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Missouri Youth Write

Missouri Youth Write is sponsored by the Missouri Association of Teachers of English (MATE). MATE, the Missouri Writing Projects Network, and Prairie Lands Writing Project at Missouri Western State University joined together last June to form the Missouri Writing Region, a regional affiliate for the national Scholastic Writing Awards Contest sponsored by The Alliance for Young Artists & Writers. The winning students’ writings from the Missouri Writing Region for the 2009 national Scholastic writing contest comprise this edition of Missouri Youth Write.

Editor: Rebecca Dierking (rebeccadierking@yahoo.com)
Death of a Writer: A Literary Memoir

Author: Samuel Barth
Grade: 11
Teacher: Ronda Scott
School: Park Hill High School, Kansas City, MO

The Poky Little Puppy, Where the Wild Things Are, and Goodnight Moon were some of the books on which I practiced the basic procedure of deciphering words and sentences. From these humble beginnings, I progressed to the lyrical verse of Dr. Seuss where I began to sharpen my sword in preparation for the uphill battle that was finding significance in writing. The lessons I struggled to learn from Dr. Seuss, just to prove that I could, became my moral foundation. The Butter Battle Book taught the young Sam not to be narrow-minded toward those who eat their bread with the butter side down. Likewise, Oh, The Places You’ll Go convinced me that I could do anything I wanted, I only had walk out my front door.

Short chapter books characterized the next stage of my reading career. Oftentimes these books were part of a series. Titles included Stories from Wayside School, The Magic Tree House, and Junie B. Jones. The connection I shared with the main characters in these series, as I followed them through countless adventures, was a precursor to the single greatest literary influence in my life. Harry Potter.

I was eight and living in Columbia, Missouri, the year that Harry Potter debuted. I had been invited to a friend’s birthday party. As an added treat, my friend’s mother read to us from a book called Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone. Not one to be easily preoccupied, much less impressed by literature, it is significant to say that I was captivated, enchanted, and mesmerized by the young wizard. Chocolate cake and freeze tag were immediately swept from my mind as my friend’s mother read two chapters of the inaugural Harry Potter. After the party, I rushed home to plead with my parents for my own copy of The Sorcerer’s Stone. Soon I was not the only Harry Potter fanatic in my family. My mom and my sister, being much more proficient readers than myself, sped through the story at lightning speed. My father and I lagged behind, no less spellbound.

I continued to read Newbery Award nominees and Mark Twain Award winning books, but in my eyes, these tales paled in comparison to J.K. Rowling’s masterpieces, which I read with ravenous thirst. I had tasted a rare delicacy, and now I could not be satisfied by anything less. It is impossible to calculate exactly how many aspects of my life Harry Potter influenced in some way, but I can safely say that J.K. Rowling at least inspired me to do my first bit of story writing.

I never liked writing as it never came easily to me. I was heartbroken by the way my sentences sounded in my head, but I persisted. I wanted to create a story of my own that would enthrall audiences the way that J.K. Rowling’s story had captivated me.

But, as a man’s nutritional needs cannot be met by delicious Peeps, I could not survive on a diet of Harry Potter alone. I knew that J.K. Rowling could not possibly be the only great storyteller in literature, so I went looking for something else that could satisfy a stomach that had grown accustomed to rich literature and hearty adventures. My mother recommended that I start at the top of her personal food chain, Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird. In retrospect, I was too young to understand the significance of the book, but I did appreciate the writing. Lee wrote in a simple and elegant way that I would attempt unsuccessfully to mimic in my own literary endeavors.

By the time I had read To Kill a Mockingbird a second time, I had won a Scholastic Gold Key Award for one of my short stories, “Saving Joe.” Overall, the story was a disappointment to me, and I could only compare it to J.K. Rowling and cringe. I adopted the tradition of not liking anything I wrote during this period.

I read on. The Giver. The Green Mile. The Catcher in the Rye. As I read, I became more open minded toward books that did not have titles beginning with “Harry Potter and the...” Eventually I read Fahrenheit 451 for school and became intrigued with books about the future. 1984, Brave New World, and Animal Farm I consumed eagerly. I came to regard George Orwell, Ray Bradbury, and Aldous Huxley as equals to J.K. Rowling. These books even inspired my own vision of the future, for which I won a second Gold Key (although I faithfully stood by my tradition of despising my own writing). “Cockaigne,” as my story was christened, was about a mythical land of ease and luxury. Unlike my undoing flaw in “Saving Joe,” which occurred because of the sheer simplicity of the plot, “Cockaigne” was quite simply too complex.

My third award for writing was bestowed upon me by Brigham Young University for the story “Lotto Man.” In comparison to my other short stories, it was a triumph of a disaster. Weighing in at nearly fourteen pages in length, “Lotto Man” was the largest literary undertaking in my life. Using all of the literary stamina at my disposal, it still
took my mother nearly three weeks to coax it out of me. At this point, I would be remiss if I failed to disclose that I write nearly everything because my mother told me to write it.

Three stages of motherly bullying are effective in making me do what I do not like to do: write. The first stage is the dropping of innocent hints during seemingly coincidental verbal exchanges. “You know, Sam, Mother’s day is right around the corner, and you haven’t written anything in a while.” The second stage happens when my mother argues that my entire future depends on writing short stories that I don’t like. “Sam! If you expect to be accepted at Washington University you had better get writing or think again!” The third and final stage is when my mother locks me in my room and yells through the cat-flap, “No dinner until you’ve written ten pages, single-spaced!” I hope we never get to stage three.

However, reading has always inspired me. As Romeo fell in love with Juliet, I fell in love with Shakespeare’s literary triumph. *Hamlet* was even better.

I soon found that I could devour books faster and with more ease by buying books on tape. *Zorro, The World According to Garp, Huckleberry Finn, The Cider House Rules,* and *Treasure Island* were conquered in this manner.

And then I found *Great Expectations.* For no particular reason other than the vague inkling to see if all the hype about Dickens was true, I set my mind to reading it. My copy of the book had once belonged to my Uncle Bob, a Jesuit priest, and I remember breathing in the musty smell of old Boston College as I let the pages fly by my face, tickling the end of my nose. Uncle Bob had scratched out notes in the margins in a loopy scrawl. I could imagine him sitting in his modest quarters behind a big wooden desk, hunched over this very book. Perhaps he smiled to himself as he wrote; perhaps he stuck his pencil between his teeth to think like my father sometimes does.

And then I read *Great Expectations.* Charles Dickens stopped me in my literary tracks. I had not reached chapter two before I discovered that I could never write another word knowing that I would always compare it to Dickens. The poor Pip could never know how worthless he made me feel about my writing. I envied the Great Dickens for every character flaw he corrected and every sentence he embellished.

*Great Expectations* opened my eyes to unattainable literary beauty elsewhere. If I had not been convinced that my carefully constructed plan to become an author had not been more than a fanciful daydream after *Great Expectations,* then the nail was certainly driven home by William Golding’s social experiment masterpiece, *Lord of the Flies.* Only one book, or should I say group of books, has surpassed my love of *Lord of the Flies.*

The regard with which I hold Golding and Dickens is staggeringly grand, but it does not come close to that with which I hold J.K. Rowling. When I finished reading the seventh and final installment of Harry Potter, I carefully closed it, placed it on my desk, and commenced to be inconsolable for the next two hours.

Having the knowledge that I have ascertained by reading these books is very fulfilling. It means that my life was not wasted and that I have a little piece of what is good and pure inside of me forever. Strange to think, then, that my greatest ambition is to acquire amnesia and read them all again for the first time.

The ability to read and write has, until the very recent past, been a factor of human experience that has separated people in the world along lines drawn by poverty and social status. In modern times, however, the written word has taken great strides toward reconnecting these broken bonds of brotherhood among the human race. It is much easier in this age to attain knowledge on virtually any subject by reading and to let your voice be heard by any audience through writing. But like all noble causes, once achieved, it is easily taken for granted. I have been one of the worst offenders. In my life, I have fallen on my face more times than I can count, but I have only one regret: I didn’t read enough books.
The Crack

Author: Megan Beney
Grade: 11
Teacher: Timothy Ryan
School: McCluer North Senior High School, Florissant, MO

“You have eighteen seconds. Ready? Begin.”
A pause.
“What?”
“Thirteen seconds. You really should get going, Mr. Edwards.”
“But what’s going on? What am I supposed to do?”
“You’re quickly running out of time. Your scores will be drastically affected by your current inactivity.”
“What do you mean?”
“Seven seconds.”

Nicholas glanced around the bare white room, his heartbeat pummeling the inside of his chest. The first thing he saw was a yo-yo on a stool, and he rushed over to pick it up. It was yellow with blue and white stripes.

“Time.”

A moment later, he heard frantic scribbling, scratches on a clutched clipboard.

“Hmm . . . The yo-yo . . . an interesting choice . . . shows signs of unwillingness to . . .” The voice trailed off into incoherent mumbling, vague and jumbled utterances. “Thank you, Mr. Edwards. Your scores will be sent to you in three weeks time.”

Dazed, Nicholas stumbled forward, falling onto the door to the lobby for support. Nicholas wanted to leave, to go back to his quarters, but he hesitated before turning the egg-shaped handle. Whirling back to the strange white room, Nicholas noticed a small black fissure on the far wall. When he looked closer, he could see that it was lined with a glowing silvery-purple material whose brightness pulsated like the beating of a heart, giving the crack the appearance of an exposed vein on a skin of flaky white paint. Nicholas blinked – once, twice – and found that he was having trouble drawing his eyes from the little black crevasse. It seemed to have its own gravitational pull, and he took a step toward it, not noticing that its pulsation was shifting to match the rhythm of his heart.

“Mr. Edwards, you can leave now. You’ll have your results in three short weeks,” said the bodiless voice of the intercom.

Shaking his head, Nicholas forced his attention away from the crack on the wall and shoved his way through the door with the egg-shaped handle. Warmth greeted him as he stepped out into the main lobby, and he looked around, inhaling the familiar smells of the seawater fountain and freshly baked oatmeal cookies. Nicholas smiled when he saw the institution’s head secretary waddling towards him, her pleasantly plump mass shifting opposite her footsteps in her hurried efforts to reach him.

“Nicky!” she called, putting a pudgy hand to the side of her bright red lips, the most extravagant feature of her otherwise domestic appearance.

“Nicky,” she repeated as she came to a stop in front of him, putting a hand on his shoulder as she caught her breath, “How are you? I heard you took your test today! How did it go?”

Before he could stammer a reply, the secretary took Nicholas by the arm and ushered him over to her desk, which was bare except for a pink, pencil-filled mug and a plate full of cookies. “Take one,” she offered, gesturing to the plate as she sank into her large purple chair, “and then tell me about your day.”

Nicholas shifted his weight from foot to foot, his eyes darting from the edge of the desk, to his shoes, and settling on the plate of cookies. He hesitated, tilting his head in consideration, and then decided to pick one up, hoping that his movement would assuage the secretary that he was contemplating, and not ignoring, her question. Nicholas took a bite, his jaw forming a methodical cycle as it moved up and down, and he crinkled his forehead in concentration, trying to recall some memory of the morning’s events. Glimpses of the strange white room flashed into his head, followed by the drone of the instructional voice over the intercom. He remembered that there had been a yo-yo on a stool, but he couldn’t recall why it had been there, why he had been there. And there was something about a crack on the far wall . . .

Long moments passed before Nicholas held his breath and swallowed, surprised by the ease at which the food slid down his throat. He glanced up at the secretary, who nodded and smiled encouragingly. When he looked down to take another bite, he noticed that the cookie seemed less tangible, almost opaque in nature. Nicholas shrugged,
deciding to ignore the change, and bit the remainder of the cookie in half. His eyes widened with surprise at the sharp sweetness of the food, and as he was chewing, he saw that the cookie had become an edible sort of harnessed mist. Rolling the food-mush into a ball with his tongue, Nicholas tried to remember the color of the yo-yo. What was it? It had been so nice. Something bright and friendly . . . The whole room had been inviting – warm and well lit . . . But Nicholas felt that he was forgetting something, something important, and he couldn’t remember what. There was something strange on the far wall . . . maybe a picture or a mirror . . .

As soon as he swallowed, a dull sense of empty longing filled the pit of Nicholas’s stomach, and he put the cookie down on the edge of the desk, unable to eat the final bite.

“What did you think of the cookie, dear? Did you like it?”

Nicholas jumped when he heard the secretary’s voice and nodded, bobbling his head up and down, his automatic response in complete opposition to his true opinion.

“Oh, good. I should hope so. You would think a boy would know his own tastes.” She smiled again, her straight white teeth gleaming like polished toy soldiers lined up in a row.

Nicholas blinked, pausing to absorb the pleasant woman’s words, and then fixed the secretary with an inquisitive stare. “Wait, what do you mean when you say, ‘his own tastes’?”

The secretary looked at him, her face the perfect mask of innocent confusion, lines of worry barely creasing her smooth, creamy skin. “Why Nicky, my dear, you made these cookies yourself! Don’t you remember?” When Nicholas shook his head, she sighed, rolling up the sleeves of her pink floral cardigan. “I suppose you wouldn’t. You did bake some of them a long time ago. Besides, I think that your cookie making memories are some of the things they pull after you take the test. I honestly don’t see why it’s necessary, making our young people forget their cookie making days. If you ask me, there’s too much of a focus on rushing you all through the crack. And now with this ridiculous test . . .” She pursed her lips, shaking her head in sharp disapproval. “But you didn’t hear any of that from me now, did you, Nicky?” she added hastily, her eyes darting from side to side as if she were searching for unseen eavesdroppers.

“N-no, of course not, ma’am,” Nicholas stuttered, unsure of how else to respond. A sense of uneasiness began tugging at the back of his mind, causing him to shift his weight forward to the balls of his feet. What had she said about a crack? In all of his years at the institution, Nicholas had never noticed any sign of wear or imperfection in the building’s smooth surfaces. After a few puzzled moments, he opened his mouth to ask the secretary what she meant, but she must not have noticed. With a wave of her bejeweled hand, she began speaking again, cutting him short.

“In any case,” the secretary said, the glittering smile returning to her face, “I’d better go check on the children.” She stood up, placing her hands on the barren desk, her thick fingers spread wide for support. “I can’t bake the cookies for them, nor would they want me to, I imagine. I had my own cookies as a girl. But I can be there to help them, as I was there to help you, even if you can’t remember.” She reached across the desk and patted his cheek, her eyes glowing with affection. “Take care, Nicky. You always were one of the best of my brood. Hopefully that won’t change, even after they send you through the . . . after you get your test results.”

Nicholas watched the secretary as she waddled away, the corners of his mouth tilting upwards. When she was out of sight, he shook his head, trying to remember the years, the days, the hours before his test, but all that came to mind were blurred images, whispers and shadows of the past. With a final glance around the lobby, Nicholas nodded, finding strength and purpose in the decisive movement, and picked up the plate of cookies. He must have made them for some reason, even if he could not remember what that reason was, and he felt that he might need them later. Nicolas turned away, hopeful of finding his friends, anxious to learn how their testing had gone. In his haste, he failed to notice the empty space on the desk where the final bite of his first cookie had been laying only moments before.

* * *

“Mr. Edwards, your test results are ready.”

Nicholas rose from his hard plastic chair, his backside sore from sitting, waiting, his heartbeat hammering in his chest. He felt as if the eyes of those still waiting to be called forward were boring into him, judging him, and challenging his right to proceed. His footsteps shook as he advanced toward the desk, making him stumble, causing the temperature to rise in his cheeks. The journey seemed interminable, each footfall lasting a lifetime. One step – another – breathe, release – stumble – recover – repeat . . .

By the time Nicholas reached the secretary’s desk, his limbs were trembling and sweat streamed down the sides of his flushed face. His stomach churned as if he had swallowed a miniature washing machine, tumbling and tossing its contents, and he found that he could not look the woman in the eye for fear of her detecting some weakness in him. Instead, he clamped his eyes shut, moisture dribbling down the seams of his face. Nicholas hoped that when
he opened them he would be back in his quarters, safe amidst his bed and belongings.

"Mr. Edwards, would you like me to read your results to you, or would you like to read them yourself?"

Nicholas snapped his eyes open, expecting to see the pleasant, plump secretary that had given him the cookies, that had called him "Nicky" and had patted his cheek. He was taken aback when he found a thin, hard-nosed woman sitting in the large purple chair in her place. As his surprise began to wear off, he noticed that the desk was now covered in neat piles of manila folders, each labeled in black ink with a different student’s name. The pink, pencil-filled mug had been replaced by a tall, stainless steel basket filled with thick, heavy-looking black and blue ballpoint pens.

The woman behind the desk blinked at him, her eyes magnified by her dark gray horn-rimmed glasses. She sat with her hands folded under her chin, her over-plucked eyebrows raised in expectation.

"Well," the new secretary began, her rigid, unadorned lips wrinkling and flexing like the folds of an accordion, "which would you prefer? You haven’t got all day to decide, you know."

Nicholas glanced behind him at the rows of people still waiting to receive their test results, each of them poised and alert as if they were viewing a production of live theater. As he reviewed the faces, images and bits of information flashed into his brain—names, rumors, memories. These were the people with whom he had grown up. If he had somehow failed the test, if something had gone wrong, all of them would know if the secretary were to read the results aloud. He would never be able to look any of them in the eye again.

"I’d like to read the results myself, please," he murmured, refusing to raise his eyes from the floor.

"Alright then," the secretary said as she handed him the manila folder labeled with his name, her already thin mouth pinched tighter in feigned indifference.

Nicholas reached out to receive the folder, almost dropping it as he took the precious cargo in his quavering hands. The performance had reached its climax, and Nicholas felt the audience, his peers, lean forward as a single mass, each member holding his or her breath in pregnant expectation. His head spun, twirling and tilting like a lunatic toy top. Nicholas closed his eyes, knowing that he could not wait for courage to come to him, and tried to clear his thoughts, finding a rhythm in the rising and falling of his chest. After a few long moments, Nicholas slid his fingertips towards the edges of the folder, attempting to distract his mind as his body performed the task that his spirit could not.

"Mr. Edwards," the secretary droned, her nasally voice heavy with impatience, "there are other people waiting to see their scores."

Nicholas’s eyelids shot apart, and he fixed the scowling woman with a piercing stare before jerking open the manila folder. He looked inside, unsure of what to expect, and found that there was only one word written on a standard sheet of clean white paper: "Admit."

Relief overwhelmed Nicholas’s senses, making him lightheaded and giddy. He had passed, oh heavens, he had passed . . .

"Congratulations," the secretary drawled, "You are free to continue. Please return to Room 34A to complete the examination procedures."

Nicholas took a deep breath, squeezing the air out of his lungs in a slow, regulated hiss before stepping forward. He did his best to walk with confidence, hoping that his footsteps would not reflect his churning nerves. Fighting the urge to run, Nicholas grasped the egg-shaped handle, and pulled the door to the strange white room open, pausing only a moment to glance back at the large, familiar lobby before stepping inside.

As soon as Nicholas pulled the door closed, he knew that the atmosphere of the room had changed, had become more ominous. He looked around, trying to identify the cause of the variance, when he noticed a man dressed in a solid white suit sitting at the end of a long white table, his hands cupped beneath his chin as if he were in deep thought.

The man stood, the ceiling lights gleaming off of his smooth, bald scalp and glittering in the bristles of his stiff white beard. "Hello, Nicholas," he said, his voice like liquid fire, "Do you know why you are here today?"

Nicholas shook his head, his throat tight, making him incapable of speech.

"No? Well, allow me to explain." The man picked up a white ballpoint pen and began twirling it around his index finger like a stunted, staccato helicopter blade. Nicholas felt his insides turn to ice, and he stood there watching him, mesmerized by the movement, wishing that the man would stop, irrational panic growing inside of him.

"You are here because you can no longer be there," the man said, pointing to the door with the egg-shaped handle. "That place is of your past. You must now move forward."

Sudden terror wiped Nicholas’s mind clear of all thought, leaving him incapable of forming a response. "No," he finally managed to squeak, his voice scraping his constricted throat.

"No?" the man repeated, stepping out from behind the table, still twirling the ballpoint pen. "‘No’ is not an option. You must comply. There is no other way."
Nicholas began to tremble. His eyes darted from side to side like angry flies captured inside of small glass jars, searching for some method of escape. In his efforts, his eyes brushed past the far wall, and he gasped when he noticed that the small crack had grown into a prominent fissure that spanned from the floor of the room to its ceiling. Nicholas watched in gross fascination as the inky mass rippled and surged like ebon lava held up by some reversal of gravity, its purple veins now thick, impressive cords. He had forgotten about the crevasse. It had been so small, so unassuming during his testing, but now Nicholas found that he could not pull his attention away from the dark schism. He stared at the onyx substance, its consistency akin to that of blood, as it pumped and pulsed, forming the heartbeat of the institution. Nicholas wondered how he had been blind to it when he first entered the room.

“Yes, it’s . . . intriguing, isn’t it?” the man crooned, edging nearer, nearer. “Why don’t you go take a closer look? Yes, that’s right . . .”

It was as if the locks in Nicholas’s legs had been released. He stumbled forward, consumed by the desire to be near the strange dark crevasse. When he was only a few feet away, he stopped, caught by the memory of the plate of cookies in his quarters.

“You don’t need those anymore, Nicholas,” the man whispered as if reading his thoughts, “Go ahead, step through.”

Nicholas hesitated, torn between the memory of the cookies and his need to be near the rippling ebony liquid. The man took another step toward him, his face growing dark with angry shadows. “Don’t be difficult, now. Go!”

In a sudden burst of energy, Nicholas spun around and hurtled himself toward the door with the egg-shaped handle. He had only taken three strides when the man grappled him from the front, grabbing him by the shoulders, pushing him back to the oppressive fissure. Nicholas tried to break free of the man’s grasp, but his strength was too great, and the allure of the schism was too strong. With a final glance toward the door with the egg-shaped handle, Nicholas closed his eyes and fell backward into the iron clutches of the swirling obsidian ooze.
Portfolio Submission

Author: Emily Boresow
Grade: 12
Teacher: Susie Schweiker
School: Blue Valley North High School, Overland Park, KS

Statement of Purpose
Poetry: Ignition
Prose: Colors and Numbers
Prose: The Secretary’s Choice
Prose: From Above the Casket
Poetry: Owl

Why I Write

I am a writer. I am a poet.

My first poem was written in a leopard print key-chain diary I received from a birthday party when I was eight. It read something like: “The rat is fat. He has a hat. He goes splat.” Original, I know. But I wrote my next poem ten minutes later. This one I copied in red ink onto a sheet of paper that I still have: “It’s nighty-night time, play is over. Think of places where there’s clovers [sic], think of stars and a big round moon, think that play will be here soon.” The words flowed in an innate sense of imagery and sound, but the sensitivity resided within my fingers, waiting for the perfect moment to blossom.

When I was ten, my “younger twin” cousin Abby died unexpectedly. Within a few months, my writing changed from poems that began like: “Johnny Go-go likes his yo-yo; he can do an around the world, an under-doggie, Why! he can even do a hop-the-froggie!” to: “Lilacs on river, must you dry your eyes? Must you whisk away the rain, Lilacs on river…” The world was ablaze, full of sorrow and unfairness; through poems and extended metaphors, I cried, “Why? Where is God?” Writing was all I could do to express my emotions and reach into the well of my soul that yearned for answers and understanding. Reading over poems and stories I have written, I find a map of my childhood.

A story I wrote for Mrs. Metlach, my sixth grade English teacher who never failed to encourage me, has proved to be instrumental in my development as a writer. Up to this point, my writing had been personal and private, exploring my own emotions and experiences. With “Fantasy Life,” I became my sister, struggling to cope with autism in middle school. Writing became like acting, an instrument for compassion. I realized that writing connects people, and based on the deep reactions exhibited by my sixth grade classmates, that my writing can be a tool to make those connections.

I am a writer. I write to love. I write to laugh. I write to grieve, to believe, to search, to question, and acknowledge. I write to share my experiences and to experience what I cannot. I write to learn; my passion to learn and my desire to succeed will only continue to drive me. Even today, after long hours of homework, I spend extra time on English reading that I could easily Sparknote, because I enjoy reading and because I realize that underlining key phrases, writing in the margins, and asking questions will make me a more profound and efficient writer. I will continue to improve throughout my life, but I have a purpose that drives me, to enrich the lives of others.

I am a writer. I am a poet.
I write to inspire.

Ignition

Brown eyes glister,
Leaves burst of chlorophyll green and swing
in the windy spring.

I spring, sing in pink-and-purple of movie star dreams
and Sissy on the tire swing--
slow-motion as the birds chirp in haughty trees,
back forth, forth back.
Knees crawl and hands under an alpha evergreen,
silent.

Jealous leaves whisper, birds whimper,
Beauty nests in the dead pine needles--
a gleaming blue egg.
Oh
a baby blue Easter egg.
Knees and hands I will cradle as a Mama Bird.
Slowly,
Fingers reach,
Touch,
Grab,
And --
On knees and hands cradle Mama Bird.

But premature are glistering eyes,
Tear like the volatile sac beneath the shell.
A quick crack SMACK!

Life is spat in runny muck.

This is
Life dead, sticky and repulsive
By my fingers;
guilt and greed and need, sadness,
Compassion;
the sound of shrieking birds and quaking leaves;
a crying love, a hating knowledge.

This is
a dead baby Robin;
Brown eyes ignite.

**Colors and Numbers**

Autism is seventeen years old and trembling as a rock grows in her stomach. I see patches of colors and shirts, hear shrill voices across the hallways diffusing the salty smell of fries and chicken. “Lilly!” I hear, “Over here!” I look around, desperately, like I am back in middle school, eating lunch with the nurse.

I follow Anne’s voice, see her green “Peace” shirt, rush to the classroom door. “Good luck in philosophy.”
“Thanks,” I smile. “Good luck on your physics test.”

I focus on each blue tile before me. Always the hallways seem like a vast network of tunnels; they wait like snakes to slither and rearrange. Clenching my fists, I feel a bee tickling my forearm. I hold my breath, pretend there is no bee.

I sit at my desk next to a brunette sophomore who smacks gum and talks loudly. Mostly she ignores me, but once in a while she teases me to get laughs from the class. “Shut up, Lilly,” she’ll remark, “Don’t be so loud.” I look away and pretend not to notice the class smirking guiltily. They think I’m stupid, that I can’t understand her.

Then always, Ms. Dimpsey who comes to my rescue. “Do we want more homework tonight?” Like I’m some kind of puppy being teased and they are guilty schoolchildren in need of scolding. Like I’m incapable of realizing I’m being made fun of because I can’t function normally, like I’m some pitiable autistic girl who won’t ever make it to college. Let Ms. Dimpsey bask in her magnanimous glory.

