of an open magazine on the coffee table, right where you left it.

It is the smell of decay,
forgotten showers, skipped shaves, and alcohol on my breath,
the aroma of your lingering perfume turned cruel and mocking,
food, untouched, forgotten, uneaten, rotting,
of brittle, papery, brown, decomposing flowers.

It is the feeling of absence,
of cool, empty sheets, drained of your warmth and color,
the clammy, rough stone which now holds your name,
of a throbbing, aching void never to be filled,
a certain chill in the blood that never quite recedes.

It is loneliness.
Jackson Smith
Personal Essay/Memoir: Pathways
Platte City Middle School
Devin Springer, Teacher

I woke up around dawn. The bright fluorescent lights were shining in my eyes through the doorway, which we never got to close because of the staff. I look over to my 3 room-mates to the right. They were all sound asleep. Our room had 4 beds, and 4 closets for personal belongings. There was a window looking in at the church across the street. The image of that church, and the parking lot, the power station to the right, will forever be imprinted in my mind. I had spent countless hours staring out that window, yearning to be outside, with the church. I had spent 57 days in that place, and it was finally coming to an end.

Today, I would be free.

Free to smell the warm spring air, free to feel the cool rain on my face, free to say whatever I wanted to, free, to be free. You never understand songs and poems about freedom until you’ve been stripped from your freedom. I had always taken my liberty for granted, and now I craved freedom more than any drug on the planet.

I rolled over and faced the wall, to be shielded from the hallway light. It was strange thinking about all the people in here I would leave behind. I felt really bad for them, knowing I would be on the outside and they wouldn’t. They were stuck there. But at the same time, I was extremely proud and grateful because I was leaving successfully, but not in a pleasant way. I made a few snide remarks to a few people. I even mocked them in my head over this past week. “Haha! You’re looking forward to your weekly hour of TV, when I’ll be gone by then. Sucks to be you!” I know that’s was childish, but hey, sue me.

I rolled over again to see the sun rising. It had to be the most beautiful thing I had ever seen in my life. It seemed so massive, it was almost hypnotizing, this beautiful sunrise, it was all for me. Nature’s tribute for my 57 days of agonizing torment. This was when the reality that I was leaving truly sunk in. I had gotten so used to rehab, it felt strange thinking I was going to be gone in less than 12 hours.

“WAKE UP! DO YOUR CHORES! EVERYBODY UP!” Amanda, the night staff hollered. Normally, I lay in bed a few minutes but today I sprung out of bed and grabbed my best looking clothes and a towel and headed straight for the showers. We were only allowed ten minutes to shower, but that day, I was in there for a good half hour. I skipped my chore, and spent the hour of free time in the morning rounding up the rest of my unpacked stuff and hacky-sacking. When breakfast rolled around, I didn’t eat. My mom and I would be eating out within the hour, why would I eat there? My mom would be picking me up at 9:00, and it was nearly 8:45 by the time breakfast was over. We went to the first group of the day, which I would be leaving from. I stared at the clock with building excitement until 9:00 am.

My mom didn’t show up.

I thought to myself, “Okay, I know my mom, she’s always late. Just relax.”

9:15 came. Still no mom, 9:30 came, and yet she was still not there. I stared out the window with anticipation for what seemed like forever until finally, at 10:00 am, they called me to the front to leave. I gave everyone a hug that was in the room and wished everyone good luck. With each passing person that I had gotten to know so well, it made me very sad to tell them goodbye, knowing we would never see each other again. We knew each and every details about each other’s pasts, but we wouldn’t get to be involved in their future. I gave the group room that I had spent two months of my life in one last look, and left.

I smiled at my mom at the front desk and braced myself to leave. My heartbeat increased with every line of papers my mom and I finished signing, like it knew what was about to happen. I stepped outside and for a moment I breathed in the fresh air, like I was never going to be outside, but then, I looked around and my heart sunk. Everything had changed. The leaves were no longer dead, but green and plentiful, like the grass on the ground. Birds chirped merrily and the sun shone bright. It made me wonder what else changed. This was probably the most bitter-sweet experience you could have. It’s not what I had expected.

When we got in the car I immediately knew what I wanted to do. Facebook and fast food. I grabbed my mom’s phone and started looking through messages. I had gotten 3 random spam messages. Nobody cared to message me and see if I could possibly talk, or when I was getting out, or how much they missed me, or to even say hi. This was like a blow to the face. I felt my face get red and my heart sink. I kept scrolling through
peoples news feeds seeing all the good times people were having while I was gone and I could just feel my emotions surfacing. I shed a tear and buried my face in my arms and leaned against the dash of the car. Had people even noticed that I was gone? Did anyone miss me? My mom got back into the car with food in her hand as I quickly wiped my tears and said,

"I called Joeys mom and told her that you'd be back today, and Joey, Chris, and Kyler (my closest friends) are waiting for you.” She paused for a moment. “Is everything okay?"

"Yeah,” I answered truthfully. “Everything's going to be fine.”
Kennedy Snyder
Poetry: Originality
Olathe North Senior High School
Molly Runde, Teacher

I don’t like being left alone with my thoughts
It’s easier to keep busy
Performing is second nature
Concealing the lump in my throat
Pushing away the reality
Afraid to write
Frightened to look into the mirror
Fearful to disappoint
Wondering abstract thoughts
Pondering abstract situations
Evaluating abstract
Questioning authenticity
Are we all going in circles
Living different versions
Of the same life
Believing we make our own way
Repeating history
Advancing
Improving
Withering
Are we mere reflections
Eager to claim ideas
Subconsciously replaying the past
Competing for the make believe awards
Dreaming the same ending
Lydia Soifer
Short Story: *The Gates of Fantasy*
University City Senior High School
Caroline Hackmeyer, Teacher

She took a step further in – then two or three steps – always expecting to feel woodwork against the tips of her fingers. But she could not feel it... A moment later she found that she was standing in the middle of a wood at night-time with snow under her feet and snowflakes falling through the air.

–C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*

My eyes had not yet been granted the power of being able to decipher the lines of black lettering on the thousands of pages that my sister delved through, so we escaped into her worlds. Into the places with fauns and snow queens, dancing animals and carousel race horses, princesses and sorcerers, pirates and fairies, snowflakes and sugarplums, witches and wizards.

My sister grabbed my hand and tugged me out the back door to the corner of the yard. We ducked under the thin branches, green needles ruffling our hair as they spread over our heads in a canopy. It was our wardrobe, our chalk drawing, our basement closet, our stage, our window, our sleigh, our tornado. It was our cave where we built teepees of twigs to be the sisters who lived in the 1800s; it was the dark and scary forest where we ran for our lives to escape the ravenous lion; it was the palace that sparkled in the sunlight where we danced with the prince who wore a regal coat studded with gemstones from every country in the world. Spreading over us like a magical green umbrella, it cast a spell that made all our fantasies real.

Our door had burst wide open, giving us entrance into the jillions of worlds that tickled our imaginations with possibilities galore.

_Popping in and out of chalk pavement pictures, consorting with race horse persons... and highly questionable outings of every other kind._

–Mr. Banks, *Mary Poppins*

Do you want to play outside? Let’s grab the chalk. Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple. Drawing flowers, faces, animals. The outlines didn’t make for especially lovely drawings. Nothing like the ones Burt drew. The black pavement shone through, darkening all of the beautiful scenes. More color, spilling our imagination onto the driveway. Top to bottom, left to right. Color, color, color. Picture after picture grabbed my attention. My mind traveled from drawing to drawing. No pavement left to see. Step back and throw the stone into the oodles of colors that appeared as a rainbow on a sunny day. Where will it land? Which drawing will I get to hop into? I skip one, two, three, and then do a bit of magic. Think, wink, do a double blink, close my eyes, and jump. As the ground rushes toward me, my feet continue on through the chalky white picture frame. They keep going and land on the lush green grass of a meadow. I hear a horn, and a pretty pink carousel horse decked out in sparkling jewels comes to my side. A horse race! I hop on and we gallop away. Passing horse after horse. First on the left, then the right, and we pull ahead, crossing the finish line. Trumpets sound and a sparkling first place crown is placed on my head.

_Whoosh! The gray floor vanished beneath their feet, and they were standing on top of a staircase shining in every color of the rainbow. A staircase leading to the land of Droon._

–Abbott, *Flight of the Genie*

As the pinpoints of light shine down on me, I kneel under the pine-green needles of the Christmas tree trying to figure out what’s inside the bags and boxes. The squishy package must be clothes; it always is. But I want toys, fun things to play with. I pick up another present and shake it. Hearing rattling like there’s a band of maraca players inside, I place it back beneath the tree. Beads, maybe. But then my eyes are drawn to a little blue box next to it addressed to my sister and me. I shake it and hear nothing. As the night wears on, my mind is more and more consumed with the box. What’s inside? In the morning, I jump out of bed with the same thought gnawing at my mind. What is in the box? By the time we open presents, I can’t wait. I pick up the little
box, untie the bow, and pull off the lid. A tiny piece of paper sits on the bare white bottom. It’s a clue. Our present is hidden. We run down to the basement and open up the door under the stairs. There is a little light on the ceiling and tan carpet on the floor. We go in, shut the door, and turn off the light. All I can feel is the carpet against my feet, and my sister’s sweaty hand against mine. We wait a few seconds. One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi. Will a new world open up? We hope that it will, but a nagging feeling in the back of our minds tells us that this is just fantasy. This worry is soon put aside. The rainbow stairs appear through a shimmering archway and we peer down them into Droon. We finally have an entrance of our own into the land of magic, battles, and wizards — into the land where our minds have been for ages.

First I must throw the fairy dust on you... I'm taking you to Never Never Land... There are pirates and Indians. Get Ready!

—Peter Pan

Walk down the aisle. Burning hot concrete beneath my feet, rows upon rows of forest green chairs that seem to stretch for miles. Go into my row, and sit in my seat, the aisle seat. That way I can see when tall people come and sit in front of me. People make much better doors than windows, you know. I look down upon the stage and see the set, different every week, and imagine the late nights the designers spend working on it. I wait for the show to start, eating my ice cream as it melts, sweet, cold drops dripping onto my tongue. And I read the playbill. Is anyone I know performing? Anyone I know that will be part of tonight’s magic? Eight o’clock. Eight o’two. Eight o’eight. Eight fifteen. The lights dim and a spotlight shines on the American flag, waving in the light breeze of the warm summer night. The orchestra starts and the people chime in, thousands of voices rising in unison. The music stops and there is silence. Then music, lights, actors, songs begin, and I am reeled in, soaring through the window to Never Never Land. I imagine myself being friends with the heroine with her witty lines and beautiful dress. I look through my binoculars, telescoping my mind onto the stage, feeling the excitement, the suspense, the joy of every moment. But then I pause and I think. I will never be that heroine; I will never be on that stage; I will never be part of the story. Only my mind can take me there.

... into a magic sleigh, she stepped blithely in beside the prince, and slid off down the frozen river towards the Shore of Sweets.

—Goulden, The Royal Book of Ballet

I stepped out onto the marley covered floor, the quiet tip-tap of pointe shoes music to my ears, and looked ahead at the wall as it stared straight back at me, providing no amusement. So I put my mind in another world, in a world that would give me something to smile about. Waltzing toward my prince, through the sugar-coated archway, I arrived at the corner and welcomed Clara into the Land of the Sweets, turning, turning. Over here are the chocolates from Spain, and there are the candy canes from Russia. But then the candy canes, chocolate, and gingerbread fell out from under me. I was rudely awakened as I found myself on the floor. My imagination had let my mind wander too far from the steps. I had to stop traveling away from Earth, but I couldn’t leave the story. I got up again, beginning anew like Aurora waking up after a hundred years of dreams. Setting my mind carefully back into a new land, I stood up without missing a beat and became surrounded by garlands of roses, with my prince waiting for me at the other end of the room. I danced, moving toward him with the utmost grace. Once there, I posed, my arms raised above my head, my feet solidly on the ground, leaving my prince behind and instead channeling all the great ballerinas that I knew and listening to the applause from the top balcony raining down on me.

The little girl gave a cry of amazement and looked about her, her eyes growing bigger and bigger at the wonderful sights she saw. The cyclone had set the house down very gently – for a cyclone – in the midst of a country of marvelous beauty.

—Baum, The Wizard of Oz

We walked out into the snow. It glistened as the sun shone brightly, the beams jutting down in rays as they warmed the earth. We traipsed across the snow to the top of the hill and looked down into the ravine surrounded with brown trunks standing tall against the rising cold winds. We stepped through the doorway of
trees and slipped and slid down the hill. As we were rushed into the ravine by the wind blowing at our backs, it was as if we were being blown into the land of Oz. When we landed at the bottom, we saw the stream flowing under the thin layer of ice, leading us through the forest just like the yellow brick road led Dorothy and her friends through Oz. We walked and walked in the silence. The only noise was the wind whistling through the frozen brown branches hanging in the cold air. Then we heard the crunching of leaves. Lion, tiger, bear? It couldn’t be. It was just a turkey strutting royally above us through the cold air, following the footsteps of its brethren. We looked down. Deer tracks. We weren’t alone, but most animals would not come out, even upon the plea of the Good Witch of the North. They didn’t have the courage that the wizard could give them. It was getting chilly, but we hadn’t reached the Emerald City yet. I shivered, wishing I were home. But we trudged on, trying to imagine that we were Dorothy and her friends on their way to see the wizard. We climbed up the steep slope, our calf muscles burning as they pulled us out of the woods onto the streets coated in a thin layer of snow. Tired and forgetting Dorothy and the yellow brick road, we walked through the streets. In no time we were back, and with a click of our heels we were drinking hot chocolate and relaxing in the warmth of a home.

You... will never come back... You are too old, children... and you must begin to come close to your own world now.
–C. S. Lewis, The Voyage of the Dawn Treader

By this time, the bush had been devoured by the ravenous jaws of a steel blade. The sky had wept as I grew up, washing away my chalk drawings, my imagination streaming down the driveway. The basement closet was still there, but the light was broken and the cave crickets had taken over. The theater was still there too, and I loved it as much as ever, but I just watched and enjoyed the story. And as for Oz, it just served as a way to get me through the cold hikes in the ravine.

Ballet stood steady as my only entrance left into other worlds. I grasped at it with the tips of my fingers, transporting myself to a different land every class, every performance, every time I danced. But why was this my only entrance into fantasy? I searched through the maze my mind had become and found the worlds buried in a deep abyss. I pulled them out one by one because I was too young to be cut off from our entrances into fantasy. We hadn’t grown too old to believe. We would never grow up. Just stay young forever, flying back and forth to Never Never Land, following the North Star; going down the rainbow staircase; jumping into chalk drawings; walking through the backless wardrobe. If I still believed, why had my entrance shrunk to the puny little brown stump that once held up the green umbrella which protected my worlds? Remember. Believe. Travel. So I grabbed my sister and we bounded out the back door to where the bush once stood. There was a tree there now, small but mighty. And its green leaves stood ready as our new umbrella, ready to take us into our fantasies.

“Where should we go?
“Anywhere. Somewhere old, somewhere new. In the past, in the future. Nearby, far away. It doesn’t matter.”

We closed our eyes and held hands, our hearts beating quickly, in rhythm with each other as we prepared for a new story to unfold.
A hoofed form stood perched at a dune’s peak, quivering with pricked ears. The welwitschia, the ever-growing shrub, breathed the bitter air that day just as it had centuries before, sleeping solemnly in the sand. A moment later and the Namib was flooded with the light of dawn. The springbok’s shadow elongated for no more than a second before suddenly flying across the terrain. An entire desert land of spectating beasts shrank into obscurity as a tar-spouting machine advanced. It shredded the ground below, scattering and spitting the dust of the scarcely-traveled path. As it rumbled along, Carrie gazed across the landscape with one cheek pressed to the window. It wasn’t long until a blurry collection of white tents came into view. She heaved her camera up to her face and snapped several pictures.

“There’ll be plenty of time for that when we get there,” said the gruff voice seated across from her. “Remember, that’s your job: documenting everything.”

“Right,” she confirmed, nodding. Her stomach became twisted with both nerves and excitement. Never in her life had she traveled such a distance from the U.S.. Her father happened to be a conservationist in Namibia and had allowed her to come along. Over the past century, the area had deteriorated into an exclusive part of Africa, and a magical place Carrie had only read about. This particular day, she was included in a six-person relief party headed to a coastal Himba tribe.

The brakes screeched, and Carrie watched attentively as her father stepped off the bus. Once the dust had cleared, she lifted her camera again and photographed a wooden sign near the window. It was rotting of age, but she managed to decipher the title: DONATIONS. She panned away from the sign and snapped another picture as her father exchanged a bow and a handshake with the chief. Behind the Himba leader was a desolate campsite. What Carrie saw through the lens was not the acclaimed African tribe from her books and articles. Her hands dropped and her jaw followed. There were no red women. The okuruwo, the holy fire traditionally kept alight through generations, was no more than a pile of charcoal. A strange light-haired man was leading this tribe; he wore modern jeans, not goatskin or jewelry. Carrie rose to her feet and made her way off the bus, watching as the rest of the tribe swarmed the back of the bus. The heat struck her after a few seconds, and she almost mistook it for shock, tentatively raising one hand to the rising sun and letting her camera hang by her neck. Josh, the party’s translator, opened the supply door and began distributing packages of clothes and food.

Once the chaos had died down, Carrie began taking more photographs. She found herself focusing on the surrounding landscape rather than the bland village, where there was little to discover. Several hours passed before the chief was alone, and she took the opportunity to approach him, bringing her notebook.

“Excuse me,” she piped up as he crossed the border out of the camp. “May I talk to you?” She halted when he did, only a meter away. She looked on as he beckoned one of the boys toward them, who trotted over obediently.

“I am Maiipi,” the boy told her in fluent English, and she shook his hand. “I can speak for B,” he explained. The group of three distanced themselves from the tribe, and B guided her nearer to the coast. Carrie held her notebook open in the palm of her hand, following him precariously down a low-set dune. After allowing an adequate period of silence, she began.

“If I may, I’d like to ask you a few questions.” She had rehearsed the words, and the rambling felt like procedure by now. “We’re planning to build another hydroelectric plant on this coast, and funding for radio towers just reached what we need to begin work. In what ways would you say life has improved for you and your tribe so far? Is there anything—” She cut her sentence short when B stopped and moved his arm in front of her. He stared ahead.

“Look,” Maiipi said, standing at her other side. Carrie raised her eyes from her notes and breathed the heavy air. They stood on the beach, surrounded by animal skulls and rusting metal. The dunes cast blue shade in the morning light, a reminder that they were still near.

“The Skeleton Coast,” she identified, her gaze traveling up and down the stretch of pale sand. She almost whispered the words, breaking her formal character. Foam bubbled away from the stones at the coast’s edge,
then returned in another sloshy wave. She held her book close and watched the chief motion to the open space now facing them. The gesture wasn’t needed; she was already in awe. It was a place she had read of in books, with the scattered remains of animals and shipwrecked sailors. Since the disastrous diamond rush of the early 1900s, it had become a muted and desolate place.

B continued along the beach for another hour, and had returned Carrie to the tribe’s camp before she realized that she had forgotten to finish her questions. As she mindlessly continued the day, the thought of returning to the coast festered at the base of her skull. She photographed a circle of tribal children, Josh in the center reciting English phrases. The nights were frigid, and before eventually falling asleep on the bus, she spent them around a fire with her father and the rest of the crew. Two or three tribe members her age often participated in meals and listened to tales from America, and it wasn’t infrequent that Carrie forgot that she was halfway around the world. The interview was finished days later as she relaxed with B and Maipi on the slope of a nearby dune. She did not ask questions about hydroelectricity or radio towers.

“Why do you wear the bandana over your face?” she asked, tempted to ask if his light skin was the reason. A hefty cloth-brimmed hat sat atop her head but she still squinted from the reflective sand. The sun beat down more harshly away from the water of the ocean. “Were you born here?” The chief shook his head. “B came here from England,” Maipi told her, “wanting to help us, like you.”

“Why don’t you speak?” Carrie questioned as she soaked up the information like fresh water, still watching B intently. Maipi’s responses slowed, as if he either wasn’t confident in his speech or was unsure of what he was allowed to say.

“If you are old enough to speak, you are old enough to be challenged as chief.” It was a loophole. “I see,” she murmured. She was delightfully oblivious to the words that would come next, which hit her like a freight train. Maipi delicately brought himself to stand and a thin coating of sand washed past his sneakers. He made one sweeping gesticulation into the roasting desert, speaking for himself now. “If you want to conserve our people, open your heart to this place around us. Do not just study the numbers in your books.”

The tribe leader’s bandana billowed in a burst of wind. A gemsbok twisted its head to observe the three figures from a distance. The boy stood still, feeling the air and listening attentively as it flew parallel to the dune’s slope. He looked down at Carrie and smiled.

* * *

“She said good-bye to clean water and modern technology just like that?”

The elderly man chuckled and joined his son on the sofa. “She is really something.” He turned the album’s pages delicately, almost painfully.

“What exactly happened back then?”

“All I can tell you for certain is that she knew something the rest of us didn’t. I remember our last day in the Namib. Our bus was scheduled to take us to the airport at dawn.” He wagged a finger at his son, squinting into a pair of eyes that reminded him so much of Carrie. “’Stop the bus,’ she said.” He looked up with a surprised expression, as if reenacting the moment. “And when she said that, she leapt up from her seat and stood, petrified. It was like she didn’t know how to explain what she was doing or why.” The younger man listened for more, his muscles tense with anticipation. “And that’s what happened.”

“You mean she just jumped off the bus and ran back to the Himba tribe?”

“And took everything but her camera,” his father explained, his voice rough as he fingered the page’s edge. “She knew I would have something to say. When she passed me walking down the aisle, she looked at me, looked at everyone else, exasperated, and she said, ’I need to see the sun rise again.’” The old man paused, gathering his thoughts and reflecting quietly. “We thought they needed us and without asking permission, we exchanged our products for their culture. We brought solutions to a civilization that did not need them. It was as though we lost something along the way in conservation. We needed your sister to help us see that. We can’t go back, but thanks to her... Well, we can try.” He caught his breath and broke his speech for a long while, inhaling through his mouth and staring into the wooden floorboards with glistening eyes. “And that’s why I didn’t go after her.”
Derick Speltz  
Christian Brothers College High School  
Jim Dohle, Teacher

The United States was not always the world power it is today. Relative to many other nations, the country is fairly new in the sense that it only declared independence in 1776. From the start, the United States was a continental power, dominating the region in commerce and territorial gains. In 1803, Thomas Jefferson acquired the Louisiana Purchase from France, doubling the size of the United States and declaring paramountcy of North America, even over Spain. Up until the late 1800s, the nation never expanded outside of the North American continent, even acquiring land extending to the Pacific Ocean. All of this changed with American involvement in the Spanish-American War when the United States intervened in Cuba. The Spanish-American War and the intervention in Cuba played a vital role in the transition of the United States from a continental to a world power but was not justified because it was centered on economic and political gains, replacing Spain’s ubiquity in the Caribbean and the Pacific, thus, violating anti-imperialistic U.S. neutrality and core principles consisting of democracy and liberation in favor of an expansionist and imperialistic foreign policy. American democracy and liberation were supposed to be timeless principles set in place since the founding of the nation when it gained independence from the prominent empire of Britain. With American involvement in the Spanish-American War it is as if the United States had made an exception to the rule.

First of all, it is important to understand the context in which the Spanish-American War took place before making any presumptions. As of 1895, the Spanish were in complete control of the island of Cuba (Coulombe). On the same year, the major problem occurred when Cubans began to rebel against Spanish rule and were imprisoned or forced to work in camps as punishment for their actions. Therefore, the question remained to the United States whether to act or not and why. At first it was out of the question to go to war with Spain to acquire Cuba because it violated national policy. President Cleveland opposed any argument to intervene in Cuba. This was the same for his successor William McKinley, who took office in 1897 (Brinker). However, other factors influenced President McKinley to change his mind as the Cuban revolt progressed. A private letter written by Spanish ambassador Enrique Dupuy de Lome was intercepted and publicized as an insult to McKinley, influencing the President on a personal level to go to war with Spain. In addition, the sinking of the US battleship Maine in Havana Harbor was thought to be sabotage by the Spanish and the first step towards war even though it was discovered by an 1898 study that the explosion came from outside the ship and a 1976 study determined that it came from inside the boiler room, suggesting mechanical failure (Coulombe). These incidents wouldn’t have been as big of a deal as they were if it weren’t for the contemporary, sensationalistic newspapers at the time. The question to whether or not the United States should intervene in Cuba and go to war with Spain was widely supported by public opinion. “Yellow Press” or journalism played a vital role in what the public thought at the time and the decision to go to war with Spain. This was a method of journalism that sensationalized or made up dramatic events in Cuba to make the American public feel the need to go to war because it would’ve been immoral to do otherwise. New York Journal owner William Randolph Hearst used his journalism methods to sell his papers but ultimately altered the hearts and minds of the American people, greatly exaggerating the stories of the US Maine and the letter from the Spanish ambassador without the use of known facts (Marotta). Directly or indirectly, Hearst’s writings influenced the U.S. to go to war with Spain. Public opinion in reaction to the “atrocities” the Spanish were committing resulted in a national preference towards war. Nonetheless, there were certainly other motives the United States had that they believed would benefit them for years to come if they were to intervene in Cuba.

The United States violated its policy of neutrality by intervening in Cuba and the Caribbean in order to acquire economic gains. United States intervention in the island of Cuba was counter-productive because it was only one imperialist nation, which was Spain, being replaced by the newly imperialist nation of the United States. This action was contrary to what America stood for, having obtained its independence from Britain, which was the major empire at the time, a little more than a century earlier. Such a rapid change in ideals of democracy and liberation occurred as a result of the opportunity for economic gains. Accordingly, there were surrounding reasons outside of the issues of the Maine and the intercepted letter from the Spanish ambassador why the US wanted to be involved in Cuba. It was a necessity for the country to introduce itself
into the global economy and taking over the island of Cuba would fulfill this. Geographically, it was in an ideal spot for commerce being located in the middle of the Caribbean. This way, the United States would be involved in the global trade between European countries and their colonies in South and Central America. One point that was brought about by Wilcox of Cornell University was the focus on the economic benefits of imperialism. He claims “Failure to expand would produce a faltering, depression-ridden economy, with accompanying unemployment and social unrest” (Marotta). Therefore, in order to obtain economic growth, the U.S. must venture out into new territories. Having a similar motivation for expansion and a nearly identical policy, the American Economic Association in 1885 declared:

We regard the State as an educational and ethical agency whose positive aid is an indispensable condition of human progress. We hold that the doctrine of laissez faire is unsafe in politics and unsound in morals, and that it suggests an inadequate explanation of the relations between the State and the citizens. (Marotta)

It is evident that there is an imperialistic nature to the United States, in hopes to be the most successful country (at least economically). It is also brought up that it is immoral to be an idle nation that doesn't interfere in anything. In other words, the policy of the US is clearly saying if a country is laissez faire in the global economy, it will never become an economic power, contradicting the will of its own citizens. What is not being accounted for is the will of the people of the nation being imperialized. The United States is only concerned about its global economic status. At the time, there was no holding America back in the fight for economic influence as “The impressive ascent of the United States in the international system and the vigorous rivalry among imperialist states for spheres of influence, gave a real urgency to American participation in the great power game- an urgency that infused the war of 1898” (Paterson). Global dominance was the defining feature of the sphere of economic influence America pursued to control over the new territories it aspired for.

American enterprise sought to dominate the global economy in every aspect. This policy of conquering territories for economic gains only for the benefit of its own citizens and for its own interest for influence is not justified.