In fourth grade, my parents didn’t believe Mrs. Winter when she asked if I was receiving speech therapy. “What?” They asked, concerned. “Why would Lilly need that?”
I didn’t speak in class.
“She doesn’t...talk?” “Not a word?” “For how long?!”
Mrs. Winter squinted straight into my parents round, frightened eyes. "You mean, you weren’t aware?"
"For God’s sake, no! How long has this been going on? Lilly?"
I looked away.
"She speaks at home?"
"Yes!"
"Mr. and Mrs. Frank, I don’t want to intrude, but has anything been going on at home that would cause..."
"Of course not!"
On the car ride home, the sky was becoming dark, and I watched the children playing tag on the streets, wonder- ing how. I felt the tension from the back seat as I rolled the window up and down, up and down.
“Lilly?” My mom asked. “Lilly...we know that you’re shy, sweetie, but you have to talk at school, you know.”
The window squeaked as I rolled it down again. I don’t know.
“Lilly. Why don’t you talk at school? Sweetie? Can you answer me? Lilly!” My mom sighed in the front seat.
I don’t know.
“Lillian Maria! Answer your mother!” My dad commanded, slamming on the brakes.
I stared into my dad’s eyes in the mirror, feeling my chest bubble up my throat. I don’t know I don’t know I don’t know– “God damnit!” I shouted and slid out the open window, thumping onto the ground. I began to run for the setting sun, straight ahead, my feet scraping the grass like scum.
Then my dad was beside me, grabbing my shoulders and pressing my face into his chest. “I’m sorry, baby, I’m sorry. We’ll get you help.”
Ms. Dimpsey passes out typed notes from the pages we were supposed to have read for homework. I tune out, lost in thoughts of my middle school years, when they pulled me out of class for hours every day.
Mr. Davis was my seventh grade speech pathologist. I knew he was only doing his job, but I disliked him; I dis- liked the turning in my stomach when I saw him and the way he pronounced my name like I was a toddler.
“Lilly,” he would say, “Can you say ‘good morning’? I’m talking to you, Lilly, look at me.”
And I would miss hours and hours of class which I hated, especially when I missed math, because there I had formulas and answers and was smart. People called me a genius then, and I felt a part of them, even though I was different. At least they acknowledged me then, when I knew answers without even using a calculator.
But here, here in philosophy I am dumb. After all the years I have worked to make friends and appear normal, I regress in this class; I become the middle school version of me who avoids eye contact and jumps at slight noises. Here, they smirk and think I am weird, because I do not act like them, because I cannot act like them. A weirdo, just like Jimmy said.
“Hey, weirdo!” Jimmy McConnor shouted from up the street. “Yeah, you, you! Lilly!” I was walking to my house from the bus, and he was standing outside next to his bike, not even playing basketball or football, just watching me.
“Wanna fight me, huh? Come on, you piece of shit, show me what you got!” Jimmy charged at me, and I stood, frozen on the sidewalk, as he butted his head into my stomach and knocked me over. “How’s that!” He shouted, and his pale freckled face was inches from mine, his small hands pinning me down. He looked at me for two long seconds.
“God, you’re ugly. I don’t want to touch you!” Jimmy rolled off me and ran past his bike into his garage.
I lay in the grass, looking up to the overcast sky, filled with empty grayness like there couldn’t possibly be any clouds up there. I remember praying for it to rain, praying for it to pour on me like the piece of shit I was, to camouflage my tears and soak my skin that smelled like Jimmy McConnor.
But Jimmy was a long time ago, and I learned to pity him, pity his unstable family life and how he now smokes away his life.
“Lilly. Lilly.” Ms. Dimpsey is smiling at me, all twenty-eight pairs of eyes studying me. “You all right, Lilly?”
I nod, aware of the loud sophomore who is laughing at something next to me.
“Okay, sweetie. I was just congratulating you on your perfect test score.”
I feel my face burn as I accept my test; a few kids groan.
Ms. Dimpsey continues to pass back the tests and the bell rings, three long dongs signifying liberation.
I recount the blue tiles until I reach my locker.
“How was physics?” I ask Anne, and she groans melodramatically.
“Miserable. Horrible. I must have gotten a C. I’m never going to get into college.”
“Never,” I laugh, and she smacks me playfully.
"You’re just sooo modest, Little Miss 'I'm Already Accepted.'"
I become quiet, and Anne relaxes for a moment, the time it takes for a teardrop to roll down a cheek, then
smiles. "They never thought you could do it."

We look at each other as the teardrop hits the floor and then collect our books for calculus.

The Secretary’s Choice

This piece was inspired by a video I watched on the New York Time’s website about the protesting in Turkey of women’s wearing headscarves in school. This law inevitably forces women to choose between religion and education. From writing this, I was able to place myself in Havva’s shoes despite our different upbringings. I believe that from experiencing other cultures through writing, as human beings and, in this case, as women, we can break through barriers.

Havva rushed into her boss’s office. “You called?”
Mr. Cames smiled, white teeth glimmering. “Havva, darling.”
“Yes? Would you like some coffee?”

“Funny.” The young man eyed Havva's silky, black hair. "Actually, maybe in a few minutes, if you can manage.”

“Oh, you think I can’t manage, Mr. Cames?”

“As a matter of fact, I do think you can manage, sweetheart…”

“Mr. Cames.” Havva suppressed a smile.

“Too inappropriate?”

“You called.”

“Oh, yes, I was just reading the paper.” Mr. Cames reached for the newspaper and proceeded to read the front page with a half-frown.

“Fascinating.”

“Feisty. Yes, I was reading the paper, and I happened to notice something about these... headscarves...that your people wear.”

“Yes, some do.” Havva sat opposite Mr. Cames in a modern, square chair with brown and green ovals.

“Well,” Mr. Cames began, “there’s this whole uproar in Turkey. Yes, I know you’re aware of it, but I was wondering why.”

The young woman waited. “Why what?”

“Why you don’t wear one.”

She shifted uncertainly in the chair. “Ah. You have work to do, Mr. Cames. You have an appointment in an hour.”

“You don’t want to talk about it?”

“No.”

“Oh. I’m sorry,” Mr. Cames leaned forward at his desk.

“No. Wait. I...I do.” As soon as Havva spoke, her rich, brown eyes began to glisten.

“If you want.”

“I was...uh...born in Turkey, as you know. I lived with my mother. I don’t remember much...but...rolling green forests, so beautiful Mr. Cames...so beautiful.” Mr. Cames set aside the newspaper. “I remember squeezing fruit in the crisp air and how it slid down my chin into my palms. But it was hard then, to live, I mean. Turkey is secular. Women can’t go to school if they choose to wear a headscarf. My mother was a very religious girl, and she chose the headscarf. You see, Mr. Cames, yes, she could not continue her education. And she was a very smart woman. No, she is not alive anymore. Breast cancer.”

“I’m sorry.” He leaned back.

“Thank you. But you see, I grew up a very religious girl like my mother. I wore the scarf starting at age ten, quite young. My first, my mother bought for me: deep purple, diaphanous with pale yellow flowers. Ah, yes, it was hard to live. My mother married young, and my father died before I was old enough to remember him. So we struggled for money. When I was a girl, a revolt movement began again, and we became very worried that I would be kidnapped.”

“Kidnapped?!”

“Yes. The Kurdistan Worker’s Party. Turkey wouldn’t acknowledge the Kurds, you know how it goes.”

“Yes,” reflected Mr. Cames, memories flashing before his eyes.

“My mother met an American man. She was very beautiful, you know, with bronze skin and rich eyes. She attracted many men. An older girl, Sara, she was Muslim... the PKK in our village killed her, mutilated her because she didn’t wear her headscarf. They hung her body from a tree and tied her headscarf around her eyes. When I saw her, dangling from the tree with crusting blood, I thought she might be alive because we couldn’t see her eyes through
her headscarf. She wasn't, of course.

"After this happened, we left for America with my uncle's family. I stopped wearing my headscarf and forgot about my life in Turkey."

Mr. Cames reached for Havva's bronze hand, his fingers falling short on the desk."Havva...I didn't know."

"Of course you didn't. I have not spoken of this since I was a girl, Mr. Cames."

Mr. Cames bolted upright.

"Why do you insist on calling me Mr. Cames, Havva?"

"You are my boss."

"Please."

"I respect your authority."

"Oh, please. You do not with your silly jokes. Why do you insist on calling me Mr. Cames?"

"I can't answer that."

He stared deeply into her eyes. "Havva."

"You are a white man."

Mr. Cames sat still for long seconds.

"Oh."

"Mr. Cames, I am bound to tradition."

Havva began again, "Forgive me. That's rude. It's not even—"

Mr. Cames stood. "Havva, you do not love me because I am a white man?"

"Mr. Cames!"

"Havva."

"I can't possibly begin to—"

"Havva, for two years you have taunted me with your shining smile. Two whole years you have—"

"You're joking!"

"See, you're doing it again! That smile thing! And you do not love me? You come back day after day from your apartment, and you smile and make me fall so deeply in love with you with your curly hair and smooth skin."

"Mr. Cames, I—"

"Havva, please do not call me that!"

"Mr. Cames, I am afraid that I have done something terrible." Havva stood now, her thick hair motionless.

"What, Havva? What could you have possibly done?"

She stared back into his eyes, gulping for words. "I am...bound to tradition, Mr. Cames...I have a...fiancé. I do not know him, but he will arrive from Turkey next month. We have been engaged since childhood."

"No." Mr. Cames turned to the windows.

"Yes. I do not want to marry him, Mr. Cames, but you see, my mother wanted this. She did not live the life she wished, and she wanted this for me."

"Havva, I have dreamed of you for two years."

"I have a duty to my culture, to my mother."

"And who is this man? You do not know him! Who knows what he may be or do!"

"That is something women of my faith must accept."

"I can't accept that."

"I am sorry, Mr. Cames...terribly...sorry. You may fire me."

Looking out to the sun, Mr. Cames followed a young girl's path on a bike. "Havva. Havva. How many times I've said your name."

"Then, Mr. Cames, I will do what I should have done long ago." Havva bowed slightly. "Perhaps we will meet in another life."

"Please, Havva, please reconsider." Mr. Cames approached Havva, nearly touched her cheek.

"You will meet a beautiful woman and live a long, happy life together. Good-bye, Henry. I will miss you."

Mr. Cames watched Havva pass through the doorway, down the hall. "Good-bye, Henry," he repeated, "I will miss you."

**From Above the Casket**

The protagonist in this story, Lynn, first came to me in eighth grade, after reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I wrote an outline for a book but completed only a few chapters. However, Emma Lynn never left me, and she reappears in this recent short story.
I never seen my mama so done and dead like she lies in a casket with roses all round her head. And Danny, he tells me: “Lynn, she’s dead, Lynn” like I don’t know it with her gray face and closed eyes. And she kinda looks peaceful, but like the way a porcelain doll looks, like any moment she could pop up out of a closet like Granny’s dolls—Mammy’s old dolls in the closet with their creaking cradles and Nina, the one who looks like me, with frizzy orange hair and blue eyes. I loved Nina so much, and right now Mammy looks like Nina too except with a gray face. Well, I did love Nina until that night, when the howling wind woke me and the covers soaked with sweat choked me. And then Nina opened the closet door, and I swear smoke slithered out and choked me more until I woke up again. And ever since then I was waiting to wake up again, and I hated Nina with her frizzy orange hair.

“Lynn,” says Danny, “Lynn, she’s dead.”

And I wanna shout, I know she’s dead, can’t you see I know she’s dead, but when I turn to Danny, he’s staring at her like he can’t believe it, and he looks so sad because his blue eyes are half-open, and when his eyes get like that everybody knows he’s sad. When you ask him, “What’s up sucker?” he says nothing, and that’s when you know to leave him be. Mammy always said he was just needing some time alone.

“What’s up sucker?” I ask, but he grips the edge of Mammy’s oak casket. His knuckles grow white, his lips tight, his eyes half-open. I stare at him, and he just looks so funny with his half-open eyes. For a moment I think I might even laugh like they say people do at funerals, but I don’t. He stares back, and his lips grow tighter, his knuckles whiter, and he whispers vehemently, “Lynn, why aren’t you sad?”

And he startles me so much that I don’t even answer; I just look at Mammy with her golden-red hair and think how beautiful she used to be before she had me and Danny and before she lost my baby sister. Mammy was always beautiful, even after she lost Baby, but I saw pictures of her before, like when she and Daddy were dancing at their wedding. Mammy looked like she could never die then, laughing with glowing cheeks in her lacy white gown.

The pictures were in a closet that Danny discovered while we were playing Tarzan and Jane. “Lynn! C’mere!” he called, and I ran to him like a jungle warrior woman. “Look at this!” And we opened the albums and saw the pictures of Mammy with glowing cheeks. “Look what Dad’s wearing! Can you believe he wore that?” Danny giggled, but I only saw Mammy with her face full of roses, dancing like the stars would never go to sleep.

I look at Mammy’s gray face again. My eyes travel down, and I realize she’s dressed in her blue dress. Granny wore the dress when she was a young woman, because just like us, Granny had red hair and blue eyes. “We stand out,” Granny always said, “and when you get older, you can wear the dress just like I did and like your mother does, with your shining blue eyes. You know, I wore that dress when I first met your grandfather.” And Mammy says she wasn’t wearing it when Daddy first saw her, but when she did wear it, he fell in love with her. And so I look at Mammy being buried in her blue dress with her eyes shut, and at Danny with his half-open eyes, and I realize that I will never wear that dress.

“Danny,” I whisper, and he looks to me. “Danny, I don’t want Mammy to go.” And then I begin to feel hot tears slide down my cheeks, and Danny wraps his arm around me which makes the tears burn because all I care about is the blue dress that I will never wear.

“Lynn, we’re gonna make it, okay?”

Now my eyes are so blurred that I don’t see anything but Danny and Mammy and Baby who is floating over us in a lacy white gown that I used to wear. And Baby has curly black hair like Daddy and Danny and electric blue eyes, and suddenly I feel my fingers squeeze into fists, remembering the time before Baby: we all put our hands on Mammy’s tummy to feel her kick.

“What will we name her, Mammy?” I ask

Mammy says, “I don’t know yet! What do you think?”

“Melodie, because Baby will sing songs.”

“You think?” Mammy says and then we all sing to her, Christmas songs, “Silent Night,” and I imagine rocking little Melodie in a manger. So we sing, and I sing the loudest to make sure Melodie can hear us and learn. If we name her Melodie, then she better be able to sing or we will have some trouble. But we do anyway when a few days later Melodie is born the wrong way. We never got to see her even. I want to see her so much, but Daddy said she had to go away real fast. I don’t believe him even; someone stole her, but Danny tells me to be quiet. So I am. And so is Mammy, lying on her giant hospital bed, so quiet now and her cheeks not even glowing.

“I’m sorry, Lynn. I know you’re sad.” Danny is still looking at me with half-open eyes. Baby floats away in her white gown, and everything comes back to Mammy in her blue dress with her hair all curled up and her face gray.

“Her hair’s not white, Danny.” Wisdom white, says Granny. That’s how Mammy should be buried, not with a young face and golden-red hair, not like my hair and Nina’s hair. Because then Mammy is just a young woman with children not even grown up, and some even say Mammy is not grown up, like the ladies with knitted hats who click their tongues: “What a shame, what a shame.”
They say, “What a shame,” from the back benches and watch as Danny and I turn away from Mammy who died with still-flaming hair like a meteorite.

Danny opens his eyes, and they are clear and blue like mine. “Lynn, she’s dead,” he whispers, and he takes my chin into his chest and strokes my frizzy golden-red hair.

**Owl**

Deer dancing;
minutes before dawn,
an owl above coos to chirping crickets,
whoooooh?
glimpses slender in night shadows:

A curious glance toward blackened path,
acrid numbness, beating:
ba-bum
ba-bum
Beneath suburban streetlights,
REVVVV
ERRR
BERRR
ATES

The goading leaves hiss;
Fears slither down gutters
She leaps in fleeting grace---
VRRRRROOOOOOOOM.

Illumined amid screaming rubber,
Eyes golden in olive branches;
whooooooh?
Beating:
BA-BUM BA-BUM BA-BUM BA-BUM

“Jesus Christ!”

Jesus Christ, oh Lord, in olive trees, on blackened paths,
in silent creeks and rubber tires, cell phones—
“Oh Jesus Christ!”
while glimmering glass sprays gravel like floating snow,
lands to glitter in maroon effluvia under beating streetlight,
like rays from
“Oh God!”
shine upon a cricket symphony and golden-eyed owls and all things that never seem to die--
crimson deer with glaring eyes.

whoooooooh?
“Damn! I’ll be late to work!”
Leaves crackle.
Slowest, Shortest, Strongest, Longest: Becoming a Guinness World Record Champion

Two attendants from a mental hospital strapped Mario Manzini into a Humane Restraint straight jacket. They tied his feet together with rope. Manzini dangled upside-down 50 feet in the air.

Eight and one-half seconds later, having dislocated both his right and left shoulders in order to bring his right sleeve over his head, Manzini was free of the jacket.

On August 17, 1979, professional escape artist Mario Manzini broke the Guinness World Record for Fastest Straight Jacket Escape, a record that remains unbroken 29 years later.

Manzini, who lives in Columbia, says his attempt was initiated by Guinness World Records. David Bohme, president of Sterling Publishers, called Manzini and asked him to make a record attempt. Guinness flew Manzini to Burbank, California, and made all the arrangements for his attempt.

For many of the 65,000 annual potential record breakers who apply to Guinness, the process isn’t so speedy or problem-free.

Thumbelina, a dwarf miniature horse only 17.5 inches tall, is clearly the World’s Smallest Horse. Though Thumbelina, born in 2001, is so small that she prefers the farm’s doghouse over the stables, Guinness stalled Thumbelina’s application until 2006.

“[Guinness] had to wait till she was like five, even though she stopped growing at, like, two,” said Michael Goessling, Thumbelina’s handler and manager at Goose Creek Farms in St. Louis.

When a response to Thumbelina’s application finally came, it was in the form of an examination.

“When they came to St. Louis to do the photo shoot,” Goessling said, “[Thumbelina’s size was] confirmed with photos with her next to yardsticks.”

Along with physical proof, Guinness “asked for some bits of information confirmed by [Thumbelina’s] veterinarian,” said Goessling.

The photos, combined with the veterinarian’s affidavit, eventually earned Thumbelina the title of World’s Smallest Horse – a title she obtained after years of unnecessary waiting.

In order to avoid snags that may cost years in the application process, many hopeful record breakers dish out the big bucks. Using the Fast Track and Fast Review services offered by Guinness, for a fee of roughly $467 each, provides record breakers with Guinness Adjudicators and Records Managers for their events. Adjudicators and Managers can speed up claims, which otherwise might sit in the Guinness mailbox for months.

Steve Pona of St. Louis, one of the managers of the World’s Longest Baseball Game, chose to hire an Adjudicator. He recalls guidelines placed on the game that lasted 32 hours, 29 minutes and 25 seconds.

“We were limited to 40 players,” Pona said.

The group was also prohibited from using the term “Guinness” when raising money for the game – they were allowed to refer to it only as a “World Record” attempt.

Pona says Guinness was skeptical that the St. Louis group was dedicated to breaking a record until they sprang for an Adjudicator to oversee the event. Pona made sure to pamper the Guinness representative, who could immediately christen the event as a Guinness World Record upon its successful completion.

Still, Pona doesn’t blame Guinness for treating his team “not personally”.

“Can you imagine that kinda volume in your inbox?” Pona said of the thousands of record requests Guinness receives. “We weren’t offended [by the treatment].”
Other aspiring record breakers, however, were not as lucky as Pona’s group. Many attempts are disqualified on technicalities, much to the chagrin of those involved. The University of Missouri-Columbia’s attempt at breaking the Guinness Book World Record for Longest Blood Drive saved 9,741 lives, but broke no records because it spanned two days, not one.

In hopes of avoiding complications associated with breaking a Guinness World Record Gamer’s Edition record, and in order to bypass parts of the tedious application process, some gamers rely on websites to send videos of their virtual achievements to Guinness.

“We watched a King of Kong documentary during [sophomore and junior] MAP testing,” Chris Jeffrey, Hickman alum ’08, said. The film inspired Jeffrey to tape himself beating the running shooter game Super Contra. He sent his tape to twingalaxies.com, a website that mediates between the Guinness Gamers Edition and potential record breaking gamers.


Jeffrey’s determination explains his record game completion time of 21 minutes, 19 seconds, which beat the previous Super Contra record of 24 minutes. Since the tape was sent to Twin Galaxies, Jeffrey has completed the game in 18 minutes, 29 seconds. He continues to strive to beat Super Contra in less than 15 minutes.

Bob Munden, the World’s Fastest Quick Draw, shares Jeffrey’s drive. Born in Kansas City, Munden is 66 years old and has been shooting guns for 55 years. The determination he feels to shoot a show perfectly makes it “almost impossible to keep up with yourself.”

“A lot of times I’ve won a tournament, even though I won, I wasn’t shooting well,” Munden said. “I can’t even make myself happy sometimes.”

Munden, frustrated with his imperfection, constantly strives to improve. Still, he warns that the Guinness Book is not to be taken too seriously. A spelling bee where people never miss a word is “nothing short of incredible” he argues, but the legitimate, truly amazing record oftentimes is overshadowed by silly records, like those of people who “put themselves in a barrel over the Niagara Falls.”

“I sure as heck wouldn’t compare [a truly amazing feat] with somebody eating fifty hot dogs,” Munden said. The determination to attain faster speeds in quick-draw, Munden maintains, is more important than being listed in the Guinness Book. Being the best in his field is worth the effort he puts into it, recognition from Guinness or no recognition.

“Who took second in the Super Bowl last year?” Munden said. “We don’t remember because it doesn’t matter.” What does matter is being the best of the best, Munden says. Mario Manzini agrees with Munden, saying that the satisfaction is worth the sacrifice.

“As far as escapes go, I know nobody can touch me.” Manzini said. “To me it’s, like, an honor just to have the title.”

Manzini says that his title as World’s Fastest Straight Jacket Escape Artist legitimizes him to the general public and makes his shows more popular.

“I use that in my title.” Manzini says. “It’s like a boxer game. More people go to see the heavyweight champion than some guy they’ve never heard of.”
Hidden

Author: Janice Clawson
Grade: 12
Teacher: Dean Stover
School: Hickman High School, Columbia, MO

My name is Andrew Owens, and I go to John Woods Boys Academy, a school that would intimidate any castle in its presence. It’s tan bricked, nine floors and screams twelfth century. This, my first year at the school, may be my last. I’ve never been popular in school; in fact, I’m the one other students pick on. I have this problem (I guess you could call it a curse). Whenever someone dares me to do something, I have to do it. A force pushes me toward the objective of the darer’s desire. Like when passing a candy shop and all the treats are there on display—truffles, snowballs, taffy, lollipops, licorice, gumdrops, you just have to go in and get a closer look. All those treats are dancing around in your thoughts, calling to you. The force is like that, but ten times stronger. And I love every minute of it. To have someone single me out is my dream come true.

“Hey! You Andrew Owens?” A deep voice grumbled from the ninth grade side of the cafeteria. In mid chew I turned to see a tall, tan-skinned boy, brown hair with hints of gold. Kyle Duncan was talking to me, a lowly seventh grader. He was intimidating to any guy in the same room who would dare think he could look better.

“You Andrew Owens?” He growled again as he approached where I sat, my two best friends at my side. Joe Jones is on my right. He and I have known each other since we were in diapers. He always treats everyone the same.

“Yeah, he’s Andrew Owens. Why ya asking?” Kyle Duncan was no exception.

“Was I talking to you?” Kyle spit at Joe. He turned back to me. “Is it true you licked the third floor toilet?” He said, as if I was his hero. This gave me enough courage to speak.

“Yeah, that was me.”

“So you’ll do anything someone dares you to do?”

“Yeah.” I said sheepishly, sounds like he has a new dare for me. Bring it on.

“I double-dog-dare you to go to the extremity room tonight, after midnight.” My stomach dropped. To be honest I was excited by this, but something about the room made me queasy. I’d always hoped I could find it for myself, but I never had a reason to.

I smiled, “I accept.” I couldn’t believe that I am going to the room of no return, TONIGHT. But, what if the rumors are true?

Before I get ahead of myself, I should probably clue you in on the extremity room. Seventy-two years ago, a seventh grader stumbled into the basement of the school. It was the first day of school and some upperclassmen stole his map. He got lost in this maze of a school. Rumor has it that when he finally made it out he kept talking about a door in the very bowels of the school. A golden light shone from the edges. But the light was something more. Like a voice; warm as milk and sweet as honey, drawing him in (at least that is what I’ve heard). The boy said that he was going to go back down there after dark to find out what was behind the door.

The next morning the boy was gone. Some say the room swallowed him; others say Headmistress found him snooping around (we all know that means expulsion). The truth is no one knows what happened to him, nor do they want to know.

“Andrew! I can’t believe you agreed to that,” said Harry Conway, my other best friend, the first to ever dare me, running into the bathroom where my lunch was making its second appearance. Fear and school lunch don’t make a good combination.

“Come on Harry, you know Andrew could never turn down a dare as juicy as that.” Joe marveled.

“I know, but I just thought this was one dare Andrew wouldn’t do. This could be life threatening, Andrew. You know what happened to the last kid.” I flushed the toilet and made my way to the sink to wash off the sludge coating my lips.

“I know, but I’ve always wanted to find it, and now I have an excuse.”

“How could you want to go down there?”

“Well, think about it, Harry. The room is a legend. If you could find out what really happened, wouldn’t you jump at the chance?” Joe said to Harry urging him to see the light.

“Sure, I’d want to know what really happened, but not if I was going to get expelled or disappear,” Harry’s face
showed the terror we heard in his words.

“I’d take either one, ‘cause if I do find out the truth, who would really want to know? The truth isn’t nearly as exciting as the legend,” I said hoping that this new thought would calm my nerves on the subject.

We made our way out of the bathroom and toward class. The rest of the day was a blur. I wasn’t able to think of anything but that room.

That night, I sat up in bed writing down everything that happened during the day. If I don’t come back, I’d like people to know where I went. I could be the next legend in the extremity room story. The old grandfather clock chimed midnight, filling the common room with sounds weaving its way up to the bedroom. The ominous sound made my whole body shiver. It was time.

I glanced to the beds on my right, Harry and Joe were asleep. They tried to get me to let them come with me, but I knew if something bad happened I didn’t want them to get hurt. As I stood, I let my mind prepare for the journey ahead. I made my way down to the commons, turning to look at the room. I tore my eyes away and made my way down to the basement.

I walked slowly down the old hallway. The wallpaper looked like it had torn at itself until it crumbled. A mouse scurried passed my foot. With every step, a squeak came from the floor boards, hollering a warning. Getting closer to the door, my heart started to kick the inside of my chest with my hands shaking in tune. The door was in front of me and all I could do was stare. I grabbed the crusted gold knob and began to turn, taking a deep breath. Would it be something amazing or something devastating? A pause. The door opened. My jaw dropped.

The light wasn’t just gold but every color imaginable and more. Sky high bookshelves filled each of the walls. Writing on the spine of the books created the colors taking over the room. The room was filled with desires. People I’ve always wanted to meet. Foods that made my tongue ache for more. Everything was within reach; it could all be mine. Think of what I could become with all these hopes. A smile crept to my face. I carefully stepped in, making sure it wasn’t a dream that was going to cause a pit of fire to open and swallow me whole. Nothing happened. Slowly making my way to the nearest book, I saw something move out of the corner of my eye. I wasn’t alone. A boy about my age sat on the wooden floor reading one of the shimmering books. He didn’t look up the whole time I watched him. He didn’t seem to know I was here. Without another thought, I turned back to the door. A lady with hot-wax skin smiled at me; I know her as Headmistress. Semi-sweetness poured into my veins as I watch her close the door. The lock on the door started to turn and ended my journey.
It’s Complicated

I’m six years old and my little sister is in the hospital, barely breathing. Severe asthma, they tell us, and advise my parents to put her in a bedroom with someone else in case she has another attack. “No,” I tell my mother. No, I don’t think it would be fun for Betsy to move into my room. No, I don’t want you to rip up my dust and dander laden carpet and take away all of my plush toys. “No,” I tell her.

She says, “Too bad.”

***

It’s pouring rain outside our room. Thunder cracks and growls, rattling the window in its frame. Green plastic stars glow from the ceiling, matching the glow of digital numbers, 12:01. The rustling of sheets from across the room tells me that Betsy is awake, and in the glow of the next earth-shattering lightning strike, I see her sitting up in bed.

“Sally?” her voice wavers with fear or sleep or both. “Sally, I’m scared.”

“It’s just a storm,” I tell her, somehow managing to sound both condescending and reassuring. Then reluctantly, “You can come over here if you want,” being sure to make it clear that I certainly don’t care one way or the other. Her clammy bare feet sound sticky on the hard floor between our beds. I lift up my blankets and let her slide in, scooting into the cold spot to make room.

***

I’m curled up on the couch, head bent in a halo of lamplight, so immersed in the book I’m reading that I barely notice Betsy standing near the couch. When I glimpse her at the edge of my vision, I pretend I don’t, preferring to ignore her than give her whatever it is she plans to request. Refusing to take my unspoken hint, she continues to stand there expectantly. Irritated, I look up, “What do you want?”

“Um,” she chews anxiously on the end of a blonde-streaked braid, “could I borrow your bag? I’m going to a sleepover.”

“My new bag?” Surely she isn’t asking me for my brand new, blue-gray, soft canvas messenger bag? I haven’t even used that bag yet. She’ll probably burst the seams with her overnight supply of stuffed animals and kid things, I think condescendingly, sophisticated twelve-year-old that I am.

“Yes?” She can clearly hear the displeasure in my voice.

Much to my dismay, I can’t think of any good reason not to let her have it; it’s not as if I’ll have great need of the bag at home. “Fine, take it,” I concede grumpily, “but just this once.”

“Thanks Sally!” She sounds relieved.

“And get your own bag,” I offer as a parting shot, annoyed that she is so happy. “It’s mine, jeez,” I grumble, and as she traipses down to my room, I bury my head back into my book.

Later that night, the bag incident nearly forgotten, I force my stiffened limbs to move from the couch, creaking my way down to my bed. Flipping on the light, my eyes catch something making a dimple in the center of my pillow. It looks like a white butterfly has alighted on the flowered sheets. I pick it up, a folded piece of paper, its edges still ragged from being ripped out of a notebook. Unfolding it, a piece of gum falls out on the pillowcase, bubblemint, my favorite. I unfold the note, ponderously smoothing the creases as I read.

“Thank You,” in Betsy’s round, slapdash hand.

***

I maneuver my way out of the minivan, plastic shopping bags turning my fingertips white with their weight. Betsy and Mom follow close behind as I push though the kitchen door and drop my load of new clothes on the hardwood floor. Betsy heads straight to her room to put on a pair of new jeans, and I putter around the kitchen, searching for bread and peanut butter for a snack.

“How did the shopping day go?” asks Dad, and Mom answers quickly.

“It was fine, but Betsy looked like she had something to sell if you know what I mean.” Her voice holds a strange mix of humor and concern. Mom is right of course; Betsy’s green cami stretches tight across her flat ten-year-old chest, her black skirt flows breezily just a little too high for comfort, and she hobbles around in clunky black platform sandals a half-size too big. The shopping trip isn’t the first incident, nor the last, in which Betsy appears in public dressed as a teeney-bopper jezebel. Ashamed and embarrassed, I make sure all of my jeans-and-t-shirt friends know
that I despise this anomaly of my family, this giggling, gossiping preteen who I know nothing about. Sitting as far from her as possible on the bus-rides home, I whisper stories of all the stupid or wanton things she’d done that day, which at the time seem unforgivable. I enjoy a smug satisfaction in watching Betsy make a fool of herself. I am mortified to be related to this mini-skirt clad stranger, but on the other hand, in the nature of siblings everywhere, every mistake she’s made makes me look that much better. I wasn’t like that when I was her age, I say sagely to my friends and my parents whenever I get the chance. I never dressed “like I had something to sell, if you know what I mean.”

***

“Are you wearing makeup?” The awkward silence around the dinner table pressed down on us, and Dad and I suddenly became very attentive to our forks, ears pricked to hear the outcome of the inevitable battle. “Betsy,” Mom repeated, as if there was any chance of her not hearing the first time, “are you wearing makeup?”

“No.” Betsy’s reply is abrupt and defensive, but I can see the sparkly purple shadow on her downcast eyelids, and I know Mom can too.

“It’s okay if you are,” my no-makeup, undyed-hair Mom says in a tone that implies a number of things regarding Betsy’s makeup, none of them anywhere near “okay.”

By this point, Dad and I are glancing up from our broccoli quiche to giggle and wink at Betsy’s denial. Our smiles don’t go unnoticed, and Betsy pushes away from the table angrily.

“I’m not! Okay? I’m not wearing any makeup!” She storms out of the room, footsteps shaking the silverware, and tears blurring her newly applied mascara.

The three of us left at the table watch her go, and in the back of my mind, a self-congratulatory voice gloats, “I’ve never worn makeup. I’ve never left the dinner table in a huff. Nope, never done any of that stuff. I’m so good.” But at the same time, I struggle to name an emotion that is entangling itself with my smug disapproval. Is it... admiration? Jealousy? Surely not, but there’s no denying that Betsy has some moxy, daring to experiment with makeup in a terrifyingly hostile environment. Her struggle reminds me of my own awkward preteen years, when I was torn between the disapproval of my friends and that of my mother. Eventually I just gave up on the idea of trying to be like other girls, bowing to parental censure. Betsy, on the other hand, is standing up for her own identity, no matter how laughable or distasteful we might find it. I suppose I can’t help but be a little envious.

***

I’m standing in the bathroom, bare feet chilled against the tile floor, hands resting lightly on the countertop. Betsy stands behind me, patiently twisting a curling iron up and down my stubbornly straight locks. Sighing impatiently, I pick invisible lint off of my dress, grimacing as another section of hair falls into a limp ringlet around my shoulders. With the clock ticking down to 6:00, I can hardly stand the tedium of forcing my clearly unwilling hair into a shape suitable for Homecoming.

With a final flourish, Betsy pulls the iron from my hair, bouncing my new curls with her fingertips. “There, done!” She squints critically at my unadorned lashes. “Are you sure you don’t want anything?” she asks, ominously reaching for her pencils and mascara wand. I glance at her raccoon-eye makeup and gooey glossed lips with that familiar twinge of smug disapproval.

“No thanks!” I laugh, waving my hands defensively in front of my face as she leans over my shoulder in an attempt to smother me with liquid-liner and grinning at her disappointed glare in the mirror. She is my mirror image, I think, seeing our matched reflections, impossible to tell where one blonde head ends and the other starts, exactly the same and perfectly opposite.
Bus No. 174

Author: Jessi Glueck
Grade: 8
Teacher: Amanda Witty
School: Leawood Middle School, Leawood, KS

I am enrolled in middle school as an eighth grader, but my friends joke that I’m a high school student in everything but name. They have a point. Each morning I take three core classes—English, math and science—at our local high school. Then in the afternoon, I trundle back to the middle school in bus 174, a squat yellow bus that seats ten or twelve people. Its other duties involve shuttling morning and afternoon kindergarten kids between home and school and taking small groups of high school students to classes in other areas. I get the bus all to myself, which is just fine with me.

I slump slowly out of the high school’s doors, weighed down with a backpack full of books and a mind full of geometry, and there’s the bus, faithfully waiting by the curb. As I climb in, the wave of warmth hits me, with the calm dimness and the reminder that, for fifteen minutes of my day, I don’t have to be an eighth grader at the high school or a high school student at the middle school. I can let someone else take control of where I’m going and what I’m doing. I’m simply there to enjoy the ride.

I always sit in the third seat from the front on the right side. I figured out early in the year that the most sunshine comes through the window at that particular spot, allowing me the luxury of basking with my eyes closed. Sometimes I almost drop off.

Other times, though, I carry on conversations with my bus driver, Dan. He’s coming up fast on 74 years old, in blooming health and cheerful spirits. He seems to have popped straight from the pages of a Dickens book—the jolly old fellow who cares for the orphan—or perhaps from one of those political speeches where candidates stare at the camera and speak soulfully of Everyday Americans and Family Values. His family has lived in Kansas for generations. He was in the Air Force in the Korean War. Each year around Christmas he wears a Santa Claus costume as he drives, and from the beginning of December to the winter break the ceiling of the bus is decked with ornaments and sparkly streamers. He has a distinct Midwestern accent that somehow imparts a touch of his simple, contented personality to everything he says.

The day after the election, Dan asked me what I thought of the results. Heartily sick of politics, I replied rather guardedly that I didn’t really know and hadn’t paid much attention (a bald-faced lie). His own response made me feel small and mean-spirited: “Senator Obama’s a great man; Senator McCain, too. I’m sure they’ll be working together a lot. You know, I traveled to lots of places during the war. I never saw one like America. It’s just the best country in the world, and I think it’s going to stay that way.”

Such solid patriotism is seldom found in these days of discontent. The greatest analysts in the country spend their lives examining the country’s problems; why, then, is it so heartening to know that a Kansan bus driver has such faith in our nation? I couldn’t say—but maybe because Dan has seen more of the world in his time than all those analysts put together.

He is a philosopher, too. Today he was telling me about Fairyland, a theme park that was the main attraction for teens in Kansas City when he was young. “There was a real big swimming pool; a big dance hall, too, and lots of rides. It’s all gone now, though. But then, by the time you’re my age, your favorite theme park will be gone, too. Your children won’t know what you mean when you tell them stories about it. Things have a way of changing.”

It was a profound statement. Of course things change, but who dares say it out loud? Who dares, by admitting it, concede his own transience and the transience of things he loves? It takes a wise person to speak so, and, a few moments later, to begin whistling.

Bus 174, in its physical form, is just a bus, exactly like bus 175 and 176. And Dan, in the duties he performs, is just like the drivers of other buses. But to me the bus has become a haven of peace and quiet, a place where I travel out of myself and my petty worries to consider a broader view of life. It is a reminder of the beauty of life’s journeys and proof that a journey can be the destination itself.
Portfolio Submission

Author: Cassie Liu  
Grade: 12  
Teacher: Crystal Maier  
School: Lafayette High School, Wildwood, MO

Writer’s Statement  
Short Story (Fantasy): “The Corollaries of War”  
Short Story (Fantasy): “Dragon Wings”  
Short Story (Fantasy): “Safe Grounds”

Writer’s Statement

The written language is beautiful, powerful, magical – and that is what draws and captivates me. Each sentence holds profound emotion, an extraordinary way of perception and thought, and each passage offers a scene so vivid and brilliant that the story can be seen, felt, heard, smelled, and tasted as if it were reality. The words jump and leap off the page, twisting and morphing in front of my very eyes. Words become images, images transform into the imagination, and the imagination has no bounds. In elementary school, voracious reading was enough to sate my growing hunger for these mythical tales, but by the time I reached middle school, I began creating my own stories of wonders beyond this world. Since then, my passion has only intensified.

But while I write of lands seen only in the mind’s eye, I draw my inspiration from everything around me – music, videogames, literature, art, film, and even real life situations. Anything and everything can fuel my imagination to journey to a place all its own. Writing is my way of sharing those enchanting stories with the rest of the world so that others, too, can become enveloped in all its magic.

I write where I can and when I can. First, I build the world with its many intricacies and create the characters with all their depth. Afterwards, I briefly outline the story and research concepts I plan to incorporate. And then, I can really begin. Once I put my fingers to the keyboard – or my pen to the paper – I become meticulous, carefully placing one word alongside the previous one to create the image I see. Music plays gently in the background, a playlist I personally create to fit the story I tell. Slowly, the pieces fall together, and the scene unfolds.

Everything after that is up to the imagination.

Fantasy, nearly nonexistent in boundaries, is my favored genre because of all the possibilities it allows. Therefore, the subjects and ideas I choose to target from story to story are diverse and complex, seeking to attempt that which is new and different compared to my prior works. Recently, my focus has drawn toward short stories to sharpen my weaker skills in writing, but composing novels is my true goal.

In this portfolio, I have included three short stories, organized in order from the most recently to the least recently completed. “The Corollaries of War,” completed in January 2009, depicts the confrontation of two noble men years after a devastating war; “Dragon Wings,” completed in March 2008, delves into the weighty mission of loyal Captain Marciel Torhild; and “Safe Grounds,” completed in May 2007, walks along a single pathway with the reader nearly one-on-one. Powerful statements can be found in all three stories, the symbolism in some heavier than in others. Because my concentrations are varied, my themes and messages tend to be as well.

Nevertheless, they are there, waiting to be discovered. Just like my writing.

And just like me.

The Corollaries of War

The chamber was immaculate, without a single object out of place. Its sapphire walls held an ethereal glow, and even though they appeared transparent, nothing could be seen of the other side. Near the top, the magnificent, sturdy structures curved towards each other, making a spectacular dome at a daunting two hundred sixty-one feet from the floor. A navy blue cloud of magic obscured the ceiling, and soft wisps trailed downward, slowly dissipating into the air as they fell further from their source. It was as if the substances of the supernatural were too heavy to be maintained in the earthly realm.
The sound of slowly approaching footsteps emanated from outside the entrance, echoing loudly against the taci-turn walls. To commemorate those in the Battle of Keadilan, the massive chamber doors were always open. From the darkness that shadowed the opening, a figure stepped forward. The long, dark green trench coat; tall, ebony combat boots; and wide, jet black fedora hid the man’s form entirely from view.

He never faltered in his pace, striding deliberately and resolutely toward the raised altar at the chamber’s opposite end. Next to each side of the broad dais stood a pillar of solid light, the only source of illumination in the enormous room. Protruding from the back wall was a colossal stone statue of Saint Aquene, the martyr of peace among nations. Fully covered in her traditional, plain robe, she had her hands clasped in tenacious prayer, her eyes closed and her head bowed down toward the altar below. Her gentle, loving face held a mix of faith and imploration.

Vigilantly, she welcomed the intruder as he advanced, subtly judging his worth in the consecrated edifice. Upon reaching the altar, past the small set of stairs, the man lowered his head and offered a silent prayer in turn. The atmosphere of caution and rigid formality lightened; Saint Aquene seemed satisfied.

When he finished his words of respect, he slipped his hands into his coat pockets and vacantly watched the magic materialize, interweave, vanish, and recycle itself in the pillars of light. Perhaps, he thought to himself with empty hope, he won’t come tonight. His lips tightened into a strained smile. The lie could not have been further from the truth. Both of them would travel to the ends of the earth for this night.

Yet, despite the years of anticipation, there remained a sense of hesitation, of fear, of inescapable doom.

The chimes from the clock outside resonated loudly into the chamber. He found himself counting each set of harmonious patterns. One, two, three. The preordained time was closing in. Four, five, six, seven, eight, nine. The other had never made a point to be alacritous. Ten, eleven. But this was cutting it far too close, even for him. Twelve. The man raised his head to meet Saint Aquene’s benevolent face. It was midnight, and the person he awaited still wasn’t here. His small beacon of hope burned a little brighter. Could it be possible that he really wouldn’t show up tonight, he thought silently to the saint that towered above him. Is this your doing?

Suddenly, a voice drifted across the chamber, its tone only mildly amused. “I didn’t know we were to be so covertly dressed.” He turned on his heels, torn between elation and despair. The image of a black-haired man, smirking in expression, greeted him.

So, he had come after all.

Dressed in an elaborate outfit of greens and blues, a belt of gadgets running slanted from his shoulder to his waist, the newcomer walked farther into the chamber, his broadsword at his hip. He paused in his stride when reaching the middle of the room, raising his head to observe the cloud of blue magic drifting downward from above. There was a transient silence. “Two hundred sixty-one feet,” he muttered to himself, his voice soft and distant. “Two hundred sixty-one soldiers left alive.” Slowly, his gaze returned to the bulky-clad figure, a wry smile on his face. “So, this is what they’ve made of us.” He paused, methodically assessing his options. “It is a pleasure to see you again, Serkan Erasto,” he addressed finally, cordiality in his voice.

Serkan removed his fedora, revealing a shock of red hair, and slipped off his trench coat, the simple belt around his waist holding his long sword. The clothes he wore were decorated with hues of blue and purple. “And I must say to the same for you, Timir Coriss,” he responded gently, tossing the hat aside and leaving the coat at his feet. “I apologize for the ensemble. It was difficult to arrive here unnoticed.”

Timir cracked a smile, his eyes glistening. “Still as overly cautious as ever, aren’t you, Serkan?” he teased.

The building they stood in rested on the very boundary line between Stolthet and Kitartas, meant to symbolize their peaceful union. The war between the two countries only years ago had been brutal. Now, the traumatic series of events was referred to as the War of Honor, but only those who had fought in it understood the irony in its name.

The reason the war had started, a contention which many had forgotten now, was inconsequential compared to what resulted because of it. In the final Battle of Keadilan, thousands of soldiers charged for Stolthet and a similar number of Kitartas’ men met them at the boundary. Hours turned into days, and days turned into months, but neither country would relent, insistent on fighting, on winning, on their pride and honor.

At that final hour, two hundred sixty-one soldiers remained alive on a field littered with fallen bodies. Stolthet and Kitartas, at long last, conceded, signing a treaty to end the war. The enormous, towering building was created at their boundary to honor those who died in battle. Since then, the countries had been at peace and even, to a point, become allies.

Serkan and Timir gave each other a knowing glance.

Back when the war had just begun, when both men had been recruited and realized they would be battling against each other, they had promised a fight to the end on the battlefield, one having the honor to take down the other. Yet, as fate would have it, they only met at the Battle of Keadlian – and the countries had proclaimed the war’s end before they had the chance to fulfill their promise. But, they were not men to renege on their word, so instead, they set another date, time, and place for their final confrontation.
And now, each man wore his country’s colors.
Timir smirked and reached into a compartment on his diagonal belt, his eyes never straying from the man in front of him. Carefully, he pulled out a black gun, its translucent barrel swelling with green magic, and pointed it at Serkan. The red-head lifted his eyebrows in surprise, but the astonishment quickly disappeared from his face. “I see,” he said slowly, kneeling down slightly and reaching into his abandoned coat pocket to pull out a similar gun, its barrel bulging with purple swirls. He aimed it at Timir. “I knew Stolthet had created these in secret. I didn’t know that Kitartas was manufacturing them too.”
Timir shook his head, almost despondently, his smile forced. “You think too innocently, Serkan,” he replied gently. “Kitartas, after all, has spies.”
Serkan’s countenance softened, the corners of his mouth rising pitifully as a melancholic understanding dawned on him. “You weren’t able to return to your old life either, huh?” he asked sympathetically.
Timir shrugged. “I’m a secret agent now.” Serkan nodded.
“I’m leading some of Stolthet’s most guarded weapons projects.” The unspoken words of war lingered in the air.
“And that is why we are here,” Timir responded abruptly before the other could say more. “But these guns didn’t exist at the time of our agreement, so they cannot be part of our arrangement now.” The atmosphere had turned drastically sober.

Slowly, both men lowered their guns at the same time before tossing them aside, ensuring that where they landed would not be intrusive to the oncoming battle.
Serkan took the lead, setting both hands on the long sword’s hilt at his hip. “Shall we continue, then?” Timir took hold of the broadsword by his side.
“We shall.” Metal rung in the air as the two drew from their sheaths, the blades iridescent in the unevenly illuminated chamber.

And then, a silence, a stillness, a period where time seemed irrelevant and devoid of meaning. The two men stared at each other down, fingers tensed around their chosen sword but unmoving in their approach.
As if they were one mind, they began moving at the same time, building up momentum in their attack. Serkan leapt past the stairs impeding his way, though it became quite clear that Timir was the faster of the two. They clashed not far from the dais, the pieces of well-crafted metal struggling for domination.
Timir broke the standstill first, striking an open area before his opponent could move in with an attack. Serkan quickly deflected, forcing the broadsword completely away, but the solace didn’t last long.
Timir’s broadsword was quicker, lighter, and since Timir had attacked first, he clearly had Serkan on the defense. Before the red-head could make his own move, the opposing sword came back again, slashing repeatedly in attempts to find – or, rather, break into – an opening. Serkan had to keep moving, as did his sword, just to keep up.
Strike. Block. Strike. Block. Strike. Block. The fight already developed an intricate dance, the clashes of metal filling the air like a thunderous melody of screaming voices. The combatants’ skills were more than impressive.
“You have improved,” Serkan noted between blows, speaking over the deathly music. The black hair of his opponent came closer than he preferred, and he quickly added distance between them.
“Training,” Timir answered, his attacks slowing marginally as he spoke. “Mandatory training.” Serkan found his chance, landing a powerful assault against the broadsword and causing his opponent to stumble, but Timir quickly regained his composure, taking another blow from the long sword and holding his ground. Quickly, he managed to glance along the blade of Serkan’s sword.
“Your craftsmanship is superb.”
A meeting of the eyes and both men took a few steps back. A sudden respite between them, their blades lowered closer to the ground. Serkan felt the edge of the miniature stairway at his heels, but his focus never wavered from his opponent. “How do you know it’s mine?” Serkan asked jestingly, his lips twisted into a smile. Timir laughed, soft but unrestrained.
“Back in the day, you used to show me all your projects. It’s developed considerably, but I still recognize your design.” That was before the war, but they knew things had changed. Their looks hardened again before nostalgia could step in, their swords rising to meet each other. A mutual silence. Then movement.
With long strides to cover the remaining distance, Timir vaulted onto the lowest stair and immediately began slashing and thrusting at his opponent, not just in weak spots but in any area that allowed the quickest access. Striking harder this time around, the technique forced Serkan to draw back in his defense, edging closer and closer to the chamber’s lofty sapphire wall.
The familiar feeling of pure adrenaline kicked in, a rush of sudden awareness and strength. Yet the pounding in their ears could not drown out the call of death. Their swords danced valiantly in the light as the men met blow for blow.
But Serkan’s time was dwindling, and both knew it. The distance between him and the wall narrowed at every second; he could not afford to wait.

In a bold attempt, Serkan quickly covered the remaining void before his opponent could catch up with him and climbed up the wall with only his feet before circling around and dashing back down, long sword held steadily with his enemy in line.

Timir appeared surprised, confusion momentarily crossing his face, but Serkan didn’t give him the time. Aiming for the shoulder of Timir’s wielding arm, he pushed off from the wall, adding force to his downward slice.

Timir was quick to react; swiftly adjusting his position, he blocked his enemy’s assault with the basket hilt of his sword, a smirk crawling up his lips at his brief moment of victory. Fate now seemed set. The expanse of space between the two men was closer than ever, and Timir’s broadsword reigned supreme under those conditions.

A thrust. A slice. An endless torrent of attacks. Serkan could barely maintain his ground, his longsword slowly failing as a proper defense, but the forte of his sword was nearer to its hilt than its tip—and that would be his saving grace. The moment Timir’s blade struck that point, Serkan channeled power from his legs and torso, his feet firmly planted on the ground, to counter the attack and successfully pushed Timir back.

Advantages had been negated. The fight began anew.

But with one key difference—the onset of fatigue had become a factor. Heavy breath and weary body began battling the mind’s will. This battle could not last much longer—and it wouldn’t. The two men stared at each other resolutely. One chance. Winner-take-all.

Serkan moved first, swinging his blade to initiate a series of skillful, nearly inescapable attacks. The combination had gained him many of his victories. Yet, somehow, in the heat of combat, Timir found an opening—and he seized it with a speed he had not shown since the battle’s commencement. In those deteriorating seconds, Serkan saw the blade rush toward him, radiant and wondrous in all its fatality, but his body could not react as quickly as his mind.

Excru ciating pain hit him immediately, his weapon clattering to the floor. Blood spilled over his clothes, down his legs, onto the sapphire floor. A metallic taste filled his mouth, and he let the crimson liquid drip down his chin. Through the hazy veil of agony, his hand reached forward, trembling, and still, itself firmly on the broadsword that ran through him. He gazed at Timir, lips turning upward in a tense but genuine smile. Serkan mustered the strength to speak, his voice pained and labor ed. “It looks… like… you win.”

A gentle hand fell over his. “No,” Timir replied steadily, “you won.” Serkan could feel his body failing him, his systems shutting down, but even through his blurred vision, he could see Timir’s tender smile. The next words reached his ears quietly. “I’ll see you on the other side. I promise.”

Carefully, Timir withdrew his support as Serkan succumbed to death’s call, letting the man crumble to the floor as he removed his sword from the body.

Silence. Timir took a slow breath and sheathed his broadsword. As many times as he had envisioned this outcome, it failed to be any less shattering.

Unhurriedly, he made his way to the gun he had abandoned at the far side of the room, picking it up and weighing it softly in his hand. Kitartas would be pleased to see one of Stolthet’s most prominent weapon-makers eliminated. Timir scowled at the thought, turning around to walk to where Serkan had left his belongings. Retrieving that gun as well, he set them both at the foot of the altar in front of Saint Aquene, one barrel facing the other.

Softly, a chant grew in the chamber, the voices infinite in number. “Wipe the blood clean.” Timir turned around. All around, the room repeated the sentence again and again, growing louder. Magical navy blue tendrils extended from the cloud that floated near the chamber’s ceiling and drifted to the floor over Serkan’s body, over his sword, over the blood, over the death.

“Wipe the blood clean!” A cacophony of voices screaming in horror. The magic wrapped itself around the body, soaking up the blood as it moved.

Timir laughed bitterly, raising his head to meet the chamber’s high ceiling and walls. “Don’t you understand?” he declared loudly, almost in anguish. “The blood can never be wiped clean.” The voices continued their chant, undisturbed by the outburst. Timir’s gaze returned to the cloud of magic on the floor to find it retreating, leaving nothing behind.

And then the voices stopped. The room was immaculate once again.

Evenly, Timir strode back to the entrance of the room, halting before he reached the end. He turned around, his dark eyes falling on the empty floor, the image of Serkan’s body still imprinted in his mind. His lips parted to speak, the words emerging barely above a whisper. “Rest in peace… old friend.”

A hint of displeasure graced his face as he resumed his walk. There was something he still needed to do. As he exited the room, he made a powerful swipe against the air in front of him, and the giant chamber doors closed with a loud thud.

The War of Honor was over. The dead deserved their peace of mind.
Dragon Wings

It was unnatural, bizarre, and virtually paradoxical. The island had been flooded in rain for nearly a month, and because of it, progress had been slow. The scouts searched sluggishly and inefficiently, often overlooking their duties in an attempt to get out of the miserable weather and muddy ground. The one thing Captain Marciel Torhild was lenient on was the condition of her soldiers. She understood that leaving them too long in the rain would lead to sick soldiers, and sick soldiers would lead to a complete cessation. If they returned no word to the mainland in the time allotted, they would be pulled back, and a new troop would be put in their place. For all the power and pride the company boasted, they could not allow a failed mission, especially when it meant harsh and strict punishment upon return.

The rain itself wasn’t strange – it held nothing magical – but for a land that was continuously in sunshine, the downpour that made day seem like endless night came as a larger hindrance than expected. It began on the day of their arrival, relentlessly and dauntingly, and had not backed down since. The soldiers were not prepared for nor accustomed to the torrent that awaited them, and the oblique doom it foretold dampened their spirits and restricted their optimism. From the very start, the operation presaged failure, but Captain Torhild’s stellar performance under pressure was legendary. It was specifically her unit that was dispatched time and time again for assignments which held little hope of success, and three-fourths of the time, they returned victorious. By now, their triumph was anticipated. Failure was no longer an option.

Although Marciel could not account for the awareness of the rest of her company, she recognized their pre-determined completion of their task before they even set out, and Emperor Raedin Mithren himself and his right-hand man, Demyan Kirill, made sure she didn’t forget.

She had considered it curious when the emperor invited her to his throne room the night before their departure, but it was not her place to question his wishes. The meeting was brief and stilted; polite tones masking his vicious threats. Instinctively, she cradled her wrist in memory. Everyone knew of Demyan’s enchantment; something about his beauty and the way he carried himself gave him an overwhelming power over others. When he wanted something, he would get it, and he served the emperor with the utmost devotion, though many believed his loyalty came as result of the practically unrestricted freedom he was allowed. His relationship with Emperor Mithren was a unique but steady one.