The United States proved to truly be expansionist with the Filipino Insurrection and its interests in the Pacific resulting in vast political gains. The resentment against Spanish colonial rule wasn’t nearly as strong in the Pacific as it was for a time in Cuba. With the emergence of the United States having a strong naval fleet, they were able to expand virtually to any place they wanted to. Therefore, territorial interests in Hawaii as well as the Philippines were of great importance to acquire for the United States. American imperialism in the Pacific is defined by being hypocritical in its policies of taking over land from Spain to ultimately let the acquired territory be independent. In reality, the United States had no intentions of letting these territories become independent, but instead they became major components to the American sphere of influence. The policy of the United States in acquiring new lands was stated as this: “It is simply trying to leave the natives in a position to form a nation and to establish the form and system of government that they deem best” (Hilton). A good example of this hypocrisy is when the United States acquired the Philippines. The Filipino insurrection was different than the US insurrection in Cuba because there was a negotiated price of $20 million for the land (Coulombe). Talk of the sale of territory disappointed many Filipinos because they thought they were finally going to become independent, only to be taken over by another country. No nation would spend that much money on territory just to let it become independent right away and not benefitting from the country some way or another. Mark Twain, one of the most influential anti-imperialists at the time noted the real motives behind American intervention in the Philippines by saying, "I have seen that we do not intend to free, but to subjugate the people of the Philippines". He wrote, "We have gone there to conquer, not to redeem. I am opposed to having the eagle put its talons on any other land" (Briker). It is as if the political motive to obtain political influence in other lands is a disease inherited by the American culture that started in Cuba and spread to the rest of the Caribbean and other parts of the world. Therefore, the role in Cuba led to other insurrections of land in the Pacific such as the Philippines.

Admittedly, it was almost a necessity for the U.S. to replace Spain as a world power due to their declination in the global competition of land. As such a prominent country at the time of the late 1800s, if the United States did not fulfill this role, few other nations could. Also, Cuba was suffering under harsh Spanish rule and some thought the United States was morally obligated to help Cuba shake off its oppressor. One of the reasons President McKinley realized it was necessary to go to war with Spain was this:
In the cause of humanity and to put an end to the barbarities, bloodshed, starvation, and horrible miseries now existing there, and which the parties to the conflict are either unable or unwilling to stop or mitigate. It is no answer to say this is all in another country, belonging to another nation, and is therefore none of our business. It is specially our duty, for it is right at our door (Bucco).

However, it is known that American intervention in Cuba did not put an end to any of these miseries the Cuban people at the time had to put up with and didn’t solve the humanitarian issues occurring on the island. The Platt Amendment of 1901 restricted Cuba’s treaty-making and debt-assumption powers and reserved the right of U.S. intervention to maintain stability. The Platt Amendment was a retraction of the 1848 Teller Amendment which promised not to annex Cuba. In other words, anti-imperialists contended “The Platt Amendment exposed the hypocrisy of those who cited humanitarianism as a reason for war” (Briker). By debunking the myth of the United States as the courteous next door neighbor to Cuba, one can resolve there is absolutely not one good reason for American intervention on the island, thus, preventing the Spanish-American War altogether.

In conclusion, the Spanish-American War was not coherent with the core American principles of democracy and freedom due to its expansionist motivation for political and economic gains in its presence in foreign territories. The intervention in Cuba played a vital role in the transition of the United States from a continental to a world power and replaced Spain as a global power, attaining its territories and economic resources in a way that could be classified as an expansionist or imperialistic foreign policy. Additionally, it is important to be cognizant of the fact that the impact of the Spanish-American war is still felt today, particularly in contemporary debates regarding the legitimacy of high military spending and the right to wage war on humanitarian grounds. Also in modern times, there are still many issues with American motives in its intervention in foreign territories, primarily referring to the tensions between Americans and the people of the Middle East. The United States is questioned by many other European nations as to the same problem that occurred over 100 years ago that started in Cuba. As the country that sets an example for most other nations, perhaps the U.S. should examine its current foreign policy with regards to American intervention in the Middle East and decide whether or not its actions are imperialistic like they were in recent history. Although the United States was imperial in its motives, the intervention in Cuba and Filipino Insurrection made it the world power it is today.
Jacob Sprague
Poetry: The Santa Claws
Central High School
Kyla Ward, Teacher

Jolly Ol' Saint Nick
Is coming 'round the corner real quick
Better be nice this year
Better obey all the laws
Fail to do so:
You'll be sliced to bits by the dreadful Santa Claws

He's on his game this year
Picking out who's naughty and nice
Those who are good will get presents
But the naughty will pay the painful price

This year my uncle got in trouble with the Feds
Come Christmas, he'll probably get ripped to shreds
A bully at my school thinks he's so tough
But on Christmas Eve night, he'll quickly get snuffed

The elves fashion the Claws from peppermint steel
They laugh at the unfortunate souls who don't think Santa is real
Because come Christmas Eve, when they sleep soundly in bed
Kris Kringle will "Ho! Ho! Ho!" as he chops off their heads

No more coal-filled stockings
No more prayers for the damned
Santa's preparing a big feast
With your flesh as the Christmas ham

So you better watch out
You better take note:
Santa will be singing "Merry Christmas to all"
As he slits every sinner's throat.
Monica Stanley
Poetry: Hereafter, Colors Confined, and St. Anthony
St. Teresa’s Academy
Dianne Hirner, Teacher

Hereafter
You awaken my ungratified soul,
Lest I lay in the snare of my skin and bones,
You resemble an angels grace and a sense of hope,
Take my spirit and don’t let go.

Call me in and let the light rush forth,
There is nothing but peace that I want more,
Anxiousness seeps through my translucent pores,
I have not walked this road before.

Although I shiver in the midst of doubt,
And am troubled by the unearthing sound,
Your celestial voice calms my desperate shout,
I am a part of the journey now.

Restless and weary I begin to revoke,
You reassure me that I am not alone,
A feeling of amity dissolves my soul,
Let my spirit begin to glow.

Colors Confined
The color orange is exciting yet composed.
Still, a lack of admiration from those opposed.
“Orange is bland and triggers anger,” they said.
Blue, green, purple, red.

With shame and disgrace the vibrant color fades.
I’ve forgotten the name of the dwindling shade.
I continue to abandon the life I’ve led.
I conform to each story; to each lie I’ve been fed.

But the lie is not that others are more defined.
I fear that the lie is just what I’ve designed:
An admirable version of colors confined.
I remember now the one color left behind.

It is orange, yes orange that my tears have shed.
Not blue, green, purple, or red.
The tie around my heart, despite all I’ve misread,
is perfectly sound as an orange-colored thread.

St. Anthony
Can I ask you a favor?
Could you peer inside my head?
Will you find my brain and show me,
What has taken its place instead?
Once more, I seem to have lost my mind.
   Or was it an ear?
   Or was it an eye?
It's funny, I don't recall again where it is I put my time.

I've gotten so good at this forgetful art
   That I've begun to misplace my body parts.
Is there a miscalculation in my wit's design?
Is it my failure to keep my thoughts aligned?

Can I ask you a favor?
   If you feel so inclined,
Will you compare my head to that of yours
   And show me what's missing from mine?
I stood there, flames and ashes swirling around me, a blazing inferno of my friend’s incinerated bodies. Through the thick foul smelling smoke, I saw the blurry outline of a man standing there laughing before the smoke finally clouded my mind and vision. I was out before I hit the floor.

This had all happened about a month or so ago in the land of Northern Fiandra a land where magical energy is harnessed and spread far and wide in temples and people are born with colored marks on their bodies each corresponding to a certain power, red for fire, blue for water or ice, green for earth, purple for illusion, gray for stealth, black for death and yellow for electricity or storms. Most people use their powers for good like your average hero and all that but most of the time you have bandits, thieves and evil rulers that run around burning villages or causing droughts to make money by selling water. Our lucky country is ruled by Zanthrath, yet nobody knows what he looks like or what magic he uses because the only people to survive facing him in battle become his high ranking officials and he always wears a suit of pitch black armor adorned with red crosses on the shoulder and chest plates.

My name is Kaiden or Kai and I was born with the power of fire, which can be seen by the red dragon looking mark that spirals from my palms to my shoulders. From my childhood I have four close friends Zane an ice/water user, Onyx an earth user, Sam an electric/storms user and my adopted brother Angello a stealth user.

The day my life changed is the day I’ll never forget, for it caused an inferno of hate and vengeance to burn inside me. I was out in a special clearing in the woods that my friends and I found many years ago to train our powers in when I noticed a pillar of black smoke rising from the distance.

“Guys lets go check out what’s going because it’s a few months early for the winter fire to be lit.” I said to my friends before dashing through the forest on the trail we had cleared many years before and saw the deep orange glow of a fire up ahead. This sight caused me to run faster towards the village of which I called home and felt the waves of heat around me increase as I came upon my village in pure chaos, every house on fire, people running in panic, thieves running around blasting fire at people and already burning buildings and at the center of it all stood Zanthrath watching all of this unfold, doing nothing to stop it. Enraged I started to run towards him and noticed my friends running beside me.

“How could you do this to a poor village!” I yelled running up to him.

“You’re freaking king and you’re letting bandits and thieves loot this village how pitiful.” I yelled and cloaked my fist in fire as lunged forward to try to punch him in the gut right through his stupid armor. To my surprise he moved with great speed and blocked my attack and held me in his counter.

“Look here peasant” He said his voice low and muffled coming through his helmet.

“Why should I ever care about a small farm village that is so worthless that I can’t even tax it because it production rate is slow when I can just torch it build something more useful like a mana temple or a barracks. Hhmmmm tell me that.” Zanthrath said in a questioning yet angry tone and before I could react planted a strong kick into my chest which sent me flying into burning rubble of a collapsing house, which then proceeded to fall on top of me. I was about to pass out from the smoke when the rubble was suddenly lifted off of me and I saw Onyx standing there lifting the rubble above his head with little effort and nodded for me to move out of the rubble.

“Thanks Onyx I don’t think I would’ve made it out of their if it wasn’t for you helping me.” I said to my mute friend who nodded, kneeled and then plunged his hands into the ground causing the green mark on his chest to glow brightly. When the light had reached its maximum brightness dirt and stone shot up Onyx’s arms and soon his whole body. I gawked up at my now golem-like friend who now lumbered over me at around twelve feet tall covered in jagged rocks and stone held together with thick dirt. I was still stunned when I felt his giant hand push me aside and he turned to face Zanthrath and got in a fighting stance.

“Wait Onyx you can’t be thinking of fighting him, I don’t know what exactly this form does but there’s no way you can beat him!” I yelled at my friend who turned to look at me and for the first time I heard him speak in a low almost gravelly voice, “It will be ok Kai.” and with those words he charged at the king the ground cracking with each step his massive body made. Onyx brought his arm back when he was about ten feet from
him and when he reached him swung his fist against the king's armor and a shock wave of force shot through the air and across the ground knocking me and some remaining house frames over causing even more fires to shoot up from the remains. I weakly stood up and saw what was the outcome of the punch, to my surprise Onyx stood there looming over Zanthrath his chest plate shattered across the ground exposing his midsection spattered with blood and pieces of his armor.

"Who did you do that?" I asked walking up to him as the dirt and stone covering his body started to fall off. As Onyx and I started to walk away to help our friends with the fire I heard someone behind me laughing. I whipped around to see Zanthrath standing, laughing as his wounds healed and his armor put itself back together.

"Heh, did you really think you could beat me foolish boy?" Zanthrath snickered as he held out his hand and a strange black energy flowed from it and hardened into a pitch black sword which then blasted out a small shock wave as it finished hardening. I just stood there in awe as he charged forward to Onyx who quickly brought up a wall of stone that got cut in half by one swipe of Zanthrath's sword.

"You can't beat me all magic is inferior to my power!" Zanthrath said as Onyx and I backed away slowly and I noticed that I was soon joined by my friends. I turned to look down the line of my friends standing next to me and I saw them all return my look then turn back to Zanthrath, looks of determination on their faces.

"Aww how cute a bunch of kids banding together to defend their home. This, should be fun." Zanthrath mocked as the wind started to howl and the skies started going from blue to a dark menacing grey.

"Sam are you doing this?" I said turning to look at my friend who was floating a foot or so off the ground, the jagged yellow marks on his arm glowing sending jolts of static into the air and his eyes glowing an ominous yellow.

"Yes now just give me a second Kai." Sam grunted as the clouds overhead now black and crackling with giant bolts of lightning and explosions of thunder started to spin which caused the lightning to become even more ferocious.

"What a storm user how is this possible I thought all of them were under my control!" Zanthrath said slowly backing up a hint of fear in his voice.

"We'll looks like you thought wrong." Angello said from behind Zanthrath, which surprised me for a second then I remembered that he was a stealth user as he wrapped his arms around Zanthrath from behind and yelled, "Now!" to Sam and with that one word a loud crack of thunder roared as a bolt of lightning a few feet wide shot from the swirling vortex above us and it seemed like the clearing we were in was in enveloped in fire for a second as the jagged piece of super-heated plasma crashed down on Zanthrath as Angello jumped off of him just in time and the clearing was filled with his screams as the bolt of lightning surged down on him and through his armor.

As the smoke around us cleared I heard Sam fall to the ground and before I go over and congratulate him, to my despair I see Zanthrath slowly stand up smoke and steam flowing from his armor.

"Heh, did you really think that would kill me my armor is resistant to all magic!" Zanthrath yelled as he stood up the same dark energy formed two more black swords in his hands.

"Uhh well of course we thought it would kill you or else we wouldn't have tried it." Zane said in a mocking tone.

"Ok now then," Zane said cracking his knuckles as ice cold air started seeping from his body, "It's time for you to die for what you've done you corrupted freak." Zane growled through clenched teeth as the ground around him started to freeze.

"Did you not hear me my armor-" Was all Zanthrath could say before an icicle ten inches around materialized out of the cold air and speared right through his foot nailing it in place.

"But how my armor is supposed to protect me!" Zanthrath said in pain as he tried to dislodge the spike from his foot.

"It's really quite simple your highness, you see what I did wasn't magic I simply just created it and let gravity spear it through your foot I didn't do anything to it at all, but if I was using magic than I could've made it back here where I'm standing and then controlled it to make it spear your foot but I didn't, so oh well." Zane said in a confident tone and when he finished another icicle materialized and did the same to Zanthrath's other foot nailing him in place which caused him cry out in pain.

"P-please don't do this I'm already in enough pain just let me go!" Zanthrath pleaded as Zane walked towards him a third icicle forming in his hand, a look of hate and disgust on his face.
"Now why should I ever let you go after you destroyed everything we loved and cared about when I can kill you right here." Zane said darkness dripping from his words like venom and when he reached him he took the icicle in his hand raised it above his head but before he could lay the finishing blow and before Zane or any of us could react Zanthrath thrust one of his blades forward into Zane's midsection, impaling him.

Time seemed to slow as Zane dropped the icicle and turned to look back at us a look of fear and sorrow in his eyes before they rolled back and Zanthrath flung him off his sword and his bleeding body landed on the cold ground with a muffled thud. At the sight of my dead friend I felt hollow and barely noticed that Sam had gone to try to fight Zanthrath but got a similar result but when I saw him die instead of feeling sad I felt rage build up inside me causing the mark on my arms to glow a bright red and the ground beneath start to char and burn.

As I knelt there on the ground I saw Onyx also try to take on Zanthrath in his golem form and for a second it looked like he was about to win but like the people who did he was eventually taken down by Zanthrath's speed. I slowly stood up trembling in rage, the air around me growing hot, heat rays shimmering the outline of my body, at the sight of my friend dying in front of me. I looked up, my vision blurry because of the heat rays, to see Angello charging at Zanthrath. I tried to stop him but it was too late and the two were enclosed in a heated battle, each of them countering and landing blows on the other. It began to look like my brothers speed was too much for him but then Zanthrath landed a huge blow to Angello's gut, causing him to fall down to his knees as Zanthrath brought up his swords.

"Angello!!" I cried out as Zanthrath brought down his swords. To my amazement, at the last second Angello rolled between his legs and popped up behind him and planted his daggers into his shoulders and then swept his legs out from under him. Angello was about to deal the final blow when Zanthrath swung his swords around into his legs and then jumped up while pulling out the daggers from his shoulders which he then threw into my brothers heart and proceeded to kick him over.

Upon seeing this I erupted in rage the ground around me catching fire the dirt started to bubble and melt beneath my feet.

"That's it, you've killed all my friends and family, destroyed my village and now I will make you pay!" I yelled rage seeping from every word as my body started to emit fire.

"Oh so now you're going to try to take me down don't you see how well that worked for your friends?" Zanthrath said in a mocking tone causing my rage to build even more.

"I'll kill you!" I yelled and used flames to propel me into him in a matter of seconds in an explosion of fire. With each punch I furiously landed on his chest plate a small explosion thundered causing almost the whole clearing to be enveloped in flame. I had savagely ripped Zanthrath's armor from his body when he countered my punch and then kicked me back a few feet and the slammed his fist into the side of my head stunning me. I slowly stood trembling with rage at both myself for letting my friends die and at Zanthrath, when I stood all the way up the amount of anger inside made feel like I was about to burst and vision turned red as I howled in rage and fire exploded from my body recatching the village on fire and some nearby trees and everything was now a hazy red as I cloaked my fist in white hot fire and ran at Zanthrath through the fire as his armor was reforming and. I took a deep breath in causing the fire around my first to explode violently knocking me and Zanthrath back several feet.

Now knelt there, flames and ashes swirling around me, a blazing inferno of my friend's incinerated bodies. Through the thick foul smelling smoke, I saw the blurry outline of Zanthrath standing there a few feet away as his armor finished reforming, laughing, before the smoke finally clouded my mind and vision. I was out before I hit the floor, or I thought I was but as I drew my last breath the fire I inhaled filled me with a strange burning energy like a miniature sun had just formed inside me.

I stood up and took a deep breath in causing me to inhale more flame and the energy inside me to grow. After doing this I saw that my mark had started to glow a bright white and that with each breath of fire I took in the light grew brighter. I then created a small vortex of fire around my mouth allowing me to take in most of the fire in the clearing leaving just me the, the charred ground and Zanthrath. After the fire was cleared I saw Zanthrath starting to walk away from the clearing but before he could I shot a pillar of white fire up from the ground in front of him to block his escape.

"Well now you wouldn't want to leave before we finished right?" I yelled at him making him to finally turn around a look of shock it his white eyes.
"What how did you-" was all he could make out before I shot two beams of white fire from my palms and in a flash incinerated his legs causing his upper half to fall to the ground.

I slowly walked over to him as I slowly traced the beams of fire up his arms starting at his hands and ending at his shoulders, hearing him scream and try to writhe in pain the entire time, when I had reached him I had fully incinerated his limbs leaving a screaming stump of a man.

"Heh, try to regenerate this you worthless little waste of mana" I growled and plunged my hand into the pillar of white fire I had created earlier and brought out a sword of pure white fire and the proceeded to sever his head with one swipe and kicked it and the body into the pillar and stood there until they were ash then turned and walked out of the burning remains of my village to the clearing my friends and I found where I made them and our families all graves and then set out for the capital to stop the destruction of villages and towns like mine by the only means I know how, force, which will be a lot easier now that I carried the sword of fire I created to avenge my village and I will now use to avenge and defend all the rest.
It’s been eight years since I last saw him. He died when I was only six. The worst part of it was that I was there when he died, and I watched it all happen.

It was your typical, dark, rainy night when these kinds of things always happen. There was nothing I could do to stop the oncoming car from veering into our lane. Why did it have to be on his side? Why couldn’t it have hit the passenger side where I was sitting?

I remember wrapping my lucky green bandana around his wrist as he was rolled off by an EMT who looked at me with sympathetic eyes and told me that everything would be okay, and that daddy would get better. Why do they lie like that? I have never seen my dad from that day forward.

I loved my dad, but there was always something that seemed like he wasn’t telling me. He traveled a lot since he was a security guard in the NFL, but when he was home, he took me tons of places. His work seemed like a mystery to me, he didn’t ever tell me much about it. When the other agents would come over to talk to him they would show their badge and ask for him by his last name. All their conversations took place behind closed doors. I tried to listen in once and I only heard bits and pieces of the conversation. Things like... watch your back... don’t trust them...keep up the good work. It makes me wonder if his work had something to do with his death. But I was there in the accident, it was real, and I saw the look in the EMT’s eyes that my dad was dead. However, there is still a part of me that thinks he’s alive and I have good reason for that.

Some people may think I’m crazy, but I know I’m not. Every night when I’m lying in bed, I hear his voice talking to me. He talks about the things he and I did before he left. The memories that only he and I know about. I try to tell myself it is my imagination, but I know that’s not possible. It’s his voice, his laughter, and his memories. I know my dad is still alive, and I’m going to find him. I have to find him.

The dreams started about a week ago. They started off slow, with very distant memories–ones that I barely remember, from my childhood. But recently the dreams have been about the things my dad and I did right before his death, like going to the Cardinals game and throwing popcorn over the ledge of the upper deck at the people below. The laughter, just his presence, made my insides cry out. I couldn’t live without him.

I felt as if the dreams had to mean something. They were more than dreams, much more than just a dream of what I missed most. It all began to make sense. All my dreams had been about a place that my dad and I went for some type of event, or just a place to that we liked to hang out. It hit me like a wave hitting the shore. The dreams were all hints, hints to where I could find him. And I think I might have figured out where to go to find him.

I have had seven dreams about him since he passed, and like I said, they were all about a place he and I went or would like to hang out. I listed the places we went off in my head.
1. Pikes Peak
2. Cardinals game
3. New York
4. Hawaii
5. Mount Rushmore
6. Avalanche game
7. Ontario

All those places have to be a clue as to where I can find my dad. I mean they all happened months apart. Why would he choose those places? Maybe it is like a word scramble or some type of puzzle where I have to put all the clues together. Maybe I am not done having these kinds of dreams. I thought to myself for a little bit. What if I put the first letter of every place we went together, maybe it will spell something.

P...C...N...H...M...A...O...
C...O...M...N...P...A...H...
C...H...A...N...P...O...M...
C...A...M...N...O...P...H...
That's it! Camnoph is the name of the park just down the street from my house. He has to be there. No way that this is all a coincidence.

I hopped on my bike and took off down the street. Left turn. Right turn. I pedaled faster, not wanting to wait any longer to see if my hunch was correct. I could see the top of the jungle gym sneak up over the hill. I reached the top of the hill where I could see the whole park...nothing.

My heart sank to my feet. I would never find him. Who was I kidding? This was never some game or puzzle. I had to face reality. My dad died and left me. I needed to get on with life and try to get over this.

Then I saw it. It was a green square among the dark brown mulch. It was just barely visible. My heart started beating faster. I tried to calm my breathing, but I needed to see this, to get closer. I sprinted down to the green object and reached down to touch it. It was buried in the mulch with just a corner peeking out. I grasped the corner and pulled. It was my green bandana that I had wrapped around my dad’s wrist as he was being carted off to the ambulance.

I started to dig in the mulch like a dog digging for his favorite bone. I dug and dug, not minding the splinters I got every time I swiped at the black, earthy bark. Then I hit something. It appeared to be some kind of metal with like a latch on it. I started to clear away the mulch, making a sweep as wide as my arms. Finally I cleared a spot as big as a door. I pulled at it with all my strength, it didn’t budge. I planted both feet on either side and began to pull again. Nothing. I looked around for something to act as a fulcrum. An old metal sign post, indicating the beginning of a trail, lay in the tall grass. I grabbed it, slid it under the latch and began to dislodge the door bit by bit. I don’t know what drove me to continue. I knew that somehow, this may lead to the answers that I had been seeking. With a groan and an ear-splitting screech, the door loosened a bit. I placed the metal post between the slim opening and went at it again. It slowly loosened and finally I was able to pry the door open. Inside were steps down into darkness, but I could see a small amount of light. It was some type of room. There, in the corner, I saw a shadowy figure. I knew that figure well. He turned around and I jumped down the last few steps and ran to him.

A million questions ran through my mind at once. Why was he here? Who put him here? Did someone have something against him? How did he survive the accident? Was the accident planned? How did the clues get into my dreams? None of that mattered at the moment. All that mattered was what was right in front of me.

"Dad!"

"I knew you would find me son"
Serena Strecker

Poetry: It's Eyes are for the Stars
Strafford High School
Jessica Williams, Teacher

Our friendship is knitting
Sentences cast stitches
Hours course between the rows
We mangle it into form
maybe a quilt
by trapping memories into a latticework
of beige cable fog
Swapping second-old ghosts like stories,
we grin at the mechanized cant of the other's voice
the way this pixel-pointillism portrait etches arabesques
into our screens
like winter trees stitched
into the dusk
I live in Missouri but
this embroidery punched
needles in
Delaware
Ohio
any where's imperative matters not
to those adamant in thought:
“Loneliness is not our lot.”
Rather we reap connection
from our drowsily decaying hometowns
We sequester ourselves in our Macintosh frames
living mostly in the beam to space and back—
a breath threaded in the binary—
tossed to the same place we left
merely a hundred miles west
(or east)
Serena Strecker  
**Poetry: Before the Bungalows**  
*Strafford High School*  
Jessica Williams, Teacher

But this house fit me like skin on bone  
A tiny little thing, but it was home  
and to only one streak of black mold,  
far cleaner than ever my old abode  
which harbored fear that lurked abound  
from basement to the cellar door.  
Outside, a sycamore—what was its fate?  
to, exploding, shatter when I was eight.  
Beyond, a barn, roof red against the dawn,  
the sides from a clapboard church with parish gone.  
Farther still, a broken bridge that fell apart  
every brutal rain—as if brokenness were art:  
a theme mirrored by the roaring start  
with which that house we fled  
when the coroner had given word,  
assured that tyranny was dead
Dark. Everything went dark thirteen years ago. I remember it all so vividly as if I had died yesterday: the lights, the rush, the panic, everything. I was only thirty-seven at the time. Life was incredible. My beautiful daughter Lillian had a dance recital that night; I didn’t want to be late. I knew I was speeding; I should’ve slowed down. The lights appeared so quickly, the rush, the panic, everything. I should’ve been more cautious; why wasn’t I more cautious? The lights: I didn’t have enough time to swerve out of the way. I knew I was speeding; I should’ve slowed down... Why did I do that to her? Everyone else’s parents were there. She hates me. She has to hate me. I miss her. I miss my daughter. I miss my husband. I miss being alive. Why did I do that to them? I haven’t found peace. I haven’t moved on. I’m stuck here watching them live as if everything is in order. Sometimes they talk to me; I respond. They ask why; I can’t respond. I haven’t found peace. I haven’t moved on.

I have a beautiful daughter named Lillian. She’s a dancer. I still watch her when she practices around the house. She says she worries about me. Why does she worry? She was twelve when I passed away. She’s grown up to be a remarkable woman, twenty-five years old now. She’s a dancer. She teaches children at a studio she opened herself. The name of it is Dancing Lilies. She says she worries about me. Why does she worry? I wish I were there when she was growing up. She had her father. Her father was an excellent man. His name is Joseph. Joseph worked in construction for thirty years; he was laid off about two years ago. Ever since then he yells at me. Why does he yell at me?

“Why don’t you start picking up some slack, you crazy maniac? I’ve worked my ass off trying to fix what you’ve left behind! Why the hell are things so messed up? What in god’s name happened to you? I give up!”

He’s wrong. I’m not crazy... I’m not crazy! I’m not crazy!

Mom ran into her room sobbing after standing silent for three hours straight, watching Dad and I talk.

“She’s really gone now, huh?” I murmured to Dad from across the kitchen table. His wrinkled face frowned as he nodded yes.

“Do you know what’s wrong with her? Why she acts like that?”