On that night, he was there with the emperor; she shouldn’t have expected anything less. However, she did not anticipate for him to act on the emperor’s behalf this time. Demyan had never appeared to pay much attention to her despite her famous reputation, and she did not think the emperor would find it necessary to use him to get across his message. Somehow, before that point, she had felt impervious to Demyan’s ministrations. Her exceptional work for the empire and her allegiance and obedience to its emperor left them little reason to punish her. She would not make that assumption again.

He spoke to her for the first time after the emperor finished with his words. Demyan had a smooth, enticing, overpowering voice, and it made her completely immobile as he came toward her. She had heard him speak before, but the effects were strengthened tenfold now that she was his target. It was the kind of voice that instilled as much fear as it did assurance.

She had let him get too close. Before she knew it, he had caught her by the waist, his breath warm against her skin, and she felt unable to breathe. The cruel words that left his lips melted away into nothingness. Delicately, he took her wrist and whispered those intimidations in her ear, soothingly and alluringly. Then, he broke it in one swift motion; she barely even had time to blink. He moved on to her forearm and did the same, a merciless grin on his beautiful face. At least three bones he had broken, and she did not react – she could not afford to show weakness in front of her superiors, even when the pain felt unbearable. Their message, she assured them, had been well received. She then graciously asked for her leave, and they had let her go, for which she was grateful. After passing through the grand doors, she immediately sought a healer from her company. She was glad that a few broken bones were all she had walked away with.

“Captain?” A meek voice interrupted her thoughts.

“Hmm?” Marciel replied inattentively, only sparing a glance at the one addressing her. The long white robe made the person’s status easily recognizable. She kept her eyes trained on the dark abyss in front of her, the ferocious needles of water continuously falling into the concoction of sludge it had created underneath. They stood under the wooden roof that extended past the building’s edge. The structure’s decrepit and outmoded state showed that it had been abandoned long ago; it served as a perfect place to house the troops. No one lived on the island any longer, and signs of civilization were rare.
It was afternoon, but the dark clouds expanding across the sky like heaven’s shadow spoke differently. Marciel had been standing outside, waiting, since the troops left in the morning; it was what she did every day for every mission if she did not travel out with them. She would not allow herself any other duty until each soldier was accounted for; she felt she owed at least that much to those who served under her.

“Captain,” the healer repeated with stronger conviction.

“Yes?” she asked, still not fully focused on the speaker. There was a brief hesitation. Perhaps he needed some prodding. “Do you request something?”

“No,” he retorted quickly, clearly struggling with his next words. Regardless, they came out solidly. “When you had come to me that night before we left, you had a broken arm.” Marciel eyed the healer warily, her hand unconsciously moving to rest on the hilt of her sword.

“What about it?” she asked curtly. The healer wavered again.

“You had told me you broke the bones in your wrist and forearm falling down the steps.”

“I had been clumsy.” Her voice had turned to ice. “Your point, healer?” The man lost his composure and shied away from her, cowering slightly. Curiously, his voice did not reflect his distress.

“The way your bones broke,” he paused, “was not the way they would break from a fall.” Marciel turned fully towards him, and he took a step back but continued on boldly. “The only way they could have ended up the way they were is...” His voice drifted off in thought and hesitation but returned with just as much resolution as before. “Someone would have had to have intentionally broken them.” Marciel stepped forward, her plates of armor softly clanging as she moved, and the healer took an equal number of steps back.

“What are you implying?” she growled. The robe hid his eyes, but she knew he was panicking. Her grip steadied around her sword’s hilt.

A wind picked up from the east. The man’s white robe ruffled wildly around his slender figure while Marciel’s blue hair flew out behind her, only held together by a single band.

“Captain,” he replied firmly, adding a bit more distance between them. “I’m aware the emperor summoned you that night.” A fury erupted in her chest, an anger at herself for not being good enough, not being strong enough, not being reliable enough for the emperor and his precious royal puppets. The inevitable events of that night had not left her with any peace of mind. Her blue eyes fell on the healer and noticed him trembling in terror. Following to where his eyes were stationed, she realized that, in her ire, her sword had become half-drawn. Quickly, she pushed it back in its sheath and released her hold. There was no reason to punish him for caring about the ones he watched over.

Silence ensued as Marciel allowed the healer time to recover from his fright. The rain loudly pattered on the wooden roof. Marciel turned back to the place she expected her soldiers to return, barely able to see past the grassland in front of them.

“Captain,” the healer spoke again, raw fear in his voice now.

“Yes?”

“We cannot afford to fail this mission, can we?” Dread filled the air. He had said it; now there could be no denying what would come if they did not return successful. Out of the corner of her eye, Marciel saw the heater face the outside rain too. They were all waiting for the same thing.

Marciel inhaled slowly. “Roshan, where is your staff? How are the troops inside? Shouldn’t you be with them?” Her breath began to form a faint fog before slowly dissipating into the air. It was getting colder.

“I left my staff in the stockpile. The soldiers are well. You made a wise choice to keep them inside today. A day longer and I don’t know if their bodies could have taken it. They’re as healthy as we can hope for.” Marciel gave a short nod in affirmation. As soon as she realized the dreary weather would not cease, she immediately fell into a plan of rotation. She split her troops into five equal groups, and each group took to the task for a full two weeks before another group relieved them of it. It was a rigorous strategy, she knew, but it gave her soldiers a longer period of time to recover, which in turn brought a greater overall efficiency. They were on the third group now—the first group had performed as expected due to their newly energized spirits, but the second group had fallen short. It was foreseeable, despite her best hopes. As the days drew on, the soldiers became less and less able. She had created an excess of groups to counteract such an occurrence; she had never anticipated to actually last through the entire ten weeks the tactic demanded, and she still didn’t. No one wanted to stay on the forsaken island for that long. No one wanted to stay longer than they had to.

Carefully, she ran a hand over the left side of her adorned breastplate, enjoying its cool texture. Underneath her armor, she always kept a scarf, a keepsake given to her by the man she loved and lost. It was a simple piece of cloth, covered with beautiful designs of dragon wings and phoenix feathers. She always kept it close to her heart.

The sound of heavy horse hooves reached them. Distant and muted by mud, they could barely be made out, but Marciel was sure of it. The pace was heavy and rapid; a rider with so much conviction and urgency could only mean one thing.
“Roshan,” she commanded suddenly, unable to suppress a small smile. The healer turned toward her. “Fetch my steed.”

It existed where things seemed nonexistent, where the fantastical breached the physical. There stood a cove of tremendous height, the entire mountain shrouded in a powerful shield of magic. Without a proper system to counteract it, the mountain would not have been able to be seen nor felt; it was wholly possible to walk straight through it without even knowing it was there, but that was clearly the intention in the first place. Bells jingled softly in the wind and rain, each attached to a separate hovering crystal orb. Together, they formed a great circle in the empty air, revealing the mountainous cavern mouth but no more. Within the ring of orbs was a transparent vortex, like a film of gyration water, that blurred the shadowy crags inside. Only able to see what the orbs provided, it appeared as if the cave and the mountain it resided in were on a different plane altogether.

The sight of the swirling chasm only made Marciel ride faster, the messenger falling even further behind. They had really done it. Nearly a month it had taken them, but now their mission was almost complete. She could almost taste their success. When she came within a foot of the large cavity, she slowed, dismounted, and took her white horse by the reins. With a bit of coaxing, they traveled through the supernaturally created opening, easily passing through with only a minor pressure and a gust of wind.

The cove was dank and musty, even more than usual as a result of the month’s worth of unceasing rain. Small streams flowed down from crevices while other places simply dripped water from the cavern’s ceiling. The cave floor was completely submerged, and the humidity made it uncomfortable to remain in any one location for very long. Marciel took a look behind her in search of the soldier that had been sent as messenger. From inside, there was no translucent vortex, no blurring of the other side. The magical barrier they had attempted to neutralize did not affect the interior; it made sense that the outside could be seen unmarred from inside the cave. As soon as she sighted the envoy on his brown steed, she gave a curt nod as explanation and continued onward.

Her blue hair was drenched, and the band that held it back in her ponytail was beginning to sag due to the additional weight. The rain had run past her armor and soaked into her clothes, and the puddles she now stepped in engulfed her combat boots. Ahead was a corner with a sharp turn to the right; from it came a tall, well-built man, heavy armor covering most of his body. “Captain,” he greeted, proceeding excitedly toward her. Marciel gave a nod in turn.

“Lieutenant Harleigh, is this what I believe it is?”

“Yes, Captain,” he replied enthusiastically, falling in line with her steady steps. “This place was difficult to find, but we finally did it. I told you it couldn’t hide from us for very long. Alongside our mages, we managed to mostly negate the beast’s protective magic – the new technology the empire gave us to test worked wonderfully.”

“I saw, Lieutenant Harleigh,” Marciel returned with a smile. “It was hard to miss and a marvel to observe. Excellent work.” The man beamed.

“Captain, wait until you see how we tided the beast down.” They turned the corner, and the sight left Marciel breathless. The rugged passageway became a wide expanse of at least four hundred feet wide and equally as tall. No apparent gap gave light from outside, though the month’s dark days would have plunged the cave into shadows regardless and the heavy precipitation would have turned the cave into a pool if such an opening existed. To compensate for the lack of sunlight, torches – their torches – had been placed on the walls and enhanced with magic so that every important area of the large cave chamber could be seen.

In the center of it all was a colossal creature with a red so rich rulers would pay an infinite amount in order to obtain its color. Large, beautiful scales covered its skin, leaving only the underside of its body and its two wide, leathery wings exposed. Elongated talons extended from its five digits on each of its four main limbs, and spikes protruded in uniform increments from its powerful tail. It gave a snarl, opening its great mouth to reveal pointed, sharp teeth, and laid its relatively small ears flat in irritation. Moving forward only slightly, it leered at them with large, serpent-like eyes.

“A dragon,” Marciel exhaled, realizing she had been holding her breath. A flush had run to her cheeks in her stunned excitement. It advanced with a greater force, but magical wires stopped it in its tracks. From its arms, legs, wings, and tail were resilient, lustrous, mystical blue ropes. Each cord of magic came from an individual crystal orb, and on each orb was a bell that seemed to ring independently of outside forces – they were the same as the ones which had revealed the cave’s entrance. The empire’s advancements in magical technology were proving worthwhile; she would have to report the success of their prototypes as soon as they returned to the mainland.

Her soldiers were stationed at the edge of the chamber farthest from where she stood and had split into two sections. To the right, the mages scoured over their tomes and discussed amongst themselves the results of the magic orbs. To the left, the physical soldiers stood in admiration of the beast’s majesty and debated the necessity of building a provisional apparatus to move it back to the base. The couple of healers ran between the two groups, attending to those who had become wounded in the process of securing the creature as well as relaying any messages from one group to the other.
Together, there were about forty soldiers inside the cave – her company totaled to roughly two-hundred people – and each was as dedicated to the empire as Marciel herself, if not more. In doing so, they also esteemed the captain they served under; their loyalty, no doubt, could withstand any obstacle.

One of the mages noticed Marciel’s arrival and quickly made his way toward her with a grin plastered on his face. His matted dark purple hair contrasted greatly against his pale skin. In the crook of his arm rested a black tome, green runes inscribed methodically on its cover. As he strode toward her with deliberate and confident steps, his dark green cape fluttered behind him, revealing the black garments he wore underneath. Light and unarmored, his clothing reflected the necessity for mages to be quick on their feet – or, at least, as quick as possible with their required tomes and items. It was well-known that they had no room for heavy protection.

Marciel stepped forward to greet him. “Captain Torhild,” he called merrily, “I am pleased you could make it.” Despite his obvious delight, his speech remained as decorous as ever. Marciel returned his enthusiasm with an amiable smile.

“Iyar, it is my pleasure to be here.” He gave a small bow upon being addressed; Marciel gave little notice, her gaze moving subtly to the soldiers behind him. “How are my men?”

“That is always your first question,” Iyar remarked offhandedly, shaking his head in humor. The entire company knew of Marciel’s compassion for her troops. “Everyone is well enough. Even though taking the dragon by surprise, we were caught off-guard by its brute force. Regardless, we managed to bring it under our control. Casualties are minimal.” Marciel didn’t respond, but her relief was evident even through her equanimity. Iyar allowed a brief moment of silence before attempting to move onto the topic he had originally wanted to speak with her about. He was certain that Marciel would wish to hear his input on the orbs, especially since he was the chief mage within the company.

His words were drowned out by a deafening roar. The dragon lunged forward in its last attempt to break free but found the effort futile as the ropes continued to hold it back. The magic cords forced it onto the cavern floor with a loud crash, and the entire island seemed to shake under the beast’s massive weight.

Reality held its breath. Time slowed. Sound muted. The dragon had gained everyone’s individual attention, and many of the soldiers had grown pale in its display of power. Its two large eyes moved across the semicircle from the troops to the three that stood at the entrance to its hiding place. A low, ferocious growl escaped from its throat as it sneered, showing blatant fury and defiance against the army’s leader. The ground trembled and the air shuddered and collapsed under its mighty breath. For a transient second, all was still. Then, suddenly, it reared its head and sat back on its haunches, taking a monstrous gulp of air.

Marciel didn’t have time to understand its intentions. Immediately, a frantic incantation was uttered and the space around the dragon’s head warped and twisted as if it had a spirit of its own. Quickly, it wound itself across the beast’s snout, forming a strong tunnel of wind to latch its mouth shut. At first, the spell worked, effectively forcing the dragon’s jaws to close, but the beast only had to put a small amount of resistance against it to weaken the human magic. A series of incantations followed at once. Spirals of light materialized out of nowhere; shadows stretched from the crevices; fire blazed from the torches; water gathered from the puddles; the ground beneath rumbled as a tower of rock, stone, and dirt was brought forth. They drew forward from their various locations to meet the beast’s challenge, fusing themselves with the wind magic to strengthen the binding.

Flames erupted from its mouth but were unable to escape far past its now restricted opening, tendrils of fire licking high into the air through its teeth. The thick magical rope around the dragon’s large jaws continuously changed colors from the combined magic, no part holding a certain color for very long before transitioning to another. It lowered its head once more, the flames diminishing in size. Its fire breath had extinguished, its energy expended. Again, it glared at Marciel, its gaze more malicious than ever before. Its feral growl gained intensity.

Despite its hostility, something about the beast was mesmerizing. Marciel couldn’t determine whether it was its legendary magic or the look in its eyes, but the dragon held a sense of allure stronger than the attraction she had experienced earlier. She found herself wrapped in its passion, tangled in its beastly expression. For a moment, she even lost grip on her company’s purpose and location, focusing only on the dragon’s distinct breathing. All other noise felt greatly subdued.

“Captain Torhild, perhaps we should put some distance between us and that beast,” the lieutenant suggested anxiously, edging backwards. Marciel heard him but couldn’t register his meaning; she stepped forward instead. The chief mage took a few stumbling steps toward her and put a hand on her shoulder in concern.

“Captain,” he muttered in hushed tones, “the dragon is dangerous right now. Please do not approach it any further.” Marciel shook her head at him, giving his hand a reassuring squeeze before removing it from her shoulder. Her voice came out soft and distracted.

“Iyar, I’ll be fine. Stay behind. I think it wishes for my attention.” The mage gave a hesitating glance and then stepped back respectfully, his head bowed. Marciel continued forward, taking deliberate steps in approaching the
mighty beast. The dragon crouched so that its head hovered only inches above the ground, and its growl softened to a dull rumble. Its two large eyes followed her movements carefully, bearing down on her, but the creature took no other action. Marciel stopped when she could feel the gentle breeze created by its nostrils, determining that any farther would be too close to danger. The dragon exhaled, blowing a strong gust of wind in the captain’s direction.

“Filthy human,” it muttered disgracefully, its upper lip raised in a snarl to reveal its long, sharp teeth. “What materialistic foolishness do you hope to obtain from my capture?” Even through the binding, its deep voice resonated throughout the chamber, heightening its image of enormous power. Marciel remained calm, her blue eyes carefully examining the captured creature. She couldn’t afford to outwardly show her excitement in attaining the rare opportunity to speak to a dragon.

“Emperor Mithren has his own agenda,” she replied placidly. “It is not my place to question his intentions.” The dragon reacted with a series of grunts that steadily increased in volume. It took a moment for Marciel realized that it was laughing. Mild confusion crossed her face.

“Your kind entertains me,” it remarked after its laughter mostly subsided. “You are of a high rank in your country, yet they do not even inform you the reasons behind your missions, nor do you question them.” Its golden eyes stared at her mockingly and its sneer quickly returned. “Tell me: where does your loyalty come from?”

“I hold my country above my own life,” Marciel retorted crossly. She was cut off before she could say anything more.

“And still, you stand here, risking your life, for a mission that may not even benefit what you value so highly,” it taunted, a cruel smile finding its way across its beastly lips. Against her better judgment, Marciel became defensive.

“Our emperor looks out for our country’s best interest. His orders are in direct correlation of our country’s needs and wants.” The dragon burst into laughter again, louder this time.

“You assume that humans are not dishonest or self-serving. Power corrupts your people more easily than any other race I have ever encountered.” Marciel refused to listen; she would not be fooled by this fiend’s tongue.

“The emperor—” she began loudly, attempting to speak over its rumbling laughter. “—is a great man—” Irritated, she clenched her right hand into a fist and tightened her jaw. “—who intends to do great things for our country. Why would I—” The roaring laughter just wouldn’t stop. “—doubt his objectives?” There was so much noise. She couldn’t concentrate.

“Are all of you this stubbornly loyal, or is it just your people?” Slowly, it quieted itself to a low grumble, but its booming voice soon took over.

“Surely, Captain, you must understand what has happened by now. There was no explanation for why the mission must be done, no mention of your country’s advantages for its achievement, and the emperor’s council, most probably, was not even present during its assignment. It resulted as a direct order from your emperor, and you might even have been met with an incentive to ensure the mission’s completion, an intimidation, perhaps, for your success.” The dragon flashed its yellow teeth at her in a pretentious smirk. “Do you not see that you have been deceived?” Something inside of her quavered at the thought. She felt her resolution bending precariously.

“This mission has nothing to do with your country.” The sickening crunch of her bones echoed in her head. The threat had been an obvious show of power. While she was not forced into the mission itself, she had been forced into guaranteeing its completion.

“Your emperor is now working for himself.” A dead weight dropped in her stomach. She had been blind. Her loyalty to the mission had been based on a nonexistent purpose. Nothing benefited from the dragon’s capture except for the emperor’s own greed. Suddenly the air around her felt like lead on her shoulders.

Marciel stared at the creature, paralyzed. Her eyes traced its powerful frame and lingered for an extended period on its open wings that were bound to the cavern floor. Her heart beat faster and her breath shortened as she was distinctly reminded of her scarf. In her mind’s eye, she could see the intricate stitches, the rich colors, and the beautiful patterning on the piece of cloth. Dragon wings and phoenix feathers was its symbol, meant to represent their goals and dreams, their beliefs and values, their freedom to strive toward their passions.

For the emperor, she could give up her time, her energy, and even her life, but the very symbol which held all her hopes and aspirations was something she could not let the emperor take away.

“Captain Torhild,” Lieutenant Harleigh barked from behind her, clearly angered from the dragon’s taunts. “That beast knows not what it speaks. We will bring it back to the empire on your orders. Please, instruct us.”

“Wait,” Marciel muttered frantically, her mind racing. Things were moving too quickly. She couldn’t allow the emperor to get his hands on the dragon, but she couldn’t release it when her troops had been so dedicated to her and their mission.

“Captain? What do you wish for us to do?” Iyar prompted. She looked around to her soldiers. Everyone was watching her, waiting for her command. The dragon stared at her haughtily, certain that it had already won. Marciel pursed her lips in indecision. Only a particular piece of the dragon she would not allow the emperor and his greed to
obtain.
“Its wings,” she stated firmly, looking at the soldiers in charge of the orbs. “Break them.” The soldiers hesitated.
“But Captain Torhild,” Lieutenant Harleigh protested, “the emperor wants—”
“The emperor never explicitly stated the necessity for the dragon’s condition. For all of his knowledge, we could have very well damaged the wings in battle,” Marciel shot back curtly, her mouth hardened into a line. She stared forward at the two soldiers – their hands brought to their waistlines, pausing for her word. The lieutenant didn’t respond; Marciel assumed everyone was in agreement, even if they disliked the idea.
“Break its wings,” she commanded again. The two soldiers nodded and shaped an invisible ball in their hands. There was a temporary stillness before the ropes that were latched onto the dragon’s wings pulled closer to the orb, forcing the magnificent structures downward. The dragon roared loudly in objection, struggling fervidly against all its restraints, but to no avail. The magical ropes held with a tenacious grip, and the one around its mouth tightened even further.
The orbs continued retracting the glowing blue rope, pulling the wings closer and closer to the ground. Marciel turned away, unable to watch. A series of loud cracks quickly ensued as the bones split and shattered inside the leathery frame – and the mighty roar that resulted covered the island like a blanket of raging fury.

Safe Grounds

The room is empty. Simple and meaningless, it remains a wide expanse with nothing in between. There is no color; there is no life. There is no danger. Time is ticking. Memories are fading. It’s time to go. You need to hurry. But, please, be careful. You can’t afford to get lost.
The scenery changes. No longer are you in a plain, white quarter. A morning breeze blows by as the tall ferns brush at your ankles. The meadow extends far past what your vision grants you. The sun is shining brightly; good weather is forecasted. Please, hurry!
A dirt path appears. Your journey starts simply. There’s only one way to go. You slowly amble along; you want to enjoy the view. Butterflies flutter by. Grasshoppers sing to their content. There is no rush. The pathway leads you to a forest. The trees are sparse at first but more emerge as you progress. The birds chirp softly, fainter calls echoing back. The bees buzz their way along, soft hums coming and going. Everything is at peace. There is no need to worry.
The path makes a fork up ahead. Now there are two roads. But which to choose?
The bushes behind you shake. You turn around. A squirrel innocently makes its way from under the leaves, picking up an acorn before scurrying off to its home. The clock won’t wait for you. You must decide. Your gaze travels to the sky. It’s still sunny; the clouds are white and full. It’s okay to choose. Both ways feel right. You decide to travel with the right trail – it has never led you wrong. The path twists and turns, making its way around trees and boulders without care.
Things are going well. You must have chosen correctly. Suddenly, the trees begin to tremble, and the branches rattle in a flurry of motion. You know it’s just the wind, but a tinge of uncertainty taints your confidence. The breeze quickly passes, and everything returns to how it was. You remain untouched. The forest has protected you. You continue on without a second thought. Your doubt is banished.
The forest becomes denser; less light is able to filter through. The tree trunks are thick with age, though their leaves are as vibrant and lively as ever. The atmosphere turns slightly colder as you near the more protected regions of the woods. The moisture in the air clings to your skin. Further down the path, you encounter three grand oaks, their branches entwined to form a sturdy shelter for its residents. Between them lay three trails. The path has split again. Be wary.
You pay no heed to the caution. This forest is safe; you trust it. You only give a fleeting glance at the trails before choosing the middle one. Your logic is simple: the center course is straight and true. The wind lightly ruffles your hair. A soft boom comes from above. You look up to see a thick canopy of leaves and branches. The clouds can no longer be seen, but your ears can distinguish the thunder. Your doubts return, but you quickly dispel them. You cannot control the weather. You were not wrong for choosing this path. Danger approaches. Be very cautious.
Your course diverges again. Now there are six paths. Which one will you choose? Hesitation comes. Qualms nibble at the back of your mind. You cannot wait. Choose a path. The thunder booms loudly, and you can visualize the bright flash of lightning as it strikes the ground below. The bird songs are gone; the bees have stopped. Safety is but a few steps away. You turn around. You don’t need to go any farther. You can continue later. There is no time. You cannot turn back. A heavy wind picks up, maneuvering itself through the trees. You put your hands up to protect your face and quickly turn your back to it. The forest could not shield you this time. You have to go. I will help you!
A small ball of light appears. Hovering in the air, it circles around you anxiously. Follow me. It dashes off in haste, and you follow. Decisions don’t matter anymore. You have a guide; you don’t have to see which pathway you’re on. The thunder booms again — it’s becoming more frequent. The light continues forward; you’re trailing it as fast as you can. Water comes pouring down; the storm gave little warning. The wind picks up from ahead, and the rain falls sideways. You shield your eyes and keep going. Though harder to see, the light is still in front of you. You’re still on the right course.

The scenery blurs. The light speeds up. You run faster. Branches scratch at your skin, your face, your clothes. The wind howls and the rain stings, but they can’t stop you. You’ll keep going. You’re still on the right track. You squint in disbelief. The light is gone — it’s traveled too far ahead. You couldn’t catch up. You keep running. There is no time.

The forest melts at your feet. Leaves blend into branches; branches blend into dirt. You give no notice. Now is not the time to enjoy the view. Slowly, things dim. And then complete darkness envelops. The wind, the forest, and even the ground beneath you — everything is gone. You stop. Silence surrounds you. Your breath comes heavily. There is nothing. Only darkness and empty air remain. You put your hand in front of your face. Nothing can be seen.

A hollow switch resounds in the distance. For a second, nothing happens. You hold your breath. A path of light materializes under your feet and snakes its way through the darkness. You thank the feeling of familiarity and let out a sigh of relief. With nowhere else to go, you begin your trek again. But this time, you are cautious. The pathway is the only solid, visible object in view. If you step off, you’ll be tossed into the endless abyss. Where are you going? The murky darkness seems to give a moan in answer.

You come upon a dead-end; the solid, glowing white path abruptly cuts off in front of you. You pause. It’d be pointless to go back, but there is no room to go forward. You feel a small breeze blow by. A soft hum reaches your ears as four new paths of light emerge and connect themselves to the one you stand on. Each one curves in its own direction. You falter; you understand the importance of your decision, but you know you can’t take too long. Time is ticking. A small series of bells ring faintly behind you. You turn around and find the path slowly starting to disappear. You have to choose a route. You follow the left one this time, stepping on the solid platform. The old pathway falls at your feet. You can’t turn back. You have to keep going. As you walk, you silently watch the other pathways vanish from your view one after another in their own direction. You did not make the wrong choice. You cannot afford to get lost.

The road makes another twist. You look ahead to see how much you have left to travel, but the light continues farther than you can see. Is it possible that this path never ends? Your breath shortens. There must be an end. You need to hurry. Your walk becomes faster, and the temperature seems to drop. The anxieties pull at your mind. If you can just get to the end, things will be okay. You hold onto this belief, vainly attempting to quell your fears. Your footsteps softly reverberate in the empty void. The solid stream of light appears to falter for a moment. You blink. Far in the distance, the light melts away. You look at the trail behind and, at the farthest point of your vision, it does the same. Slowly, the invisible force makes its way toward you. The now small strip of light grows even smaller. There is nowhere to run.

The path under you starts to tremble and shake, already beginning to soften. The gentle waves turn larger as your weight becomes too heavy for the path’s support. You begin to fall, and even though you know the inevitable result, you still hold on to what little solid ground is left. It disappears from under your fingertips, and you plunge completely into the darkness. Your heart skips a beat; panic takes over your body. Things stop again. You open your eyes to find a blank room. Carefully, you pick yourself up from the ground and stare at the empty space. You’re safe. Time is ticking. Memories are fading. It’s time to go. You need to hurry. But, please, be careful. You can’t afford to get lost. The landscape shifts in a flash of light. A soft breeze blows at your back; the grass tickles your ankles. You’re in the meadow again. You had not chosen correctly. Please, hurry!

The dirt path reappears. You must find your way.
“So, you coming to the game with us tonight?”
“Can’t. Need to practice,” I said.
“GOD. When will this thing end?” Brandi asked, a hint of exasperation in her voice.
“After the piano competition ends—”
“Which is like what—50 years from now?”
“I compete tomorrow,” I replied.
“Yeah, then you can get your life back,” Brandi’s voice was smothered in sarcasm. (When was it not?) “Well, have fun practicing!”
“Sure. See you later!”
“Bye-bye!”

Heaving a long, deep sigh, I set my cell phone down on the grand piano’s glossy frame. *Time to practice.*

Again.

I didn’t just play through the songs either—oh no, life can never be that simple—I applied “deliberate practice.” Meaning rushing your homework at school, rushing your sleep in bed, and rushing your meals at home; meaning six, seven, eight hours a day thundering away in the same room, at the same piano, on the same seat; and meaning finding every single little mistake and searching for the “essence” of every note. *Every* detail is part of the obsessive pursuit of perfection.

*Sigh.* *Tomorrow’s the competition.* Played the Shostakovich Prelude and Fugue. *What am I gonna do?*


The next morning arrived all too soon.

I reached the university campus around 6:00, an I-know-I’m-dangerously-nervous-to-the-point-of-intoxication-so-why-am-I-smiling-look slapped over my face. Ironically, the campus was breathtaking: old English mansions situated on miles and miles of undulating hills, a brilliant cascade of fiery autumn colors, mellow breezes softly whispering of the past.

I was to perform second.

Backstage, I anxiously listened to the first contestant. *He’s good. Really good.* I watched my raw hands alternate between white and pink as I clenched and unclenched my sweating knuckles. I switched to rubbing my fingers neurotically. Stomach lurching, I swallowed throatily in an effort to not throw up. My heart pounded with an intense mixture of dread and fear. The boy finished; the audience responded with thunderous applause. *My turn.* I dragged my feet into the blinding light...

The hall was abuzz with excitement: the results would soon be posted.

“Coming through! Coming through!” A slender lady, chestnut curls a tumble, made her way through the crowd. She stapled a pastel blue sheet to the bulletin board.

**Results**
Please claim award and/or judges’ comments at front desk.

Aleksey Kuznetsov
PingPing Xiao
Annabelle Marie Jacobs

My heart dropped to the floor. I scanned the paper over and over, futilely expecting the name in big bold letters by the number “1” to magically change into mine. I turned numb. Completely numb.

Being numb made everything surreal. For the next two weeks, I flitted around as a ghost: pale, silent, and gloomy. Like in a dream, I watched a reflection, an empty shell of the real me occupy the space once called my life. That empty shell ate mechanically, worked mechanically, and slept mechanically.

I stopped practicing piano.
I began to measure time relative to the competition. Tonight was the thirteenth day after it. I glanced at the clock, now an obsession: 10:08. Time to sleep.

As I lay in bed, tucked under the thick blanket of a warm night, my thoughts drifted to that Saturday morning. My mind still wasn’t used to the idea that I failed because I refused to think about it. Agonizingly slow, the details floated back...

_Hundreds of expressionless faces stared back at me, the silence suppressing. My metallic footsteps vibrated in the echoing auditorium as I walked towards the polished Steinway. I glanced at the judges. One nodded blankly._ What were they expecting of me? Miracles? Taking eight deep breaths, I began to play.

_Falling softly on the keys, my hands smoothly began the velvety opening to the first piece. Fingers weaving an intricate embroidery through the milky white and in-black keys, eyes tracing the chiseled hammers tapping on glinting, winking, teasing strings, and lungs breathing in the sweet, sparkling scent of maple and pine, I gently drifted away...drifted away...into that beautiful Eden full of passion and mystery the composers must have discovered through music._

_I no longer played the piano; the piano played me, the instrument only a body through which my soul traversed. With each new wave of notes, my fervor increased until I finished on three tender chords. Bowing, I managed to stumble off the stage..._

The flashback ended. My throat hurt, my head hurt, and my heart hurt. Everything hurt, but it was better than being numb. Anything was better than being numb.

Sunday morning, I awoke with a sharp jerk. Life seemed different today—more vibrant, more effervescent! I slipped quietly out of bed—it was only 6:27 (therefore, five more hours until everybody else woke up)—and stood in front of the bathroom mirror. _Oh God!_ My face was a ghastly canvas of dried tears and coal black mascara. I hiccupped, then giggled.

As I made my way downstairs, I passed the room my piano napped in. The intense sunlight streamed in through the blinds, creating a quirky striped pattern on my piano’s gleaming mahogany color. Abruptly, I felt an urgent need to walk in the room. I eyed the piano; the piano eyed me. Slowly, curiously, I slid back the case and rested on the bench. My finger lightly tapped the A. The note rang clearly in my ears. I remembered why I love piano...

“GO PANTHERS! GO PANTHERS! GO PANTHERS!!!” The crowd roared in unison.

Brandi turned to me, “So you’re over the piano thing, right? I mean, that was like a month ago.”

I nodded blissfully. Brandi, along with my other friends, was bundled up in an assortment of black and gold blankets covered with the school’s mascot: a brooding panther, brown eyes sharply arched up, fangs glistening in the black background.

The piano competition had become a distinct memory from I often drew strength and courage. I had recovered, stood back up, and looked forward to life—LIFE!—again! The harrowing experience proved to be a valuable lesson.

Smiling, I glanced at my laughing friends and settled back into the blankets. I was happy. My friends were happy. The world was happy. Life is good. Still.
Cowboy

Author: Emily Perry
Grade: 12
Teacher: Jennifer Gross
School: Park Hill High School, Kansas City, MO

My grandpa’s name was Ray, and I didn’t know him well enough. He worked long hours on the railroad for most of his life. He met my grandma just before joining the Air Force as a mechanic, and two weeks later sent her a letter saying, “You can mail it, hoc it, or wear it.” An engagement ring was tucked in the envelope. He woke at sunrise every morning, ate quickly—a habit from the military—and hand-washed the dishes even when he didn’t have to. He carved and crafted jewelry out of silver and turquoise and agate. He held a fortune in stories. His laugh was infectious.

Grandpa Ray was a John Wayne cowboy in a family of Indians. His eyes were clear blue, and he had combed white hair, once blonde. Moviestar handsome. And I knew Grandpa could beat out John Wayne any day of the week. Did John Wayne ride bulls or own a motorcycle? Could John Wayne recount stories that made you laugh ‘til you cried? Could he fix damn near anything? I didn’t think so.

John Wayne was an actor. My grandpa was a cowboy.

Grandpa Ray died of a brain tumor in the early summer of 2004. While he was sick, we all flew out to Arizona to see him. Most days he lay on a bed by the back living room windows. Grandpa had always been reserved—he didn’t waste words—but now he seemed to be somewhere else entirely. He never spoke.

I had the bedside manner of a nervous child and the awareness of someone moving in a dreamscape. My family encouraged me to talk to him, but I couldn’t find the words.

One evening we all sat in the living room and talked banalities. I showed some of my drawings to Grandpa. Nervous smiles. My sister Beth read him a poem of hers, and then I read him one of mine. An early attempt, immurely written, but sincere. When I looked up, Grandpa was crying. It didn’t register at first. Before my mind had a chance to process, Grandma rushed in with reassurances for me and a kerchief for him.

That night I lay awake on the fold-out couch bed Beth and I shared during the visit. I asked Beth why Grandpa had cried. Beth said he just liked my poem.

June was still young and cool in the mornings, school still fresh in my mind. Beth was away in Europe, her first time out of the country, with the high school’s Spanish class. We didn’t tell her until she got back home. We didn’t want to ruin her trip.

I remember sitting on the old couch in the living room, sorting through loose change from a huge glass jug. It was all my grandparents’ pocket coins from years of living, dumped into the jug each time they came home. Now it was a jumble of memories on the worn cushion, one by one being wrapped into cardboard tubes to be spent or forgotten. From continents away, Beth rang up on the phone, which passed to me, and I talked to her as I sorted change. More banalities. She was in Grenada, Spain, and I foraged for the right words, too aware of what I should and shouldn’t say.

Winslow’s only funeral parlor was incredibly quiet. The walls were a not-quite warm white, and the rug slept thick and muffling in red-purple burgundy. Nothing so dark as violet or comforting as wine, but roses would be an insult. Plush chairs, a dark wood bench and dusty fake plants had been placed with tip-toeing care in the entryway.

The back room had a round table too large for the space, where the smiling employee helped us pick out a casket and headstone. I paid little attention; that back room churned gray and cold under the fluorescent lights. I just wanted to leave.

The funeral parlor employee showed us sample caskets in a room off the entryway, the same room that would be used for the wake. His sales pitch was the only time I went in that room; I stayed in the hall during the wake and faced the building’s other room, with the same cushy rug and chairs. Maybe they sent hysterical parents and spouses in there to regain their composure, I wondered. I sat and pondered pointless things like that, but I never went in for the wake. I was afraid he would look too dead. And I was afraid he would look too alive.

I assured my mom I was okay and just sat on the dark wood bench by myself. I stared at the red-purple carpet while family members and friends filed past. I struggled not to cry. I failed.

I could hear Grandma weeping on the other side of the wall. Then I could hear her yelling, pleading, almost angry. “Take me with you,” she said; “I want to go with him, I want to go with him.”

My mom came back and hugged me. I cried.
I don’t remember the funeral very well. People, many of whom I knew by face only (and then just vaguely), stood and recounted stories. Some stories I’d heard before, some I hadn’t. In well-loved words, Grandpa Ray rode his motorcycle down Main Street, up on the sidewalk, and right into the General Store on the corner; he raced bikes through the desert with eggs balanced on spoons in his mouth to see who could reach the finish line with their egg intact. He was courageous, a saint, a soldier, the best damn man you ever met.

He was human.
He was a cowboy.

Cousin Shar played “Amazing Grace” on her bagpipes while we left the church and that vividness—the uneven hum of the instrument before she began, the sharp, sweet-sour flavor of the notes—bleached out the rest of the day.

The Arizona sun shone on the fake grass around the grave, bright green plastic stuff that covers the porches of the cooped-up elderly. The blood relatives held roses as the church-man spoke, and we sat under the uneasy shade of a canvas awning. I turned my rose round and round, looked up at all the faces, turned the rose round and round again.

With speeches finished, we put our roses on the casket lid one by one. Workers lowered the silent, polished box and all the roses into the ground.

It was a long walk back to the car, all cemetery trees and headstone shadows. And the shadow of his marker yet to be placed, the shadow of the cowboy I hardly knew, fell a mile long.
From the very first moment of my life, I knew who my best friend was. Not my workaholic mother, who immediately made a three-hour conference call within minutes of my birth. Certainly not my couch potato father, who escaped from the hospital during the birthing process so he wouldn’t miss the season finale of his favorite show, “Chuck.” Definitely not my older sister, Claire, who pitched a fit so unbearable that the doctors nearly damaged my brain shortly after I took my very first breath. My best friend and closest family member was the one who took my newborn body into her arms when my mom was making her phone call, the one who sang me to sleep when my sister rampaged the entire hospital. My Grandma Rose will always be my best friend, no matter what the stars of life have to say about it. They’re just stars, after all.

Rose has witnessed every accomplishment I’ve made and every milestone I’ve survived. She heard me speak my first word, “Rose,” while my parents were both carefully absorbed in other not-so-important activities. She helped me take my first steps and watched as I continued across the kitchen floor to fetch my binky without her hands for support. Rose was with me when I broke my first bone, courtesy of a grouchy six-year-old Claire shoving my delicate four-year-old body down the steep staircase. She even took me shopping for new clothes to match my green cast on the way home from the hospital. My Rose celebrated Christmas with me year after year, being especially generous whenever my sister received gifts from my parents and I did not. She did not leave my side for five whole years, except at night when she returned to her house three blocks away. I later calculated how many days were included in five years’ time. For the first 1,826 nights of my life, I cried myself to sleep.

I specifically remember my first day of kindergarten at Peach Tree Elementary School in Chicago. The very name of the school made me queasy, and I practically begged my Rose to let me skip education. She’d already taught me how to read and write, two areas in which Claire struggled. Secretly, I took great pride in being smarter than Claire, but I wasn’t going to let satisfaction sway me from my hatred of leaving Rose for school. We argued for a long time, until I finally gave into her judgment of what was best for me. After all, she was the only person whom I could trust to care what was best for me. (The only reason my parents even bought food anymore was so their “Darling Claire-Bear” didn’t starve to death, though how they could imagine that I had no clue. Claire’s idea of a three-meal day included six meals of donuts and Diet Coke, leaving me with nothing to eat but leftover Spaghettios and the unlikely chance of finding a pear. I often ate lunch at Rose’s place.) I finally surrendered to Rose’s verdict, and she kindly escorted my trembling body to the fiend pits of Peach Tree Elementary.

Naturally, I had enemies at school from the very first step I took into the kindergarten classroom. Rose embraced and encouraged me outside of the door before she betrayed me by turning in the other direction. Sulking, I had barely stepped through the door when my shoelace got caught in the hinges, and I was catapulted into the easel beside the doorframe, taking down two students with me as I fell to the tiled floor. One of the kids, named Jason, turned around and threw his fist neatly into the crevice underneath my jaw, leaving a throbbing bruise the size of a golf ball on the left side of my chin. The other child, Marisa, began wailing so noisily that I was warily reminded of Claire when she once dropped her favorite Barbie doll in the upstairs toilet. My teacher, Ms. Krandall, happened to turn around and witness the destruction just as I hastily jumped to my feet, accidentally breaking Jason’s nose in the process. The rest of the day went more smoothly, probably because it was spent sitting on a stool staring at a crack in the wall in the “no-no” corner. I’ve never liked school.

Outside of purgatory, I spent most of my time reading books at Rose’s apartment or curiously watching her sing to herself as she worked outside in the garden. When I was seven years old, she eventually began asking for my help. Although I always enjoyed any chance to be more like Rose, I was also vaguely aware of the fact that her energy was leaving her a little bit more every day. Her muscles seemed to become sorer every hour. She was getting old. I watched as she skillfully demonstrated how to neatly rake the soil, how to gently plant the seeds and how to water the flowers with care. One Friday night when I had the rare privilege of staying the night at Rose’s place, she took my hand and pulled me down to sit on the swinging bench on her roamly front porch. We sat there for a while, enjoying the cool night air and gazing soundlessly at the bright stars. She eventually spoke, surprising me a bit as her soft voice broke through the silent evening atmosphere.

“Now, Lydia,” she began. “Look at how all of the flowers compliment the house so nicely.” I looked.
“What would those flowers look like if we hadn’t cared for them so, if we just worked all day without a thought or sat inside while they withered and suffered? Would the house look as lovely as it does?”

She waited, so I softly answered, “No ma’am. But Rose, why do you care so much about the pretty flowers? Why do you love them?” She looked down at me thoughtfully and smiled.

“I love those flowers for the same reason I love you, Lydia. Those flowers don’t hurt anyone; they do their best to make the world a better place. Just having them around makes people happier, though they are so neglected around the world.”

Her smile had been replaced by a grimace, her tone more serious. “Everything in this world needs to be cared for, Lyd, whether or not it’s alive. The horrible truth is, not everything is loved and taken care of. Everything needs nourishment and attention, though sometimes never receive either.”

I sat still, bewildered and impressed. She didn’t speak for quite some time, so I stared up at the stars once more. As I watched the sky, a shooting star flickered by, and a thought occurred to me. “Rose?” I asked tentatively. She gazed down at me in response. “Rose, who takes care of the stars?”

My question seemed to take her off guard, though her gentle, calm expression did not alter. “You do, baby,” She murmured tenderly. “You care for the stars because you take care of the world. You care for the people around you, even if they don’t feel the same.” She tilted her chin down knowingly. “You understand?”

I nodded wordlessly. She sighed and explained.

“Lydia, in my eyes, stars aren’t just balls of light and gas. I believe each star is its own constellation. A constellation is a picture the stars make, baby. I believe when people die, their souls become pictures in the stars. When you look at the stars, you can see people for what they truly are.”

At this point, I had already begun searching the sky, looking for people’s souls. My vision was becoming blurry, though, as tears obscured my view. “Rose?” I asked again. “Someday, will you be a con-ster-lu-tion?” The idea had just dawned on me, and it overwhelmed me completely. Slowly, she turned around and stared deep into my eyes. I could see her eyes beginning to prick as well; a tear trickled down my cheek.

“Constellation, Lydia,” she corrected me carefully. “And yes,” she continued, “I will be my own star.” Then, with a halfhearted grin, she added, “I suppose you’ll have to take care of me someday.”

I leaned into her, and for an endless time, silently contemplating the concept of “someday.” Someday came far too soon.

I was twelve years old when it happened. I had just begun attending junior high, a place that made Peach Tree Elementary School seem like heaven and angels in comparison. Despite my apparent dislike of school, my grades never faltered from an A average. Rose was always proud of me, even when I missed an assignment or two. She was seventy-five, not especially old for being a grandmother of a seventh grader. Her heart did it.

I woke up one morning and skipped to Rose’s house in an abnormally cheerful mood. I was so excited to tell her about my graded test, and I assumed we could talk about it over my favorite breakfast, blueberry muffins. Usually, I could smell her cooking all the way down the street. Galloping down her road, I sniffed the air to check the breakfast menu. Nothing. I stopped when I got to her front yard and took another whiff. Nothing. It wasn’t the lack of smell that made my stomach do a flip, but the lack of personality outside of her house. Her entire land normally emanated life and cheer. Not today.

The feeling of emptiness finally took me over, and I was running. I sprinted to her front door, harshly throwing it open in my attempt to see her as soon as possible. I found her, sitting in a rocking chair, her book fallen on the floor beside her. Aside from the book, she looked exactly how I had left her the night before.

I walked swiftly to her side, shaking her softly. “Rose...wake up.” Her eyes stayed closed. I shook her again, harder now. “Rose, please. Rose! Wake up!”

My hand dropped lifelessly to my side. My brain deflated, and all at once my body went numb. Subconsciously, I’d already known she wasn’t waking up. Helplessly, I stepped stiffly away from her cold form. I automatically picked up the phone to call for help, but stopped abruptly. Who could I call? I thought back to a time when Rose informed me about safety, and my frozen fingers slowly dialed the three digits. A kind voice picked up, exuding authority and calm at the same time. I vaguely remember her asking for the emergency, though it barely registered in my fried brain. The last thing I remember was my crackling voice squeaking “help.” Then my world went black.

I woke up in the hospital, momentarily forgetting the situation. Too soon, though, the memories flooded in. The doctor once again explained to me the horrible news. Although the information was clear, I don't think it had made an impact on my brain yet. My soul was still numb, and every kind word spoken to me simply went in one ear and out the other. Everything I did was mechanical, every action automatic.

The funeral took place the next day; I didn’t cry. The tears I longed to shed were locked up inside me, surrounded by emptiness and what now felt like an anesthetic in my heart. My only feeling during the whole ceremony was an anger that brutally flared inside me at my family. My mom left during the funeral service to take a phone call.
When we reached the reception restaurant, my sister practically swallowed the entire buffet table. As for my dad, he didn’t even show up. Apparently, there were some important reruns to attend to at home. Finally, mercy arrived, and the longest day of my existence came to its bitter end.

About a week later, my parents received the will. My mom accepted it inattentively, not even reading the important print. Claire’s greed took hold of her and she snatched the will from my mom to read her inheritance, excitement blazing on her face. I painfully fought the urge to either throw up on her new blouse or sock her so hard she’d be colorblind. Her enthusiasm faded, and her face took on an expression similar to that of a pit bull. Her flat gray eyes bored into my own eyes, glaring repulsively. She then proceeded to throw the paper to the ground, stomp on it, and run in the opposite direction. I rolled my eyes at her dramatic exit, carefully picking up the paper and smoothing out the new creases. My eyes, taking in the contents of the page, suddenly bulged wide. Rose had given me everything. The paper slipped from my icy fingers, gracefully drifting to a halt on the kitchen floor. My mind was overwhelmed, abruptly plagued with confusion and disorientation. Her jewelry, her house her garden... all of it belonged to me. I couldn’t bear it.

I looked out the window to distract myself from my deteriorating life and saw the stars. They were winking at me, encouraging me to take hold of my life and turn things around for the better. I looked away harshly, disgusted. What did they know? They were just stars, after all.

Though my tragic life continued, the feeling of numbness didn’t fade. My behavior changed, as well as my grade point average. I no longer tried to do well in school, lost of all motivation. I ditched classes regularly and took drugs on occasion. Naturally, my parents didn’t notice, nor would they have cared if they did. I had no friends and certainly no love interests. My life was wrong, a flaw in the happy chain of society. At that point, I really didn’t care.

It wasn’t until tenth grade that my life changed. We were going on a surprise field trip, one I was miraculously allowed to attend. I sat alone on the bus while the rest of my chirpy biology classmates tittered about field trip locations. The place didn’t matter to me, I just wanted to escape town for a while.

I drowned in my negative thoughts for a bit until the bus finally came to a stop. I strolled out into the fresh air, a sensation I hadn’t felt in months. A certain fragrance was perfuming the air, one that tickled my nose and played with my memory. I started walking again, hoping to find the source of the smell and cure my curiosity. After about ten more feet, I stopped abruptly. Oh. Now I understood the smell and the reason for my abnormally fast heart rate. The aroma was flowers, an odor filled with traces of lilac, tiger lily, lavender, orange blossom, roses... I had smelled them before.

I walked through a large iron gate between two long concrete walls, and confirmed my suspicions. This place was a garden; I now had no doubt. The first hints of feeling were beginning to leak through my long-dormant heart. I restrained them callously, not willing to show any signs of emotion in public. I knew what I had to do.

I ran from the bus, but not to my normal destination. I sprinted for three blocks until I stood at the front door of her house. I pulled the familiar key from my jacket pocket, and bravely marched into my empty home. I cherished the familiarity, feeling the hope and happiness finally saturate my veins once more. It was then that I noticed the small envelope sitting on the very rocking chair that had ruined my entire life. I opened it carefully, not sure what to expect. It read:

Dearest Lydia,

The state in which you are reading this must not be positive, considering the time this note was to be delivered to you. For that I apologize, because I have known my time was coming for quite a while now. I didn’t want to waste any of my time with you, so I kept my health conditions a secret. Your life is in your hands, Lydia, and I know you can turn it around without my help. Remember that I love you forever. If you need me, I’ll be in the stars. Take care of me there, and take care of yourself.

Love,

Grandma Rose

The tears I had worked so hard to conceal spilled freely now. All of the numbness surrounding me was gone, replaced by an overwhelming amount of emotion. I sat in her chair for hours, drowning in the tears that consumed me at last. Memories flooded my mind, finally awakening my brain from its endless reverie. After a while, I dried my weary eyes and composed myself enough to check the damage outside.

No trace of life ever existing in the bare wasteland the garden was evident. My heart sank in despair as I realized this monstrosity was my fault, my burden. A burst of intuition suddenly enveloped me, and I knew what I would do. I would gain control over my sorrowful life, and I would turn it around. I would replant the garden that made life a better place to be. I would take care of the stars. With a smile, I realized that by caring for myself, I was caring for the stars.
I began to walk away when a flicker of color caught my eye from the desert garden. I bent down and examined the bright red rose; it was bursting with life and exuding personality from every angle. I grinned and looked up at the starry sky, wondering how one could possibly doubt the power of love when it came right down to it. I walked home in the dark, smiling grandly the entire way. I gazed at the garden of stars in admiration, and I knew why I felt so protected that night. After all, they’re more than just stars. They’re life.
“Now, twist yourself into this position and strike at the training dummy.”

The young squire did as he was told, but before he could strike, he fell to the ground from keeping the pose. His knight fell to the ground, rolling with laughter. The squire joined in, laughing at his own mistake. Wiping tears from his eyes, his knight, Sir William, spoke. “Now, remember, we aren’t doing yoga, my young pupil. Honestly, who fixes themselves into those crazy forms, just for ‘spiritual enlightenment’? Bah! I suspect witchcraft at work.”

“Yes Sir William, and…”

The squire, Lance, was cut off at the sight of a messenger on a horse, riding towards them. What be this?

“Sorry to interrupt Sir William, but the King has declared war! He asks that all of his knights prepare to ride into battle!”

“Hm… indeed. Now, did he say anything about my squire?”

“Your squire? Why, it would be absurd for him to say anything about it!”

“Excellent! Lance, prepare for war, we ride today!”

While the messenger rode off, Sir William began putting on his armor and gestured for Lance to put on the armor that Sir William had crafted for him. Lance picked up his sword and shield while Sir William did the same. “Now, with this war upon us, I believe it is time to prepare you for knighthood. I want you to fight me with all of your might, not even restraining for a kill. I will do the same, but will move to not kill you. This exercise is meant to help both of us, as it will get us both into fine shape for the war. And now, begin!”

With those words, Sir William dashed forward, his sword outstretched. Lance dodged the blow, jumping to the side and aiming a blow on Sir William’s breastplate. Sir William raised his shield and pressed on, landing a blow on Lance’s helmet. Staggering back, Sir William continued with a volley of strikes, which Lance barely dodged with use of his shield. Seeing a chance, Lance ran forward as to stab Sir William in the chest. Sir William raised his sword and struck a powerful counterstrike, thrusting Lance’s sword away from him.

“An excellent battle! I truly believe that you are ready now; you will ride into battle alongside me and fight alongside the knights of our good king.”

The two embarked on a journey to the battlefield, a good day’s ride away. Upon approaching, the scene of utter carnage met their eyes. Severed humans lay on the field, stained eternally with dark red blood. A small wind swept through the area, heralding the possibility of a storm later, as a tall knight limped towards them. “So, you’d be the reinforcements? Excellent! We need as much help as we can get. The King of the Western Plains is sending scores of knights towards us; it’s a miracle we’ve survived so far, albeit barely…. HERE THEY COME!”

What seemed like a black cloud roared towards them; as Lance looked closer, he noticed knights in black armor riding on black horses. Sir William roughly pulled Lance to his own horse. “You remember how to ride horses? Good. I’ll be close by if you need me.”

With a battle cry, the White King’s knights charged forward ready to defend the land. Lance, perched atop his horse, used his free hand to land blows on nearby knights, but to no avail. Thinking, Lance took his sword and, this time, struck a nearby knight’s horse. The effect was immediate; the horse gave a loud whinny and bucked off its rider. What happened next chilled Lance; as the knight attempted to get up, a score of knights ran towards him, both friend and foe, trampling him to death. As Lance looked on with shocked eyes, a clap of thunder reached his ears. His horse, frightened, threw him off. As Lance picked himself up, he looked around and saw that no one had managed to stay on his horse. He ran towards another enemy knight and struck against him. Within moments, Lance’s strength proved superior, and he felled the enemy. His next sight burned into his memory. In front of him, Sir William fought with a knight. As Sir William raised his sword to strike the knight, his foe quickly whipped around and struck his side. The knight’s strength followed through, and Sir William was cleaved in half.

Lance turned around, not wishing to see more of the scene. Hot tears poured down his face, as the closest thing to a father faded into death. Lance knelt beside his mentor’s severed side, still crying, his tears disguised by the storm now in its earnest.

“Hey crybaby, return to your mommy. The field here ain’t for tears, unless you wish a quick death, like your dead friend here.”
Anger bubbled inside Lance. As he turned to see the knight’s face, he saw nothing but a void. Feeling intense hatred, and an urge to avenge his mentor, he unsheathed his sword, and struck at the knight who met the blow, smiling, and pushed Lance onto his back. Lance got up and continued the fight.