“Lillian... It’s hard to take a stand, grab your mom, and tell the doctors to figure out what’s wrong when she won’t even acknowledge my existence. I still love her, but I can’t help her.” My dad’s hazel nut eyes began to fill with tears, but he quickly grabbed his composure and switched subjects. “So how’s your dance studio?”

I told Dad everything was going great, but my mind was still on Mom. “Dad, I can’t ignore what’s going on with Mom. She’s fifty-years-old now and is refusing to eat. You know she could die, right? And earlier you said she doesn’t bathe unless the neighbors help keep her still. Don’t you see a problem there? She’s crazy, but there has to be a reason. That thing crying in your bedroom isn’t the woman you married. If you still love her call 911, maybe a psychiatric specialist, or just call your doctor and ask if he could stop by. Get Mom back Dad, or I will.” My stern tone shocked my Dad, making his face turn ghost white.

“Let’s make a deal. I’m too old to be worrying and caring for your mother. My back has given up on me, and my brain can’t handle the stress. If you take her in, figure out what’s wrong and all that, I’ll help pay for the cost with every single penny I have left. Just promise me you won’t do nothing to hurt her... deal?” Dad put his hand out and with a smile on my face. I readily shook on it.

Watching my husband and daughter live without me was far too much for me to bear. This purgatory state I’m trapped in might exhaust my soul entirely. I can’t take it. God has given me this personal hell as a punishment for the night I closed my eyes to all things moral. An eternity of suffering and hopelessness is all I have to look forward to. I can’t take it. I’d give up anything and everything to be a living, breathing, animated being again. My spirit is weak, but I continue to weep hoping that one day my prayers will be answered. I want to be with my family again, I want to be alive, but all this will never come... All these wishes are childish dreams that will never come true.
Mother sat cowered in the corner of her bedroom facing the wall. The poor woman wasn’t herself, and I couldn’t even see her as my mom anymore. With utter hesitation I walked up to my mother and gently placed my hands on her shoulders. Her head snapped back at me, her eyes full of tears, and her lips completely chapped.

“Hey mom, it’s me, Lillian. Do you remember me?” I said with a gentle tone trying not to scare her off. There was about fifteen seconds of silence until Mother had murmured something. “Mom, what is it?”

Listening as closely as I could the only words I could make out was I died... miss my daughter... obviously I missed some key points. She starting crying and tucked her head between her knees. “Mom, I’ll be back soon and when I’m back, you’ll be back.” I released my hands from her shoulders and walked away.

My poor daughter Lillian hasn’t moved on. With witches and demons she believes she can bring me back. I sure hope Lillian doesn’t get involved in that evil stuff. She hasn’t moved on. I weep as I hear the foolishness come from her mouth. You’ll be back. The silly phrase echoes in my mind like and train under a bridge. You’ll be back she says. Oh, my poor daughter! If she even dares to dabble with the devil I will weep until my eyes grow dry. It has been years since I’ve passed. Has she not gotten the support she needs to forget about me? Oh, my poor daughter! I pray that no matter what she does she remains safe. Grant me that request, Lord, and I’ll remain in this hell fire forever. I wanted to be free; yes, I wanted to be free. But, if that means taking the soul of my daughter, I will have no part. I wanted to be free, but my selfishness can wait for the safety of my daughter. Keep her safe. Do not let her stray from the path. Lord, if you only hear one prayer of mine let it be this, keep her safe.

I gave my dad a hug goodbye and went back home to my apartment. Google had become my best friend until about three in the morning. I wanted to find the best doctor I could possibly find and I wanted to get an idea of what could be wrong with my mother. The words depression, sleep deprivation, and anxiety kept appearing on my computer screen, but I knew what Mother had was much more than that. I found a psychiatric specialist who worked three and a half away from my home. A note on the side of his webpage said, “If you have any questions e-mail at kmorrison@snailmail.com” Without a doubt I clicked the link and sent him an email saying...

Good evening Dr. Morrison

After researching for hours I think I’ve finally found the right person to speak to. My mother has been sick for years now, and I can’t quite seem to grasp what is wrong with her. She is refusing to eat, bathe, sleep, and she said the strangest thing to me the other day. All I heard her say was, “I died... miss my daughter.” Of course, I am no doctor nor do I understand the human brain, but I can tell that her behavior is not normal. If you could see her personally that would be wonderful. Thank you for your time.

At the bottom of the e-mail I left my contact information and name. I went to my bedroom and prayed Dr. Morrison would contact me in the next week or so then went to bed.

The devil has come into my purgatory today. The fair-skinned, grey-haired demon is dressed in a white lab coat with a blue dress shirt underneath. A named tag hangs from the coat pocket stating, “Kyler Morrison.” The devil has come into my purgatory with bright green eyes and two serpents on his badge. God has given me a warning that my time had come, and I am ready. Please spare my daughter, for she has done no wrong. All she wanted to do was help me, but a sinner who has died cannot be saved. Oh God, please spare my daughter! I ask no more but this...

The devil approached me with his magic, which he used on my eyes and caused a temporary blur. How dare he play with me like I am some toy! Just take me away to the pits where I belong and stop this inhumane torture! How dare he play with me! How dare he taunt me!

For the first few minutes of the exam Mother stared intensely at Dr. Morrison’s Medical badge. He took her blood pressure and while Dad stood in the corner of the bedroom.

“So her case is this serious, huh?” I asked knowing it had only been two days since I had sent the email.

“If her symptoms add up to what I have theorized, then what she has is pretty serious“ but a murmured from the sick woman interrupted Dr. Morrison’s sentence. “Can you repeat that please?” Dr. Morrison asked as he removed the blood pressure cuff.
“De-mon.” Mother said with her eyes locked on the caduceus located on the medical identification badge. After documenting the time and the word Mother had said, Dr. Morrison continued the exam. Using his otoscope, he asked Mother to follow light, but she had other plans. In a heartbeat mother jumped onto Dr. Morrison knocking him to the ground. Dad and I quickly ran over to help but Dr. Morrison had pinned her down.

I tried to stop the demons, but they are too strong. They have taken me to a deeper purgatory where I am tortured and stabbed daily. The demons shove needles in my arms and throw me in rooms where I am shocked. I weep even more because I can touch my daughter now. This should not be so. I tried to stop the demons, but they were too strong. Now, I sit here in a room where I get closer to mortality every day. I am on a dangerous path. My daughter is on a dangerous path.

After months of new medicines and electroconvulsive therapy, Mother finally started getting better. I visit her in the hospital every Sunday where we speak to each other. Of course the conversations are odd. She continually goes on tangents on how I am not safe and how she is becoming mortal again. It is quite abnormal, but I am very pleased to see improvements in my mother’s health. I have heard that she has gained thirty pounds, making her only ten pounds below average. The doctors and nurses say she sleeps every night and bathes at shower time like a star patient. Dr. Morrison said her Cotard Delusion may never go away, but I remain optimistic.

It has been a year since I was admitted in the Oregon State Correctional Institution, even though I only remember two months of my time. My daughter Lillian visits me every Sunday and checks up on her old, insane mother. She told me the reason I started acting this way was because of the car accident thirteen years ago. The accident had triggered a malfunction in my brain and I thought I was dead. I have abandoned my daughter mentally for thirteen years, and she still calls me Mom. I feel like such a freak, I feel like a crazy maniac, I feel like I’ve messed everything up. I go home next week and by home, I mean home.

Mother had been discharged two days ago with a clean bill of health. The doctors said she might react uneasy to our family home after being “absent” for thirteen years, but they never said this would happen. Dad called me this morning while I was teaching Junior Ballet at the studio saying that mom had passed on. After looking through her room he realized she had taken all of her pills the night before. A note was in the pill bottle that stated...

Dear Family,
I’m doing this for you. I abandoned you for thirteen years, and you survived without me. I’m a burden to you all. I still have bizarre feelings and I don’t trust that they’ll ever go away. I’m better off dead than believing I am. I love you all so much.

Much love,
Mother
Basketball is not just a sport. It’s a passion. You really have to love the game to want to excel and be the best on the court. The number of hours you put in at the gym, the amount of sweat and tears you shed and the measure of lessons learned from mistakes are all fueled by devotion to working to be superior. Where you get your reason to keep fighting is personalized to your life and your abilities. My reason is to satisfy myself with my efforts and overall performance on the court.

From a young age I loved anything that had to with athletics. I brought footballs to recess in first grade and played kickball with the boys in third. I was always looking for someone to beat, I was addicted to victory, and still am. Any chance I had to compete I took eagerly. When the opportunity to play basketball presented itself to me in the winter of second grade, there was no way I could deny the offer. As soon as I stepped onto the court for the first time I knew that I belonged there. I worked hard at every practice, never satisfied with my effort. The same year I started basketball the girls high school team won the state championship, with my dad and grandpa coaching. As I watched the game, I dreamed to be on the same court, playing for the same team, doing the thing I loved most. Especially with my dad as the coach.

My passion for basketball really seemed to explode in fourth grade when I started to play semi-competitive tournaments. The need to win increased significantly, as did my want to get better. I started staying longer after practice and getting to the gym early. One day after practice I was not fulfilled with my left-handed layups, at all. I begged my dad to let me try for a few more minutes to get the form right, a few more minutes quickly turned into a full hour. I was sweating and crying, still frustrated at myself for not perfecting my layup. Why didn’t this come as easily as the other skills I had acquired? Everyone had said I was a natural, born with athletic ability. If so then why couldn’t I accomplish this skill? I automatically thought I wasn’t good enough, that I just could not do it. At that moment I realized that basketball wasn’t something you could just automatically be good at, it took a lot of hard work, but I was willing to accept that and to beat the odds.

The next year I wasn’t happy unless I was in a gym or had a ball in my hand. I was playing one-on-one with teachers at recess and going to every one of my dad’s high school games. There was always an empty seat at the end of the bench calling my name. By watching so many games not only was I more involved in the sport but my basketball IQ was quickly rising. I was getting better, more shots were falling and more people were noticing me. But when winter rolled around, my talent would be ignored. I played on my first competitive basketball team that wasn’t coached by my dad and was not put in a position where I could excel. I really have no other way to put it, my coach and most of my teammates despised me. I always gave my best at practice, going the extra mile and hustling after every loose ball. I was the fastest one on the court with the ball in my hand and everything about my shot was falling perfectly into place. But I was apparently still not good enough. About halfway through the season we played in a tournament that was one year above our grade level, which was kind of frightening at the time. I was ready for the challenge though, I believed I was good enough. I hardly played at all. After the championship game my coach pulled me and a few other girls to the side and explained to us why we didn't play much. She said we didn't play because she wanted to win.

Middle school was a new start. The chance to play for the high school was getting closer. I was in the gym nearly 24/7 rain or shine. All my efforts were really exposed in one game in particular in the summer. My dad was thankfully my coach again, his wise advice more accessible now than ever. The score was 30-35 with two minutes left in the game. My lungs were burning, hands were shaking, sweat rolling off my forehead continuously. We were facing the Eclipse, the team we never seemed to pull out a win against. The crowd was deafening, causing my focus to falter. I saw an open shot and took it, causing their lead to cut to 33-35. Time flew and before I knew it the end of the game would be approaching us, as would overtime, and finally a earned double-overtime. I can't fully remember the final part of the game, only the last few crucial seconds. The ball felt heavy and slick in my hands, the fate of the game literally in my grasp. I took one dribble, two, then passed to my teammate waiting on the wing. I planted my ankle hard in the ground then shot towards the basket, losing my defender in the process. I curled around a mass of defenders then sprinted off a screen set by my team. I was wide open. The clock ticked behind me, precious seconds passing. Suddenly the
shape of the ball flew towards me. I set my feet and prepared to shoot. Five seconds, the soft leather touched my fingertips. Four seconds, I tucked my elbow into my side. Three seconds, I bent my knees preparing to release my shot. Two seconds, the ball traveled in a high arc towards the basket. One second, the ball trailed through the net leaving a familiar swish ringing in the air.

High school was two years away, my dream becoming more and more realistic. Practices were increasingly intensive, everything was doubled, running, conditioning and even the level of play. My weekends were all filled with basketball and constant practice. I began playing in varsity tournaments where I was the youngest one on the court by at least four years. Each game I was pushed to the limit. I had to play at my best every minute of the game, no matter what. I started off playing a mere few minutes of the game, then a whole quarter, half, then I was soon starting on a competitive varsity basketball team at twelve years old. All my hard work had finally paid off, but I knew I wasn’t hardly done yet. I still had to give 110% all of the time in order to keep my skill and not lose my endurance. I was determined to do whatever it took to be ready for the varsity team in high school.

One more year. The thought races through my mind every time I set foot on a court. I am finally playing for my school, I wear the eighth grade jersey with pride. Every practice, every game is another step closer to high school and another chance to improve. The win isn’t it all for me anymore, advancing my level of play and making sure to learn from my mistakes, not to let them bring me down, is my main focus. My dad still watches proudly from the stands any chance he can get and I still look to him for any helpful advice possible. I’m just counting day by day till my chance for my dream to come true.
“I hate you. I wish you never existed.”

“What ever.” I replied to the bully. Well, not really a bully, she just picked on me. I kind of just shrugged it off, didn’t really care. But one day, this odd girl saw it happen and immediately backed me up, and the bully never bothered me again. I didn’t think much of the girl, just another peer. At first she just started talking to me, and then pretty soon she wouldn’t even leave me alone. She went everywhere I went and invariably sat next to me. I wanted to get rid of her, she was so irritating. But pretty soon I got used to it and we ended up as close friends. People always kept telling us “How are you guys friends? You are nothing like each other.” But it’s true. We were complete opposite of one another. Whatever she liked, I hated and vice versa. Her name is Emily. She is the most joyful and bubbly person I’ve ever met. I mean, she was.

The end of fifth grade was the peak of our friendship, and then it all went downhill since middle school. At first it was only because we didn’t have any classes together. I remember she always missed the tardy bell so she can slip me a note in my class. It was always a witty joke or comical faces and drawings. I kept them all. Then one day, in the first class period, she snuck in my classroom and handed me the note. She was later than usual. I was wondering what joke it would be this time. But when I unfolded it, it wasn’t a joke at all. There wasn’t even a funny face like she always draws. Instead, there was something that made my stomach lurch. She has always had problems at home, but it wasn’t this big.

The bruises and scratches were barely visible at first, but as time went on, they got worse. She can’t really do anything about it; I mean it was her mother. She usually just verbally abused Emily; maybe hit her a few times a week as far as I knew. As I saw more and more bruises, Emily spent more and more time at my house. Sometimes she even spent the night on a weeknight.

It was the beginning of seventh grade. Her last day at PCMS. She was gripping a handful of flowers and gifts people gave her in one hand, her backpack in the other. I remember she was wearing her favorite sweatshirt, the one I gave her. As tears and runny make-up stained her face, she was hugging all of her friends that have come to say goodbye. Emily was going to live with her mother two hours away from here. We knew this day would come, we didn’t know if we would be ready for it.

I had a feeling it wouldn’t last long with her mother. About ten days later, I got a text. Emily had gotten in a huge fight with her. She messaged me after she called the police. Emily was going to make arrangements to live with her dad in another town about thirty minutes away. We were both so happy once she was finally with her father in November. But unfortunately it didn’t last long.

One problem after the next, it never seemed to stop. Her new school was her new Hell. Every day she told me how dreadful her school life was. How she got bullied and pushed around by everyone. Emily’s dad tried to help, but soon gave up. I can’t blame him; he already has too much to deal with. I didn’t think the bullying was that bad, until a few weeks later.

It was the following January when I got the message I wish I never saw. After that, for about forty minutes, I was trying to talk her out of suicide. She sent me the pictures of bleeding lines sloppily painted across her wrists. I looked down at my wrists then, and realized how much better my life was than hers. How my easy-going lifestyle was practically handed to me on a silver platter. While she fights for scraps of happiness, starving from lack of joy, I’m stuffed on rich delight.

It’s the beginning of eighth grade. It has been a year since she left. She went to a mental facility over the summer, and is now taking anti-depressants and going to a counselor every week. I still talk to her over text, but not as much. We don’t really hang out anymore, but I still consider her my best friend. It would just be easier if I let her go and not talk to her anymore, but I can’t do that. She needs me too much. I don’t want her to need me. I want her to be happy without me. I know I’m the only thing that keeps her going, and that scares me, because we are so far away from each other.

The end of the semester is almost here. As far as I know, Emily has gotten better, but not much. I’m just waiting for another dreadful episode to come along. I know it will. But what disheartens me the most is that, at one point, this broken girl used to be happier than me. It was just a few short years ago, she was always smiling.
and having fun, not caring what others think of her, not taking a blade to her skin, not crying herself to sleep, not taking pills so she doesn’t kill herself. At any given day, I would die to have the old Emily back.
Who is the person that affects you in life, currently or in the past? Most would think of someone close to them like a grandma or their parents. But for me, it’s not one person or even a significant other. No, not even a person that I know enough about to know their name.

Millions of people visit Mexico each year and that’s what their whole economy revolves around: tourists. When you go out, you see the bargaining markets and see the workers producing works of art by hand: painting, glass making, or weaving. They work their asses off each and every day so they can fill their market with items that can be ready to sell, using that money to buy more supplies to make more products to sell while barely breaking even after actually putting food on the table for the family. They are just able to survive and not truly live.

They make their stand looks pretty by the standards that Americans set for their daily lives in the US. They send their kids out each day wondering if they would make any money to help out their family, hoping that their kids could sell something to contribute. They send out kids that are half my age but with twice as much working motivation. That’s their life every single day. Yet, many tourists see a scam.

When I visited Mexico, I saw a group of kids looking at the pack of tourists in which I was in. They offered many different items that all seemed to look very odd but simple and cheap. Some were little pieces of gum called canals, only a quarter apiece. I happen to remember every single part of this but not for reasons you think.

When I gave a dollar to one of the kids, he started to walk away with a huge smile on his face. Then, what I saw was that he was attacked by every other kid there, starting a huge brawl of little kids fighting over a simple dollar that a friend could gladly lend out in America.

In Mexico, those kids could work all day and not even make an hours’ worth of minimum wage in America. My parents spend countless amounts of money in Mexico and the money that they spent in one night will be more than most of the kids in Mexico has even seen.

When the parents and kids make themselves look like they’re better off than they really are and make their shops look nice to make us feel as if their shops are almost as nice as an American shop to live up to the standards that were used to, that’s just the mask they put on. Like a photo editor, their job is to hold a fake ID for the day, to live sad lie to survive. But in the end when they head home, if they have one, it won’t be anything too special or anything that compares at all to their workplace.

I got the nice welcome of an old lady that was making tortilla patties on the side of the road. As she sold them, seeing that we missed the bus, she gladly welcomed my family into her house and let us stay there the 45 minutes without constantly being asked to buy stuff from the many beggars on the street or little kids. Our translator told us it was most likely unsafe, but as we were the most nervous that we could have been, my dad freaking out but my mom just ungodly tired, we went, and it was nothing more than a metal sheet for a roof just flat, a small area that looked like a cooking fire, and a wool blanket on the ground in the corner that she says she shares with her family.

She told us that she can’t have many things in her house because there’s nothing to protect it all day while her husband is at his job and his kids are out begging for money. She told us that the worry that comes in her head every day about her kids not coming back or someone looting her house for the little she has.

She even tells us that she isn’t proud of sending out her kids but that it’s the only way for them to make money to help out with the family. She wishes she could have them sent off to school or have them come to the U.S. to make a better life and not have to live like this.

At this point in time, she is on the point of crying to us about how badly she wishes that she could have a better life, and I personally wish that I can do something that could have helped at all, but there was nothing.

I froze. Like a deer on the highway, I didn’t do anything but think how just 20 minutes ago I was so mad that we missed the bus back to our guarded hotel that was safe and had food ready to go whenever we wanted. I thought about how I knew that I could sleep in a warm bed each night with plenty of blankets and not have to worry about whether or not I will be safe that day or if someone will loot my house when I leave to
drive my car to go hang out with my friends, or go to paintball and spend a $100 dollars just so I can have fun and practice with my team.

It made me flashback from that place in the house in Mexico to my life of all the things I have that the people in Mexico won’t ever experience like my phone, or what it feels like to have a nice shower, or relax at night with the TV on and having your family laughing all together being so thankful for what they were born into. When I look back into this woman’s house now, I just look at everything differently: What makes me happy for what I have and what they don’t?

When we are finally on the bus for the ride home, I look at how everything with gratefulness. At this point in time, it occurs to me how sad it is that most American don’t think about the clean clothes on our backs with the nice chairs we sit in. Those of us in schools may not appreciate our heated environment with books and laptops to type on.

Just think on this: What would be some things in your life that you’d appreciate more, after just a glimpse at what happened in Mexico. Just think about it. And to any students on their way to their next class, don’t think of the bad but only the good, because you won't think of the easy moments of walking down the hall you have compared to what some kids are doing in Mexico right now: selling, crying, fighting, starving. Those kids just being a person that adds a number to the total population on earth. Those kids not living, just surviving.
Just like any other day, you wake up and make your way downstairs, turning on the news. Images flash across the screen: footage of fighting in the Middle East, Ebola patients, and mass shootings. You stare nonchalantly at the screen as the footage plays, a normal indifference to these events covering up the small amount of pity you try to feel. All of a sudden, a headline catches your eyes: “America’s Most Feared Enemy: The Spider”. Your breath catches in your throat, and you can only just stop yourself from spitting out your coffee as the news reel plays. You wonder if the true threat to everyone has started. You take down notes as the reporter tells you the tips for dealing with these horrifying products of nature. Taping the list to your fridge, you switch off the news and head upstairs to continue getting for the day.

Suddenly, to your horrific dismay, you see a sight that makes your heart stop. A sight so terrible it makes even the greatest of beast cower in fear. You see America’s new worst enemy. You see a spider. A Common House Spider, one of the most feared species, to be exact. Recollection of the advice from the news surfacing to your brain, you push yourself out of your shell-shocked state and begin to take action. As advised, you begin to carry out the following steps:

1. **Don't Show Fear.** The enemy will act upon any expressed emotions, so it is vital to remain calm in this time of grave danger. Use a variety of techniques to hide your emotions, such as extreme hyperventilation, curling up into the fetal position, and not making eye contact. Keep doing this until the enemy begins to retreat.

2. **Secure the area.** Set your premises into lockdown to prevent any escape of the enemy. Draw blinds, shut doors, and turn off the lights. This prevents the enemy from escaping and will help ensure your victory in this life threatening battle.

3. **Fire Off Your First Line of Defense.** Using extreme stealth techniques, acquire your enemy target and approach as close to it as you can. Using a variety of long and short range weapons such as the soles of shoes, metal bats, and your handy MK-17, attack until you have no will left in you to attack. Do it for your children, your family, your coworkers, and most importantly for your dog.

4. **Prevent Any Possible Resurrection.** Acquire large amounts of harmful substances such as salt, bleach, and mom’s week old split pea soup. Approaching the battlefield, soak each and every inch of possible enemy residue with these substances to ensure the utter and complete death of the enemy. Repeat this process again just to be safe.

5. **Destroy All Evidence of battle.** Bring out your final resources, and drench every inch of the battlefield with flammable liquid. Lay out a line of your favorite firecrackers, the one’s you got for Christmas from your grandmother last year. Light em’ up, and run out of there like your life depends on it. After all of the evidence of battle is roasting in a nice toasty fire, break out the marshmallows and make some s’mores over the burning battlefield. After all, you deserve it for your sacrifice in this war.

All of a sudden you stop. Your breath catches in your throat, and your eyes bulge out of your head. Is that what you think it is, out in the distance at the edge of your lawn chair? No, it can’t be, not after all this hard work you spent in belligerence today. Yet it is what you fear it is, another Common House Spider. You feel like you’re about to drop dead on the spot when you notice a few things. The spider is smaller, lighter in color, and carrying a white flag signaling surrender. All signs of panic leaving your body, you let out a suspiration, relaxing your muscles. You relax back into your lawn chair, holding out a hand for the spider to crawl onto. As it nestles up to your thumb you decide to name it Steve. It looks like a Steve to you. Gently petting Steve, you again rethink about today’s events. All of a sudden you snap your fist shut, crushing the little creature whose trust you gained. Sighing to yourself, you dispose of the arachnid’s remains, deciding you are too tired to repeat the whole process again. Ah well, there’s always tomorrow.
Garrison’s skinny knees stick out above the water of her bath. A black bowl bobs between them, sticky rice, sweet egg, marinated beef, salmon sticking to its curves and her fork and her teeth.

It’s detached from the wall, entirely independent, off in the corner of her room; rooted down by narrow pipes, lit mostly by the tall, naked windows on both the corner walls. One of the them’s open, to get the curry smell out of the bath and out of the apartment and into the cold.

Her toes stick out too, and her feet and legs, all beaten up from hiking and stumbling.

On the underside of her watch, Thomas had inscribed It is in your best interest to be very tender. She hadn’t asked at the time, but now she wonders if he’d been referring to the tenderness of her skin over the tenderness of anything else.

Balkan folk music plays on her radio on the little table by the bath.

She finishes the salmon and reaches her arm out to set the bowl on the wood floor; reaches her other arm out to shut the window, pick up a foggy towel and draw it closer to her as she drains the tub.

She stands and wraps the towel around her tender self and steps out of the tub, then drops the towel at her bed and wrings out her hair.

As she pulls on her underwear and tights and skirt and sweater, she peels stray bobby pins off the necks of all her clothes and sticks them in her hair; hits the wire and the exposed bulb hanging from the wire, making the light in the room sway along with her.

She approaches the mirror and the bureau below it, pitches everything but what she needs into one drawer, and slows her swaying. If there’s one thing at which she excels, it’s applying eyeliner.

Her favorite’s this white crayon-looking thing, with which she lines the her upper lids, drawing the lines past the lids and dotting in by her nose.

And it makes her eyes so much louder because she’s kind of dark and her eyes are kind of dark too. The whole world lives in them, and it’s the mountains and the gloamings and the dirt that make them so bronze.

She stretches and looks for his gift. Garrison had fixed him a sweater a month before she lost her sewing needles. Green and white-striped, initially; she’d added dark pink patches, yellow string.

Under her bed, she finds it and notices that the F patch is falling off and huffs - she can’t very well gift him a sweater with half an F and a fully-sewn UCK! on it.

“Fuck,” she mutters. “Fuck, fuck, uck.”

She folds it and drops it into a brown bag.

“Fuck him,” she says.

She approaches the mirror again and twists her bangs back, pins everything pretty and brushes out what falls around her shoulders and collar, then picks up the bag, picks up her purse and coat, shuts off the radio and lights, and leaves the apartment.

The way to his apartment takes her by three bars, an Asian market, two Mexican grocers, a whole slew of bookshops and Laundromats and restaurants, some shops, a bowling alley, a 24-hour pet supply store, a bus stop, a park, and a lingerie boutique.

She plays in a group at one of the bars every Thursday and Sunday night, in a plum velvet dress. An upright bass like twice her size.

She passes a car filled to the roof with yellow apples and laughs to herself because the driver probably deserves it, and then ducks into the Asian market, buys him a box of boba pearls and pastes her little birthday note to them, drops them into the brown bag.

His place is overwhelmed with people, to where she feels smothered walking inside. She drops her coat where all the other coats are and remembers how choked his walls are with motivational placards. It’s gross. They've gotten worse.
Never before had she been in a home so able and eager to strike up conversation, and how fitting it was that it was Thomas Sinclair’s home.

He’s with Leah in the kitchen, she sees, tall and English and boyish, the both of them. He sees Garrison and waves. She drops the bag where all the other bags and boxes are and walks over.

“You look really good, Garrison.” He hugs her for a little too long.

“You too.” Tender as can be.

“There’s drinks and food everywhere,” he says. “And we’re doing a cool thing outside later.”

“Balloons?”

“Nah, lanterns.”

“In this weather?”

“Tradition.”

“Sonny,” Leah interjects, “there’s actually someone we wanted you to meet.” She bumps into Thomas’s side and Thomas nods, looks up at his girl. “Two someone’s, actually. We know you’re into all kinds of people and we met Marlaina and Colin a few weeks ago and thought you might hit it off with one of them.”

“Oh,” Garrison nods, “great.”

“Yeah, I’ll point them out,” Leah says, putting her hands on Garrison’s shoulders and turning her. Garrison just keeps nodding. Leah points. “See the girl with the glasses? By the window?”

Garrison does.

“And the guy over by the bathroom, with the blonde hair?”

She does.

“You should totally go talk to them.”

She nods.

“Great,” Leah says. She takes Thomas’s hand and squeezes it. “We’re going to make the rounds. Talk to you later?”

She nods.

They walk off and leave Garrison dizzy. She gets a drink and stumbles over to the couch.

The girl by the window is pretty. There are white sheets on the wall behind her and she stands out against them with her purple lips and her short hair, her general dark everything. Really pretty. She likes her glasses, clear some places, metallic others, and her dress, with its oversized collar and geometric pattern.

The boy by the bathroom is pretty too. He’s got dark hair that sort of flies one way and a nose that changes directions halfway down the face. Eyes lighter than Thomas’s.

He’d liked being with more than one girl at once. That didn’t change when he told Garrison it would.

The drink is gross.

Garrison watches Leah talk to Marlaina in much the same way as she’d talked to her, and then looks down at the drink as Marlaina approaches.

She shuts her eyes and opens them when Marlaina asks, “You’re Sonny?”

“Garrison.” She looks up.

“You should tell Leah.”

“I have.”

Marlaina sits down on the coffee table.

“You’re Marlaina?”

“Marielle.”

“You should tell Leah.”

“I have,” she smiles.

“They’re trying to set us up.”

“Yes,” she says. “Leah warned me Colin’s also out to chat you up.”

“His name she gets right.”

“Right?” she laughs. “I think I’ve seen you around before.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” she says. “Do you go to that bar on Elm?”

“Yeah, I play there some nights.”

“Right,” Marielle nods. “You’re with the riot girl band? You play the bass.”

Garrison nods.
“That’s really cool,” Marielle says. “I can’t play anything for shit.”
“Oh.”
“I sing a little though.”
“We’re looking for some back-up singers.”
“Really?”
“You should send in a demo.”
This has become a business deal.
Marielle keeps going, starts telling a genuinely interesting story about something that happened in her lab, but Garrison’s dizzy again and there are three of Marielle all telling the same story. She’s a lightweight and drinks again. It’s gross.
Marielle laughs and Garrison follows her lead, nods when she thinks it’s appropriate.
“I think people are going outside,” Marielle says.
“Oh,” Garrison says.
“They’re gonna be lighting lanterns,” she says. “Want to go?”
Garrison nods and they both stand and allow themselves to be swept out with everyone.
“Thomas told me to bring a camera and I totally blanked,” Marielle says. “This is going to be gorgeous. I’ll go grab one.” She disappears from Garrison’s side and Garrison stumbles a bit.
They’re called Kongming lanterns - tiny hot air balloons made of paper, of questionable legality where they are. Leah and Thomas had assembled them; they all just had to be lit.
She watches Marielle burrow into the group to try to wrestle out a lantern. She watches Thomas get up on higher ground to make a speech, thank everyone for showing up. She registers that it’s really fucking cold and no one’s wearing a coat.
“You look really fucking cold.” A big tweed coat drops on her shoulders. She turns and Colin’s chin greets her.
“I’m Colin.” He opens his hand and holds it out.
“Garrison.”
“Thomas has been talking you up for weeks and I wanted to tear you away from Marielle for a second to introduce myself.”
He’s loud and aggressive.
“Hi Colin.”
“Hi Garrison.”
“Are you going to get a lantern?”
“Marielle went for one.”
“How do you think they work?”
Dizzy as hell.
“When you light one,” she says, watching someone light one, “the flame heats the air inside the lantern, lowering its density and making the lantern rise.” She talks with her hands. “It only stays up for as long as the flame is lit. After it dies, it falls back to the earth.”
“You just know this?”
“Thomas has been doing it forever.”
“You looked it up?”
“Middle school science.”
He touches her tender forearm and laughs and it’s weird.
Marielle comes back, in a coat and hat.
“I got the lantern,” she says, holding it out. The paper’s bronze and blue, swirly, royal. “It’s the same as your eyes.”
“It is,” Colin says.
They start talking, in quips and bitter banter, looking at Garrison too long at a time.
“I think they’re setting them off,” she mutters under them.
“Oh,” Marielle says. “Want to light it with me?”
“I think I’ll stay back, but, by all means, go do it.”
“Okay,” she says, not tender, but piqued. She moves into the group.
Everyone’s a little too drunk to play with open flames.
Garrison and Colin watch Marielle light the lantern, hold it back with her coal-cloth-cloaked arms, and her red knit hat slip off her head as she lets it go with a whistle. Everyone lets their beacons go with whistles and cheers. Fuck, it’s beautiful.

“Damn, that’s beautiful,” Colin says.

Garrison shakes under his tweed. He slips his arm around her waist. She shakes more. Too tender. He takes every liberty and leans down to kiss her too close to the mouth. Not tender at all, but loud and aggressive.

“What the fuck?” she spits, stepping back. “I don’t even know you.” She drops off his tweed because it’s itchy and gross and goes inside, arms crossed, to find her coat.

It and her purse are somewhere buried under everyone else’s coats and purses and she resolves to walk home without them, but before she can leave, Leah taps her fucking shoulder.

“Yeah?”

“Thomas is opening presents soon,” she coddles. “Won’t you stay for that?”

Garrison stammers and just says Sure and follows Leah back to the corner couch.

“You must be cold,” Leah says. “Just wait here a little while everyone finishes with the lanterns, okay?”

Garrison nods. She wants to throw up. Leah leaves her alone. There’s beef in her teeth and breath tastes eggy. Her clothes probably smell like yellow curry. One of the bobby pins is boring into her scalp. Her face is hot.

She stands and grabs someone’s drink and walks into the bathroom, locks the door and washes her face. The white eyeliner doesn’t run. Her eyes look tiny. She sits on the lid of the toilet and imbibes in the fullest sense of the word.

She wants a tangy apple, or something that’ll make her sweat. Or a watermelon, cracked open and eaten with her hands.

She wants to cut off her hair so it curls on the tile like dried carrot peels.

She wants to tell Thomas he deserves the world, but not the world’s women.

She drinks some more, drops the glass in the waste bin, and walks out of the bathroom.

His room is just down the hall and she goes there, shuts the door behind her and sits down on his bed.

It hasn’t really changed at all. Bigger than her whole apartment. Posters everywhere. For someone in the advertising game, he doesn’t like white space at all. She lies down on her back, grabs his sheets, and turns her head enough that she sees his dresser and the grimy tank on top of it.

“The fucker kept Josephine.” She rolls off the bed and approaches the tank, looks inside.

Josephine, their goldfish from when they dated, swims in her own filth and fungus like an idiot. She smashes into the sides of the tank and when Garrison finds her food and drops in some flakes, assaults them.

“The fucker’s killing Josephine.”

Garrison leaves the room, fishes her coat and purse out from under everyone else’s coats and purses, goes to the kitchen, finds a small plastic container, fills it with tap water and covers it, tucks a ladle under her arm, and goes back to his room.

“Josephine, I’m taking you home.” She opens the tank all the way and ladles Josephine out and immediately into the plastic container. She covers the container, closes the tank, and watches Josephine swim around like an idiot. She puts the container into her purse and covers it with her coat. She leaves his room and goes back to the living room.

People are just starting to file in. She sees Colin and Marielle on the couch. Marielle waves her over and she comes, sits down on the arm.

Thomas sits on a wooden chair in the middle of everyone and Leah’s brought in everyone’s gifts. The unveiling begins with something in green paper and it makes Thomas laugh and hug someone. Next come three blue boxes and then Garrison’s brown bag.

She tells Marielle she has to go and they exchange numbers, and then she stands and by the time Thomas unfolds the sweater and laughs and looks for her, she’s out and walking home.

She stops in at the 24-hour pet supply store and drops too much money on a many-gallon tank, a net, a filter, an aerator, glow-in-the-dark gravel stones, planet-themed baubles, name-brand fish food, a water dechlorinator, and everything else the cashier suggests. She takes it all home and sets it up while still very drunk, and watches Josephine swim around like an idiot until she falls asleep by the bathtub.

Her phone wakes her at nine, ding ding ding with missed calls and messages. She rises, slowly, and rushes to the bathroom, vomits in the toilet, flushes, gargles, and goes back to the tank.
“Hey Josephine,” she mutters. “How do you like your new digs?”

Josephine swims into the glass and turns around and swims the other way.

“You fucking idiot.”

She does it again.

Garrison gets her phone from her purse and drops into her bed, calls her voicemail.

“Hey Garrison, it’s Thomas. Hey, I know it’s nuts but were you in my room last night? Josie’s missing and there’s a ladle by the tank and Leah said she thought you might have done it. I know, it’s crazy. Call me?”

“Hey Garrison, it’s Thomas again. Just checking in that you got home okay, since you didn’t call me back. Could you do that?”

“Hi Garrison, this is Marielle. I’m going to be at the bar tonight and I was wondering if, after your set, I could buy you a drink or we could go to a movie or something. It was great meeting you yesterday. I’m gonna stop rambling. Call when you know.”

‘Hey Sonny, it’s Leah. I know it’s kinda silly, but do you know what happened to Josie? The fish? When everyone left and Thomas and I went to feed her, she wasn’t in the tank anymore! Can you believe that? Oh, I saw you and Colin totally hit it off – I saw you two kissing while everyone was playing with the lanterns.”

“Hey, it’s Thomas. You did get back to your place, right? I know you were kind of drunk, but I never saw you leave. You should’ve told me you were leaving. We could’ve- I could’ve called you a cab. Call me or I’m coming over.”

The phone pings with the end of the messages.

She shoots off a text to Thomas, to which he responds within seconds, and shuts off her phone without reading his response.

She rolls up out of bed, goes to the fridge, gets out an apple, runs a bath, strips down to nothing, and sits down in the water.

Josephine bobs around like an idiot.

The apple bobs between her skinny knees. She picks it up and bites into it. Too tender.

She spits it out, into the waste bin on the wooden floor and throws the rest of the apple in too.
The organic bits are harder to come by than are the mineral things. One glass measuring cup. A mint tin, chapstick tube, old lipstick tube, contact lens case, all of the above, something else container-like. Veronica has them present in cabinets, on her bedside book edifice. A microwave, contrived into the island. A pull-out drawer of silver spoons. All there.

The mineral things aren’t evaporated in the back of Veronica’s cupboard, or fixed tight to the bottom of her couch. One half teaspoon of coconut oil. One quarter teaspoon of olive oil. One crayon. Once retrieved, multiply by a few to achieve coveted tones, soften the balm.

Lou brings the crayons from her place in a brown bag previously used for apple-picking, stops in at a grocer for the coconut oil. She drives to Veronica’s with the jar open between her knees and Shit Luck braying over the speakers.

They put paper towels over everything first, peel the wrappers off all the crayons with no nails next, and break what pink and salmon crayons they have into little pieces in the measuring cup. A half teaspoon of coconut oil. A quarter teaspoon of olive oil.

“What if it blows up?”
“It’s not gonna blow up.”
“But what if it does?”
“It’s my microwave, my problem.”

They put the glass in the microwave, set it for a minute and thirty seconds, and Veronica hits Start. Lou goes around the corner into the living room, where Veronica’s curtains are yellow and her walls are ivory with three violet-lined elephants, trunks linked, she’d painted when she’d moved in. Preserved flowers on every shelving unit. Gold lanterns strung along the ceiling, shrouding the light fixtures like the fire hazard they are.

The radio’s off. Lou remedies this and the discordance that is all Beirut songs croons over the speakers.

“I approve,” Veronica says. The microwave beeps. She pops it open and there’s a clattering. She swears.

“Did you forget your hot hands?” Lou asks, returning to the kitchen to find Veronica nursing her middle finger.

She sticks up that finger.

“Uncalled for.”

Veronica’s hair and smile are wild. She’s got her impassioned dark hair in a kinked braid, pulled back behind a cherry bandana, and her big eyes inebriated because she’s lost her glasses for the eighth time in two months. It’s a new high.

Lou slips on the hot hands and pulls out their solution. She drops it on the counter.

Stir to get the lumps out. Heat at thirty-more second increments if the lumps remain steadfast in their lumpy ways. Stir again. Pick a container. Pour solution into container. Allow to settle for one minute.

They use one of the chapstick tubes for the first attempt. Lou doesn’t have a steady hand, so part of the wax dribs into the table.

It dries.

“Try it.”

“No, you first, guest.”

Lou rubs some of it over her lips with her index finger and it looks grand and doesn’t burn.

“Crayon lips are a success,” Veronica grins. “Now we do mine.”

They repeat all with melon and gold, coffee and gold, red and more red, sea foam and white.

“These are fucking fantastic,” Veronica says. “I’m only ever making my own now.” She starts scraping the remains of the sea foam and white into the garbage, then sets down the glass and goes to her purse.

“You could start a business.”

“Absolutely.” She nabs a cigarette from a box and cups her hand around it, lights it, props open the kitchen window, crosses her legs on the counter, and blows out into the rain.
She smokes invariably. Walking with her is a little hard on the lungs. Like, she makes ambling down a busy street especially oppressive. Like, her head's like a storm cloud that’s decide Fuck the people in my near surroundings in particular. She also walks fast. Her legs are longer than Lou's.

Her boy taught her to smoke. She used to walk in front of him, down the street on their cream soda runs, so the exhaust from his reefers wouldn’t muck up her white shirts (as if it could), and then she got curious, took the smoke with her lips from right between his teeth.

She’s very tall. Veronica and her boy are long and spare, Gage six feet and five inches high, Veronica somewhere nearly as high in her violent heels.

Lou's not nearly as high as the two of them, a grand foot and an inch smaller than Gage, and has a little more body to move. She minds her friends’ smoking a lot because the muck probably gets in her hair and leaves gray rings on her pillows.

“Gross.”
“Want one?” Soot drops out the window.
“Nah.”

Veronica’s hair is usually a big orb of opulent frizz and for the longest time, Lou’d wondered if, if one were to clap her hair out, a great lot of soot and sediment would float down like deflated birds.

Her own hair’s short and wavy, to her chin, light like a sinuous plume, her eyes like marbles, lined with blinking white liner.

“What do you think of time travel?” Lou asks, sitting on the counter opposite Veronica.
“I’d love to be able to do it.”
“Where would you go?”
“I don’t know,” Veronica admits. She puffs out. It’s so humid and windy that the smoke stays where it is for a moment and then sticks to her skin. “Where would you go?” She's really something else.
“A time before you smoked.”
“Not back to kill Hitler or something?”
“Nah, you’re more important.”
“You have to sort your priorities, man.”
“Can we make soup?”

Veronica snorts and stifles her light. She swings shut the window and slips down onto the white tile of her kitchen.
“I like your priorities.”
“Actually, mac and cheese?”

Veronica ambles over to a high cupboard and rolls onto her toes. She emerges with a box. “Yes.”
Lou hops down. Her toes ice over.
“Can I take a nap?”
“The couch is at your disposal,” Veronica says, setting a pot of water to boil.
“I’m taking your bed.”
“Fine.”

The hallway spirals a bit, like a short Fibonacci curve, and Veronica’s bedroom is the epicenter, with an ungovernable crimson door and tempestuous Cambridge blue walls and frenetic winking lights and hot rugs and pillows and clothes and books and the whole world a mess on her bed.

Lou pushes everything off the bed and lies down, submerges herself completely in the sheets and rolls onto her side.

She can hear her pulse and turns onto her back.

Something smells loud. Veronica’s burned the cheese. She’s the sort of person who can burn the cheese and not get made fun of for it.

Lou pulls the blanket over her eyes.

Veronica scrambles into the room and falls into the bed almost on top of Lou, face first, ass up like an inchworm.
“I fucked up,” she spits into her pillow.
“Oh honey,” Lou says, folding herself up on her side, “I know you did.”
“I don’t even get an It’s ok?”
“No, you fucked up.”
“You’re the worst.”
Lou rests her head on her elbow and she can hear her pulse. They lie as they are for a half hour, half asleep, half disappointed by the way they don’t have any food in the bed with them.

“What are you thinking about?” Veronica asks, holding herself up by her elbows.
Lou falls on her back again. “When I was little, I never liked sleeping on my side. I didn’t like the sound of my own heartbeat and pulse.” She pauses. “It was like little drummer boys pounding in my ear. They freaked me out.”

“You absolute fucking walnut, that’s so stupid.”
“I know,” Lou says. “I thought there were little people in my head.”
“No, not that,” Veronica interjects. “That you’d be afraid of your heartbeat.” She sits up and crosses her legs. “It’s what makes you alive.”
Lou sits up too, folds her legs under her.

“You must be just as afraid as I was,” she says to Veronica. “The way you smoke like a- I’m at a loss for names of things that smoke a lot.”
Veronica doesn’t say anything, just climbs out of the bed, shakes out her hair, and walks out of the room. She takes her storm with her.
Lou curls up again and stays as she is until she smells fresh Parched food and failure and crawls out of bed and slinks down the hall.
She sees Veronica, sitting up on the counter again, her head out the window, cigarette attached to her index and middle fingers.

“At least we’ll die pretty,” she says to Lou.

“Huh?”
Veronica tosses the girl the tube of pink and salmon crayon lipstick.

“Oh,” Lou nods, “yeah.”
When you are very small and live by the mountains, your hair goes blue in their gloom. This is a cosmically acknowledged truth to the many acquaintances of Ahran Dumont, who went to the mountains for one summer and came back with organically-grown blue hair, electric and bigger than her whole body, and a space whale impressed into her inner bicep.

In a red and beige dress that bares scraps of her back and no shoes anywhere, she sits, ankles-crossed, on a barstool, roughing a few-line tattoo blueprint in a tiny sketchbook. Beside her, Bay rattles off all the things she wants etched into her arm.

“A solar eclipse,” she says. “That’d look cool.” She peeks over Ahran’s shoulder at her sketches. “Like, as minimalist as the exploding firework, but smaller, even.” She touches the paper where the firework is and Ahran nods, starts on a perfect circle.

It happened like immaculate conception. She fell asleep one night, nose burrowed into a pillow, shoulders bussed with a wooly blanket, in the loft of an abode under the alps, and woke up with foggy curls like ultramarine powder.

At first she wore it in a kinked bun, pulled so tight it exposed naked lines in her scalp. It made her a teenager, angry and galling, and the black hair chalk just made it ashy.

Then she came home and bought a very yellow eyeliner that made the hair and black-pepper freckles look avant-garde. Like she meant to have them.

The bartender is sleepy, pours too much vodka in Ahran’s tonic. She doesn’t stop him, feels like a housewife in her thirties who knows about her husband’s affair but won’t leave because his money’s too good.

“I like that,” Bay says, tapping the page, the soft, stippled sketch. “Right under the elbow, I love it.” Her nails are painted white, no nicks, beds rounded. Look loud against the red leather of Ahran’s moleskin.

“We should talk payment, right?” she asks.

Ahran nods, shuts the book, drinks. “You know the system, right?”

“Yes,” Bay says. “Trades, right?”

Ahran hums a yes and reopens her book, uncaps her pen. She steadies the cap between her teeth and looks up at Bay.

“What do you need now?” Bay asks, eyeing the piece.

“I like homemade dinners,” Ahran says, using her tongue to keep the cap in place. “Old clothes. House plants, those are popular. Socks.”

“You don’t take money?”

“Nah.”

“What about services?”

“Huh?”

“You said you needed some skirts hemmed,” Bay clarifies. “I could do that.”

Ahran thinks. “Yeah,” she nods. “Yeah, that’s a solid trade.” She scrawls it into her index.

“It’s one trade for one design?”

“Yeah.”

“So I owe you two other things,” Bay says. She bites her lip and it leaves a cranberry stain on her front teeth. She murmurs to herself. “For the solar eclipse, the skirts. For the wildflowers,” she trails off.

“The wildflowers and fireworks can be one thing,” Ahran offers. “They’re small.”

“Okay,” Bay agrees, instantly. “How about dinner, then?”

“Sure,” Ahran says. She scribbles that down, too. “So you have no outstanding balance.” She smiles.

“Congratulations.”

“How about something else, too?” Bay responds. “I don’t like not paying you back for everything.”

“What are you thinking?”

“A hair cut?”
“Nah,” Ahran says, “that’s alright.” It’s gotten so long that it crowds her face, almost makes the eyeliner obsolete. She’d grown to like the hair, an extraordinary, loud thing.
“Nah, I like it here.”
Bay’s an exceedingly plain girl, camel-haired, red-nosed, with lashes that span miles and tiny tattoos all over her skin that you’re not sure are there the first time you look at her. Ahran’s best acquaintance. Angry and sincere.
“Okay,” Bay concedes. “How about a baby cactus?”
“I love those,” Ahran nods. She writes it down, giddy.
“Great,” Bay says. She looks at her wrist, which doesn’t harbor a watch, and then glances up at the wall clock above the bartender’s head. She stands.

“Shit, we should go if we wanna catch the game,” she says to Ahran, setting a twenty on the counter.
Ahran looks up too and folds her things into her bag, pulls out a pair of leggings and a tee. They haul into her car and drive to a park some miles away, pull their socks to their knees and knot their tees as they cross a field to get to their friends.

Thirty-odd people, all in their late teens and twenties, huddled together on the pitch, drinking in water and companionship on their break. Ahran and Bay break in and ask for the divisions of teams. It’s all the kids with darker coloring versus everyone else. Segregation at its best. What a group.
Ahran and Bay part when everyone finishes stretching and complaining about strained bones and broken glasses and they all begin the game anew. In the dusk, all anyone can see is neon shoes and white goal posts. It’s cool and dewy and shameful when Olivia scores on her own team of everyone else, but since most everyone is dreadful at the game and they’ve long quit keeping score, it’s funny.
Ahran’s less dreadful than most everyone else and takes George’s place in goal, throws her body into things and gets bruised by someone’s untied shoe. Nithya’s untied lambent laces.

“You’re an unusual person,” George says over an upright bass solo. “A lot of good.”
Ahran nods. “I am a damn good goalie.”
They pull up to a stoplight.
“No,” George says.
“No?” She turns her head, eyes darting between the light and his mouth.
“You just carry with you a lot of joy, it seems,” he says, voice the bass to a trumpet gone rampant. “Go.”
“Huh?”
“The light’s changed.”
She jerks her head back and presses the gas. They drift.
“You make tattoos, right?”
“I draw them,” she says, “and other people do them.”
“How do people pay?”
“In favors.”
“Really?” he howls and it resounds with the pedal of a piano.
She laughs. “Not at all what I meant.”
“T’ve always wanted one,” he chuckles, and it’s a real chuckle, low and rapturous.
“What of?”
“I don’t know,” George says. “Something that sums up the word augenphilologie.”
His mouth moves a million ways over the course of that word.
“Which is?”
“Linguistics that misrepresents the realities of speech because of overemphasis on writing.”
“So something stupid simple made into something gorgeous and involved.”
“Yes.”
“What a challenge.”
“Could you do it?”
“Yeah,” she nods. “It’s not so big a challenge.”
“What would the trade be?”
“If I have to be creative, you have to be creative,” she says.
“You first.”
“How about space bear?”
“What?”
“No one ever goes for it,” she sighs.
“Why is it a suggestion?”
“I’m just really intrigued by space.”
“And bears?”
“And bears.”
“I like it,” he says.
Another light, and his mouth, again.
“Seriously?”
“Yeah.”
“That’s not personal to you at all.”
“I like it,” he says. “Personal enough, then.”
“You’ll draw it, then?”
“Yeah.”
“Good,” he says. “Go.”
“Huh?”
“The light.”
And she goes.
They get to the frozen yogurt place and park far away because Ahran hates parking near other cars. Wide right turns.
Everyone else are already there. Bay and Armaan. Sally, Catie, Olivia, John, Sav, Hannah, Elisabeth, in a line with paper bowls and mounds of sherbet. John has a savings card, passes it down along the line to rack up enough cents to get his yogurt for free. He doesn’t.
From the car, Ahran brings with her Moleskin. She buys a bowl of melon and hazelnut yogurt and sits on the corner of her friends’ three wrought-wire tables all smashed together by Sav and Hannah, George to her left, Bay across.
She sketches while they mull over topics, scribbling, too, every other fine one-liner Sav emits when he interjects the girls’ laughing digressions.
Homoerotic undertones color the conversation, with recurring talk of trains and tunnels scarring the girls.
She jots down John’s favorite pick-up line (“I fell for you the way Troy fell to the Greeks - quickly, and in the most embarrassing way imaginable”) and the way everyone picks it apart (“It’s not really a pick-up line, dumbass!”) and Sav caps the discussion so they can move on (“John, you should have a show where you just explain jokes”).
“So what colors will the space bear be?” George asks Ahran.
She’d been sketching through the jabbering, nearly finished the bear’s ship.
“I was thinking blue,” Ahran says. “It’d just be outlines in beryl, maybe light gray fill.”
“Yellow?”
“Nah, just the blues and grays.”
“It is my skin.”
“I have a degree in colors.”
He bursts out laughing and all the table looks at him.
“What’s up, Georgie,” Sav asks, clapping his hand on George’s back.
“Ahran’s drawing a tattoo,” he responds, “and we can’t agree on the colors.”
“Well, listen to what she says,” Sav says.
“Yeah,” Bay adds, “she’s got a degree in colors.”
He laughs again and it’s a captivating sound. Everyone else continues chattering and it’s all fun and lovely.
Ahran watches George trade bits with Armaan and John, his wooly hair peeling out from the rubber band he’s pulled it back with, his jawline protruding and protruding with all the words. He’d gotten coffee and strawberry yogurt as his fix, some on his chin and then in his hair, and no one’d said a word because the contrast was just too funny.
“How do I pay you then?” he asks, wiping his chin with his thumb.
“Consult the group?” Ahran suggests, shutting her book.
“Nerds,” George calls, “how should I pay Ahran for the art?”
“You only take favors, right?” Sav asks.
Ahran nods.
“Sexual favors,” everyone says at once.
“My favorite,” she says.
“Yeah?”
“You should just tell the boy what you want,” Bay says. “It’s always hard to think of stuff.”
“So you understand why I ask the counterpart to do it,” Ahran says.
“I’m telling you,” Sav groans, “sexual favors.”
“I’m telling you, no,” Ahran sighs.
“How about a date?” he prompts, throwing a napkin at George.
They both shake their heads and don’t look at each other.
Everyone else wanders into a new discussion and the great blush up both their necks evaporates.
He gets up to find more napkins, finding the strawberry husks in his hair and on his collar. She leans in to listen to Liv and Catie try and tell a story between fits.
She’s almost out of the eyeliner. The convenience store by her room sells it one stick at a time, each time more gold-leaf than maize (or maybe she’s been going further down the aisle), and she resents it.
Two of the girls have broken off, Sally and Olivia. John had brought them a blanket from his car, but it’s gotten colder and they can’t bear it, tuck into the backseat of Sally’s car to talk things they won’t with anyone else.
It’s an exclusive team - this lot of beautiful people with beautiful minds that are sometimes open to Ahran. This lot that’s tight and select, with a language of their own, whose first-rate kindness rots when someone asks a question, that sort of smothers Ahran’s curious-as-hell character because one discretion is a seat at a new table and another is a place in the line for the gallows.
“How about one of those little candle toppers that projects things into your ceiling?” George asks, clapping his hands on the back of her chair. She jumps and bores a barbed line through bear’s mouth.
“Sorry,” he stresses, sitting. “Sorry.”
She waves him off, shuts the book and crosses her knees.
“What were you saying?”
Uh, for the trade - one of those candle toppers.”
She nods, smiles. “Last time I had one of those,” she says, “the holes weren’t big enough and it suffocated the thing.”
“I make them,” he says. “You can make suggestions, make a blueprint with the right sizes.”
“But there’s me being the only creative one again,” she leans into her elbows on the table.
“I’ll draft it myself, then,” he says. “It’ll be space.”
“It’s like you live in my brain.”
“You have a one-track mind.”
“Can you teach me how to do it?”
“Sure.”
“A service for a service.”
“What’s your service?”
“The sketch.”
“No,” he says. “No, a service would be you teaching me how to draw my own tattoos.”
“I can do that.”
“Then that’s our trade?”
“Sure.”
They lose another girl, Elisabeth, with her cleats, to the car.
“What do you think they’re talking about in there?” Bay asks the remaining lot.
“Probably making out,” Sav offers. Everyone else shrugs.
“The car is rocking,” Sav says. “They’re totally making out.”
“Speaking of one-track minds,” Ahran murmurs to George.
He laughs. Everyone else sighs.
“You’re so sure, why don’t you go see?” Bay asks, sitting up straight. Sav smirks.
“Why would I spoil their moment?”
“Really,” Ahran says. “You should go climb up on the car. Sally’s got a sunroof. Try and freak them out.”
“That I would do a lot to see,” John says.
“You do it, then,” Sav says. “I’ll dent their car.”
He’s not a large boy, just long, with big feet. John’s rawboned.
“I will.” He stands. “Armaan,” he beckons, “I’ll need you to distract.”
“Nah, I’ll do it,” Hannah giggles. “I’ll tell them I’m cold too.” She stands and follows John to the car.
Everyone else watch Hannah knock on the back window, watch John steady himself on the trunk. The girls open their door to her and something upbeat pours out of the car. She dances her way in, John slinks his way up and crosses his legs.
When there are no screams, they grow concerned. Catie goes to the car to see why John’s stalling.
“The sun roof’s not open,” he texts the team.
The girls let Catie in. The others get up and venture toward the car.
“Just go down on the windshield,” they hiss at the boy.
He hisses back “No, I’ll scuff it.”
“Pansy,” Sav heckles.
The boy puffs out his cheeks and lies face-down on the roof.
They watch Catie stick an arm up and open the cover of the sunroof and no one cries when they see John’s face, all screwed up and amusing, looking back at them.
He hops down, defeated when they tell him they felt him leap onto the trunk.
“Honest effort,” Ahran cheers. “You did try.”
Sav climbs into the passenger seat, pulls John in with him.
It’s more of a van than a car and everyone fits just fine with all the seats reclined and the windows popped open. Sav locks the door as Ahran approaches, so she spins on her heels and goes back to the tables. Bay and Armaan go into the coffee place a door over. She picks up her book and goes to her truck. George follows her.
“They’re almost bullies,” he says. “Do you think they know that?”
“No.”
“Someone should tell them.”
“No.”
She clambers into the back of the truck and unfolds a blanket.
“Why not?”
“It’s easier to love them,” she grins.
He leans against the truck.
“Why are you still here, then?”
“Bay.”
In the dim lights of the outer parking lot, they can nearly see the moon.
“You know, your hair looks different out here.”
“It is pretty dark,” she nods.
“No, I mean,” he stammers, “it looks like the blue’s all washed out.”
“ Weird,” she says.
“Yeah.”
He pushes off from the truck and starts to walk away.
“Will you wait with me?”
“Yes.”
He sits down on the opposite side of the back, pulling the blanket over his bare legs.
“How will it look, then?”
“More stars, maybe some mountains.” He rambles a bit.
“Did you know my name’s probably French for Mountain McMountainpants?”
“There’s a case of augenphilologie if I ever saw one.”
Blonde blonde blonde almost white hair that Colin can’t distinguish from the sleet. She has on his red hat, now, so he can actually follow her in her dumb white puffy coat and her dumb gray everything else.