In the ferocity of the fight, Lance managed to clip his opponent’s thigh, while he took a blow to his shield arm himself. Now fighting without a shield, Lance found himself outmatched. The knight sensed this and struck him a blow, forcing him to the ground. Hitting the ground hard, Lance’s head hurt awfully. As the dark knight twirled his sword to stab him, something flared up inside Lance. *No! He may have killed Sir William, but he won’t kill me! I MUST AVENGE HIM!* Lance jumped up and slashed the knight’s chest, striking through the armor. The knight fell, slain.

The battle had been won by the good king who took it upon himself to visit the battlefield days later. He made pains to call upon Lance. “Sir William always spoke highly of you. I am sorry for your loss....” he began. Lost for words for a moment, he spoke again, “I would like to honor you as a knight. Your bravery is unparalleled; your honor, unbelievable. I know you will rise to the occasion, as Sir William did years ago.”
At midnight, a silver rain was falling.

The sky, filled with mist and haze, diffused the moonlight into a single radiant cloud. It enveloped the raindrops as they fell and reflected on them as they passed, slipping in endless sparkling curtains to the dark quiet earth.

In one small town, beneath the rain, in a house on a sleepy street, a boy and his father sat, eating soup. Their kitchen was brightly lit and empty save for a table and stacks of cardboard moving boxes. They were eating the soup with plastic spoons out of little Styrofoam bowls, and for a long time there was no sound but the scrape of the spoons and the drum of the rain.

Then the father spoke. His voice had grown hoarse from little use. “You know, Sam,” he said quietly, “I didn’t want her to go.”

Sam did not answer. He put down his spoon but kept his fingers clenched around it as he stared blankly at the table. His father continued, “What else was there for me to do? She was—is—so young, so... beautiful. She’s like sunlight—no one could ever contain her. What could I do?” his voice broke, and there was silence again for a long time. Neither of them moved.

Sam’s father spoke again. “And then she met that other—guy, the artist.” His voice dripped with contempt and pain. “I couldn’t keep her after that. Next thing I knew she’d handed me the papers.” There was a sudden sharp crack as the handle of the boy’s spoon snapped off in his palm. He did not seem to be conscious of it, and he continued to gaze at nothing as the splintered plastic dug into his skin.

“And then,” continued his father softly, “Then—we had to leave. It was no good trying to stay. Not in that house.” He looked up suddenly, stared into his son’s face. “You can understand that, can’t you, Sam?”

The boy met his father’s eyes, the same as his own, gray and sad now, but when happy, those eyes could flicker with argent fire. “I understand, Dad,” Sam whispered.

They did not talk again that night. Sam sat and looked at the rain that fell like tears and the boxes filled with unspoken words and unfulfilled dreams.

***

In the morning, Sam helped his father unpack. It was no lengthy process. They had always lived simply, with few possessions.

The day dragged on. Sometime in the late afternoon, Sam was overcome by a consuming restlessness, an inability to stand the silence of the house and the sadness in his father’s eyes for an instant longer. He walked outside and was dazzled by the brilliance of the sun, seeming to mock the bitterness he felt. He couldn’t go back in the house, though, where his father sat in idle misery, and the unfamiliar walls and ceilings bore down on him. So, he walked on, wishing he could shrug the balmy summer air away from his skin.

A shout startled him from his abstraction. A short red haired boy ran up to him, smiling and carrying a basketball under his arm. Sam grew aware that he had walked past some outdoor basketball courts. Several more boys, about his own age, straggled along behind. The red haired one said, a little breathlessly, “Hi, I’m Adam, and I always play basketball with these guys, but we just found out that Steve is sick, and now the teams aren’t even. Could you play?”

The other boys had caught up with Adam at this point and stood in a half circle around Sam. There were four of them. Sam rolled his eyes. The last thing he wanted at the moment was to spend time with guys his age. He started to decline but stopped, surveying the boys. They smiled at him hopefully, casually passing the basketball around even as they waited for his reply. It dawned on Sam that an extra teammate wasn’t necessary for good players like them, that this was a gesture of friendship. He mustered up a smile in return, shrugged and said, “Sure, I’ll play.”

They jogged off toward the basketball courts, chatting the way boys of that age can only do when playing sports. They teamed up and played for a few hours, talking easily about their summers and briefing Sam on the local sports teams. Sam only half-listened, enjoying the sensation of rhythmic dribbling and shooting. He was shocked when he looked up to see the sun hovering at the edge of the horizon. His dad would be wondering where he was. Regretfully, he made a last shot and tossed the ball to Adam, waving to the other guys as he took off at a trot for home. His newfound friends shouted a rough chorus of goodbyes that followed him into the summer night.

***
School began in a week. When Sam spent time with his friends, he was happier than he’d been since his mom left. But when he was at home, his father’s sadness ate into him like some gnawing disease. Sam was constantly reminded of the aching wounds his mother had inflicted. He knew that for his father, the pain was real and excruciating, and Sam was powerless to help. For seven interminable nights, he lay in bed staring at an unfamiliar ceiling and shaking with grief for the mother he had lost and the father he was losing.

On the first day of school, Sam was wrenched from fitful sleep by his alarm clock. He ate a silent breakfast, trying not to look at the hunched form of his father across the table. He was shocked at how nervous he felt; it seemed ridiculous that after all he’d endured in the last few months, he should still be worried about the first day at a new school.

The first thing he noticed in his crowded, noisy homeroom was Adam’s unmistakable mop of crimson hair. The two boys greeted each other cheerfully and chatted until the dry, twig-like teacher called for silence.

During a long and uncomfortable commencement speech, the teacher, with consummate tactlessness, pointed Sam out as “the new student.” Every eye in the room peered upon him, and he wanted to shrink into the floor.

However, the rest of the day passed quickly. Sam already had friends to sit with at lunch and talk to during classes, and the teachers were no worse than ordinary teachers. He and the other boys went directly from school to the basketball courts, working in a few games before going home for dinner.

***

The week passed, each day much like the first. People slipped easily back into the routine of homework, classes and friends. The whole school buzzed with excitement for basketball tryouts.

But Sam had more important things to worry about. His dad, who had been a grocery store manager in their old town, had made no effort to get a job or set up shop here. He sat in the dark, cold house and ate almost nothing. His face and sturdy frame were wasted and gray, and once Sam came home after school and smelled cigarette smoke. He became truly frightened. Though thinking about his mom still made him sick and sad, most of the time he succeeded in not thinking about her. He missed her, but it had been a month and a half now, and she wasn’t part of his life anymore. Sometimes he felt guilty about that. How could a month and a half erase fourteen years of loving someone? But the answer always came: it hadn’t erased it. It had merely managed it, stowed it away so he could live his life, have friends, do well in school. Sam’s dad could not understand this. For him, the sadness was forever.

The weekend after school started, Adam called Sam and invited him to come on a trip to a nearby lake with the other boys. His dad would drive. Sam gratefully accepted, happy to push the pain to the back of his mind.

The following day dawned bright and hot, one of those late August mornings when the exuberance of June reawakens and engulfs the world in sizzling sunshine. The six boys piled into the van, feet and skinny torsos bare, squashing together amidst giant coolers of food and drinks and topping stacks of inner tubes. The excited thread of their chatter wove itself backwards and forwards, loudly overlapping and getting tangled and beginning over again, as the lake grew closer and larger.

Finally, they reached it. Sam’s friends led him to a little hill, where they dived into water that looked like a cool basin of reflected sky. They plopped about in the inner tubes, swam across the lake, played Marco Polo in the shallows and snacked on soda and chips in the sand. Before any time had passed the sun was sinking in a purple haze across the water. The boys floated in the inner tubes, talking and thinking.

“I miss summer,” someone said.

“Me too,” said someone else.

“Before long,” Adam agreed, “we won’t be able to do this any more. It’ll be too cold. And there’ll be horrible tests and homework and things. Why can’t summer just last forever?”

“I guess that’s just the way things are,” Sam said, thinking of his mom. “The best things go away, and then you have to stumble on without them, but at least summer always comes back.”

“Yeah,” replied Adam, “but not for forever.”

“What do you mean? It’s only a year,” said Sam.

“That’s the same thing.”

They sat in silence on the darkening water.

***

August faded into September. Sam made the basketball team. He worked harder than ever in school, distinguishing himself academically for the first time. Some girls talked to him and his friends now, but Sam ignored them; it was a girl who had shattered his father.

And his father was still shattered, getting worse every day. He hardly left his room any more. He never ate, at least while Sam was around. He slept a lot, and cried out in his dreams. Sam smelled cigarette smoke again.

Finally, one glorious chilly Sunday at the end of the month, Sam decided to do something. He’d been home all day, and his father had not left his bed. Enough was enough.
Sam marched into his father’s room and shook him roughly from a painful dream. His dad looked frightened and bitter at being disturbed. He looked at Sam through cloudy eyes. “What do you want?” he muttered hoarsely.

“Get up!” said Sam, throwing off the blankets. He hated himself for being angry, but he was desperate. “Dad,” he said, more gently now, “Dad, you’ve got to get up. Get dressed. We’re going somewhere.”

Sam’s father watched his son for a moment. Then he rose. “Where are we going, Sam?” he asked quietly. Sam led his father to the car, and they set out for the lake.

When they arrived, the once-packed parking lot was deserted. The sand wasn’t warm now, and there were no piles of inner tubes or coolers or towels. It was a lonely place, even on as bright a day as this, and it suited Sam’s mood.

They trudged up the hill, and dangled their feet over the edge. The silence dragged on. Sam’s father leaned back on his arms. “So, Sam,” he said quietly, “how’s school?”

The question was unexpected, but Sam knew that neither of them could speak openly yet. So, he answered, “School’s ok. I made the basketball team.”

“Really?” his dad’s eyes flickered with interest. “Did you know that I was on my high school team?”

“No!” Sam was genuinely surprised. “Tell me about it.”

“Well, it was a long time ago,” laughed his father.

“Try to remember,” Sam said. “Dad, I know so little about you when you were young. What was your life like? I want to hear it all. I want to hear about the old girlfriends you couldn’t mention when mom was around.”

His father laughed again. Then he began to talk. The pictures he painted were so real to Sam. They were all part of Sam’s life too, all part of that indescribable sense of being a freshman in high school, on the cusp of the rest of your life.

By the time they were done, the stars had come out. It was cold, and a wind that tasted like winter blew the sand around their feet as they strolled to the parking lot. They drove home in thoughtful, quiet.

On Monday when Sam returned from school, he saw a light on in his father’s study. He tiptoed to the door and, peering in, saw his dad bent over a job application, pen in hand. Feeling a warm flood of emotions rise within him, Sam closed the door quickly and tiptoed away.

Sam’s father got the job. He became the manager of a new grocery store, a big, sparkling place. His desk, which had long been bare and dusty, was now overflowing with cheerful clutter. Sam watched as his father began to come home happy again, as the hollows in his cheeks filled in and the dark smudges under his eyes faded.

But still at times Sam’s father sank back into his old ways, refusing food and bolting his bedroom door. It frightened Sam. He resorted to the only cure he knew: he began to take his dad back to the lake every Sunday.

They’d bring lunch, climb the hill, and chat. Sometimes Sam did most of the talking, telling his dad about school and describing basketball games. Sometimes Sam’s father would plunge them both in vivid memories, happy and sad, of his childhood.

And bit by bit, they began to talk about Her again. At first, neither of them said Her name. Then it slipped back into the conversation, almost without their knowing it. They talked about how Sam’s father had met her in a tiny bookstore off 2nd Street in their old town.

So it went, every Sunday, beset by harsh weather or bathed in winter sunshine. Sometimes Sam and his dad just sat in silence and stared out over the white-gray-blue hues of the world.

Slowly, slowly, through the fading of winter and the beginning of spring, Sam’s dad grew stronger. His bouts of solitary misery dwindled, faded, and disappeared. He seemed thoughtful and resigned when Sam’s mother was mentioned, rather than paralyzed and dejected. But real proof of his improvement came when Sam was cleaning out the very last of the moving boxes and discovered an old photograph. It was of his mother at her prom. She was wearing a red dress that made her hair glow and her eyes sparkle.

Sam felt a hard lump in his throat, looking at it. His hand trembled as he held it up for his father to see. “Do you want to keep this, dad?” he asked quietly.

His father studied the picture, then swallowed hard and closed his eyes for a moment. “No,” he said softly, and opened them again. “No,” he repeated, more clearly this time. “Sam, I think you should have it. I don’t need it anymore.”

Sam smiled shakily and slipped it in his pocket. That night, when he knew his dad was asleep, he pulled out the picture and shook with sobs. This time, though, they were not just for the mother he had lost—but also for the father he had found again.

***

Spring came, with more sunshine on the very first day than had been seen all winter. Sam worked feverishly to finish the school year well. He made principal’s honor roll, and his father came to the awards ceremony. Sam asked a sweet, pretty girl named Sarah to the end-of-the-year dance, and he celebrated his birthday at the lake with his friends.
When school let out, Sam threw himself into a summer of swimming and endless games of basketball, but every Sunday, without fail, he and his dad went back to their own little hill at the lake. Each visit brought more laughter and less silence. 

One cloudy, moonlit night, a silver rain began to fall. It rippled the shining mirror of the lake and made soft markings on the sand where a boy and his father sat. For a long time, neither spoke. The only sounds were the whisper of the waves and the gentle rush of the rain. Then the father said, “You know, Sam, I didn’t want her to go.”

“I know,” Sam replied, “but—it looks as though we turned out all right anyway.”

The father smiled. “I suppose we did. We did turn out all right.”
Summer Collection

Author: Jessi Glueck
Grade: 8
Teacher: Amanda Witty
School: Leawood Middle School, Leawood, KS

After the Storm

It rained today,
Torrents of teardrops speeding down
Dancing like happy children,
Playing drums on the roof.
Now the world is still,
Silent—yet not silent.
The birds have come to trill their favorite melodies.
The water trickles from eaves and branches,
Creating quiet harmony.
The grass flaunts a cheerful, vibrant green,
Scorning the sad blue-gray sky,
And the playful sun pokes her fingers in the clouds.
Boys play Frisbee, mud sucking at their shoes.
A breeze brings their shouts to me
As I stand here,
Surveying beauty that
Those who hide from the rain
Will never see.

Summer Nights

Stars aglow in the pinwheel sky,
Burning drops of light
Like silver sand in an endless sea
Of all-consuming night.
Mist floats upon the ground;
It twirls between the trees,
Wrapping Earth in velvet quilts,
An argent filigree.
A few hours remain ‘till dawn must come,
Just a little more of this waking dream,
Then earth will bake under the sun,
And things will become what they seem.
Moonlight, starlight, treetops black,
Surging forward, sliding back,
Night after night
These moonbeam summer evenings
Slip through my fingers.
The Promised Land

Sun-baked breezes ruffle the spiky palm trees,
Feed the flames of gold sparklers that grow in their leaves.
Above, blue-drenched sky is anchored to earth
By the hard navy line of motionless sea.
In the midst of this world of blue and soft green,
Of hot white sand spread thickly between,
Here they stand, here they sway,
Here they topple and lean:
The flowers! The flowers!

Brilliant gold castles and amethyst towers,
Waves of pure bridal lace,
Shy blooms blush crimson;
Peach leaves clutch daisies;
Burgundy luster spills in the sun.

Like rippled bright dresses in a crazy clothing shop.
They flutter and fall,
Whispering sparkle in gossamer shade,
Finer silk than ever a human hand made.
Forever and ever they’ll grow and increase;
A long bright glorious mane,
They’ll laugh in the face of the desert’s fierce heat,
Living jewels,
Colored shimmering rain.

The Sun’s Farewell

The sun goes down
Across the sea,
Tinting cloud ribbons with pink.
The stars come out,
Sharp points of light
That flicker and glow
And then shrink.

The waves are brightly gilded;
Spilt sunshine engulfs the beach.
The sky is rainbowed with gold, green and blue;
The horizon is just out of reach.
The sand is crushed velvet underfoot;
The salt-air like wine in calls of children, and whisper of waves
Are a soft farewell symphony
For the sleepy departing sun.

She melts, like hot copper,
Far away,
Sinking in eternal purpling sea,
The red transience of the day.
It didn’t take much to turn you or your world upside down. That’s why I decided to write a story about you.

Something about you and the way you interacted. Something about you and the way that you moved. Something about the absence of your smile. Whatever it was, it didn’t matter. I would write about you and make you someone memorable to everyone, even if they didn’t know you.

“What a stupid bitch.”

Maddie set her fork down on the table, devoid of a dainty demeanor, as she began to angrily stir her cup of soda with her straw. “I tell you. If it’s not one fucking thing, it’s another.” Even as she spoke, a scowl visibly stretched across her face, devouring her naturally playful expression. Her consumption of anger was almost a laughing matter. “Come on. Don’t tell me you think that’s right,” she continued, her voice beginning to rise.

I set my napkin down in my lap even though I wasn’t using it and placed my elbows down on the table to cradle my face in my hands. “It’s weird, yeah.” Maddie raised an eyebrow, almost declining my reply. “Okay, fine. Yes, it was really strange, even creepy, but I think we’re both assuming it won’t happen again.” It was more a declaration of hope rather than a promise, but Maddie snatched it while she could.

“Really creepy, yeah. You’re just being nice. You’re silly, always defending someone.” Her smile developed into a crooked smirk that spanned across the width of her face. “How does that make me silly?” I asked with a laugh. “I just try to be nice.”

“Yeah, until you’ve got a scary fellow circling your house and pleading to be let in.”

“Doesn’t happen to me a lot with men,” I remarked, playfully mocking her.

“Regardless, it shouldn’t happen. I shouldn’t have a creepy ‘love-struck’ boy trying to peer into my windows when I won’t answer the door.” She tossed her napkin onto the table, signifying that she was finished. “Since when was I not entitled to my own privacy?”

I attached thirty dollars to the ticket, covering the entire cost. I had to be a generous tipper; it made me feel adequate.

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely. I’m being nice,” I responded, standing up and sliding my chair under the table. “Do you think you’ll be safe at home?”

“I lock my doors,” Maddie responded, grinning.

And so it was destiny...

To retrace my footsteps in order to make it back to you.

It didn’t feel the same when I fucked Ashley during my freshman year, so I discarded her like she needed. But you, you were different. You were a piece of work to get over. You consumed my mind like some sickening cancer, and I was sure I was collapsing to a terminal illness as you moved in and out of my neurons. It was a daily practice. I shed my thoughts of you as best I could, partaking in other activities that would avert my eyes and my mind, but somehow you were always there. You’d etched your way through my veins and now you were dancing on my grave, a step so catchy that I almost wished to assist.

I’d buried myself thirty feet under and swallowed enough dirt in the process to burst, but I stomached it and stomached the loss of you. I shed the former image of myself and morphed into something drastic. I’d become outlandish, something strange and silly. I almost laughed as I unfogged the mirror in the morning with dreary fingertips, seeing my wilted eyelids and loss of enthusiasm. I knew what I was seeing wasn’t me, but I had to let you know that I could give you what you wanted. I could let you move on and find a different love that was more fulfilling. A love with a dick attached. I was sure that was what you wanted.

After looking into the mirror, I would silently gag to myself. I was two people at once, but I was willing to do whatever it took. After pulling my fingertips away from the hazy mirror, I would towel dry my hair in my underwear,
sitting on the bathroom counter as I ran my fingertips through my hair over and over. I wanted clean and smooth and shiny hair. I wanted a life.

I let my hair air-dry, stopped drying it on my own. I stopped caring about things like that. I couldn’t make you love me…I couldn’t make anyone love me. My spine started to slant dramatically and I was slowly languishing with the times. I started to think that smoke tasted appetizing. I started to think that ugly girls were pretty, but only because I was subjected enough to pretend. I started to think that long, dark hair was pretty even when it was trashy, I’d started to think that I could drink alcohol as if it was water to instigate a sexual escapade with the shy hope that it would make you jealous.

I’d even said a prayer to God, whatever god you wanted it to be, just as long as I could pretend some other false deity aside from you heard my tale of heartbreak.

You may call it desperation. I called it a sincere laceration to my internal organs. I didn’t mean to accuse you of slicing me up and letting me decompose, because it was for the best. You knew it. I tried to know it too.

I had to make your word into law so that I could survive.

That day I knew I wasn’t the best example as I strolled down the hall with my pants unintentionally hanging off of my waist, sagging down past the curve of my ass and exposing my patterned boxers. People asked me if I was having a problem maintaining my weight. I told them to shut up. People told me that I was having a problem sustaining my weight. I told them to shut up. I wasn’t going to hear about how I was falling apart from another person who hasn’t experienced the internal decay that I was. I wasn’t going to blame you for my body’s deterioration.

The next day I stepped on the scale and realized I had lost eleven pounds in five days.

A womanizer comforted me the day before with his useless loop of words when I really just needed someone to hug me as I bawled until my eyes were bloodshot and felt like someone had rubbed sandpaper across my corneas. That day, though, I crumbled to the ground on my knees in my own little heap and cried into the linoleum floor at someone else’s house during their family dinner which I had declined because I was being too polite and because the appetite had been sucked right out of me. I was a senseless mess and not the same girl that you had dated. I didn’t know who or what to be, what I should become or what you wanted me to transform into. This was harder than you thought, though it was easy for you. A fucking walk in the park. A breeze. A fucking cakewalk for you, while I cried on someone else’s bathroom floor with drool pooling around my lips and my eyes becoming a catastrophic adversity.

While you were out swooning over other people, I was out pretending to like girls. We all knew it was a hoax. My friends knew but didn’t say a word. Maddie indicated that I was engaging in something irrational. They wanted this spell of heartbreak to be over, so they played along and watched as I interacted with someone who I could never love...someone that I could never even like. I didn’t think that it was a good idea, but I decided to mock your path because if it was easy for you to move on so quickly, I wanted to make it seem like it was a fucking cakewalk for me too.

They knew differently.

My breathing was heavy and sultry in the midst of the night as she climbed on top of me, and I could feel her slender body swaying gently because she was astoundingly intoxicated. She did her best to regain a small sense of balance and dove down onto me, her fingertips searching and scanning over my limbs and my body’s terrain. I knew this was something she had never done before. I knew that she wasn’t as impaired as I was and that she was conscious of what she was doing, though I hardly was. The only reason I let it happen was because I was so heavily intoxicated that I thought it might be a good idea. They say that the first thing alcohol impairs is judgment. No fucking kidding.

I felt her fingertips dig into me, the satisfactory feel of my skin slicing, and I was at her disposal. I hardly recalled my hands tangling into her hair, and it was better that way. I barely recalled my eyes brimming with tears that spilled across my face and smudged my eyeliner into a pasty mess. This wasn’t something that I wanted to remember, not something I was proud of. I was so inebriated that I couldn’t see straight. I was so fucking uncomfortable. It wasn’t you expressing your love for me.

But then I told myself, your love had expired. It was gone, so that made this act okay. That made it okay to degrade myself with a tasteless girl in the back of Mitch’s car. That made it okay, but I still didn’t want it to happen as much as I tricked myself into thinking.

That night I lost consciousness and didn’t remember what I had done when the morning rolled around. That was the only way I could be with someone else: be unconscious and let them exploit me while I had blacked out. Now I knew what every typical high school teenager did on the weekends.

That wasn’t love.

I had lost love.

“You’ll just go into the room, assemble your instrument and introduce yourself.”
“As what?”
“As what? Well, who are you? Say who you are and what piece you are performing.”
“Just the first two movements?”
“That’s what you did at districts, so that will work here.”
Okay. That’s fine. I can do that, yeah.”
“You’ll do excellent. You did well at Districts, and I’m confident you’ll do fine here.”
“Thank you.”

“Here, we’re leaving soon; you need to get dressed in something decent.” It was a command rather than a suggestion, and tension was rising as it always did on Christmas Eve. I didn’t want to get dressed fancily because church was supposed to be about pretended faith, not attire to impress the dead deities, but I shuffled up to my room late like I had every year and quickly dressed in slacks and a button up shirt. I slid on my sneakers and glided down the stairs as a silent assailant, avoiding tossing together family’s presents at the last minute. My mother and father arranged them in the trunk of the van in preparation to leave. My night was sealed by the endless tradition of Christmas Eve with the extended family.

It was traditional bullshit. The deafening drone of Catholic Church punctuated my eardrums and lacerated the illusion of holiday excitement. I counted the crevices worn into the wooden pew as I waited for communion to progress, signifying the halfway point of the service. As everyone began to drain out of the aisles and advance toward the priest distributing the Eucharist, I followed in their wake with my hands placed appropriately to receive the stale piece of holy bread. The line began to filter out, and I moved closer toward the front. The priest looked me directly in the eye, holding the Eucharist in front of my face with his fingertips. In his powerful Catholic voice he recited a statement of jargon, and I responded, “Amen,” as I had been taught, placing it into my mouth and passing on the red wine. I walked back to the pew, demonstrating the sign of the cross. It was tradition to kneel down and pray until everyone had received communion. Year after year I declined to participated, but this year I knelt down with my eyes closed, my senses completely dying to the organ resonating between the church walls and the people rustling in the aisles.

I knelt and prayed. I told myself God must be real to have blessed me with someone like you. God must be real to have placed someone of such beauty in my life.

I told myself that I was truly grateful to love such an astounding person.

My senses died for the entirety of the night as I told myself how blessed I was. I didn’t need the screeching organ or crying babies in the background to realize the impact you had on my life. I always knew and cherished it. I didn’t need anything else for Christmas time. I didn’t need the pretended unit of family; I didn’t need the thoughtless gifts and clothes that would never fit me. I didn’t need a lavish dinner or dessert to make me feel full.

I had love. I needed nothing else.

But then I realized that God nonsense was all bullshit. I sat outside the trumpet room and listened to a girl play the solo I played my freshman year. She skipped the Pastoral movement along with the counter-melody and instead barraged her listeners with squeaks and clangs in her formal high heels and pleated skirt. I waited for the conclusion of the suite, heard moderate applause, and the door swung open for her to exit with her trumpet in hand, face drained and pale. Silly me, I wouldn’t do much better. I sat in that chair for hours.

People came and went. Marisa played her solo, and I could feel my body immersed in the intensity and passion applicable to the song, the Andante section transpiring magnificently. I knew that I would never play my solo so professionally or beautifully.

It didn’t matter. I had nothing to prove.

In the vast veil of nighttime I sucked the humidity in through my deteriorating windpipe with a cigarette between my fingertips, emitting a dull cloud of smoke that twisted through the air as a distraught dancer. Summer was blossoming and the excitement was beginning to burrow into my skin, but I had gone about this the wrong way. I was entirely too contemplative and my over-analytical mind was being ground into a disgusting sauce of nonsensical ideals. Sometimes I had trouble gripping reality.

I could hear crickets purring off in the woods as I flicked the ash from the tip of my cigarette, watching curls of smoke twirl from the cavern of my mouth as I exhaled. I believed this to be contentment as my time was depicted symbolically through the cigarette burning away even though I was conscious of how I was needlessly poisoning myself. I was determined to make something other than you into my suicide, regardless of how potent. I needed something else to help me wither away.

“Let’s share more nights like these,” Sara said, her voice projecting in a more delicate manner across nighttime’s expanse. “I feel like I’ve been missing out on so much.”
I wanted to nod in approval but wasn’t sure if I would really mean it. I was missing out on a lot in the midst of my heartbreak.

“Being around friends makes me realize my appreciation for everything,” she explained, feigning her signature laugh that always produced a smile. I wanted to tell her that I understood, so I did. I really did understand. I just didn’t understand it in the manner that I once had. Things never meant as much as they used to. I let the cigarette fall from my fingertips onto the concrete and slid my shoe over it, deposing of its remains. I was wasting enough time and lung capacity to regret it later.