It’s dark out, too. She’s wicked in the woods, like a bird, down a hoary slope, between china branches, and out into the white field, where she drops and pants and he almost stumbles over her because the hat’s gone and she’s so blonde blonde blonde.

He drops beside her, rolls a bit and settles in the fluff.

“Bird, it’s going to close soon.”

“It’s not gonna close.”

“It closes at eleven.”

“It’s not eleven yet.”

“It’s ten fifty two.”

She sits up and stands up and starts running again, hat in her hands.

He stays down.

She comes back and starts pulling him by the shoulders, backwards, across the snow.

“No, I don’t like this,” he calls up at her, scrambling to stand.

They run. Threaded vines on the field trip them and pull them down but they don’t let off, and then, they’re there. The lambent red neon sign promulgates that the place sells lottery tickets. The thick film of brume makes it blurry.

She staggers the last few steps off the field and into the lot and he follows, falls in line with her at the glass door. She opens it.

Heat hits them first. They discard their layers and keep moving in. There are sweat circles or melted snow circles all over her shirt.

“This is the worst date.”

“Shut up, bird.”

“What are we getting?”

“And we have four minutes to get it.” She does that a lot.

They take two red shopping baskets each and rush down every other aisle, dropping in things that look half-sufficient, meet at the register with two minutes.

“What’s that?”

“Strawberry ice cream.”

“It has strawberries in it.”

“I don’t even know how to respond to that.”

They drop their loot on the belt and the check-out boy gives them that bitch, please face he gives them every Tuesday at ten fifty eight p.m.

He shuffles around his body and rings them up, gives them their bags and the key to lock up because he knows she’ll ask if they can stay in and load up on their heat before they have to walk home again.

Colin and Prudence sit on the ledge against the windows and cool their backs, warm their legs, wave Louie out. She has her headphones in, leans against his arm, his hand in his pocket, and shares one with him.

Tom Rosenthal in his ear, and he’s singing about the beach and a boomerang with some unnamed girl.

“Is it a drinking song?”

“Could be.”

He grabs the beers out of the bag and clips them both open, hands one to her.

“Yeah,” she thanks him, drinks. Instant warmth.

She kisses him on the cheek. Instant warmth.

“Should we go?”
She nods. They don their coats and gather everything in their brown bags, some things gripped between their teeth, and go outside. She locks up, sticks the ring of keys somewhere under the fake grass of the lawn furniture display.

They walk home.
He can see her this time. She goes slower. The blonde blonde blonde almost white hair is louder. Her eyes are like oysters, her brows are dark, and the hoop in her nose makes the dark lip balm make sense. He understands, vividly, why storms are named after people.

They get home. She helps support his bags while he fiddles with his keys.
They get inside and drop the bags on the island in the kitchen.

“I’m not even hungry anymore,” she says, sprawling out on the couch. Her ringer shirt’s white with a cherry collar and her hand covers the bit of it he spilled beer on at the market when he kissed her back. She stands and gets the box of microwavable popcorn out of the bags.

He leaves the kitchen and picks a disc up off the coffee table and feeds it to his laptop, sets it down at the end of the couch and lies down, long ways.

She walks in wielding a knife and another beer bottle.

“I feel powerful.”

“Well,” he says, craning his neck to look at her, “you’re holding a knife. Being armed does that to people.”

She uses it to wrestle the cap off the bottle and walks back into the kitchen with the neck of the bottle in her mouth.

He starts the movie - something scary from the fifties. The microwave beeps, a bowl clatters, and she comes back with the popcorn, sits down between his legs, and starts eating.

It’s all in black and white. They readjust so he can see it and so she can hide behind his arms during the ugly parts. She hates scary movies.

They watch.

She falls asleep on his chest and he falls asleep too, and wakes three hours later to Prudence changed, pouring a glass of milk in the kitchen in a long yellow skirt and an oaty sweater.

“Come back, bird” he says, and she does, shutting the laptop and curling up where she fits.

He falls asleep on her shoulder and she falls asleep too, and wakes thirty two minutes later to vibrations and Colin’s baritone groaning.

“What’s it say?”

“I think the snow killed the signal,” he says. “A Hispanic boy is either missing or a murderer, and he’s out there, so be weary.”

“Shoot.”

“Yeah.”

She falls asleep with her nose to his neck and he falls asleep too, and wakes another twenty minutes later to her tying her boots and wrangling on her boots under the flashlight of her phone.

“What are you doing?”

She looks up at him and the basins in her cheeks and under her eyes make her look hollow. She smiles a distressing smile and they all fill out.

“I dropped your hat somewhere outside.”

Blonde blonde blonde almost white hair pulled back so tight her white white white temples almost burn pink.

“We can find it in the morning.”

“No, there’ll be too much snow in the morning.”

“We’ll wait for it to melt.”

“It’ll melt and flow right down a sewer drain.”

“Slippery slopes.”

“I’ll be back soon, okay?”

He sits up. “The Hispanic boy.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“It’s a few hours until the sun’s out,” he says. “Wait.”
“I can’t sleep.”
“Stay.”
“I’ll be back soon.”
She opens the door.
“Let me come, then,” he says, standing.
“You’ll just slow me down.”
“I won’t.”
“Go to sleep, bird.”
“You’re not going alone.”
“I’ll be back in a few.”
She slips out the door and shuts it, taking the light with her.
He sits back down, grips the seat, and then stands again, runs outside in his socks. His row of apartments isn’t well-lit and he stumbles down the stairs to solid land.
“Prudence?” he breathes in all directions. He runs out into the snow and the cold reminds him that he’d disrobed some since they’d gone to the market. “Fuck. Prudence?”
A red light bounds into sight. One of the building’s smoke detectors is out.
“Bird?”
She’s long elsewhere.
He walks back to the apartment and makes coffee in the dark, sits down and drinks it in the dark, falls asleep at the table in the dark, and wakes fifteen minutes later to the door unlocking.
“Prudence?”
“Yeah.”
“The fuck?”
She turns on a light and it stuns him a moment, and then she’s pressed in her coat against his back.
He blinks the spots away and turns. “Did you find it?”
“Yes.” She removes her coat and drops it on the ground.
“Where’d you go?”
“Someone else needed it more.”
He nods. “Okay.”
He walks with her to the couch and they lay down as they did before. She opens the laptop.
“Can we watch what we were watching earlier, or are you tired?”
“I thought you didn’t like scary movies.”
“It’s not all that scary anymore.”
He presses play.
Oh god, she thinks, she doesn’t love him at all.

The tiny welts in his neck moan to the contrary, but she means that. No matter how Jack wants to, and she really does, she doesn’t love him as fervently as she means to. Not with the same tantrum with which she hates how he picks apart her braids, nor with the temper with which she loathes how he doesn’t know the conversational names of all the wildflowers.

She wears her hair like Margot used to wear her hair before she got a wad of chewing gum and an awful lot of rubber cement caught in it and had to cut it off - in careful milkmaid braids that Ferris, when Jack’s not looking (which she seldom isn’t nowadays), likes to deconstruct. (He’s started carrying with him his own stash of bobby pins because he always knocks Jack’s out in the street and it makes her furious.)

Dabbing at the little swoop of indifference under her eyes with concealer, Jack watches Margot rebutton the stud fixing her collar together in the reflection in the next storefront window over. Her hair’s short and quaffed, and she shakes out the one longer lock that twists on her forehead before turning her back to the window and handing Carter a plastic comb.

Jack drops the little glass bowl into her bag and fishes around for her and Margot and Carter’s lipstick tubes. The skin of a plum but lighter, the boldest sort of red, a nude pink. She’s the designated carrier. She never loses things.

“Why do you all wear that shit?”

Ferris and Marlon stand off to the side. Jack can’t see them in the reflection, but she can feel their arms crossed over their respective chests.

Jack passes out the tubes. Margot turns back around and they all touch up their mouths.

“It makes us feel pretty,” Margot says. Two strokes and she has it all clean again.

Jack’s is the only one from the drugstore. Two years before, Margot’d come over after a cream soda run, the street behind her flooded, her hair wrangled into a funky braided bun and slicked on her scalp, her white tee saturated and limpid, raving about how she’d found Jack’s perfect shade - this 99-cent-plus-tax hard tube of weird, off-pink wax that no one but Jack could ever work.

“Guys, we’re late.”

Jack and Carter finish up and the girls pitch their stuff into Jack’s bag.

Carter embraces Marlon. She’s taller than her boy, but he’s broader. They follow Margot, who walks in front, always, with their arms around each other’s hips and shoulders. Jack and Ferris follow them, hand-in-hand, her cheek to his shoulder.

Ferris wears tweed. It’s Jack’s third favorite thing about him, which is not a good thing to have, the gray tweed bomber, flecked with tea greens and tawny. It’s half open, baring his steely oatmeal-colored and -stained sweater. He burrows his face into her twists and breathes in.

“Hi,” he says into her hair.

She’d dressed him. He’s useless with clothes. He’d texted her a picture of him in this horrible orange checkered button-down, asking if he could wear it to the party.

She’d called him back with rigid directions.

“Hey, doll,” Jack says, pawing his chin away.

“I like your perfume a lot,” he says. She smells like orange blossom and the woods and, most overwhelmingly, clove. “If, in some freak accident, I was left without a good sense of smell and it were the only thing I could ever smell, I’d be okay with it.”

Burnished light from the row houses they stride past kindles the five and the sidewalk. Jack turns and looks into the low windows of each one. Most have wiry bikes with baskets and bells at their mouths or locked against their doors. Everyone in Boston has a bike.

“Oh, I’m sorry, doll,” she sighs, touching his chest, “I ran out this morning.”

She doesn’t love him, but she talks like she thinks she can talk herself into it.

“The light pollution’s really low tonight,” Jack says into his shoulder.
Ferris laughs. “Ah, we can see the Big Dipper.” He raises his arm and points at a random cluster of stars.

“And Orion.” He waves his wrist.

“You big dumb,” Jack sighs, “you don’t know any of the constellations.”

“I lie to impress you.”

“You should quit it.”

Wind racks up the skirt of her dress and it billows out in front of them, a knee-length mass of sour cherry lycra, and Jack lets go of her boy to wrestle it back down. He grabs hold of her waist to help.

She’d never loved how he did that - grabbed her waist. Held her hand. Grasped her chin or one side of her jaw between thumb and index finger and reeled her around to kiss him.

It’s lovely, to have someone want to hold her, but she likes kissing Margot better.

“Ey, it’s a left here somewhere,” Margot calls from the front. The couples, like ducklings, twist their heads in all different directions, down every little back lane, looking for a neon blue sign.

“Wait,” Margot croons, “it’s the next right.” She charges ahead, a modish giraffe in her black pumps, and disappears around a corner.

They chase after her and fall into a building under a heavy curtain, and the room is brilliant. Lambent graffiti, kids hopped up on everything with glow-sticks spilling from their too-small pockets, bass drops projected on a tinted screen - everything is in the five’s addled faces.

“Margot, where the fuck are we?” Carter roars. Her face goes pale, which is not an easy thing for it to do, at the sight of a boy toppling over from his headstand.

“I don’t even know,” Margot shouts back. “Silvii knows a guy who works here, said she could get us drinks.”

“Where’s Silvii, then?”

A tiny girl with violet curls in a mossy dress conveniently appears out of the fog of the dance floor. Her swollen sleeves hike up high and she latches on to Margot’s side, pecking her cheek and nose and forehead furiously.

“Hey doll,” Margot grins. Her mouth’s wide like a burlesque figurine’s and her lipstick is still immaculate. She turns her head and kisses Silvii back, leaving a crimson blot on her girlfriend’s cheek. The beat of the club’s electro-jazz swells and then stalls while they say their hellos, and it’s like the whole club stops to watch the two.

Ferris squeezes Jack’s hand and nips at her ear.

Billions of boys and girls in the world, all but one of them in want of Margot.

“Let’s dance, huh?” Ferris murmurs into Jack’s hair.

Jack arches her neck to look up at him, takes a step back. “We should find a place to put our coats first.”

She takes him by the elbow and the six go to the coat check.

Marlon takes five numbers and sticks them into his slacks pocket, and the boys slip their girls’ coats off their girls’ shoulders. Margot wants to keep hers, so she finds her lipstick in Jack’s bag and checks that instead.

Silvii brings the bunch to her table right off the dance floor. They meet three drunk children and crowd around the tiny round table.

“Who’s up for drinks?” Silvii asks, hanging off Margot’s arm. Margot nods and asks for a ginger beer, Carter for a sidecar, Marlon for a Dancing Scotsman, Jack for an Old Fashioned, and Ferris for water. He doesn’t drink. Neither does Jack, but she wants to tonight.

Silvii bounces off and the way Margot looks after her is amazing.

Ferris bites the strap of Jack’s dress. “Will we dance now?” he asks with mammoth eyes.

She grins and turns toward him, nodding. Ferris takes her hand and leads them to the center of the floor, and before he can pull his Homeric moves, the song melts into a slow one.


“You did dress me, you gem.”

“I am a gem.”

“Want to go to the park tomorrow?” he asks. “It’ll be cold as balls but the lake might be hard enough to skate on. You can try teaching me again.”

She doesn’t want to try teaching him again. He is the worst kind of lost cause.

“Of course,” she says, grinning. “I’d do anything to see you fall on your ass again.”
“You’re so caring.”
“I am.”
“You’ll drive me to the hospital when I fall so hard I crack the ice and fall through, right?”
“We’ll burn that bridge when we get to it, kid.”

He pauses for a beat. Their swaying continues. The song is longer than she thought it’d be.
“I do swear not to let you die of cold or drowning tomorrow, if you swear not to smash me in the face with snow again.”
“That was one time,” he exclaims. It booms in her ear. “You didn’t have to fall over.”
“Yes, but I did.”
“But then you found that cool flower.”
That he doesn’t say its name upsets her. The Daphne bholua “Jacqueline Postill”. A whole bush of them. Incredible. Her name, her least favorite flower.

Jack craves validation and she knows it.
She would, she thought a long time ago, learn the names of all the constellations and all the wildflowers and the bugs and the ducks and the snails and then impress people with how beautiful the world was and teach them that sometimes being part of this earth meant picking up an almanac, meant asking questions like, ‘what’s that beetle called?’ and knowing the answer without blinking.

Knowing things was some sick sort of validation. If she could identify it, she could understand it, and it could be.

Another slow song with a slow beat and a resonant bass warbles over the amplifiers. Ferris holds her tighter and she breathes in his sweater. For his eighteenth birthday, she’d bought him this cologne that smelled like paperback books and ginger, and he smells like that and fancy French soap and mint shaving foam from Trader Joe’s.

“I clipped a bunch of those flowers, remember?” Ferris asks, kneading her back. “Jacqueline Postills, right? I still have them, dried in a jar on my bookshelf.”
It’s why she knows so many languages. The validation (and the family tree). The identifying, the understanding, the accepting. Four, fluently: English, Portuguese, Mandarin, Slovak. If she can name something in at least one tongue, it’s ok.

To deal with feelings, too. She’s not good at communicating those. The more words she knows, the more she can feel.
“Feeling ok?”
“Yeah,” she says.

Over his shoulder, she can see Margot and Silvii swing from side to side. Margot’s discarded her coat. Her dress is black and wispy and the open back reveals purple and yellow flower tattoos like watercolors. Calla lilies. Zantedeschia aethiopica. Set against scattered vines and charcoal paint smudges. Jack’s favorite.

“Want to sit down?”
“No,” Jack says.
“You sure?”
He always asks twice now, because once he didn’t ask at all and everyone was upset.
“I like swaying with you, kid,” she sighs, distancing herself from his chest so she can breathe. “Can we keep doing that?”

He looks down and nods.
Oh god, she thinks, he’s all good, and she’s a second-rate lover.

The song expires but they stay at the edge of the graphic floor. Jack’s hands shake. She doesn’t want to release him. Ferris touches her hand and they walk to the table. Silvii had come back with drinks and Jack has hers too quickly. Someone trying to pick up Silvii’s sister’s offered to pay for the next round and Jack downs her refill within the half hour.

“Can we make lemonade when we get home?” she asks everyone.
“It’s hardly the season for lemonade, darlin’,” Ferris says.

She doesn’t feel anything when he kisses her. Or when he touches her. He says there’s a rush of sorts, so she says the same. She lusts after a finer account of what it’s like. If he were better with his words, knew more of them, she could understand the feeling, try to feel it too.

She stumbles over herself and trembles the table.
“We can drink it warm,” she says. “One uh the steps uses the stove. Makes syrup.” She hiccups.

“Doll,” Margot murmurs, “come to the bathroom and help me fix my lipstick, huh?” It’s rubbed off a bit. She picks up her coat and links an arm with Jack before she can respond. Carter links the other arm and they hobble out to the bathroom.

“I have to break up with Ferris,” Jack murmurs as they haul her away.

Neither other girl produces a sound until they hit the bathroom. They watch her dissolve into a watery, sloppy mess of a person on the ground against one of the floor-to-ceiling mirrors. She draws her knees to her chest and kicks off her shoes.

Margot leans down so the stray curl of her virgin hair touches Jake’s forehead. She clasps her hands over her knees.

“Honey, what’s wrong?”

“Honey, it’s—”

“He’s all good and there’s literally nothing more I could want from him, but I don’t get it, I don’t love him. I don’t feel anything, and I’m trying so hard to. I want to love him so much.”

And she sounds so disheartened, Margot thinks, that poor girl.

“Jack Ginsberg, what are you feeling,” Margot demands, “right this moment?”

Jack calms her crying. “I’m trying not to.”

“Well, stop that,” Margot says. She motions for Carter to leave the room, asks her to round up everyone’s coats. “Let yourself feel this, ok? If you don’t love him, stop trying to make yourself love him. You’ll never be able to teach yourself how to love someone. It just has to happen.

“Don’t suppress this. It’s ok to feel like this. There’ll be a moment soon when you’re walking down the street and you’ll see petals strewn underneath all the trees on the sidewalk and the air will feel like someone’s sweet mouth against your mouth and you’ll smile with your arms open and everything will make sweet sense to you and you’ll be ok. But for now, you have to be ok with not being ok.”

She’s probably given this speech before, given that everyone’s in love with her.

And then she leans down further, pulls Jack’s head up by her chin, and kisses her square on the mouth.

Jack feels the strangest rush.

“Now get up, fix your lipstick, and we’ll get you home.”

Jack stands. The two girls turn to face the mirror. Margot hands Jack her drugstore rouge and they touch up their faces. They link arms and march back into the ballroom. Ferris wraps her in a bear hug and when he releases, she notices that he’s snuck her coat over her arms.

Oh fuck, she thinks.

They walk (she stumbles) back along the same stretch of row houses as before. Jack still peers in through all the windows, and in one of the houses, she sees someone’s put different colored scarves over a floor lamp, making the light sway between hues of orange.

At home, she clambers inside and strips off her clothes, drops her coat and bag at the foot of the tub, unravels her twists, steps into boiling water. Her head pounds and she decides to opt for a shower instead of a bath, standing and turning on the showerhead. She washes away all the club filth and her grimy makeup, and then at the end of the shower, turns the water from steaming too hot to warm to lake-water-temperature, and then as cold as she can make it. She opens her mouth to the water, feels everything inside her cooling down, then turns the shower off and drains all the water.

She leaves the tub, cool and dewy as a Fourth of July popsicle, and leaves her hair down as she falls into her duvet.

Her phone buzzes and she rolls over, still entirely naked, to check the text - a hi from Ferris.

Oh god, she thinks, I have to breakup with him.
You should come back over, she types in response. Bring a movie you’ve never seen. We’ll set it to mute and improv dialogue.

At one ‘o nine in the morning, half-clothed, she staggers to the back door and sneaks her boy down to the basement. They sit on her bed, cross-legged, staring at each other. Her hair’s still down. The occasional bobby pin sticks out on all sides. Her lipstick’s solid.

“We need to talk, don’t we,” Ferris asks.

Jack picks at the hem of her tee and doesn’t want to look at him, but she does, anyway, for many minutes.

Then, instead of dealing with things, she fall over, wraps herself up in her blanket, and shuts her eyes. He lies back next to her.

“Your hair was nice tonight,” he murmurs, “but I think I like it more down, like now.”

She surfaces and looks at the thrown boy - his crooked nose, his lips the size of California, proud jaw and cheekbones, steadfast eyes - and she rolls right over and kisses him with the most vehement enthusiasm either has known in months.

He doesn’t notice the way he knocks a bobby pin from her hair when he draws her closer.
I tried screaming for help again. No help came. The country roads were silent; the bugs were quiet as if they knew something bad had occurred. Death, something so common, yet we hope to never experience it. I lay there on the ground on the side of the road, my leg seething in pain. How could this happen to me? How could I be dying? Just hours before I was at home eating with my parents. Now I lay here, alone and dying. To break the deafening silence, I begin to softly hum. I should be at home and safe in my bed. But no, here I am sprawled out on the side of the road like a discarded piece of trash. Out of the corner of my eye, I see headlights and the frame of a car approaching. I struggle to push myself off the ground. With my last reserve of energy, I crawl towards the road and attempt to wave my arms. I hear the car as it passes by without even slowing down. I collapse down in defeat. The world starts spinning and I feel myself falling, unable to stop myself from hitting the ground. My face hits the ground hard and slowly I drift into unconsciousness.

I look around and realize where I am. I’m back in the school’s theater, my second home. Mr. Pater motions me over, excitement in his eyes. “Drake, I just wanted to say that you’ve grown so much as a young man this year. I remember when you were just an incoming freshman, not sure where your place was in this world. I’m so glad you discovered your love and passion for theater. You’ve accomplished so much this year and I’m sure you will do the same in college. I’m very proud to announce that you’ve received the lead in our final play this year.” I squeal with joy as I embrace him in a tight hug. Mr. Pater chuckles, “I’m glad you’re so excited Drake. You’ve earned this role as Hamlet.”

“Thank you so much. I promise I will not disappoint,” I gush and begin looking around the room for David to tell him. Searching, I finally spot his mop of bleached blonde hair. As I start to yell his name, the room starts spinning again. The walls spin around and around until I can’t decipher which is which. Then I drift into unconsciousness again.

I jolt awake and struggle to realize where I am. I panic and scramble to get up. The silence and cold, hard pavement reminds me. On the side of the road, dying. I am dying and my final thoughts are not of close friends or family, but of theater. Something that mattered so much will soon mean nothing. Soon even my existence will not matter and I will be nothing.

This time I wake up in my kitchen. I see my mom sitting at the kitchen table petting Oreo absent-mindedly, as he purrs and rubs himself against her leg. Dad is leaning against the counter and he looks pretty upset. His small, pig-like nose is bright red and he looks flushed - definite signs. Oh God, he’s starting another rant. “I put so much into that boy Christi. And now he’s going to just throw it all away. And for what? So he can prance around a stage reciting lines. I didn’t raise a girl, Christi, I raised a man. He needs to start acting like one now. And make the right decisions and sacrificing for your future. If he continues down the path I set for him in football, he’s guaranteed a full scholarship to Iowa State. Then from there, there’s a great chance he could be drafted onto a major team. But instead he wants to take off to pursue his acting career Christi. Acting, for Christ sake! he wants to go off and act of all things. When I was 18 I was not prancing around a stage I was getting things done. When you got pregnant with Drake I did what needed to be done. I finished high school and got a real job. I provided for my family and thought of my future. Drake is not doing that. How in the world would he be able to support his family or even himself with an actor’s salary? His priorities are not straight. He is so different from me, sometimes I wonder if he’s even my son.” With that he stormed out if the kitchen. A few seconds later I hear a door slam.

I wake up feeling the tears streaming down my face. He will never understand, he will never understand anything. I get so angry sometimes, knowing the one thing I love, my father despises. He couldn’t care less if I got the big lead in the play. All he cares about is football. Football, football, football. That’s all I hear about all the time. He’s obsessed with it. I guess I can’t blame him after what happened to him. I almost pity the old man. Having a child at 18 and giving up for football scholarship to get a job to take care of your family. I think he blames me. For destroying his life. For taking him away from football. I’m his mistake. A mistake.

I turn my head just in time to see the car before it hits me.
I stowed away in the creaky wickerwork hamper lying in wait of my worthy adversary. After dinner, the living room furniture transformed into stadium walls encircling a shag carpet arena. The audience – my brother and mom – awaited the suburban bread and circuses. Unaware of the lurking warrior, my foe sauntered into the improvised ring without a second thought. THWACK! The hatch blasted open and I launched myself at my dad’s backside. Backfiring, the daring ploy forced me to the battle ground. I persisted, thrashing and squirming, intent on breaking my competitor’s clench. Against the odds dictated by our size difference, I managed to pull myself upright. I debated my next plan of attack. Ignorant of even the simplest of wrestling techniques, I could only improvise – enjoying the thrill of amateurish arm drags, takedowns, and sprawls – harbingers of more strategic combinations to come.

Ten years later, the thrill of our after-dinner antics stayed with me, even when my dad did not. Like modern nomads, my family pursued the perfect oasis of opportunity. By my junior year in high school, I had moved four times – each time inevitably leaving behind members of the tribe in an emotional dust storm. At first, wrestling reconnected me with my father – my first sparring partner – and functioned as the constant in my tumbleweed world. In time, it did more than serve as a link to my past; it tapped unexpected strengths.

Wrestling kindled my inner fire. A sport without tryouts or cuts, wrestling is self-selecting. I had to decide for myself whether I was good enough, whether I had what it takes. I overcame unique discomforts: the sauna-like temperatures of the practice room, the brutal and invasive clashes with strangers, and the homophobic mocking of peers because of the poses and postures struck by men in multicolored spandex onesies. There were days when my muscles would lie still in defiance, and I would find myself negotiating with my alarm clock. There were days when I would sooner throw in the towel than subject myself to further abuse. In times of strife, I chose to listen to a deep-rooted voice in my conscience, a voice screaming that there was a reason I set the alarm in the first place. I was unwilling to abandon an integral part of myself for the path of least resistance.

Wrestling promoted my ingenuity. It required mastery over my mind as well as body – a synchrony between the purely hypothetical and the imminently possible. Before stepping onto the mat, I would ponder the optimum moments to execute the myriad of wrestling maneuvers ingrained in my memory. I loved the point and counterpoint of each move, detecting my opponent’s vulnerabilities in each muscle contraction. My mind raced to conceive efficient methods of untangling the multitude of human knots that I would find myself in. As a game of strategy, wrestling is a changing landscape; I constantly adapted to meet the challenges of rapidly shifting circumstances.

Wrestling nurtured my instinct to inspire a team. I provided each team candidate with an arsenal of tactics to master the sport. Every newcomer’s first instinct was to lunge at their opponent with blunt force. Gradually, my mentees honed more precise weapons – wielding them strategically and efficiently. Teaching the importance of support of teammates over winning allowed ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary feats. I inspired novices to outgrow their concentration on individual performance in favor of team harmony. But the most important quality I instructed was devotion, for many have wrestled without great talent, but none have wrestled without great passion.

In the end, while I was trying to regain something I lost, I ended up finding things I never knew I had.
Cameron Jaede Thompson
Flash Fiction: Running
Ann Hawkins Gentry Middle School
Jake Giessman, Teacher

He was running.

He had been running along the familiar, quiet streets of his neighborhood, just like he did every day before school. A song he didn’t care to know the name of was blasting through his headphones. It was early in the morning and the sun was just beginning to illuminate the land through the dense clouds. The skies had been dull and gray for as long as he could remember, and that day was no different. The clouds loomed above him, looking heavy, like they could break open at any moment. The wind was up, too. It made the branches of the surrounding trees sway and bend in extreme angles. The air around him smelled like rain. As he was running, he glanced at his phone. It was 6:14 am. He had begun at 6:00 exactly and had traveled just over two miles; he was right on pace. Satisfied, he reached to turn up the volume on the already blaring music, but something stopped him.

Something wasn’t right. He paused the song, removed his headphones, and began to slow his pace, looking for something—anything—that seemed out of place. He glanced behind him and saw but a single person. A man, barely visible through the early morning fog, was walking about a block behind him, talking quietly on the phone. He was wearing a long dark coat, a hat, and sunglasses. The harsh wind whipped through his hair and clothes leaving his body numb. A shiver ran down his spine. If this was a movie, he didn’t want to think about what would happen next.

By then, he had slowed his pace to a walk and was unsuccessfully trying to overhear the man’s hushed conversation. He looked back again. The man was closer now, no more than 50 meters away. Alarmed, he began to pick up his pace. His face stung from the cold and his heart seemed to be beating at a million miles per hour, but he forced himself to keep moving. The man was talking louder now. He could hear footsteps getting faster, and closer too. A thought crossed his weakened mind— if he was running, and the man was walking, how could he possibly getting closer?

He looked back one last time and saw that the man was running. Sprinting. He was barely 25 meters behind and was gaining fast. His head pounded. He was running as hard as he could, trying with every ounce of effort and power he had left to escape, but the man was too fast. The world around him stopped. He was trying to run but his feet wouldn’t move fast enough. With every step he felt the weight of a thousand pounds resting on his feet. He knew then that he couldn’t make it. He couldn’t escape. The distance between the two was slipping away rapidly—twenty feet between them… ten feet… five… two… one…

He jolted awake in a cold sweat. The bright sunlight pierced through his windows. He tried to shield his eyes from the harsh sun as he turned onto his side. His eyes went in and out of focus then finally rested on his small red and blue bedside alarm clock. After a minute his eyes were finally able to comprehend what lay in front of him. The blinking red numbers read 6:37. He sat up abruptly. The bus would be outside in three minutes. He ran around in a frenzy, throwing on the first t-shirt and pair of jeans he could find. He sprinted out of the house with a final glance at the living room clock— it was 6:40 exactly.

Outside his house he sat on the curb with his head in his hands, his heart still racing from the recollection of what had gone on inside his head mere minutes before. He tried his best to gather his thoughts as he heard the faint engine sounds from the bus down the street. He exhaled deeply. It was only a dream, he repeated to himself. It was only a dream.
A solid park bench crafted from stone welcomes a young woman with open arms. The surface, rubbed smooth over time, belies a hollow inside. A faded cotton sweatshirt shields the woman from the blustering wind. Her blue jeans are ripped at the knee: inflamed, red skin lies underneath. Two dirty toes poke through her tennis shoes, nails long gone untrimmed. She owns no socks.

She leans back into the bench, giving her tense muscles a brief reprieve. Bleeding lips bring color to her ashen face. The woman dab carefully at her cracked peeling lips and wipes away the mucus running freely from her nose.

It is the end of autumn, the end of another year alive. Leaves crowd the ground around her, brown and lifeless. Groups of other people wander around the park. Some linger on other benches, alone; other come in pairs or families, all have hopelessness apparent in their slouched shoulders, their dull eyes, their permanent frown lines.

In Remembrance is inscribed on the park bench’s side, the gold lettering barely visible. Several layers of grime practically cover it. They were there at first. All the park benches are “In Remembrance.” Ashes of the unidentifiable dead fill them.

Overpopulation, shrinking resources, and more people. The government had no choice but to limit the amount of resources used. But why prevent new life when one could easily dispose of the nation’s trash, those who contribute nothing to the state? Of course, the government commemorated this program’s inaugural year, claiming to honor those who sacrificed their lives for the greater good. In reality, they had no choice. All citizens must pay a yearly tax in order to continue life after they pass the age of eighteen. If unable to pay on the collection date—the last day of fall—one was cremated on the first day of winter. There was no chance of escape. City borders closed every year a month before payment day, and a microchip implant tracked every move of its citizens.

These benches litter the park, a pathetic compensation for the now countless lives lost. The government stopped building new “In Remembrance” benches after the program completed its second year. Why continue to promote death as honorable when to the poor and unlucky, it is already inevitable?

Born into a family that struggled to pay the life tax each year, the woman already faced a disadvantage at a young age. Jade’s parents could not afford to pay for her education; her only work, tallying food inventories at the local grocery store, did not last long. As an adult, the woman could not afford many necessities because she put all her savings into paying the life tax each year. Her family already succumbed to the life tax. Businesses did not want to hire a stick-thin, unclean employee. Therefore, despite countless job applications, each subsequent job interview fizzled into a pathetic “We’ll call you later, Jade.” Still, the woman’s year had not come. She had managed to find work cleaning, doing errands, helping others with things that nobody else wanted to do. Her friends, fellow struggling young adults, provided moral support, but they were too worried about saving their own lives to provide financial support. Jade shrugs her hood up over her head, shading her eyes from the shining morning sun. The atmosphere feels gray, the sky choking on heavy smog; yet, the light sun beats down and brings a slight warmth to the woman’s shivering body. She wraps her arms around herself, quickly rubbing up and down to get her blood flowing. Standing up, she turns her covered back to the sun’s rays. $20,000 in the form of different types of dollar bills—mostly 100s—rest in her sweatshirt pocket, just enough to meet the year’s life tax, just enough for another “quality-adjusted life-year.” It is the entirety of her savings. She will have nothing left after today. Jade fingers the money to assure herself that it’s still all there. The knowledge that she was so close to death this year grabs her abdomen and kneads it back and forth like the harsh wind twists the branches of the naked trees.

Her feet know the path to the stadium by now; her eyes barely register the “Buy Life” billboards dotting the horizon every few blocks. They depict exultant, clean families, the ones who will surely see another year. She lets her hands swing back and forth along her sides as she travels, not noticing the $10 bill that the ravenous wind slips out of her sweatshirt pocket and carries away into the blanched sky.
“ID, please,” the worker prompts, hands waiting. The older woman, hair pulled back and body lavishly clothed with a sleek pencil skirt and a silk jacket, daintily presses her form of identification into the worker’s hands. He rapidly enters her information into the computer.

“You and your family of four, Mrs.?”

“Yes. My husband was too busy at work to drop by.” She slips him a sealed envelope from her jacket pocket. $80,000 is tucked inside, naturally.

The woman takes back her ID and slides it into her wallet before exiting the line. Her eyes point in Jade’s direction, but the woman doesn’t really see her. To her, Jade is just another polluted part of the contaminated city.

“Next,” the clerk calls.

He looks up from the illuminated screen and locks eyes with Jade. He thinks that she is one of them. He thinks that this is the year that she will pass his desk, never to be seen again. Light pushes itself through the darkness of Jade’s pupils; she makes eye contact as she slides over her ID card and the wadded money. Unlike the wealthy woman from before, the worker carefully counts the money several times to confirm that she has enough money. Jade cannot prevent a proud smile from crossing her face during his first and second times counting her payment, but the bemused look that appears on his face after the third count wipes it away. A cold fear begins to creep up from her palms, which lie on the counter, to the tip of her still runny nose.

“$19,990?” He questions. Any sign of pity that she had detected in his face while he counted her bills is replaced with a smirk.

She had been sure to count out $20,000 when she had left that morning, double and triple checking.

“Are you sure?” Jade scans the bills frantically, adding them up again in her head. The worker confirms her worst nightmare at the same time as she sees the proof with her own eyes. A sob escapes. Jade’s vision blurs. She feels nauseous, devastated. The chill glides its way back down and around her throat like the scarf that she never had the chance to own. Jade cannot breathe.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Lucas, but please go through the gate behind me and sit in the waiting room.” The worker’s eyes convey no emotion. “A guard will be waiting there to accompany you to the hospital.” The worker stores away Jade’s money in silence and returns to typing on his computer.

“This can’t be right!” Jade screams. Her hands slam against the counter, visible veins pulsing to the increasing beat of her heart. “It’s just $10. Don’t you have a soul?” She moans. Behind the gate, Jade spots a bulky guard outfitted in a bulletproof vest rushing over to subdue her.

Jade desperately tries to catch the worker’s eyes again. No chance. She glances back, peering at the myriad lines of people behind her, but not one pair of eyes rises to match hers. Giving her hood a tug so it falls back over her eyes, she passes through the gate and, with a forced composure, enters a dimly lit, austere room. The security guard follows behind her silently. The worker’s complacent, “Next, please,” sounds behind her, but Jade does not hear him. She has turned away from the light.
I woke up cold and shivering. For a moment I didn’t know where I was. Then the memories from the night before came flooding back in waves. I stretched my legs slowly, wincing. The cold had done a number on them. Though I was young, I as though my body was old and decrepit. I leaned back, shivering against the barren truck stop brick wall that I used for a bed last night. I wrapped my flannel shirt tighter against my body. The night before, I’d considered sleeping indoors, but my fear of being found by a Good Samaritan and returned to my foster home was a risk not worth taking. So I took to sleeping in the back, right next to an old, rusty dumpster. Not exactly the adventure I had planned on.

The sun hadn’t yet risen when I stumbled sleepily inside the truck stop, though the clock on the wall said it was almost six. As I made my way towards the restroom, I stared longingly at the vending machine that wouldn’t normally appeal to me, but in my current state, I felt as though I could ingest half of its contents. I entered the bathroom and began to wash the layers of grime from my body, allowing myself to enjoy the scalding hot water against my frozen limbs. As I washed my dirty wrists, I felt the crinkled paper I had hidden further up my sleeve marked with an address. I shoved the slip of paper back inside my sleeve. As I looked up in the mirror, I didn’t recognize myself. My matted hair, sunken-in eyes, and pale skin did not look like the girl I was just a week ago.

I made my way along the roads, I would entertain myself by counting cars that passed by. I was just taking a mental note of a rusty banana yellow truck that drove along the highway, when it pulled up near me. I trained my eyes on the truck as it slowed beside me, loud music blaring from its open windows. The driver, a man who seemed to be around the age of twenty, pulled off the road and stopped right beside me. He turned his music down and gave me a once-over.

“What’s a pretty lady like yourself doing wandering on the side of the road?” he asked, putting out the cigarette he had in his mouth after taking one last drag.

I looked away from the truck and continued to walk along the highway. But when he asked again, this time in a voice that didn’t seem too predatory, I turned on my heel and faced him.

“I’d rather not say.”

He shrugged and gave me a lazy smile, “Suit yourself. Where you headed?”

I eyed him warily and attempted to speak with a bravado I wasn’t sure I had, “New York.”

He chuckled at my reaction, “I take it you don’t smoke.”

I thought for a moment before deciding to take my chances. “Yeah, alright.” I said, rubbing my beyond frozen hands together, “Thank you for this.”

“New York,” I said carefully, remembering the slip of paper with the address. I slipped my hand in my pocket to reassure myself that it was still there. Should I be telling him this? I thought. New York was a big city, however, and it would be difficult for him to track me down without the address.

“That’d be at least a two week walk from here,” he said slowly, as if thinking, “Let me drive you, I’m heading there anyway. You really look like you need a rest.”

I considered my options. A two week walk in the cold, I thought, or possible psycho planning to kill me? I thought for a moment before deciding to take my chances.

“Thank you for this.”

He replied with another shrug and motioned for me to get in the truck. I paused for a moment. This is my last chance to run, I reasoned. But what did I have to lose? I doubted I would be able to survive alone two weeks, and I didn’t know the area well. It’d be nearly impossible to find any food or shelter on my own since I used the money I had before to hitch a ride here. I finally used the last of my courage and left behind a little bit of my dignity to pull myself into the truck. As I did, I noticed the strong scent of smoke and nearly choked. He chuckled at my reaction, “I take it you don’t smoke.”

“I take it you want to look forty when you’re twenty.”
He threw his head back in laughter before we began to speed away but rolled down the windows to let the truck air out. After a few moments of driving in silence, he leaned back and pulled something out of the console. A beer.

“Don’t you think driving while drunk isn’t the best idea?” I inquired, worry creeping into my voice. Look what you’ve gotten yourself into.

He proudly thumped his chest, “A man of my size needs much more than one beer to get buzzed.”

“Right.” I said, not sure whether or not I should trust this man’s judgment. We spent the next hour in silence, the trees and wilderness zooming by. I hadn’t seen any signs of civilization for at least forty minutes. It was relaxing, more so than the bitter cold outside. The warm truck and the scenery quickly lulled me to sleep.

When I woke up, the sun had set and two of the same beers lay at my feet. I too took a groggy look at the man who was still driving. His jaw was set, as he was concentrating on the road. Just then, my stomach gave a low rumble. His head turned to face me.

“You’re awake? You hungry?”

You have no idea.

“You have no idea. A little.”

“There’s a diner about twenty miles from here,” he said, “I’ll stop and get us some burgers or something. The food there is great.”

“When you drove this route before?” It really didn’t seem like a journey that someone would make more than once, especially because the road had been nearly empty the entire time I had walked it.

“Every other week,” he replied, “I have family in New York.” He didn’t elaborate and I didn’t ask any questions.

We didn’t say much until we reached the diner. He told me to stay in the truck and that he’d be back in a few minutes. He walked into the diner like he was coming home, and I wondered if the people here knew him well. I still didn’t know his name and I wondered if he’d share it.

By the time he returned, The smell of delicious fried food filled the truck and I wanted to snatch the bag away from him right then. I didn’t, but when he sat down in the driver’s seat I gave him a grateful smile.

“Thank you so much,” I said, “I’ll pay you back when I get the money.”

He chuckled, “You sound like I’m going to be at it out of you. I’m not, by the way.” I felt that he was telling the truth and I relaxed a little as I tore into the bag of food.

I mumbled one last ‘thank you’ through a mouthful of burger. We had finished our food in record time, then I sipped on the water he bought me because I “didn’t seem like a beer kind of girl.”

“So,” I said as I cradled my drink in my hands, “What’s your story?”

“What?” he asked, a confused expression on his face as he looked up from his fries.

“You know, your story,” I said with a shrug, “Everyone has one.”

“You sure are a talkative hitchhiker.”

“Hey, that didn’t answer my question,” I replied pointedly.

“My story?” he paused, thinking, “I live in Rhode Island. I’m a trucker, visit my mother in the hospital every other week. That’s where I’m going today.”

I frowned, “Your mother’s in the hospital? I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” he replied, sighing, “I don’t really know her. Never have, but I’m trying to make up for my faults by being a good son now. Probably too late for that, though.”

He didn’t say anything for a few moments. I turned to look at him, and saw the frown on his face as he stared ahead. “What about you?”

“What?” I said, snapping out of my reverie.

“What’s your story?”

I paused, gathering my thoughts, “I’ve been in and out of foster care for as long as I can remember. This last house, though, was bad. I was struggling, I guess. So I did some research, looked around, and found my real parents’ address. They live in New York.”

“So you’re just going to show up, and say, ‘Surprise, I’m your daughter?’” he asked with an amused expression.

“I never said it was a good plan.”

He shrugged and started the truck back up. “Just don’t expect great things, sweetheart.”

“Nadia.”

He gave me a questioning look.
“My name is Nadia,” I repeated.
“Nice to meet you, Nadia,” he said with a tip of his head, “I’m Gage.”
Gage drove for the rest of the night, claiming that he’d ‘sleep when he was dead’. He said that we’d be in New York by morning. I began to feel nervous; I had always planned on seeing my parents, but I didn’t expect to see them so soon. Tension began to gather in my stomach, but Gage told me to calm down. My parents would be disappointed to see a nervous, blubbering girl that claimed to be their daughter. That seemed to calm my nerves, enough so that I fell into a deep sleep.

The next morning was beautiful. The landscape that zoomed by us was that of a postcard; clear blue skies, in contrast to the deep greenery that lined the highway. I woke up excited and refreshed for my big day. I’m finally meeting them, I thought with an inward smile. Gage seemed happy for me as well, though he didn’t exactly say so out loud.

“Do you want to grab a bite before we go into the city?” he asked while scanning a highway sign that listed various restaurants.
“I don’t think I’m going to be able to eat anything,” I said and broke out into an excited grin.
“Fair enough,” he replied with a hint of a smile as the city came into view. We passed through a toll bridge before we entered the city, but as soon as we were in, I began to have second thoughts.
“Maybe this was a bad idea,” I thought aloud. I bit my lip as my eyes darted around to all of the magnificent buildings and the breathtaking skyline.
“Oh, no,” Gage said, “You are not turning back now. What’s your parents’ address?”
I frowned, but reluctantly handed him the crumpled piece of paper from my sleeve. He unfolded it and slowly read the address out loud, “620 West 42nd Street, Apartment 483,” he read as his eyes widened.
“What?” I asked, unable to hide my own growing worry.
“Your parents are loaded.”
“What?” I repeated, “What are you talking about?”
“That’s the Silver Towers building,” he said, “One of the most expensive buildings in the city.”
I pondered this new information. “Okay,” I said slowly, “Does that say anything about the kind of people they might be?”
“It might,” he said as we drove through the busy streets, “But it also means that getting to them might be more difficult than you thought.”
“Because of the high-class security.” Or because wealthy people don’t tend to want a child they gave up years ago on their doorstep.
“Right,” he nodded.

It took another hour to reach the apartment building, as the traffic was highly congested. As we slowly neared the apartment, I began to wonder how I would present myself to my parents. I needed to seem put together and mature, two things that I definitely wasn’t. I eventually gave up on trying to figure out how I was going to act, though, as I settled on just being myself.

“We’re here,” Gage’s voice interrupted my thoughts. I looked at the towering building before me, examining the shimmering glass panes that covered much of its surface.
I took a deep breath, “All right. I’m ready.”
“Do you want me to come with you?”
I hesitated. Did I want him to come with me? I felt that I could trust Gage, even though I’d only known him a short while. I did really want someone familiar there while meeting these strangers, so I said, “Yeah, I do.”
Gage patted my shoulder reassuringly before getting out of the parked truck. It stood out from the rest of the sleek black and silver cars that lined the street. I got out as well and mustered up enough courage to bring myself inside, Gage following closely behind. I knew I had made the right decision in asking him to come with me. I was so nervous that my knees wobbled as I walked.

I walked up to the front desk, “Hello, I need to get to Apartment 483.”
“Are you a resident of the Silver Towers?” she asked distractedly. She was reading over a label on a UPS package, a delivery man standing before her.
“No, but my parents are.” I said with a nervous glance around the lobby.
“It’s on floor forty-two. Take that elevator over there,” she waved us away hurriedly before signing for the package in front of her.
That was easy, I mouthed to Gage. He nodded.
We entered the elevator as I tried to calm my nerves. Gage pressed the button while I wrapped my arms around myself and took deep breaths, giving myself reassuring thoughts. Everything’s going to be alright, I thought.

The elevator beeped and the doors opened to reveal a grand hallway with rich wood and exquisite doors. I sucked in a breath and took small steps out of the elevator. Gage lead the way towards the end of the hall, and stopped in front of a door. He gave me an expectant look.

“Okay,” I breathed, standing up taller and pushing my shoulders back, “I can do this.”

The moment of anticipation between the time that I pressed the buzzer and that time someone answered was perhaps most anxiety inducing of my life. When someone finally did answer, I let out a breath I didn’t know I was holding.

“Yes? What do you need?” it was a voice of a girl much younger than my parents were.

“Hi,” I said, unimpressed my quiet voice. “Hello,” I said, louder this time.

Gage nudged me and made a face. “I’m looking for Elliot and Lydia Richardson. Are they here?” I asked in a rushed tone, stumbling over my words.

“Elliot and Lydia Richardson?” she paused, “Oh! Those folks lived here before me. They…” The girl stopped talking and I saw a doleful look cross her face.

“They what?” Gage said slowly.

“There was a car accident. I don’t know much, but both were killed,” she said solemnly. I didn’t hear the rest of what she said because I was sprinting down the hall.

“Nadia!” Gage shouted after me as tears blurred my vision. I ran into the elevator and pushed a button to the first floor. Out of all the outcomes, I thought desperately, this is the one I wasn’t ready for. As the elevator doors opened, I sprinted out of the apartment building. I leaned against the outside wall, ignoring strange glances from passersby. I slid down the wall, my legs too weak to support me as I let out wracking sobs. I cradled my head in my hands as thoughts raced through my head. How could I become so attached to people I never knew?

I don’t know how long it was before Gage crouched beside me and pulled me to my feet. He said something but I couldn’t hear him through the buzzing in my mind. I felt numb as he guided me to the truck, opened the door, and allowed me to get in. I stared straight ahead as my drained body slumped against the seat.

Maybe hours passed before I could gather my thoughts. I knew it was no longer mid-morning, but I wasn’t sure of the time. I turned to see a sleeping Gage, who stirred and awoke when I nudged him. I gave him a sad smile.

“I don’t really know what to say, but I’m sorry,” he said.

I breathed in slowly and closed my eyes, “I’ll be okay,” I said after opening them.

“You can always stay with me. I have an extra bedroom, and my place is pretty clean —”

“Thank you, Gage,” I said with a small smile, “I can promise you that I’m better off on my own.”

“But what about the legal stuff? Technically you’re a homeless minor.”

I looked to the distant skyscrapers that gleamed against the afternoon sun. “I think maybe I’ll start over. I’m eighteen, you know.”

He nodded slowly, “You’ll need a job.”

“I’ll need everything.”

“Where are you going to go?”

Moments passed before I replied, “I think I’ll stay here. New York seems to be the place for new beginnings, after all.”
I rolled up to the house where I will be staying for the weekend. I was with my brother and my father. We were staying with my grandpa and grandma for the next few days to hunt. As I slung my bags out of the trunk, my brother climbed out of the car. He was coming with us, though he wasn't allowed to shoot anything. Happy to get out of the car, we grab all of our things and walk inside to greet our family. We said hello to them and they helped my brother, Jojo, and I find some boots to wear, as ours were too small. We set our stuff out to be ready in the morning, and prepared to go to bed, as we would have to wake up early in the morning.

We went to sleep in the living room, Jojo got the couch, and I got the floor. As I lay down in front of the fire, and stare into its depths, I begin to feel relaxed and calm, to overpower my excitement, and help me fall asleep. I fall asleep thinking thoughts of past years of hunting, and thinking about tomorrow.

I awoke early in the morning as my dad walked by the spot where I was sleeping on the floor. I got up, much more quickly than I would on other days. It was opening day of deer season. Walking around the corner, I began getting ready for the cold weather. We all got ready and walked out to the truck.

It was about a half hour drive through the dark, on the bumpy gravel road. The truck was full of anticipation, and hopefully at the end of the day, full of deer. We stopped and we carefully climbed out of the truck, trying to make as little sound as we can, so as not to scare away the deer. Quietly, we gathered our things and began making our way to the blind.

As we zipped the final window open, the boring part began. We sat there for a while, as the sun slowly came up, and it became light out. We heard lots of shooting across the creek. He had to have shot at least an entire box of shells that morning. I saw a big deer come out of the brush in front of our blind. He was a pretty good size deer, and he was walking through the thick brush, so he was hard to see. He disappeared and I tried to relocate him with the binoculars.

“There he is,” my dad said. We were both trying to count points to make sure that it was a legal deer. It didn’t look like he had enough points, but I couldn’t tell. Unfortunately we couldn’t confirm that it was legal before he was out of sight.