“It feels like I haven’t seen you in so long,” Sara continued. “I always used to think of you as Stephanie’s friend, but now it’s more how it should be. I think of you more as my friend now. I think our friendship has evolved a bit.”

“Yeah, I understand what you mean,” I told her, my voice resonating satisfactorily. “Since I strayed from her, our friendship gets to flourish.”

She prided me with one of her quirky smiles. It was typical, real, and it was signature. It was something that I was becoming accustomed to. It felt like I had been deprived of general human kindness because I was so wrapped up in assuming I was permanently subjugated without hope of revival. I needed to fucking snap out of it.

I was regurgitating everything I knew.

I was falling apart and disregarding my own ideals and morals. I was becoming the girl that I had never wanted to be. I was transforming into something that I despised, something that you could never love.

I wanted it to feel pleasing.

I wanted to be someone else other than the girl that you had fallen in love with. I needed something, anything, to move me along and to heal me, even if it meant deteriorating in the process.

This was the first thing that I had done for myself in a long time.

For once, this was for me, not for you.
The Tears Streamed Down My Face

Author: Emalie Jacobs
Grade: 12
Teacher: Tracy Boslog
School: Parkway South High School, Manchester, MO

“Get up against that wall, you n*****s! Boys on one side, girls on the other!” The first words I heard as I got off my bus in Selma, Alabama, at the Slavery and Civil War Museum. I was frightened, not knowing exactly what was going on; all I knew was that someone was calling me something that I did not like at all. I had been called this word before; however, there was never a lesson behind it.

I was screamed at and told I was the n-word repeatedly. Then this “master” told my friends and me that we were no good, lowly beings and needed to look at the ground; we were not worthy of looking “master” in the eyes. All of us were struck with fear, as if standing against a wall in 110 degree weather wasn’t bad enough, now we had to be yelled at too. Some of my friends were told to step up to the curb but keep their eyes down. I didn’t know when I would see them again. After this, the “master” screamed at us, “Get inside and put your face against the wall! Don’t talk.” I am not used to being told what to do in such a manner, or at all. Who is this person? Why should I listen? I did, though. I was struck with fear and could only obey my “master.”

Once in a room, bright and hot, it didn’t seem like it would be bad. After all, we were in Alabama and beginning to get used to bright and hot. Then we heard someone banging on the door; we weren’t sure if we were to open it or not. When the banging stopped, our “master” came in and told us to run into another room, pitch black, muggy, and frightening. “Master” closed the door and yelled at us not to move. “Master” said, “Imagine your ancestors in a room like this, where they could be raped, beaten and pulled away from the only family they had.” We were told not to move no matter how scared we got, don’t move. Then we heard terrifying screams of women saying, “No, please, no.” Immediately hot tears sprang in my eyes; I tried to brush them away, but I was too scared. The voices went away, and I thought maybe this was all close to over.

Next, I was rushed into a room and told to get in a very tiny boat with 30 other people by the time “master” counted to five or else. We all rushed the best we could; we barely made it. A screen depicted an ocean rolling along and sounds came, so realistic I was almost sea sick. Packed on this boat with no breathing room, I wasn’t quite sure whose hand I was holding or who was clutching my arm. I just knew it was dark, scary and I needed my friends.

“Fifteen seconds to get through this hole and stand on the black line you d*** n*****s!” “Master” screamed at us. How were we supposed to get through this small hole in fifteen seconds and then get on the black line? This room was so incredibly dark I could hardly see my hand in front of my face, much less a black line on the floor. I rushed to get there; once again we barely made it.

“Master” selected five good n*****s; they were told to pick one bad n***** each. They selected a person because they had to but feared what would happen to them. Other people pulled those chosen from our room and put them behind a door; I didn’t know where my friends were going. Then I heard them scream. Tears welled in my eyes again, but I pushed them down and swallowed as if it would help to prevent the tears.

The next thing I knew I was put into another room and told to stand on one side. Dark as night, once again I was unsure of who was clutching my hand. The door opened, and all I could see was a silhouette of “master” coming in.

“N*****s for sale! N*****s for sale!” I was pulled out of line and pushed into the middle of the room; my friend who was clutching my hand did not let go until her hand was ripped from mine.

I heard the sounds of a woman screaming for a baby. “Are you my baby? Where’s my baby?” I felt a hand on my arm. It was warm and sticky; I did not know whose it was. It felt as if it were the embrace of a mother, a mother separated from her children, a mother who thought she found her baby. She asked me, “Are you my baby? Be my baby, please will you be my baby?” I could not hold it in any more. The tears streamed down my face. These were hot tears that burnt as they touched my cheeks. I tried to make them stop, but they kept flowing.

Then, incredibly everything stopped. The lights came on, the tears stopped rolling, and a feeling of safety swept over the room. Our former “master” came to each of us. The same woman who had been screaming orders at us was now our friend. This African-American woman grabbed my face and told me to look her in the eyes, for mine were beautiful eyes that belonged to a strong woman. Her statement made a strange feeling go through me, something I had felt, yet it was so much more. Self-gratification. I was really proud of myself. I knew she was right and that I was strong. She had a powerful hold on me; this woman taught me more in fifteen minutes than I ever thought I could learn in a lifetime.
After a minute of reflection, the woman introduced herself as Afriye We-Kandodis, a name she gave herself when she dedicated her life to teaching people the truth about slavery. On this day in Selma, Alabama, with my friends from Cultural Leadership, I experienced 15 minutes of what my ancestors went through for hundreds of years. I will remember this day for the rest of my life. That day I learnt what it would have been like to go through something this terrifying. I learnt to appreciate what my ancestors struggled through. More than anything I learnt that I am a strong, determined woman and that I can do anything I set my mind to. I will never forget that day; my empathy for all those poor people will stay in my heart forever. While I cannot change the past and the horrifying things that happened, I can work to make a better future in which nothing this atrocious ever happens again.
The moment I stepped out of the car, I read, “North Adams Home.” My heart was racing. The palms of my hands felt sweaty, yet I shivered as if it were cold outside. So many questions sunk into my skin. What would he think when he saw me? Would he like me? Would he recognize me? They replayed over and over, like a song stuck in my head. I opened the entrance door silent, gently, uncertain of what the surroundings would reveal. The appearance was the same as any nursing home, yet something made it different than any nursing home I have ever visited. This nursing home held a special patient.

My dad was abandoned by his dad, leaving me without a grandpa. I heard very little information about my grandpa’s whereabouts or if he was even alive. Never knowing my grandpa for that many years, I was clueless where to start my search. I wish my journey to get to the “North Adams Home” was simple. I was determined to find this man, no matter how long it took.

My first thought was to check to see if this mission was possible. I didn’t want to waste my time trying to find a dead man. My dad’s best friend was a mortician where they both had lived. I texted him, and within minutes, I found out grandpa was still alive, the only information I had at the time. All I knew was that I still had hope to meet my long-lost grandpa.

After digging around on the computer, I soon discovered my dad’s half-sister lived in the same town where my dad grew up. Immediately, I got her phone number and prepared to call. The more I thought about it the more nervous I got. I was afraid she would hang up. Dialing the number took me about 30 minutes, but I finally got the nerve. She was so nice to me. She shared the same desire for our families to be a part of each other’s lives. We talked for about an hour. When I got off the phone, I had information that led me to Jean, Grandpa’s wife and my dad’s stepmother.

I felt I was getting closer and closer. I didn’t want anything to get in my way now. I slowly paced around, practicing what I would say. My heart was beating, but I gathered my thoughts and took a deep breath. I held my breath and started dialing the numbers. The calling tone seemed never-ending. My hopes were beginning to lower. Finally, an older lady answered. “Hello,” the lady snarled. I whispered, “H-h-h-hi, my names is Alyson Jones.” The lady didn’t reply. I was anxious to hear her next comment, when suddenly, I was left with the worst answer. Beep-beep-beep! She hung up on me.

A few weeks went by, and I was still didn’t know what to do. One evening, I received a call from an unknown number. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to answer a call from someone I didn’t know, but something told me to do it anyway. I pressed the big green button and said, “Hello.” An energetic woman answered, “Hi sweetie! This is Mary Jean Jones. I am your step-grandmother.”

She sounded like a whole different person. She had a high-pitched, warm-hearted voice. We talked and shared our life stories. She gave me all the information I needed to know, like that they lived in Mendon, Illinois, but not together. She was living in a small apartment. He was living in a nursing home after suffering from a severe stroke. The news was shocking, but stroke or not, he was still my grandpa, and I wanted to meet him.

I convinced my parents to take me to Mendon. I was nervous the entire seven hour drive, but we finally arrived. The moment I stepped out of the car I read, “North Adams Home.” I knew I was at the right place! I quickly found his room on the second floor and couldn’t believe I was actually standing in front of the door that held my long-lost grandfather. I knocked on the door before slowly entering the small area. An older man was lying in a bed. The first thing I noticed was how much he looked like my dad. My grandpa looked at me from head to toe. I gave him a graceful smile and looked him square in the eye and said, “I love you grandpa.” He had little movement and no words. He flashed me a quick grin, and I saw a tear travel down his cheek. After twelve years of having a missing piece of my life, everything was put together.
Sickness on Display

You’re half dressed.  
It’s curtain call;  
better get to fasting, flaunt  
insecurity while you’re passing  
by;  
goodbye;  
deranged  
and exchanged for worth,  
worthy  
of their applause.  
You worked hard for this; smile;  
hit rock bottom in denial.  
You look vile.  
They’re in disguise, watching,  
strangers with eyes, taunting,  
pointing  
at your sweat dripping.  
You’re slipping.  
Get a grip;  
don’t slip.  
You’re ego’s fine; keep in mind  
the sound of the groan.  
Don’t moan.  
They’ll see your struggle.  
The light’s on you; your moment of  
glory,  
was it worth it all?  
When you didn’t  
f  
a  
l  
l  
?  

Boy and His Drum

He held a drum  
under  
his arm.  
It played a song as consistent as the wind  
blowing the leaves the little girl raked
horizontally.
He bleeds,
metaphorically, of course,
sitting next to the girl he claims to love,
playing his drum.
It screams honesty,
like her,
outside the window.
“You’re alone!”
The little girl screams.
He bangs
her,
his drum.
He looks to
her,
the mirror.
The bed is
empty.
He lets go of her hand
and bangs his drum
to let
the little girl
dance.

**Claire**

I feel it
thought it’s subtle,
easily mistaken
for attraction.
Even now
that I came to the realization
it may be more.
I’m no optimist
and often lose vision
of what’s in front of me
until I feel it.
I felt it once
when the butterfly
brushed my lips,
flutter.
I got so high,
escape,
so unreal,
but we are real.
We cannot fly.
I’m the weakest
of the three.
Equal opportunity,
but you two connect,
kind hearted,
but don’t
help me gain strength.
Everything will be as it should.
You two will fly to the heavens,
and I will fall
and be forced to walk
on fragile feet.

**Drawn Up Masterpiece**

Drawn up masterpiece,
work of fiction,
deception,
but I fell
inside the pretty colors.
It smiled at me.
I got lost,
captivation,
but its true beauty was revealed.
Blank canvas,
disappointment,
inspiration,
I created
a masterpiece of my own
depth,
beauty
ripped from my hands
for someone else to enjoy.
Recreated,
flawless,
unappreciated,
left to hang,
I view from afar,
alone,
possibility,
but dare I touch it again?
Winter has banished autumn with a snap of its frigid fingers.
Snowflakes race each other to the chilly ground.
Like diamonds, they hold no warmth or value for me,
Only cold, hard beauty.
They are lifeless.
I dream of bashful white cherry blossoms that blush a pale pink
And the sound of footsteps pounding on pavement,
The applause of summer,
But the clouds billowing in the sky howl ferociously.
They thrash about,
Struggling against the icy chains that bind them.
Like a rabid dog, they snap their menacing jaws and grind their teeth in anger,
Unleashing turmoil.
The colorless landscape shies away, grimacing,
Ashamed of its cheerless hue.
I try in vain to cling to memories of warmer days.
I can taste the sweet perfume of spring
And hear birds chirping joyous melodies,
But winter creeps into my fantasies
And snatches them in its heartless grasp.
They float away,
Merely wisps of smoke from a broken dream.
The Dock

Author: Virginia Runcie
Grade: 12
Teacher: Kimberly Witt
School: Mount Vernon High School, Mount Vernon, MO

I don’t sleep well at night. I haven’t for a very long time. Five years, one month, three weeks, two days – no, it’s three o’ clock, make that three days – three days and eight hours. That’s how long it’s been. That’s how long it’s been since – since – The sun should be rising in three hours and forty-five minutes. I’m lucky tonight. I’m tired enough to sleep till then.

***

It’s six-thirty. I dozed off from about ten-thirty to midnight and three to now, collectively five hours – one of my better nights. I used to watch the sun when I was up this early, but now I don’t. Too painful. Now I set Nettie’s journal beside me and fill my own with my dreams. It’s easier to focus on describing nightmares than trying not to think of them at all; I was never the kind of person who could just sit and stare at the sun.

***

“Jake? Jake? Jacob Renaldi! Are you even listening to me, or am I talking to an empty chair?” That’s Mr. Phillips, my high school guidance counselor. I’ve been watching him pace for about ten minutes now while he goes on and on about my grades, stopping every once in a while to ask me what’s wrong and do I need a study partner and is there something going on at home? But it looks like he’s done pacing for now, which is too bad because, in profile, he looks just like a taco with a cheap, green bowtie.

I don’t answer him, of course. He hasn’t been talking to an empty chair, but he hasn’t really said anything worth answering to, either. I look behind him at the clock. Two-thirty. I look at Mr. Taco Phillips, who’s looking right back at him, hoping for some sign of...well, something anyway. I don’t give it to him. “Can I go back to class now?” I ask. He slumps, defeated, and waves me out of his office without looking at me. It’s been five years, one month, three weeks, twenty-one and a half hours. I leave.

***

It’s amazing how a tiny dock on a little river in a nowhere town, the most peaceful scene almost anyone could ever think of, can hold such a terrible memory. I have to cross the bridge every day to go home, and the dock is just over there on my right, only a hundred yards or so away. I try not to look to the right.

I really can’t help today, though. I don’t just look – I go over and sit on the dock. I put Nettie’s journal beside me and open mine on my lap, full of neat rows of perfect handwriting. I see I’m going to need a new journal soon, because mine has only two empty pages left.

I sit on the dock with my journal on my lap, open to the second to last page, and stare out at the water. I know that the water comes up to only two feet below my feet, and that it flows fast and strong and cold beneath the surface, but the surface looks so peaceful. It ripples gently, and the sunlight skips from path to empty mini-path. I can see ghostly boats and hear echo-y laughter and almost—almost—smell the pumpkins and apple cider we had that night, and, if I turn my head, I almost think that Nettie will be right here, standing right where I put her journal. I look. She isn’t there. Five years, one month, three weeks, three days – my watch – four o’clock – three days and twenty-three hours.

***

“Happy Birthday to you! Happy Birthday to you! Happy Birthday, dear Jaa-aaake! Haaapy Biirithdaaaaay Tooo Yooooou!” Thirteen at last – I’m finally a teenager! Mom made me this huge square cake with chocolate frosting and my name is big, loopy, white letters; it has thirteen candles, two in every color but yellow, and one in white. Absolutely perfect. I grin at my family across the table.

“Presents! Presents! Presents!” Nettie squeals. “Mine first!” She pushes a little box across the table at me, and I laugh, ripping it open. Inside is a green book wrapped in sparkly pink tissue paper – a journal. I open it up and have to smile; there’s a dedication scrawled on the first page in true Nettie style:

This is a special book for a special bruther. You better rite special things in it for me!

–Nettie

“Wow, sis,” I say. “This is perfect – just what I needed.” Nettie beams. I open up Mom and Dad’s presents next: a watch and a tackle box complete with jigs, pliers, weights, and fish string. I put those by my chair, but I keep my new green journal with me all night.
“Jake? Some Ryan kid’s here! He says you’re helping him study!” My mom’s voice is tiny and distant through my door so that, at first, I can’t understand her. I shut my journal – it was full anyway – and open the door.

“What? Oh.” Mom has materialized at the end of the hallway with Ryan right behind her.

“Hey,” he says, waving a little. Ryan’s this scrawny kid in my grade who has glasses and spiky blond hair and has somehow roped me into helping him with his chemistry. This is the first time he’s been to my house, and he kind of shifts from foot to foot when Mom leaves.

“Well,” I say, opening my door a little wider, “you can come in, I guess.” He starts to follow me into my room but stops in the doorway.

“Dude!” He says, “where’d you get so many green books?”

“They’re my journals,” I snap, and he leaves it alone. Well, he leaves it alone for an hour and a half while I help him study the one subject I’m not failing. Mom brings us two bowls of grapes after about an hour – she doesn’t back cookies anymore – and then we’re finally done. I walk Ryan to the front door, but he kind of lingers in the doorway, looking like he wants to ask me something but doesn’t quite trust himself not to screw it up.

“Spit it out,” say. He spits it out.

“Why do you have so many journals? And why are they all green?” I think of my room with all those green journals stacked up on my nightstand, but my nightstand, but my desk, on my desk, under my desk, on my shelves, in the corners, the journals full of dreams and nightmares, all in my carefully perfect handwriting.

“Green is the best color – and I go through them pretty fast.”

“Is that why you always carry two with you?”

“Yeah,” I say, startled. He noticed?

“Then how come you never write in one of them?” I frown at him – now he’s noticed too much.

“I just haven’t found anything worth writing in it yet. Don’t you have other homework to do? Go home already!” He leaves. I stomp to my room, muttering. Stupid Ryan – mind your own business. I have a good reason for not writing in Nettie’s journal, and I don’t want to think about it. I slam my door.

***

It’s three o’clock in the morning. I can’t sleep. It’s been five years, one month, three weeks, four days and eight hours, and I dreamed about it. I remember I dreamed about it every night for a month after it happened, and then I didn’t dream about it anymore. I wouldn’t. I refused.

It’s three o’clock in the morning, still dark outside, and I know there’s not a chance of me sleeping again tonight. I can’t write either; the only empty journal I have left is Nettie’s, and I never write in it, not after what I did to her. The only thing left to do is sit and remember.

I relive the night full of browns and reds and centennial dresses – the night that smelled of pumpkins and apple cider – the night that echoed with laughter and ended in rushing water. I remember the leaves crunching underfoot, the dock, the boat-race on the river with my new friends saying, “Come on, Jake! Come on!” Me, only thirteen and new and just glad to be included.

I remember the boat rocking and pulling away from the dock and hearing, “Wait! I wanna come too – Jake!” and looking over and seeing Nettie there on the dock, only eight years old, in her green homemade centennial dress that matched her eyes and the ribbon in her hair. I remember her waving desperately and bouncing up and down, on the very edge of the dock, and me yelling, “No, you can’t come. No—Nettie—get off the dock. Get off the dock, Nettie. Nettie!” She bounced just a little too much, and the dock didn’t catch her, just kind of spilled her into the river. She was gone.

I jumped in after her, swam with the river as fast as I could, and it was cold, so cold, and I couldn’t see and my lungs burned. I came up for air. Nettie wasn’t there. I dove again and finally found her. She was tumbling along the bottom, limp, a rag-doll, and I pulled her up as best I could. Then we were on the bank, just a little past our house, and she wasn’t breathing, cold, so cold, her little dress all plastered, almost black from water, and her hair all matted and her ribbon gone.

I remember I couldn’t go to the funeral. I tried, and my parents tried to make me, but I left before it even started. I went down to the riverbank instead and just stood there, holding Nettie’s journal, the last thing she ever gave me.

I sit and remember and realize that now the sky outside my window is going gray; I have sat and remembered for three hours. After five years, one month three weeks, four days, and eleven hours, I have to write about it. I dreamed about the dock every night for a month and then no more – I wouldn’t; I couldn’t; I refused. But, I dreamed about other things and wrote them down, and now I have to write, but the only journal is Nettie’s. The only journal is Nettie’s. I could never… I couldn’t possibly…
I take out her journal, sit down again, and dig out my pen. I trace my fingers over the little dedication she wrote, turn the page, hold my shaking pen to the paper. I write.
Poetry Collection

Author: Virginia Runcie
Grade: 12
Teacher: Kimberly Witt
School: Mount Vernon High School, Mount Vernon, MO

Do the Leaves Play?

Scitter scatter, scrity scratch,
hop 'n skip 'n jump down the
street with the breeze.
Stumble and tumble,
leap and roll,
slither and slide down the
slippery sloping road.
The breeze rushes by
and shushes by and
leaves are grabbed and dragged,
sliding and gliding by the church.
They scimper and scamper
and twist and leap
and floaty fall, passing
quickly and fast.
Red and yellow, scarlet and gold,
orange and brown, twisting round.
Hundreds of leaves, passing and tapping,
crustily rapping the street by the church.
Scitter and scatter, scrich and scratch,
wuthering winding and windy.
Whirling and twirling and dancing down
the road by the church by the bush.
Spinning and skipping and
blowing and showing the colors all golden
and reddish and orange and brown.
Blowing and slowing until the wind stops
and shows the leaves’ new crumble tops—
yes, I’d say the leaves play.

Haiku #1

wet clay spins
glides warm and smooth through still fingers
unseen but gently felt

Haiku #2

Frozen, the world,
covered in cold fire,
a thousand small suns in the ice.
**Haiku #3**

wind dances through leaves
rustle and sigh – perhaps they
soft sing a love song.

**Haiku #4**

creature-cloud in sky glides,
looms vaguely left, blocks moon
blackens sky moves on

**Haiku #5**

Rain falls on lonely
band, pummels eye fingers horns,
leaves when band is gone.

**Ode to a Sunrise**

What a lovely, fragile wonder it is
to watch the sky turn to water above the trees
and mist creep about underneath,
rising in some stray clearing like a serpent-dragon
luxuriating in the cool morning air;
to hear a lone bird chirp a soft, shy greeting in the
dew-silvered meadows; to see
the sky white at a single point direct ahead,
stealing the moon’s luminescence
and giving it to the sun; to see the sun hover,
glistening, uncertainly behind a tree,
then – rise, slowly, shyly, carefully, looking about
for some hint of what to do, then
throwing wide its cloak and announcing to the
world – “Here I am! Look at me!” –
as if it hadn’t just made the world wait with
bated breath while it pretended it wasn’t rising.
His hand held me down; his cold, pale hand grasped my neck. I couldn’t move; couldn’t breathe. His face came ever-closer, his skull white as marble. I could see his teeth, along with holes now occupied by maggots and worms. His eyes no longer lived in their sockets. A black robe, torn along the seam, fluttered in the non-existent wind. I opened my mouth to scream, but no sound escaped my lips; no air, through my compressed windpipe. I stared into the face of Death. It must have been Death. I had seen its picture in so many stories, yet this thing, it did not kill me. If it was Death, shouldn’t it take me to heaven or hell, if there is one? Why did it keep me here, in such pain?

I did not have much time to wonder, for the next moment, the creature vanished. I fell backwards in the shock of having nothing to hold me up, rolling over my desk, the only piece of furniture I owned, sending papers and lit candles flying. Darkness fell into the room. I strained my eyes and flailed my arms wildly, searching for the creature to return. Would it? Why did it vanish? Was it not yet my time to die?

When a sudden chill swept over me, I froze. A high-pitched hiss sounded from the darkness, along with a snake-like slither that slowly grew closer. My eyes darted wildly, searching the darkness for the cause of the noise. Something slimy and slippery slid around my legs slowly, quite at ease. I could not move. My body refused to cooperate, my limbs locked in shock. The thing kept wrapping itself around me, now at my knees.

I could think. Lying on my back, I knew I had to react or this freakish thing would eat me alive. I tried to separate my legs, bound tightly together, yet the strength of this creature was greater than any I’d ever experienced. As much as I fought it, I could not move. At my stomach, it continued up. I tried to scream, but, although physically nothing stopped me, I could not gather the air or the strength to do so.

I bid goodbye to my life, knowing the end was near. I would not survive this. How could it? This thing was hungry, and I was free food. With the creature at my chest, nearly at my neck, I thought, Just let it be quick; just get it over with.

Still, as much as I hoped for my suffering to end, I wanted to continue to live. Suddenly the thing disappeared, just as the creature before it had. It vanished and left me panting and panicking on the gray cement floor.

Then, the room blazed in color, light, and warmth. A chandelier, which I had never before noticed, dangled above me. I stood up on what was now a polished, hardwood floor, almost shiny enough to show my reflection. I moved slowly, testing my legs to ensure they were really there.

Then, once again, something appeared practically out of nowhere. Not dangerous, as the others were, this creature was a beautiful young woman, only about a year below my thirty, by the looks of it. She smiled at me, her red lips parted to reveal straight, white teeth. Her brown hair was tied behind her head, and her skin was pale as snow. I recognized her as my lovely wife, Clarice. She carried a glass of wine, red as blood, vibrating with each step she took towards me. I walked forward, closer to her. I longed to touch her face, to see if she would disappear along with everything else. She handed me the glass when we met, which I took with trembling hands. I couldn’t speak. She was here; she was really here, the love of my life.

"Drink," she commanded, her voice echoing in the room. I did, swallowing it all with one gulp. She smiled again. I reached up to touch her, but she backed away before I got the chance.

"Please," I moaned, feeling my head begin to ache, and my body begin to tremble. I collapsed, unable to stand.

"Please." She laughed but did not reply. I could no longer see her as a new light erupted in my eyes, a blinding light that hurt too much to bear. I screamed, covering my face. New voices came, unfamiliar ones, anxious ones.

"Look, I think I found something!"

"My God, is he alive?"

"I think he is. I don’t know how to get him out. How he survived, I can’t imagine."

"If he is alive, he cannot be sane. The radiation leak would have turned his brain to mush..."

The voices grew fainter until they no longer existed. My wife, Clarice, was gone. I couldn’t move. A cloaked figure approached, a skeleton beneath the black. Death.
Portfolio Submission

Author: Kate Welsh
Grade: 12
Teacher: Sarah Wolff
School: Crossroads School, Saint Louis, MO

Red Delicious (Poetry)
En France (Personal Essay)
Anticipation (Personal Essay)
How It Is (Drama – One-Act)
Autumn (Poetry)

Writer’s Statement

“It’s an absolute brawl between you and your words,” my poetry workshop teacher said. “Whatever is left standing at the end is what’s supposed to be there.”

I realized pretty quickly that the comparison between writing and a brawl captured everything I’ve ever felt about the process. Overwhelming passion in the beginning. Kind of a blind rage – rage isn’t quite it, but it’s close – where my mind is so stolen by the idea I have that I only see words to bring it to life – some sort of magic spell. A frightening, exhilarating takeover. I’m usually certain that what is in my mind right now is more pure and perfect than it will ever be. So there is no alternative to writing it down and making it real. Sometimes, it stops here. Two or three lines, occasionally. More often than not, only two or three words appear. Sometimes, when I’m lucky, it goes further. I can write stanzas or paragraphs. I can start to revise. I pull out thesauruses in a quest for falsely attainable perfection. In the middle, though, like a brawl, stalemates arise. My words and I face-off in a staring contest, backed against walls or ropes or in the hands of friends, regaining composure and becoming more agitated. And so we go at it again, with varying results.

The thing is, though, no matter the result, the endorphins will get to me. They say they’re as addictive as a drug, and that’s true. I come out with battle scars every time, and because they add character, I don’t mind. There is nothing better than the verve of creation and destruction, or their interchangeability’s essential irony.

So I’ll brawl with words any chance I get. If I don’t, nothing will stand at all.

Red Delicious

The Evil Stepmother would envy the glossy-covered red ones and Eve would have given in without the snake’s suggestion.

They’re bloody in their hued intensity, too voluptuous in the corset shape. This is what they call dangerous.