A few minutes later, when I glanced over at my dad, he put his finger over his mouth and pointed to his right, signaling that there was a deer over there. I looked. At first I didn’t see anything, but after looking hard for a few seconds, I saw a dark deer moving in between the trees, a good size nine-pointer. Slowly, he worked his way into view, but then started to run. He got in front of my dad then in front of me. Attempting to get a shot, I put my sight on him, but I didn’t get a good opportunity before he got away.

We sat for a while more and saw a coyote trotting on the other side of the creek. A while past, and then my dad left to go take a leak. Jojo and I were in the blind by ourselves.

“There’s a deer,” my brother said. I asked him where, but he just said, “There,” with no hand gesture to indicate in which direction. I figured he was joking, but as I looked around I saw a doe walking right towards an open spot for me to shoot her.

Looking through my sight, I confirmed that it was a legal deer, and as she walked into shooting range, I had a good broadside shot lined up. I aimed at her shoulder and slowly squeezed the trigger. Bang! A loud shot rang out, deafening me for a short time. Her back dipped down as she jumped away, out of sight. Surely I hit her, I know as I rarely miss.

My dad came back, and we sat for a few minutes, to see if any more deer come out. Nothing happens, so we exit the blind and work our way down the mountain. As we are walking toward where the deer was when I shot it, I saw her laying in the grass about twenty feet away from it. She was a pretty good size doe, and I hit her with a lung shot.

We spend the next twenty or thirty minutes dragging her up the rough terrain. “It's harder dragging them up a cliff when they don't have handles,” my dad complained.

When we finally got to the top, I began to gut the deer. It was my first time gutting a deer, so it took me a while to figure it out. Eventually my grandpa and uncle got back while I was still gutting the deer.
“God dammit, son. Hurry up,” my grandpa said. He was always cranky, and found whatever he could to yell at me about. With him, you couldn't ever do anything right. With everyone talking to me, I continued to gut the deer.

“Pop the balloons,” my uncle joked. He was about to get hit in the head by grandpa.

Eventually I finished, and we went home for lunch after we loaded the deer into the truck and tagged him. After lunch we went back, and sat until dark, but we didn't see anything. My uncle got a small 8-pointer. It was about the same size as my doe. We went home and had a good supper, then went to sleep.

In the morning, we went through the same routine, and got back out to the blind. For a while we didn't see anything. Even the guy across the creek wasn't shooting that much, so we figured the deer aren't moving much. We were about to leave to go to church, but then my dad spotted a good size buck across the creek. We couldn't shoot at him though unless he crossed the creek.

We watched him for a while, and then a doe came out from our left, right in front of the blind. My dad stood up and shot him. A very loud shot rang out, even louder than the one my gun makes. She dropped right there, as the buck began to trot across the creek in front of our blind to go after her. I was trying to communicate to my dad, but I had no idea how loud I was talking, and I couldn't hear him at all. I figured I was supposed to shoot him, so I aimed right at his shoulder, and slowly pulled the trigger. As soon as I shot he ran, and my dad shot at him, but probably missed. He ran down, dangerously close to falling off the hill, into the creek. My dad was about to shoot him again, but then he staggered, and fell down, dead.

We didn’t wait because we knew it would take us long enough to get them gutted and dragged up the mountain. Walking over to his deer, we saw that it was pretty small, compared to mine, but still a good size doe. After looking at his deer, we went over to view mine. It was a decent size 10-pointer. My dad gutted both of our deer because we were in a hurry. We spent the next hour, hour and a half, dragging the deer up the mountain. Eventually, we got the deer tagged and in the truck.

We went home for lunch, then took the deer to enter my buck in the contest. After that we took them to the butcher, to make steaks and sausage.

Later we left to drive back home. It was a good hunting trip, and good family time. My brother decided he really does like hunting, and we had some good eating for later.
I consider myself one of the greatest criminals that ever lived. There is only one problem. No one knows that I even exist. Well, that's not completely true. No one alive knows that I exist. You gotta cover your tracks! Anyways, this is my story.

I am Twenty-Three years old. I live in a safe house under a dock by the Boston harbor. The Boston bombing? Yeah...that was me, I was also the one who was responsible for the twin towers. I have a tendency to tell people that I am working with them, and then I throw them under the bus. Sometimes literally. No one who makes any contact with me lives. Ever. I have a perfect reputation of covering my tracks. No one would know that though. If you are reading this then I am probably dead. This journal is kept in my safe house and I am the only one who knows about it. It's not the best place, it’s kind of cold and dark. I make do though. Agh, here I am rambling. I'll just tell my story.

It’s the first of October. I have been playing it pretty low. I was robbing a house the other day, when the owner came home unexpectedly. I just lit the house on fire, but I don’t want to take any unnecessary chances. Today I am back in the game though. I am about to hack into a certain Grant Lousding’s computer. There! It just finished uploading all of his files, passwords, medical history, and bank account numbers. And there’s his credit card information. Now I’ll just hack the camera, good! I can see about three quarters of the living room from here. I Think I will go through that window there and rob him blind.

It’s October seventh, I robbed that man. There were so many great things in that house. I now have a new laptop and a bunch of other things. You know, jewelry, stuff like that. I think I will sell it and then set the Jewelry store on fire! Hasta la wego!

It's October twenty-third and I am about to go kill a man. I haven’t done that in a while and I am itching to throw someone off of a cliff. I hope it’s someone with a large, poor, family!

It is November thirteenth, I haven’t been able to write for a while. I had to take a flight to Beijing, China. Someone needed killing so I killed them, and then I killed the guy who hired me. After I got paid of course. Payment comes first. I am back now though so all is well.

It is Christmas Eve. There are so many lives to ruin this time of year! All the thoughts of what I could do to ruin people’s Christmas make me giddy with joy!

It’s a few weeks after Christmas now. I ruined a lot of peoples Christmas’s. It was a lot of fun! I must run along now and terrorize some little children. See you soon!

Hi there! The date is January 23rd. I have just set fire to someone’s house. flamethrowers are so much fun! It is February fourteenth. I have blown up a flower shop and the Russell Stover factory.

I am in jail now on death row. I was caught trying to pull the greatest crime in the history of the world. I tried to blow up the empire state building. It was a Beautiful fall afternoon. I was dressed in my nicest suit and was ready to kill some people. I was working with a group of undercover Nazis. The leader was a man named Clyde. Clyde the killer. We had scouted the building a while back and had found key locations to place bombs. I had been planning for months. I had planned everything including pushing Clyde the killer down the elevator shaft just before the elevator reached the bottom. It would smash him. It would be fun! I was ready.

We met outside the Empire state building at two o’clock sharp. Clyde was acting a little weird and I didn’t like it. He would be at the bottom of the elevator shaft before the end of the hour though so I didn’t think too much of it. He supplied the bombs so I wasn’t able to tell that the bombs were made out of foam. I was just starting to set the bombs in their spots when I felt a tap on my shoulder. Then everything went dark.

When I started to come to the pain came. It kind of felt like someone was stabbing me with dull knives repeatedly. I was then told what had really happened.

Apparently Clyde the Killer was actually named Joe Sharp. Joe worked for the FBI and the so called Nazi organization was a trap to attract criminals. When they found my journal I was put into a straightjacket and chained to a pole. They were not taking ANY changes. So now here I am on death row waiting for my uncalled for demise. All I did was kill over three thousand people! This is my last entry. Goodbye world. Goodbye.
McKenna Wells  
*Poetry: Something Like a Love Junkie* 
Ann Hawkins Gentry Middle School  
Jake Giessman, Teacher

Why is it,  
That his eyes are the ones deep as ocean waves,  
Yet mine are the ones that are always flooding?  
Why every time I let him engulf me,  
His way of drowning hurts something terrible like no other?  
Why after all of these years I have nothing left?

Why does it seem that he is the Sun,  
But once I have him I see...  
He was just the moon reflecting a light that doesn't belong to him?  
... But then whose light is it?  
Nobody else is around but me...  
Does that make it mine?  
He stole it  
And lied  
To show off for the other stars.  
Still I burn bigger and brighter.

Why is it,  
That I always let them in?  
Let them hurt me?  
Again,  
And again.  
Maybe I like the pain?  
Like the perfect needle.  
The sweet drug seeping into my vein  
it hurts so good.  
I promise myself rehab...  
Yet I can't resist the urge,  
To binge just once more.  
And again,  
And again.

I have to let them go.  
For myself.  
For my love.  
For my beauty.  
I must.  
Breathe easy.  
Burn brighter.  
Live sober.
“Wait up Kristi, my chest is burning!”

“Oh boo hoo. Come on, Karsyn catch up!”

“I, I, I can’t breathe.”

“Karsyn? Karsyn, answer me. Karsyn!”

I remember standing there, squinting through my tears, frantically calling for the teacher, my voice cracking. Placing my warm hand onto her wind chilled skin, a shiver radiated throughout my body. Her chest strayed from its regular up-down pattern, remaining in a single spot. She wasn’t breathing. I was too young to understand why all of this was suddenly crashing into my world all too quickly, why my best friend was laying on the frosted ground below me. Later I would learn she had stage two lung cancer and would need assisted breathing most of her life from that point on. I would also learn to face the unrelenting presence of reality.

******

Walking through the empty hospital halls, I was on my regular visit between college classes. Her eyes were cold as the winter’s night sky, her arms thick from the chemo like the large end of a baseball bat. Hairless, her head reflected the florescent lights that hung above the bed, controlled by the switches plastered to the wall. I remember asking her why she always preferred the dark. She always replied in the same way, “It helps to escape the stabbing pains of reality.” I missed the days when we could talk. It was all different now. Sometimes I stood, and sometimes I sat. I stared blankly into the hospital bed that used to hold my best friend, Karsyn Williams, that now held a weak body, her lungs relying upon a ventilator, fighting for her life.

******

The grey sleeve of my North Face hung limply from my backpack as I walked across the street from the high school I had thought I would attend with my best friend. I stepped into the west cancer wing of the hospital. The vents threw cold air against my face. I dug for my jacket to alleviate the unappealing goose bumps arising on my skin. I ran my tattered, grey frequent visitor card across the laser red scanner; the doors pushed open. I stepped into her room. “Hey Kars.”

“Hey Lex, I have got to show you my stylish wig! You know since I’m bald. You haven’t seen it have you?” I watched her clench her throat muscles tight to force her words out.

“No, I have not seen it, but I doubt you would get a wig any less than stylish, now would you?” I teased. Leaning over the edge of the stiff hospital bed, she yanked out of her bag a blond wig. It was short, nearly a bob cut. It defiantly differed from her old hair which had been long luscious, brown curls. She pulled her oxygen nubs from her nose to free her head’s range of movement. She slowly, subtly pulled the wig over her hairless head. It was definitely different - definitely Karsyn, but different.

******

“I just wish I could talk to her again.” I mumbled to myself, twiddling my thumbs. The waiting room was full of depressed, cold, anxious bodies. I looked around, the lady sitting next to me, her two year old son was dying of leukemia that had spread to his heart and liver. So many sad, empty people surrounded me, each with a different story. Abruptly my thoughts were interrupted by the screeching sound of the intercom.

“All visitors of Williams, Karsyn please report to the main office to visit the patient, in recovery.”

The doctor brought us into Karsyn’s temporary cubicle. Some of her family that I didn’t even know gathered to hear her news; I knew something wasn’t right as soon as he reached for the curtain. The last time I gripped my mother’s hand that forcefully was when I got my ears pierced. The doctor began. “Karsyn has a very rare type of lung cancer; it originated in her bronchioles and has now spread down the lining of her lungs, the surgery was supposed to successfully remove the cancer from the lining of the lungs. However when we got in for the surgery we realized the cancer had spread to her capillaries, which feeds into the bloodstream. We will need to complete a PET scan to see how far the cancer has spread, if it has spread as much as we think, there will be nothing we can do from that point forward. Eventually her body will rely entirely on assisted breathing, and her heart will no longer be able to generate healthy blood. If the cancer makes it to her heart, she will rely on more machines to help her continue to live. She will be in coma for the rest of her life once this
happens, most likely she will remain unresponsive and unconscious. I am so sorry.” The room filled up with what seemed like a ceaseless cloud of tears that would never fall. No matter how sad the day was, the tears just didn't come, to anyone.

******

Days came and days went before I made my way back to the hospital to visit the unresponsive Karsyn. Finals were coming up and I could not afford to fail my test in Cancer based biology. Knowing I mentally couldn't handle seeing her also factored into my refrain. Soon enough weeks passed, I had aced all of my finals, and I was on my way home. My phone’s annoying ringtone wrenched in my ears, I picked it up and slid the answer button over.

“Hello? Yes this is her.”

“Hello ma’am this is the cancer specialist at mercy hospital, Karsyn has had an immediate pulse rate drop and is not responsive to the ventilator. Doctor Mendes believes the cancer has traveled into the bloodstream through the capillaries.”

“Where are her parents? Why are you calling me and not them?”

“Her parents are no longer a part of the picture, they have given up and are now relying on the hand of god, she is responding to the ventilator, but her parents requested we take her off of the machine and give her a natural peaceful death.”

“What about her distant relatives?”

“No one else of relation is willing to take her along with the medical expenses that come with her.” My throat dried up thieving my ability to speak. My best friend was all alone, dying and not under her control.

“Ma’am, Put her back on the ventilator and heart monitor, I will be there in 10 minutes.”

“Okay darling, whether she stays or she go’s it’s all up to her so whatever fight she has left in her she needs to pull it out now.” I had no words, I knew she would make it. She had to, she couldn't leave me not like this, not here, not now.

I threw my books into my bag and rushed out of my class, the professor calling my name, louder and louder slowly escalating. I kept walking, squinting through tears poking at my eyes. I waited for the elevator far too long, I gave up after about 10 seconds, pushing through people forcefully, and I made my way to the lowest floor. I felt the cold air brush against my skin as I walked into the west wing goose bumps accumulated, I continued walking. I kept walking, right through the guarded doors of the ICU.

“Ma’am, Ma’am! You can’t be in here, only immediate family!”

“We may not be blood related but she needs me right now! do you know why she’s in here? Do you!”

“No it’s not my concern.”

“She is dying. She is dying of stage 2 cancer that has spread to her heart. So when you know what it feels like to be dying alone, you can tell me who I can and cannot visit.” I pushed through the guards attempted arm block. As I walked into her cubicle, I stared at yet another stiff hospital bed, I silently listened to the annoying chirping of the heart monitor, for what seemed like hours I just stared at her. After time I realized the annoying chirping in the background was gone. it had turned into a steady beep. My heart fell to the floor. she was really gone, and whatever hope, whatever wishes I had went with her.

I laid there next to her for a long time, finally the nurses ran me off. I forced my fatigued legs beneath me and exited the small ICU cubicle.

Minutes turned to hours, hours to days, and days to weeks. I never got a funeral flyer, never got a call or a letter. Soon enough I gave up on the public’s ability to understand the pain I was in. My walls were filled with pictures of me and her, she was always in a hospital gown but I never noticed. I only noticed that I would never get to see her smile again, and that's what stuck.

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Life asked death, “Why do people love me but hate you?”

Death responded, ”Because you are a beautiful lie and I am a painful truth.” -unknown
The story of the eponymous protagonist of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is the story of a coming-of-age tale gone awry. The world around Hamlet has aged, but Hamlet himself seems to have not. Hamlet experiences a break with his childish innocence, truly, but instead of learning to adapt to the adult world, Hamlet completely shuts down emotionally, breaking bonds with every character around him except Horatio and pursues a death wish on the hopes that somehow he can maintain some semblance of the world before he lost his innocence, by pleasing the ghost of his father. Therefore, Hamlet’s story is one of the inability to accept and function in the adult world.

The death of Hamlet’s father, the hasty marriage of Hamlet’s mother, Gertrude, to Claudius, Hamlet’s uncle, and their seeming disinterest in grieving for the death of King Hamlet shatters Hamlet’s childish innocence. The Hamlet we see in the first act is undone by his woe over his father’s death. When asked by his mother why he still wears mourning clothes, Hamlet responds, “I have that within that passes show;/ These [mourning rites] but the trappings and the suits of woe” (1.2.85-86). Hamlet’s dark clothes, tears and other actions of grief are not simply the duties of a devoted son to his father; rather, they represent the collapse of Hamlet’s world around him. In the circumstances of this collapse, Hamlet both turns his rage inward, wishing he could melt into thin air in the “rogue and peasant slave” soliloquy and later contemplating the relative benefits and drawbacks of suicide in the famous “to be or not to be” speech. Outwardly, he lashes out at his uncle, his mother, his school friends, Ophelia, Polonius and finally Laertes, leaving only Horatio and the odd minor character out of his line of attack. Many of these people do deserve blame: Claudius for killing King Hamlet, Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for conspiring to spy on Hamlet, and Laertes for his underhanded dealings in seeking revenge, but the punishments Hamlet deals to each of these people seem hardly fair. In fact, every one of these character dies, and most of them by Hamlet’s hand. Did Rosencrantz and Guildenstern deserve to be murdered in cold for simply following the wishes of a powerful king? Did Polonius deserve to be stabbed through a curtain for trying to protect and receive help for Gertrude? Did Laertes deserve to die for his intensive grief for his dead father? Did Ophelia deserve to die for being shuffled back and forth as a pawn between Hamlet, her father and Claudius? It seems hardly fair for Hamlet’s reactions to the collapse of his childhood to lead to such horrible death and destruction, but it comes directly from Hamlet’s inability to see the people around him with any balance of moral complexity. He seems to have two boxes: the “good” where he places his father and Horatio and the “bad” where he places anyone, whether manipulated or not, who opposes his revenge. This inability to see moral gray areas is a reflection of Hamlet’s still often child-like psyche. While most of the characters around him are relegated to the “evil box” there is one character, above all others, that Hamlet sees as the epitome of all that is good.

Hamlet, like a child, still places his father upon a pedestal above all others and has no ability to see wrong in him. Hamlet’s father’s untimely death is, after all, what sets him off on his path of murderous revenge in the first place. When confronting his mother after murdering Polonius, Hamlet notes his father’s face was “a combination and a form indeed/ where every god did seem to set his seal/ to give the world assurance of a man.” (3.4.61-63) To Prince Hamlet, King Hamlet was a god among men; he could do no wrong and had everything that could be hoped for in a man. Indeed, Hamlet seems to base his entire conceptions about what it means to be a man and a good person on his father. When Horatio describes him as a “goodly king,” Hamlet replies that “A was a man. Take him for all in all,/ I shall not look upon his like again.” (1.2.186-188) Hamlet sees his father as the truest representation of a man, unlike others, and so it is not surprising that when he encounters his father’s ghost, he bases his entire actions going forward on what the ghost, his idol, tells him. After Horatio warns Hamlet not to risk the danger of listening to the ghost, Hamlet responds with reckless abandon, saying “I do not set my life at a pin’s fee/…I’ll follow it.” (1.4.65-68) It is clear that Hamlet values his father, even his literal shadowy ghost, over himself, without leaving open any possibility for moral complexity in his father’s character. Hamlet responds in a similar way to his mother Gertrude, but in the opposite direction, seeing her and the entire female sex as evil, disloyal, weak-willed monsters.
Hamlet’s relationship with his mother goes from bad to worse over the course of the play, which he uses to attack women as group as well. Hamlet turns his rage at Getrude towards women as a whole saying “frailty, thy name is woman!” (1.2.146). This is evident in his overly rude and sexist treatment of Ophelia as well. During Hamlet’s play to catch Claudius, Ophelia notes that the prologue “Tis brief, my lord” (3.2.151). Hamlet replies that it is “as a women’s love,” (3.2.152), a clear attack both on Ophelia for her rebuffs of Hamlet’s advances, but as well on Gertrude, who, in Hamlet’s mind, betrayed her old husband by marrying Claudius so soon after King Hamlet’s death. In Hamlet’s mind, Gertrude’s decision to remarry so soon after her husband’s death represents the “frailty” and disloyalty of women. Similarly, Hamlet’s rage at his mother and his desire to make her feel remorseful and confess her disloyalty after her husband’s death is so great that after killing Polonius, he scarcely takes a breath before continuing to berate and browbeat his mother over her supposed lack of loyalty to the older Hamlet. Gertrude tells Hamlet that his verbal attacks have “cleft [her] heart in twain”, but Hamlet, instead of repenting his actions, says

> Oh, throw away the worse part of it,
> And live the purer with the other half.
> Good night. But go not to my uncle’s bed;
> Assume a virtue, if you have it not. (3.4.163-167)

Over and over again, Hamlet expresses his opinion that his mother and uncle’s sexual relationship is dirty and immoral, referring to it as “honeying and making love/over the nasty sty” (3.4.95-96), and “incestuous” (1.2.157). The collapse of the world as it should be in Hamlet’s eyes, the rottenness in the state of Denmark, is all a consequence of his father’s death, which represents the death of Hamlet’s own childhood. Even before he knew that Claudius had killed his father and Hamlet knew his mother had wed his father’s killer, Hamlet was full of rage at his mother, because she chose to love another man, and wed that man in no less than a month after Hamlet’s world collapsed around him. The idea that Hamlet’s mother can move on from her first husband’s death is too much for Hamlet, because it attacks at the very foundation of Hamlet’s goals in life, which are to be like his father. If his mother and father’s relationship was not the idyllic one Hamlet’s childish worldview seems to hold, it must be because of Gertrude’s own failings, and not possibly those of Hamlet’s angelic father.

And this is the core problem that Hamlet has: he sees the world as a collection of friends and foes, good and evil, black and white. He is unable to see moral complexity and acknowledge the possible motivations for other characters’ “evil” or morally ambiguous actions. For all his scholarly thought and pondering on the nature of life and death and action vs. inaction, Hamlet cannot seem to see the thing right in front of his face: the adult world is not a place of monsters and villains against gallant heroes and justified avengers; it is instead a place where everyone lives in some way, shape or form in a gray area, and no one’s motives can be classified as wholly good or bad. Hamlet wants so desperately to be the man his father wants him to be that he is willing to destroy the entire court of Denmark in the process. After all, why should he feel regret? His own world was so utterly destroyed by his father’s death that he cannot see the negatives in pursuing his chaotic, suicidal and manic desire to finally be the loyal, “war-like” son that he feels he has to be.
So you want to go to college? Want to go to a good college? Want to go to a college that will bankrupt both you and your parents in the short space of only 4 (or an accelerated 3) years?

Please sign up with The Harvard Recapitulation for a review class or private tutoring for many common standardized tests, including the SAT, SAT II Subject Tests*, SAT III (the hidden SAT), ACT, AP Exams*, TOEFL, TEARS and STRSS.

Included in this letter are several pages of tips to help you get into your dream school, including a letter from famed college admissions advisor Linda Carothers.

While you, the receiver of this letter, may have not begun the college's admissions process yet, please know that it is never too early to start thinking about the college admissions process: everything you do between now and the spring of your senior year is critical for obtaining the positive results we all know you can achieve (with the help of Harvard Recapitulation!).

Sincerely,

Bud Mentiroso-Zweifel, President of Harvard Recapitulation

*The Harvard Recapitulation provides test prep in the following SAT II and AP subjects:
Both: Art History, Astrology, Biology, Chemistry, Chinese, English (Literature and Language), Falconry, French, German, History (all eras), Japanese, Latin, Mathematics (all levels), Palmistry, Physics, Spanish.
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AP only: Environmental Science, Food Service, Music Theory, Psychology

A Letter to the Prospective College Student
by Linda Carothers

Linda Carothers is a super star in the world of competitive college admissions, ushering over 3,500 students to prestigious universities like Stanford, Harvard, Princeton and Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry with her Proven Advice Young Intellectuals Need (PAYIN) for over 15 years. She is author of 3 books: 5 Steps to Prove Your Child is as Smart as You Think She Is, Financing College: Why $60,000 a Year Really Isn’t that Bad, and Behind the Barricade: How to Help Your Child Survive the Horror that is a State School. She holds a BA in Forest Ecology from The University of Ohio and a PhD in Fine Arts from MIT.

Dear Prospective College Student,

I’m speaking directly to you, the student. Goodbye Mom and Dad! (You guys sure aren’t rad. I am rad. Gnarly. Hip.). You’re reading this letter because you’re a smart, motivated kid who wants to go to a highly competitive college. And I’m writing you this letter to give you a few pointers so you can succeed. Just a few little pointers to help you find your way to the school of your dreams.

1. Test early and test often. While taking your first practice SAT in 3rd grade may seem a little daunting, getting a taste of what the test is like before your junior year of high school can be a lifesaver during that stressful year. And since many schools will super score your standardized test scores, only taking your highest scores in each category, you really have nothing to lose by taking the tests monthly from late elementary school until fall junior year. Studies have shown that each year you take the test, your score will raise by 110 points, so you should easily gain a 2400 by your senior year if you start practicing from birth. Even better, consistently talking to a Harvard Recap tutor will help you boost those scores in time for the college admission process- 2500 points guaranteed!

2. Try to take challenging courses to show schools you’re a serious student. One of my students was very eager to pursue his dreams in mathematics, but was nervous about taking difficult liberal arts classes his senior year, thinking they might damage his GPA. However, we managed to compromise and he took AP Falconry, receiving a 5 on the final examination. Don’t be afraid to try
a difficult course in a subject area you’re unfamiliar with. You just might find it’s a passion of yours! And with the help of a company like The Harvard Recap, you’re sure to do well. Their patented 1-2-800 Program will get you to ace your standardized tests for the price of only the blood of a virgin and your first born child.

3. **Let your true self shine through in your essays.** Finding your voice can be difficult in essays, but try to really show the real “you” in your essays. However, this is not the place to start talking about your midnight Halo sessions or trips to the mall with friends. In short, show the real you... if the real you only cared about sports and the extracurriculars you did to try to look good for college. A traumatic experience can also be a great addition to a college essay. Arrange the death of a loved one to help make your grief genuine; I’m sure Grandma wouldn’t mind taking one for the team. To help get your essays into tip-top shape, schedule a lesson with a Harvard Recapitulation Writing Buddy! Not only will your tutor help you to perfect your essays and write a handful of the more difficult ones for you, but you will also do your part to help the poor, unfortunate English majors who would otherwise be turned out onto the streets like feral cats due to lack of job prospects. Though, frankly, it’s kinda their fault for majoring in liberal arts in the first place. Suckers.

4. **Do your best to prove your leadership in and out of the classroom.** Everybody has the ability to be a leader, but you have to prove that you are better at it than everyone else. Try to showcase your leadership by creating or climbing the ranks in a club. Or 2. Or perhaps 23. I usually advise my students to become involved in around 30 clubs during their freshman year to test the waters of their leadership abilities, and by senior year to settle into a leadership position in about 8 or 9 that they are passionate about. A leadership conference over the summer is also an excellent opportunity to hone your skills in bending the populace to your will. Speak to a Harvard Recapitulation Service Agent to send you a FREE GUIDE TO SUMMER PROGRAMS! In it, you’ll find all of the top leadership programs for the budding young supervillian professional along with many wonderful other summer experiences to revitalize you after your requisite nine months in the gladiatorial arena. Shipping & Handling not included.
In Michael Chabon’s The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay, Brooklyn-bred protagonist Sam Clay and his Czech cousin Josef Kavalier dread and crave the future. Merging Kavalier’s artistry with Clay’s professional savvy, the adolescents secure a comic-book deal. However, residence in fast-paced New York reminds Kavalier and Clay of business manipulation ahead. While inventing comic-book characters, Kavalier and Clay realize their heroes are not flawless immortals, but versions of themselves who master the menacing future. In 1940s New York, artists’ desires to escape industrialism prompted works popularizing self-transformation.

The 1939 World’s Fair encouraged illusions of a technological future. On the surface, the Fair’s innovations attracted millions emerging from “grinding poverty” (Fogel and Stevens). Following the 1929 market crash, unemployment rates nearing 25 percent confined many to bread lines and foreclosed homes (Shmoop Editorial Team). For Great Depression-era Americans, visions like the Trylon’s radiant spire offered renewal (Fogel and Stevens). As Kavalier and Clay relied on alter egos, the Fair’s spectators needed glittering gadgets to conquer the future.

World War II’s outbreak led people to recognize the Fair avoided rather than solved problems. One attraction was utopian city model “Democracy,” which included residential areas called “Pleasantvilles” and “Millvilles” bordering an urban core (Fogel and Stevens). While this ideal intrigued people, no one adapted the technology to current cities. After the Fair, “America’s postwar homes were crowded into vast tract developments,” infusing suburbanites with inner-city exhaustion (Fogel and Stevens). Meanwhile, lower-class citizens’ urban domination meant “infrastructure—transit, schools, parks—was left to strangle on a declining economic base” (Fogel and Stevens). As the disparity between the Fair and reality evidences, spectators embraced the Fair as an escape instead of enacting its visions.

When war ignited after the Fair’s opening, visitors’ optimism crumbled. Multiple countries “closed their pavilions in the Court of Peace,” the seven-acre stretch of flags that marked countries’ goodwill (Fogel and Stevens; “War and Peace”). Likewise, the Trylon and the accompanying Perisphere became disassembled into WWII materials (Fogel and Stevens). The Fair’s gadgets could have constructed an efficient future, but visitors knew such tools could not delay America’s wartime agenda. According to Fair attendant Jason Robards, “It had become pretty obvious what tomorrow was going to be like” (Fogel and Stevens).

While the Fair’s “candy-colored pavilions and exhibit halls” were “bulldozed into piles,” another force alleviated Americans’ wartime anxieties (Chabon 377). In 1939, DC Comics introduced Superman, who “rocketed to Earth from the distant planet Krypton” in literature but derived from “two Jewish kids from Cleveland” in reality (Gaiman and Rogers). Equipped with “super hearing, heat vision, x-ray vision, and super cold breath,” Superman appealed to Americans who feared 1939’s turbulence (Gaiman and Rogers). Like the Fair, Superman pretended America was assuming a forward-thinking path while newspapers screamed war messages. Rather than feeling isolated amid paranoia, adolescents like Kavalier and Clay found comfort knowing millions sought comic books for relief.

Although teenagers prized Superman’s courage, the figure possessed humanity the Fair lacked. Superman’s peers, such as “Spider-Man” protagonist Peter Parker, wished their mortal selves possessed their alter egos’ power. With Superman, though, “it’s mild-mannered reporter Clark Kent that’s the disguise” (Gaiman and Rogers). Superman boasted otherworldly qualities, yet longed to assume his human identity. This desire to be mortal empowered comic-book readers, implying they held potential Superman envied.

Angst over the Nazi Holocaust in 1940s New York intensified comics’ power. Although the genocide occurred overseas, organizations such as the German American Bund incited disputes in New York through a “Madison Square Garden rally [that] drew a crowd of 20,000” (“German American Bund”). Meanwhile, the American Jewish Congress held Madison Square Garden gatherings to accumulate support for rescuing European Jews. New York’s immigrant population peaked in the early 1900s, and each foreigner defended his home nation. These divisions not only linked prewar America to the Holocaust, but created tension specific to New York.
While the Fair avoided violence, superheroes stimulated New Yorkers by confronting such conflicts. The first issue of Timely Comics’ “Captain America” flaunted a cover in which the hero punched Nazi commander Adolf Hitler. National pride led the German American Bund to threaten Timely, leading police to protect the publication’s offices (Cronin). Despite wartime misery, comic books’ eagerness to defeat Nazis excited readers. Watching their situation unfold through comic books, New Yorkers experienced not “siege, panic, or grim resignation to fate but rather the toe-wiggling, tea-sipping contentment of a woman curled on a sofa, reading in front of a fire” (Chabon 340).

Likewise, WWII’s conclusion forced people to abandon alter egos and embrace white-collar routine. Since the postwar G.I. Bill provided veterans cheap mortgages in the suburbs, soldiers who had cherished comics gravitated toward family life (“Baby Boomers”). Despite relieving Americans’ worries, the reassurance of a positive future also destroyed adults' self-transformation fantasies. As comic-book readership declined in the 1950s, the books shifted from superhero titles to horror titles, struggling to stimulate a maturing audience (Cohen). Publishers were comfortable posing fights against antagonists like Hitler, but finding glamour in domestic life was challenging.

As comic books questioned their purpose in postwar America, new fathers grew disillusioned with suburban life. An immigrant hub in the late 1800s, New York’s Lower East Side swelled with crime until middle-class families migrated to boroughs like Queens by subway (Katz). However, this stability carried costs. Upon moving to a Brooklyn suburb, Clay discovers “[t]he rhythms of the commuter train, the school year, publishing schedules, summer vacations, and of his wife’s steady calendar of moods had inured him to the charms and torments of his life” (Chabon 474). While Clay feels untouched by inner-city stress, he also lacks the exhilaration that powered his comic-book success.

Although people like Clay resented family life’s repetition, artists’ ostentation also proved tiring. As Greenwich Village gem Rosa Saks prepares for a family in The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay, she admires high-society neighborhoods she once condemned. Rather than being “stuffily bourgeois,” the Upper West Side’s apartments appear “filled with serious and thoughtful people working hard to accomplish valuable things” (Chabon 384). While Saks understands adulthood brings security, she cannot abandon youth’s zeal. As Saks faces maturity, her sorrow matches that of a child watching the Fair collapse: “[L]ike childhood, the Fair was over, and [Saks] would never be able to visit again” (Chabon 377).
7 p.m. The band enters amid shouts and clinking glasses. Music envelops the room, the rebellious mood swells and, in an hour, the performers have packed their instruments. Stepping outside, they stroll past houses until locating the next club.

8 p.m. The band’s rich sounds invigorate another crowd.

9 p.m., midnight, 2 a.m.

“[The clubs] were operating 24 hours a day or close,” American Jazz Museum education manager Bill McKemy said. “[There] wouldn’t always be music, but there were drinks and gambling.”

According to McKemy, jazz “grew up” in Kansas City. The city’s 1925-1939 jazz age matched the term of political boss Tom Pendergast, whose dismissal of Prohibition fueled Kansas City’s lawless reputation. National interest in rock and pop, while reducing the amount of recognition Kansas City’s jazz receives, has also tightened the jazz community, McKemy said.

“Now, we can look around and at least say jazz is not at the top of the pop charts,” McKemy said. “Now, it’s taken its form as an art music.”

Jazz developed in New Orleans, La., in the early 1900s, with many musicians frequenting a prostitution-stricken neighborhood called Storyville, McKemy said. When the department of the Navy prepared to station troops in New Orleans, the city closed Storyville to prevent the men from partying. In ending jazz performances, the shutdown destroyed musicians’ financial framework.


The sound settled in Kansas City’s 18th and Vine, an African-American community.

“It was a city within a city,” McKemy said. “Whatever types of professional services, whatever people needed to have, if they were African-American, they were shopping here.”

In this creative hub, Kansas City’s jazz style formed. According to McKemy, a quick pace characterized early jazz material like Louis Armstrong’s “Hot Fives & Sevens.” In Kansas City, musicians distinguished themselves by integrating the blues into New Orleans jazz.

“The Kansas City musicians were generally playing the material [with a] slower, more relaxed feel,” McKemy said.

When frequent KC performer Count Basie played on a national radio broadcast, jazz musicians across the country adopted the swing style, McKemy said.

“(Count Basie) changed the feel of the music from [dance phenomenon] ‘The Charleston’ to the [bluesy] ‘One O’Clock Jump,’” McKemy said.

When Pendergast’s tax-evasion charges forced his term to end, Kansas City’s vibrancy faded, according to McKemy. Forced into reform, the city left musicians few opportunities to earn revenue. Thus, jazz musicians sought radio jobs in other cities.

“The musicians that were able to go to New York and get on NBC or whatever, that was much higher potential than playing clubs anywhere,” McKemy said.

The residential stronghold on 18th and Vine deteriorated with jazz culture, as amendments to segregation allowed African-Americans in other KC areas, McKemy said.

“All of sudden everyone can go to the Sears and Macy’s downtown,” McKemy said. “The neighborhood kept dwindling.”

Recently, housing projects and institutions such as the American Jazz Museum have sparked interest in 18th and Vine, but McKemy said redevelopment is “a work in progress.”

“Things seem to be going in a sustainable and healthy direction currently,” McKemy said.

The jazz scene, however, has never lost its followers. According to McKemy, the genre’s community has spread throughout the city, with notable venues ranging from Midtown’s Broadway Jazz Club to Take Five Coffee + Bar at 135th Street and Metcalf Avenue.

“A Johnson County establishment is vastly different than [venues of] the heyday,” McKemy said.
But, while jazz’s community remains strong, public knowledge of the genre has narrowed since the 1930s. Jazz musician Laura Chalk, who grew up in Kansas City, said she did not become familiar with the area’s jazz history until her 20s. According to Chalk, Kansas City’s Prohibition-era jazz scene deserves every resident’s attention.

“If we had programs that taught [jazz history] in schools … I think that there would be a lot of kids, young people tuned in to what was going on,” Chalk said.

According to Green Lady Lounge owner John Scott, Kansas City’s jazz venues serve as educational tools. Even those who enter Green Lady Lounge without jazz knowledge will be hard-pressed not to love the material, Scott said.

“[Jazz is] not popular music of the day, and it hasn’t been for a while—it’s been a niche genre,” Scott said. “But it is always … quality music.”

However, encouraging “quality music” does not mean booking musicians who imitate the greats, Scott said.

“Kansas City is … full of fantastic musicians,” Scott said. “That’s the easy part [of booking performers]. Then, I didn’t want these bands to play traditional jazz. I wanted to move the genre forward with original compositions.”

McKemy cited trumpeter Hermon Mehari as an innovator in Kansas City jazz. Like his predecessors, Mehari cannot cultivate his sound in one place, as last November he traveled to Los Angeles, Calif., as a semifinalist of the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz’s 2014 Trumpet Competition. But, also like his predecessors, Mehari remembers to honor the Kansas City community.

“When [Mehari is] in town, you can see him for free almost any night of the week,” McKemy said.
Chills spread over me as I feel a sense of cold water rush over my skin. Turning my head, I can see his eyes, staring at me intensely from across the room. They are an odd mixture of deep green and blue, and I begin losing myself in them. Their intensity draws me in. I want to say something, get up and ask him why, but I am frozen, almost as if in fear. The man’s appearance is not threatening, but there is something about his intense gaze that intimidates me.

I decide to take baby steps and wiggle my fingers, his eyes still piercing my soul. I look away and try to focus, but I can still feel the heat of his eyes on me. I grow paranoid and look down to see if something is wrong with my clothes, only to find my outfit is perfectly fine.

Flustered, in an attempt to ignore him, I nervously take a sip of my coffee. I run my fingers through my hair, trying to calm myself, but my efforts fail.

I push my chair back and the legs screech across the floor. Flinching at the noise, I slowly stand up, trying not to draw attention to myself. With coffee in one hand, I push my chair back in and take a few steps forward. I stop in front of the man, only to have my breath catch in my throat. His presence becomes overwhelming and I dash out of the coffee shop.

My sprint soon lessens to a moderate pace a few blocks from the shop. I turn around to see if the man is following me, only to see busy New Yorkers bustling up and down the streets. Anxiety builds as I push the crosswalk button, nervous to take my first steps onto the pavement. I did not want a repeat of this morning.

My alarm went off at 5:05 A.M., sending annoying beeps that echoed throughout the apartment. I rolled onto my side and moaned, throwing my hand onto the off button. It was time to run. I threw the sheets back and rubbed my eyes in an attempt to wake up. After fixing my hair into a tight pony tail, I reluctantly pulled on my brand new tennis shoes, and walked out of the door.

Once outside, a bitter wind rushed by, sending a chill down my spine. I immediately regretted my decision and wanted to run back inside and wrap myself into my warm blankets. I reminded myself I must prepare for the marathon in March, and pushed the urge away.

Today I decided I was going to beat my mile record. I started off on 1st street and made my way through my usual route.

The mid–winter chill became nonexistent as I neared Arch Avenue. I peered down at my stopwatch and was overcome with excitement. I was finally going to beat my record. All of my hard work was finally paying off. Finishing one mile in less than 6 minutes, I slowed to a walk and caught my breath. As I neared the intersection, I spotted the crosswalk button. My fingers grazed across it as I recalled all of the past times I stood at this spot, unsatisfied with my time.

As the light flashed for me to walk, I gracefully made my way across the empty street. Suddenly, as if in a flash, I was violently shaken from my day dream.

The pain came first, then the noise. I wish that I could have seen what had happened but all I remember is blackness–everything was dark, and cold. So cold. Tires screeched, horns honked, men yelled and women gasped. I don’t recall flying, but I do remember hitting the ground. I believe the utter shock and irritation of the situation kept me from bursting into tears or recognizing any pain. The incident was more emotionally damaging than physically, or so I thought.

Looking up into the faces of worried and anxiety-stricken bystanders, my mind tried to understand what was happening. I slowly stood up and argued with the driver of car, assuring everyone I was okay. I wanted nothing more than to soothe my already aching muscles in a relaxing shower. Frustrated and tired, I made my back to my apartment, my body in seemingly okay condition.

The hot water rushed over my shoulders, relaxing my neck and relieving stress from the morning. After getting dressed and bundling up into my warm winter coat, I decided to get coffee from the small café down the street.
As the light flashes for me to walk, I move cautiously in fear that I will not make it across the street safely again. I stay awkwardly close to a stranger for protection. Finally, my foot hits the sidewalk and I sigh with relief. I turn towards Maple Avenue to go to work when I spot him.

I see his eyes first, their intensity draws me in. Hypnotized, I step closer to him. My mind goes blank as I take another step forward. My vision narrows on him, and the world around me blurs. Soon I am standing arm’s length away from him and can only think of how beautiful his eyes are. His top lip twitches as if he is about to speak. I want to be the first to say something, but my lips fail to form the words. As if reading my mind, he responds, “I am death.”
Luke Woolery
Poetry: Nightmares and Monsters
Sherwood High School
Lorraine Burns, Teacher

We fight and fight,
As the blood pours out.
Our blood we share,
Is what starts this bout.
I knock you down and smile in harrowing glee,
As my hands go around your throat,
It’s only red I see!
I squeeze and squeeze,
Until your heart does stop.
I stand with a laugh and grab the mop,
I look at my hands varnished in blood,
Both yours and mine it’s like a flood.
I laugh and cry, as I walk to the sink,
I turn on the water and let out a shriek!
For in the mirror it’s not me I see,
But you, only you staring back at me!

Then a shadow does appear with a malevolent smile,
It puts a hand on my shoulder and tells a tale so wild.
You are your father don’t you see,
It’s in your blood, as it will always be.
So come on and let me in,
For once I am, the fun will begin.
I shake my head, and say fuck you!
He gives a laugh and says you too.
I push him away but my hands go through,
He laughs again and says you can’t hurt me,
But I can definitely hurt you.

Waking up I cry,
I scream deep down inside,
Will I die?
Will I lie?
Or will I become content?
In the world of men,
There’s hate to go around.
What I want is the love,
That oh so few have found.
It’s in this hope that I fight the night,
And destiny itself,
I will not be my father,
I will not join his hell!
Blood, it’s everywhere. Splattered on the walls, dripping from the ceiling, even soaked into the carpet on which I stand. I’m not really sure what occurred here, but it wasn’t the most pleasant. Now you’d think I’d be used to this by now, being a coroner and all, but no this was definitely not in the job description.

The victim was a thirty year old white male, he had blonde hair and was in a dress suit. He looks so serene, as if he died without any dissatisfaction with the way his life turned out, well that’s what his face looked like, the rest of him was scattered across the room. His hands placed delicately on the piano in an E minor key, his arms once strong and proud baring a US Army tattoo on the left forearm were now interlocked over the red wood doors. His legs and feet where placed on tip toe in the stance of a pirouette. His torso is what I assume to be splattered and shredded all over the walls and ceiling, but the most peculiar item of all is his suit which is gently laid out over the bed with his head laid just at the top, as if the rest of his body just melted leaving an empty shell. At first I was confused as to how he got all the limbs to remain this way, but then I noticed the thin wiring that was spiraling up each one like vines up an abandoned house.

I’m not really even sure why I’m here, Detective Jacobs called me in, yes, but why? There’s nothing here for me to do, you need a forensic team or hell maybe the FBI, but not a fresh out of college coroner, but just as I turn to leave Jacobs walks in.

“Hey good man, what do you think of this piece we have here today” he says casually.
“Oh, Well in all honesty I don’t even know why I’m here.” I retort.
“Well that wasn’t the question was it? I asked you what you think of the piece.” He said rather briskly.
Why was he getting upset? And more importantly why did he keep calling this crime scene a piece? “I, well I’m not really sure what words can describe a scene like this. It’s horrendous to say the least.” I say.
“Now now Joseph, I thought you were more sophisticated and would see the masterpiece before us.”
Walking to the hands he gently caresses them. “The hands set the tone, with the arms to show how the strong can be brought low, the legs and feet to show the dancer in us all, and finally the wire to show the fear that encompasses all of you.”

“Detective you’re confusing me, how do you know what these things mean?” I say turning around just in time to see the white cloth in his hand, before it covers my mouth.
Blacking out I pass into the abyss, I’m not sure how long I was out or where I ended up all I know is I’m in a chair with the wires going up my legs and around my chest and arms.
“tsk, tsk, tsk, I was hoping you were different dear joseph, but I guess you’re just another piece of clay.”
Says Jacob as he pulls out a carving knife. “You showed so much promise in life, I can only imagine what your death will show.”
“We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain this constitution of the United States of America.”

Not many people my age know that by heart but, me being myself, I have it memorized. I learned it when I was in fifth grade and I have remembered it since. Many people say that having a photographic memory is a great privilege but I think it’s a curse. Yeah, school is easy. But making friends when you have a perfect GPA isn’t so easy.

When “cool” kids move to a new house and a new state, they fit right in. They are athletic, funny and, good with the girls. When a “nerd” moves to a new house and a new state, they don’t fit in so well. When you are in elementary school and you move, it’s not that hard to fit in at the new school and the new neighborhood. And that was my experience the first few times I moved when I was younger. But when I moved from Ohio to D.C., I was moving from seventh grade to eighth grade. It was if the hellhounds had been turned loose from the Underworld.

When you move, the worst part is not packing the truck and driving cross-country, it’s saying goodbye to best friends and having to make new ones. When I learned I was moving to D.C. I was very excited for the new adventure. I didn’t realize the troubles I would have. The day came and I had to make my goodbyes and honestly, it sucked. I had to just let go of six years of friendship and move on and try somehow to replace the best people in the world.

The drive wasn't bad but it gave me time to think and grieve about my friends I was leaving behind. We arrived at my new home and I saw the true colors of D.C.. In my neighborhood, you would never walk to a friend’s house after 5:00. But that wasn't a problem for me because I didn't have any friends. Yes I eventually made friends at my new school but I was bullied at least twice a week by a group of thugs.

At this new school if you weren’t muscled up and had long hair, you were never going to get a girl, let alone be allowed to live your life quietly. I found this out the hard way one day at school. This girl I had in a couple of my classes was really pretty. I decided to ask her out to the movies and I got the “Are you talking to me?”. I said yeah and she laughed, laughed so loud that her friends came over and asked what was so funny. She told them what happened and I was humiliated.

The gym locker room the next day was brutal. As I was changing, a man, or so he thought, and who will never be named, came up and shoved me into the lockers. He proceeded to remind me of how I wasn't strong and that I had short hair. A military buzz cut doesn't necessarily shout “groovy” to all these hippies. A couple of his buddies came up and decided to join the fun. This threw me over the edge. I changed as quickly as I could and went out into gym. We played dodgeball that day and I don't think I need to explain how that went.

Needless to say, days went by and some of the aggressors chilled out and decided to pounce on other victims, but there were some persistent one who made me their annual school project. They would work on me, put me away for a few days, pull me out again, finish up here and there, put me away for a week or two, and it went on like this the entire year. The school year seemed to drag by with all the horrors of middle school mixed in.

Summer finally arrived and the news came that we would be moving again, great. I thought to myself. I would have to start all over and that it would be just the same. I am thrilled to tell you that I was wrong. Dead wrong...

We moved to a small town in Missouri where everybody knew everybody. The town had two stoplights, three home cookin’ cafes, and an old-fashioned barber shop. Our new town was the county seat where the county fair was held. Blue ribbons, horse shows, kettle corn -- the whole nine yards. It looked promising, but this gave me the impression that the friend groups would already be established and hard to get in. The new school was much nicer than my old school and everyone was actually...welcoming? No one gave you a dirty look when you bumped into them by accident and making friends was just that easier. I made many good friends fairly quickly and life was good.
As the school year went along it went great. I found this girl that I really liked and come to find out, she liked me too. I asked her out and she said yes. I was surprised because in my mind, I wasn’t the strongest, the tallest, or the most popular kid in our grade. She saw something in me that I evidently didn’t see in myself. Word must have gotten out because the next day in gym I was congratulated on “getting the girl” which was so much better than getting beaten up.

I still live in this small town and I love it and pray that I get to stay here for a little while. I know that the recent moves that we have made as a family are a necessary part of giving service to our country and I support my dad and the armed services by trying to be positive about moving around the country, trying to establish roots. I try not to get too attached to anyone, knowing that I may have to say yet another goodbye in a few months. But this time around, I’m letting my guard down a little, relaxing a little, enjoying life in this town where the sidewalks roll up at seven o’clock every night and where the bullies have moved on down the road. Yep, I just may get to settle down, put down a root or two, and pick up a friend along the way.
Hang Zhang

Poetry: Sonnet: Finally, Embrace the End of Our Love
Missouri Military Academy
Erin Chambers, Teacher

I do not want you to find me again,
Moonlight is ruthless, like your pretty eye.
Lest relent and forgive happen again,
Sunshine was vain, when you walk in my life.
Recall could explode at any time,
Scar teaches us how to hold back the tears.
Memories are not precious like a dime,
Maybe you will stray after a few years.
How could we don’t care each other? We care.
Don’t blame at present, please, just forget.
Who confused whom, would we wreck? We dare.
From comedy to tragedy, your eyes will wet.

Nowadays, we can’t get back, the best move.
Finally, embrace the end of our love.
Yueyi (Emily) Zhao

Poetry: And the Axis Tilts
John Burroughs School
Eleanor DesPrez, Teacher

commandments in the season of Christ

only fall in love
in winter, when it's too cold
to breathe alone

only fall asleep
in winter, the death-trance
from which one wakes
hungover with thoughts
of paradise
and apocalypse

forge companionship
in the steel screech of blizzards,
stamped in kisses stained
with barren starlight,
signed by fingers stupid
with frost, slipped between lips
svelte north winds parted

dream atop the highest
hill, toes brushing
the pigeon-colored sky,
the universe's secrets unraveling
in a swirling breath.

Fickle Springs

all I ask of green spring is
your face in a flower with
odd-numbered petals
to love me, love me
scattered under my
wet feet in a sighing gale

water lilies in a vase
on the bathtub
where you wait,
to stroke blind Monets
across my back

camaraderie with the sky,
deep enough to swallow
all consciousness;
our tendrils of vagrant
thought, spun velvet
briefly alighting
on an idle cloud.

Variations on a Summer Night

I. The stars will keep your ghosts away
II. The night sky is a sheet of black velvet, full of pinpricks through which the light of Heaven slips
III. Slips, loses its footing, falters; these are the verbs for an atheist, a skeptic, but for others
IV. The light of Heaven glides through the edges of gently pierced universe
V. Pierced by what? Pierced, or sculpted by the hot winds of everything until with a sigh it opens its arms to embrace—
VI. The moon is the biggest mirror we will ever see, larger and freer and less cratered than our consciences
VII. Science, our modern mythology
VIII. Matter cannot be created or destroyed, so we thrum and have always thrummed and will always thrum with stardust
IX. We are photons from Above, fabric of our world’s thin rippling cap, hairsplinters at the edge of conscious divination
X. Ladling celestial marrow in thimbles of poetry.

For the First Day of Fall

The sky shines flawless overcast, light
from photos of zen gardens,
from the backs of koi
who sank to the mud in your grandmother's winters
and resurface to blossom in your granddaughter's springs.
Leaves freeze eerie green,
warm to the gaze but cold to the touch.

And perhaps my back would ache less
with winter’s first yawn if you leaned upon it,
but how impossible the union of a koi fish
with leaves still trembling doomed upon the branch;
how ill-suited is company to the brittle separations
of the first day of fall.
Remember when you almost left me?
I wrote in my pretentious writer’s notebook a checklist in which I vowed to: hug you twice a day; hug your mother once a day; hug each of my family members every time I walk out the door of our home; donate a dollar to every homeless person I see; never think another harsh thought about my (admittedly petty, vapid, and cruel) enemies; somehow win a full tuition to Harvard and proceed to steal the cure for your grandmother’s Alzheimer’s from a poor research professor who’s slaved away half his life. These seemed fair prices to pay for your presence as I contemplated the prospect of having no one to call at 2am, to hysterically ask what will happen if I chose the wrong undergraduate major—Music, or Creative Writing, for example—and remain unemployed after graduation with more student debt than I can count up to. I imagine you picking up the phone and telling me, “Fuck off, you dumb bitch”; I’d still smile at the sound of your voice.

No, no, no. Easier to cure Alzheimer’s.
When my list exceeded in page number all of the writing I had ever finished, I threw the entire notebook away. I pulled out my acrylics and tried to copy a soothing Monet, but it quickly became apparent who was really half blind. I threw the canvas away too, and resigned myself to sitting on the hardwood floor with phone in hand, flicking the vibrate button back and forth to give the illusion that flurries of loving text messages were thrumming through the stupid little tablet’s heart. My lock screen remained blank save for your face and mine. I changed the background to an amicable field of round blue pebbles. I ate a lot of guacamole but didn’t cry. I listened to Breakeven by the Script on replay for two hours straight.

Remember?
Well, you don’t remember, because you never almost left me. You called me at 11:48 pm to tell me that you had spent the day at your grandparent’s, 4321 Middle Of Nowhere Drive, without cell service.

“Are you mad at me?” you asked plaintively in the voicemail. “Sorry I called so late…I hope I don’t wake you up. Give me a call when you get this, OK?” I imagined you hunched over your own little list as you rattled from the heartland hospitality of Middle Of Nowhere back to the cold uncertainty of the suburbs and fickle love.

Of course; this is who you are, this is your kindness that is my karmic punishment, this is my constant doubt that betrays the rot at my core.

This is the moment in which I happily abandon every resolution I wrote down, and realize a split second too late the implications of the abandonment. This is the day I am glad you don’t remember, the day on which I realized I am capable of happily selling my soul and pretending I hadn’t.
Katie Zoldos
Poetry: Where I’m From
Platte City Middle School
Devin Springer, Teacher

I am from picket fences,
From Jeeps and bare feet.
I am from the Oak Trees
So tall, so big, if you climbed them you would touch the moon.
I am river banks,
Where you dived off the rocks.
I'm from fishing and freckles,
From blood-sisters and soul-sisters,
I'm from the calm side,
And the wild side.
From, "Don't make me tell your daddy."
And, "Don't ride the dog like a horse."
I'm from the little church we stopped going to,
And our own prayers.
I'm from royalty and heroes,
From the grandma who traveled across the world,
And my great-Grandpap's abandoned castle.
I'm from the pictures on the piano,
From seashells on the counter,
I'm from the memories,
The moments,
But most of all,
I am from picket fences.