So, is it wrong to presume an apple, a diva? All shine, no substance, save for the grainy white pulp.

Still, the backstory: a tender orphan, plucked from the family tree. Yes,
they'll say, licking lips,

*that one’s perfect.*

**En France**

Day 1, Sunday:
Andrea and I are sitting in our Eurail seats, flipping like maniacs through Rick Steves’ French phrasebook and a tattered dictionary, quizzing each other as the green of the countryside whips past our windows.

“How do you say ‘grapes?’” Andrea asks.

“Les raisins, oui?”

“Right.”

“What do they call raisins, then?” I grab for the dictionary. We’ve been at it for hours already, in bursts: Waiting for our flight in Toronto, on the plane over Greenland, in the train station at Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris. We try to soak up words and phrases like sorts of linguistic sponges, but only some of it stays. Learning a foreign tongue and running on very, very little sleep hasn’t been going so well. We’re running on adrenaline, but it’s worked so far.

*Three more hours, two more hours,* we chant to ourselves, *just a few more hours and we’ll be in Hyères.*

Day 2, Monday:
Last night, our host parents, Nathalie and Thierry took us to their favorite place to view the sea and all of Hyères. It’s close to an old fort that Nathalie warns us is ugly. She tells us that the other fort is better, prettier. Yes, there are two medieval forts in a small French town by the sea.

While we’re there, Thierry shows us what we’re seeing on a map, then shows us the real thing. He points out the two narrow straits of land that jut out into the ocean. Between them, he says, are salt marshes and *les flamants.* When we tell him that in English, *les flamants* are called flamingos, Nathalie, listening in, bursts out laughing.

Day 4, Wednesday:
I didn’t know that palm trees and pine trees could exist so harmoniously, that cobblestoned alleyways could be so labyrinthine, or that skies could be so surely blue. I haven’t seen a cloud – not even a wisp - since we arrived.

Every morning after I wake up Andrea and I dress, we stumble down the stairs and have brioche with Nutella for breakfast. We laugh with Nathalie about the fact that even after practicing, neither one of us can successfully pronounce *yaourt* – yoghurt – without stumbling in the tangle of vowels.

When we go to our class in the morning, there are cliques of different students, all from different countries around the world. We play the guessing game at break time, trying to identify the language and jumbles of words that fall off the other students’ tongues. During class, we talk about the conjugation of “-er verbs” as easily as we talk about Barack Obama; the proper placement of adjectives as openly as the *banalisation* of sex.

It’s the honesty that I love. The frankness. No one hides anything. Even though we’re American, Thierry tells us without worry that he couldn’t hate Bush more. If Nathalie and Thierry argue, or if their grown son Florian stops by and is tired and moody, it’s okay. They argue, and they love each other. They’re unapologetic, and it makes me wish the entire world lived and loved as they do.

Everyone wraps their arms around their loved ones’ waists and shoulders. If you love someone, you’re close to them, physically and mentally. No discrete kissing, no coy handholding. Handshakes are firmer. They grip your palm, squeeze your shoulder. When you bump into people on the street, there are no *Oui!* *Excusez-moi*’s. For a wonderful dinner, there aren’t any formal *merci beaucoup.* It’s as if the American version of a common courtesy is understood fact. You know that people are listening to you, because they look you in the eye and say *Oui*? and *Ah, bon!* and *Non!* *Vraiment*? in all the right places.

Day 7, Saturday:
We went to Nice for a day. How unreal is that? We rode on a crowded train, had to ask people to get out of our seats with a polite, “*Excusez-moi, messieurs.*” They complied with a little bow and sauntered off to find somewhere else. A mother and her little boy were sitting in front of us. His round blue eyes kept popping over the edge of the seat, and he gave little flirtatious smiles to Andrea and showed her his toy car.

Why does everything seem more perfect when you see it out of train windows? We pass small villages with pastel-roofed houses, rolling bright green hills and pastures, industrialized towns, and the ocean. People always talk about water sparkling, but this water shimmered. The sky still looked as if it had never seen a cloud.
Nice positively bustled. We spot the first other American tourists we’ve seen since we arrived in France. Every store is packed, but we eventually find our way to a small sandwich shop and then to a large, bright plaza where hip-hop dancers are performing in front of a fountain. We laugh with the rest of the crowd as they dance with the audience. When we finish our sandwiches, we wander towards the beach, into massive department buildings and tiny dimmed shops selling olive oil and lavender candles. The old part of Nice is the most gorgeous. There are apartment buildings with elaborate carvings, curved balconies, and massive, inviting doors. The opera house has wrought-iron lanterns with tiny cherubic faces along the sides. I wish the rest of the world was so detailed.

It’s nice to know that we’re going back to somewhere quiet when we get on the train that evening. Nice, as Andrea’s dad says, is nice. But, il y a beaucoup du monde là. Literally, there’s a lot of the world there; it’s crowded. As we fly along the tracks, the sun sets. We pass the same sights on the way back: the ocean, industrialized towns, green hills and pastures, pastel-roofed houses, all in the gold light of the sun. Finally, though, we’re home.

Yes, after less than a week, Hyères is home.

Day 9, Monday:
In the afternoons, after le déjeuner, we wander. We traipse through smooth, cobblestoned streets, only wide enough for little mopeds. We move under strings of laundry and open painted shutters. There are fluffy gray cats and strangely dainty bursts of graffiti. Restaurants and art galleries, open markets and gelato stands are hidden away. We find modest churches with round windows and marble plazas with modern fountains.

If we were simply linguistic sponges at the beginning of the trip, we have become cultural ones. We soak in the French couples who sit at cafés with a bottle of wine, try to have conversations in French as we duck into shops with a polite “bonjour!” and a “merci beaucoup” when we leave. On the way back home, we go to the bakery down the street and buy two baguettes. Translating rapid-fire numbers isn’t so hard anymore, and we can count Euros as quickly as dollars.

If we time it right, we arrive at the bakery right when they take out fresh baguettes. When we ask for deux baguettes, s’il vous plaît, they grab two loaves, wrap them up in paper, and hand them to us. They’re so warm still they nearly sear our fingertips, but strangely, it’s the best feeling in the world. We carry them under our arms, fancy ourselves les filles françaises, and break off the very end.

As if we could resist, at that point.

Day 10, Tuesday:
With Nathalie’s question posed, “Do you mind going over to meet my mom? She wants to meet you and feed you cake,” how could we refuse? We drove up hill after hill to reach their house and stepped out of the car only to have our cheeks kissed and shoulders squeezed. Nathalie’s mom declared, grinning, with her hands in the air, Je n’ai avant jamais vu les filles américaines! She had never seen American girls before and was positively gleeful when she pushed us towards conversation and a lemon tart on the back terrace.

We were asked question after question about our lives. When I told them I played soccer, Nathalie’s dad ran inside to find pictures from his days on une équipe de foot. Afterwards, with as much lemon tart as we could handle pushed on to our plates by Nathalie’s mother, our hands were slapped away from helping with the dishes, and Nathalie’s dad took us around his garden, puffing out his chest when he pointed out the wall he had built by himself and the slender ferns he had planted.

When we left, more kisses on the cheek from Nathalie’s mom, a strong handshake from Nathalie’s dad, and little porcelain crèche figures – a drummer for Andrea, a shepherd for me – tucked safely in our pockets to remember them by.

Day 12, Thursday:
We skipped class yesterday and used the adjective “gorgeous” so many times it doesn’t sound like a real word anymore. This morning, we hopped on un bateau that carried us across the water to Porquerolles, an island off the coast. Bright blue sky, same shimmering water, perfect green trees.

When we got off the boat, we were handed to the dock and walked with the masses towards the solid ground of the village. Even armed with Nathalie’s precisely penned directions, we decided to just go. So we follow unofficial looking signs promising that le moulin à vent – the windmill – is up ahead. As we walk along the gravel, olive groves line the path: bountiful, dusty green, small, wise. It seems hard to think of olive trees in any other terms than the ancients.

The windmill stands watch over the entire island. When Andrea and I stand under it, we look to our right and see how much we have left to explore, so we go straight towards the other side, towards Fort Ste. Agathe, whose crumbling stones seem as wise as the olive trees. We poke around, stick our heads over walls and walk down ancient stairs. Then we see the beach.
We walk down switchback paths hurriedly, towards the market and what we hope is the beach. In the village, we buy some sort of sandwich and fresh looking peaches and apricots. And – again with the unofficial looking signs – we follow a path that looks like it may head towards our beach. Luckily, we guessed right, and we end up in a spot right before the sand curves. The water is clear, turquoise, beautiful. A breeze you can only feel by the water, that breeze cuts softly through metallic sunrays.

We eat lunch first. Maybe because of the extra bite of salt air I’ve never eaten anything that tasted so good. The sandwich? Amazing. The apricots? Wonderful.

But the peaches. The peaches. There are no words. Andrea and I laughed when we bit into them. They were that good. We debated going back to get more, but what if that ruined it? What if we could only have peaches that good once? And why had these peaches become our fixation when an entire sea was in front of us?

So, after gnawing the peaches down to the very pit, we started swimming. The water was so cold, our arms and shoulders exploded in goosebumps, but we kept going, swimming far enough out to stand on the sandbar, throw hands in the air and glory in something beyond awe.

Maybe the salt air altered something besides our taste buds. Our feet were scraped every time we walked in because of the sharp rocks. Our bouts with goosebumps were practically violent. We were running out of sunscreen. Standing on the sandbar, though, shivering and joyous, Andrea declared, “I live a perfect, cold life.”

On Porquerolles, truer words were never spoken.

Day 14, Saturday:

We’re packed. Suitcases are in the hallway downstairs. Andrea’s made sandwiches, hoping to come close to the perfection of the Porquerolles sandwiches. We’ve packed part of another baguette, too. Just plain. We’ve decided that we have to savor this one.

Just this morning, we were at the beach again. We had a quiet picnic, all of us wanting to think more than chatter, je pense. With Thierry’s expertise, Andrea and I took off with snorkel gear, looking at the seagrass that Thierry told us is the lungs of the entire ocean, at little slippery fish, at massive red rocks. We swam farther away from shore than we probably should have, maybe hoping to escape from the inevitability of the train headed towards Paris too soon.

We’ve started to begin sentences with “Remember when...” and “When we come back someday...” because it makes it more real. Makes it less the idyll it’s become in our journals and more of what we lived everyday for two weeks. How are we supposed to leave now? We ask ourselves. We were just getting started.

Maybe, though, we don’t ever have to leave. Maybe, a little piece of us, not physically of course, but mentally – emotionally, even – can be stuck with the salt marshes and flamingos. In the cobblestoned, graffiti dusted, moped-wide streets. On the ends of baguettes. In kisses on the cheek. On the Porquerolles sandbar.

In falling in love with France.

**Anticipation**

It’s Valentine’s Day and we’re pressed against the metal fence in front of the stage, talking to the blond security guard. He explains that he basically gets paid to watch concerts and pull people up if they faint from excitement and too-straight legs. His favorite concert, lately at least, has been one by a Led Zeppelin tribute band. Or something. We strain our ears, and still can’t quite understand. Eventually, we just nod and say “cool,” because it’s a noncommittal phrase and we know he’ll understand.

Before the concert, people-watching is at its best. We notice that the girl behind us, who keeps apologizing for being pushed against us, bears a striking resemblance to a drunk brunette at the last concert who pushed her weight into the back of our knees in order to get to the front, sprinkling obscenities along the way. And we see that the boy with the lip ring leaning next to Hannah is hitting on her, and she goes seamlessly along with it, smiling. And, we note that the tallest boy in the crowd has a weirdly vacant face, dark eyes too gloomy for his pale coloring, but covetable, model-esque cheekbones.

Anticipation hangs heavier than the stale swirls of cigarette smoke above our heads. Finally, the opening bands – one, two, three of them -- hit the stage in rapid succession. They all come in, jump around, pound their feet on the stage: guitarists brooding, bassists mellow, drummers insane, and singers flying to every corner of the platform. The opening bands were fine; everyone put on a good show. But the anticipation was still building – growing and growing and growing.

After the openers, our security guard moves so the number of security guards can be increased to four. Now, our guy is a tan, pokerfaced man who won’t even glance at us. We talk amongst ourselves, our bodies pushed closer together than is comfortable. My shoulders no longer fit between Andrea and the other girl next to me, so I’m
turned at an awkward angle.

There’s a wave in the crowd and the girl behind us apologizes again, while her friend determinedly pushes, it seems, everyone back to their rightful positions in a synchronized motion. There’s a swell of shrieking younger girls who push Cheekbone-Guy out of his spot. He looks frustrated, trying to push his way through again, but his eyes are still unnervingly empty.

As Cheekbone-Guy blinks (and it seems that he’s finally given up), the lights dim, and everyone screams, arms shooting towards the ceiling. I feel like the ultimate teenage cliché, and I love it. The stage has been transformed into a single guy’s living room: flea market rugs, cool lighting, a Corona bottle lava lamp. The only thing different was the black grand piano – shiny as patent leather - parked solidly in the middle of the stage. The band walks on, smiling as if they’d just shared an inside joke, but they’re excited to see us, too.

They go to their places. The lead singer, Andrew, hops on to his stool and starts pounding away at the keys, then springs back up, like the seat is way too hot. No one stops cheering the entire song, and they revel in it. They introduce themselves: “Hey St. Louis, we’re Jack’s Mannequin.” The crowd drowns out his voice with cheers. He sings a few other songs. “Happy Valentine’s Day. It’s a Hallmark holiday, but what the fuck? It’s a holiday about feeling good, and it feels good to feel good.” He croons something else. “Um...this song’s in honor of Valentine’s day. It’s a song about love...and some other shit.” The crowd laughs in a rough unison. Their music and their energy infect the whole room. Even when the smell of too many bodies and cigarette smoke finally takes over, no one seems to care. Everyone keeps jumping.

When Andrew stage dives, gasps blossom into shrieks as he sails above our heads. People push powerfully just to be able to proclaim “Hell yeah, I touched him!” to envious friends. My friends and I just missed him.

Next time, we’ll be ready.

**How It Is**

*Inspired by Sonja Livingston’s “The Ghetto Girls’ Guide to Dating and Romance”*

CAST: Allie  Meg  Natalie  Ben  Paul

Empty stage. Five boxes are set up. As each person first talks, they are illuminated. When they’re finished, they freeze. They can move, but not out of the light. They can stand up, sit down. They do what comes naturally as they speak to the audience.

NATALIE: You know how it is. You turn in the mirror. Look for signs of change. Signs of something more than a ruler straight line.

MEG: Thing is, though, that you won’t see it happening. Won’t see the bends, the pulling in, the swelling.

BEN: We’ll see it, though.

ALLIE: They will tell you when it happens.

PAUL: We’ll give compliments the way we can.

MEG: The ones that are older than your dad give you those low, eerie whistles and the younger ones hum a mmmhmm. You should just keep your eyes down.

PAUL: For you, I’ll come up with something new.

BEN: If you looked up, you may catch me gazing.

ALLIE: In a strange sort of way, it’s interesting to listen to those men on break, outside of the fish market, smoking, calling out to girls and women. Mostly girls.

BEN: When they’re younger, they care more about people looking. It’s as new to them as it is to us.

PAUL: You got to learn to whistle by the time you learn how to shave.
MEG: Their voices are jungles at night.

BEN: Some make their voices low as Eve’s apple on the branch.

PAUL: There’s no disguising what we do, but we can pretend to be mysterious.

NATALIE: You don’t think you mind being called baby, sugar, honey.

BEN: You are sweet.

ALLIE: But you must mind.

NATALIE: You should.

MEG: So you forget the smell of them. The slow glow of the cigarettes. How hot it was outside.

ALLIE: You think of all the fish they’ve handled, imagine the slimy film of silvery scales.

ALL GIRLS: Keep walking.

BOTH BOYS: Eyes down.

PAUL: If anything, I hide behind the smoke. Behind the way the heat makes the air tremble.

BEN: You should know that you can make me a little breathless.

Beat.

NATALIE: But then you’ll lift your eyes up.

MEG: Because why not? You’re curious. They’re not that bad looking. They could be nice. You could just smile at them.

PAUL: And it’s such a smile...

ALLIE: Yes, it’s possible. So you grin a slow grin. Blink your eyes slowly. You know you’ve got long lashes.

BEN: Long, long lashes.

ALL GIRLS: But they say come here, sweet thing.

NATALIE: And you better bolt the other way. Those eyelashes will get you in trouble.

MEG: And you wander over. You say hey, bat your lashes. Hey.

PAUL: When she says hey back, I pretend to be unimpressed.

ALLIE: And you keep on walking. Slowly though. Eyelashes down. You sway more than walk.

BEN: Forget looks. That sway could kill.

MEG: And he says, You okay, baby? You nod. He clasps your hand. You turn up your face to him.

PAUL: I say you okay, baby? as gentle as I can. I pull your fingers into mine. You look at me.
ALLIE: But just be careful. Because he may say only for a minute and that may be true, but he certainly won’t have a watch. But then he’ll say just a minute longer and the time won’t matter.

BEN: Time doesn’t seem quite right when you’re standing so close.

PAUL: It speeds up. Or stops completely.

MEG: Minutes don’t exist anyway.

NATALIE: You learn to bring your girlfriends with you when you walk to the store. It’s better that way.

PAUL: Better? That’s true.

ALLIE: That way, when you walk, saunter, march, meander, past the men at the fish market, you can talk about anything but those ones staring at you from their porches or from behind their glowy cigarettes.

BEN: Anyway you walk, you look good.

MEG: Yes, get your friends to go with you.

ALLIE: They won’t want to.

NATALIE: But they’ll go. They’ll need you later. For the same reason.

PAUL: Come on, now. I don’t mean any harm.

MEG: So talk about anything but them. School. Clothes. That new CD.

ALLIE: Pretend they don’t exist.

PAUL: If we think you’re pretty, don’t you want to know?

BEN: I wish there was a better way to tell you that you’re beautiful.

NATALIE: If you have to, pretend you hate them.

PAUL: Not you, too...

ALL: [Only girls] Them and their [boys join in] rainforest voices...

Beat.

NATALIE: They’re not all bad, though.

BEN: I promise.

MEG: There’s that one that give you roses...

BEN: Tell me your favorite color?

MEG: The one who says that your eyes are better than stained glass, that your skin is like milk.

ALLIE: Or like café au lait.

PAUL: Or coffee.
NATALIE: Even though you could have him, even though you deserve him,

MEG: You may want to go back to the other one.

ALLIE: But you shouldn’t. Don’t lend money. Don’t give them gifts.

ALL: Don’t fall in love.

NATALIE: At least, not with him.

ALLIE AND PAUL: His [Your] heart’s a sponge.

MEG AND BEN: Your [My] heart could be all liquid.

ALLIE: And you could give and give and give. And get nothing back.

NATALIE: So, no, not for that one.

MEG: But for the one that buys you flowers. The one that said that thing about your eyes

ALLIE: About your skin.

BEN: Maybe the one that actually talks to you.

PAUL: The one that doesn’t wolf whistle.

NATALIE: He’s the one that wants you to meet his family. He wants you to meet his mother, his brother, his aunt coming in from New York.

MEG: It may feel strange. After the slow glow cigarette smokers and the ones that say *hey baby, mmmhmmm*.

BEN: It feels strange for us, too, though. To catch your attention.

PAUL: To catch it, at least, in another way.

NATALIE: After the ones that you put on mascara for and the ones that you wear that white sweater for.

ALLIE: The one that you wait for at that one spot, counting cars as minutes roll by.

PAUL: I didn’t think you’d show up, anyway.

MEG: Hope is worse than a pebble in the shoe.

BEN: But hopelessness is worse than that.

ALLIE: The ones that say *Yes, I’ll take care of you*. That is.

ALL GIRLS: The prettiest of poisons.

NATALIE: Don’t be Juliet.

MEG: Turn from Romeo.

PAUL: What else was I supposed to say?
ALLIE: Gaze again at the boy who wants you to meet his family.

BEN: I’ll introduce you, if that’s all it takes.

NATALIE: To be wanted like that isn’t familiar.

PAUL: I’m still learning how to want you like that.

ALLIE: Maybe, to you, it doesn’t seem normal.

BEN: Try to let it be?

MEG: It’s like tasting a spice you’ve never tasted. But

ALL GIRLS: Don’t spit him out.

BOTH BOYS: Not yet.

ALLIE: You should know that what you had before was bitter. You may not have realized it.

MEG: So realize it now.

NATALIE: turns to MEG Love your eyelashes.

ALLIE: turns to NATALIE Love that white sweater.

MEG: turns to ALLIE Love your skin.

BEN: So we can love you.

PAUL: So we can love us.

ALLIE: See if you want the boy who writes you letters,

BEN: Using Romeo words and none of his actions,

MEG: Who says your eyes are like stained glass:

NATALIE: See if you want him to love them too.

ALLIE: Just forget the voices like the jungle at night.

MEG: You could have a boy, now, that says he wants to

PAUL: Give you roses.

ALLIE: A boy that wants to introduce you to his mother.

BEN: To my family.

NATALIE: A boy who deserves you.

Beat.

ALL: Maybe.
Autumn

1.
Fall murmurs death, but you know that.

Balloons from summer hang
tangled in the skeleton trees,
noose-like,
the ghost of my breath
disappears skyward,
and the leaves seem
far too dead, too fragile
to have once been part
of something mighty.

2.
If anything, you thrive on it.

You feel so alive in the midst
of the lifelessness, you worry
that it’s wrong.
I can only say I don’t know
either. That perhaps
we never will.
You assure me there shouldn’t
be an answer for everything;
the best we can
do is wonder.

3.
In wonder, then, I will join you.

I will kick up the leaves
for you and watch
the wind catch them. I
will exhale billows
of air and see them swirl
with yours.
The skeleton trees will be
nothing but sharp silhouettes
in the sudden dusk.

4.
Maybe, I will love the fall as you do.

Following, then, the echo
of your insisting voice,
I walk hunch-backed
under gaunt branches.
It is for you I breathe
the smoky ripeness
of decaying leaves, for you
I exhale it in a solitary cloud.
My eyes fixate upon a woman, chained to a stone wall.
Her head and arms droop from fatigue,
for she has suffered for a while,
hiding her pain and masking her constant agony.
The world seems oblivious to her,
and she continues on without a single word.
But, soon her silence will turn into a roar,
and all will suffer the consequences.
My eyes admire her pale green skin and notice the
bulging black bags under her affectionate blue eyes.
Black tears continue to fall, though
the previous ones are still dried to her cheeks.
A ring of fire surrounds this angelic woman,
and the sweat from her brow drips
to her tattered brown dress.
A thick cloud of smoke suffocates her,
and pollutes her mind.
Torture like this should be terminated.
“Mom, who is that?” a young boy asks as he
timidly looks at the caged woman.
“That’s mother nature,” the mother replies.
“Can we help her?” he innocently asks.
“Honey, that’s not our job,” the mother said
as she pried her son’s fingers
from the burning bars of the cage.
Typical answer, her ignorance was expected,
just another tear down Mother Nature’s already stained cheeks.
The question isn’t “who will save her,”
but rather, “when will we save her?”
When will we?
Fugue

Author: Ruth Boettner
Grade: 12
Teacher: Janet Jelavich
School: Maryville High School, Maryville, MO

Prologue:

Of all the things in my life that have helped me grow, two stick out to me the most: my music and my heritage. The overall format of this memoir pays tribute to the former. A fugue is a somewhat complicated musical piece that contains a Subject, Answer, Countersubject, and Stretto (or ending), as well as any other parts—such as Codas or Episodes—that a composer wants to add. It can be compared to sonnet, having a sort of conflict/resolution style. See if you can identify which “movement” of the story matches a particular section of a fugue.

I.

I sat aboard our Midwest Airlines plane, ready to embark on the journey of a lifetime. I fought back tears as we entered taxi, looking for our family’s white Ford Taurus, the child in me wondering if Daddy could see me wave goodbye. Mom held my hand; I cried quietly until the parking lot left my line of sight. As the clouds drifted by my window like people on a movie screen, I turned on my music and daydreamed about the next fourteen days. I knew to expect a wonderful experience; I smiled in excitement, despite my homesickness. After years of waiting, I was finally returning to my original home: the Philippines.

II.

Mom and I left Customs and walked into the hustle and bustle outside the airport on Mactan Island. We spotted Uncle Totong in the crowd, along with Aunt Mira and four of my cousins. I embraced each of them, feeling strange and happy at the same time. The eight of us piled into my uncle’s friend’s van and headed for Days Hotel. I regarded the rosary hanging from his rearview mirror and then the streets, getting my first glimpse of Filipino life—at least, the first glimpse I could remember.

Later that evening, Mom, my aunt and uncle, my five cousins, and I sat around a huge table to enjoy my first authentic meal. I drank Coke out of a glass bottle while the waiters brought out the biggest lazy Susan I had ever seen. On a rotating circle of goodness sat fried rice, lumpia, bird’s nest soup, fresh shrimp, and more. I braved all of it—most of it in a joyful manner. My family laughed at me when I cut off a shrimp’s head, only to be shocked when its brains came spilling out. I made a mental note to be prepared for this in the future. After dinner, we walked to the little grocery store to pick up some necessities. For me, this—of course—had to include mango Tang and Hello Panda cookies (which were, excitingly, half the price of the ones at Hy-Vee...and in double chocolate).

On Sunday, we went to church. This would be the most amazing religious experience of my life so far. I remember it like it happened yesterday: thirty-some people in a non-air-conditioned matchbox of a room with a small stereo as a source of music. Some were even sitting outside the actual pseudo-sanctuary, just so they could be present. I thought raising hands during praise songs was reserved for religious conferences and revivals only; here, this behavior served as the norm. To say I couldn’t believe it would be an understatement.

Our last evening in the Mactan Island, Mom presented this part of our family with the gifts we had brought for them, including t-shirts, dresses, and even Velveeta cheese. She discussed how different it was in the Philippines how happy people were, even in poverty. It struck a chord in my mind as we prayed together, and I evaluated the level of truth of that statement. It spoke volumes.

III.

It was time to begin the second leg of our trip: nine days in Bacolod City with my grandmother and her side of the family.

After a forty-five minute flight from Mactan Island, we were finally done with planes for a while. My mother and I grabbed our suitcases and walked into the Bacolod heat. The first thing I remember seeing was my cousin Kinamwe and the brightness of her eyes as she smiled shyly at me. I squinted in the light of the tropic sun, and we boarded Uncle Roel’s jeepney, en route to our hotel. I took a deep breath and drew in my surroundings, listening as my mom conversed in Ilonggo with my relatives. Beside us, the sugar cane wafted in the cool breeze. Cows and roosters
Ruth Boettner

Fugue

walked along the roadsides as Filipino farmers slaved away in the rice paddies. I snapped pictures of bananas and papayas in trees, fascinated that I could actually see these outside of the Hy-Vee produce section and growing wild. I inhaled the smell of fresh mangos and then that of lechon kawali, as we zoomed down the streets. As the security guards took our bags for us, I walked into the main lobby and plopped down on the sofa, enjoying the cold air conditioning.

Our relatives presented us a bucket of fresh shrimp and crab, and a container of rice once we got to our room. I ate and reveled in the sweet taste that one can only gather from Pacific-caught seafood. The shrimp were as big as my fist and still had their heads, just like the ones from my first meal there; I braved the mushy, egg matter of the female crabs. My grandmother laughed at my reaction to that. And afterwards, I had my first Asian-grown mango, which would soon become my new addiction.

That first evening in Bacolod (half my time there, actually) was spent at my second cousin’s party planning office and my great uncle Pedro’s home. I remember being surprised by the wall-length mirror next to the stairway entrance of his five-room flat above Edson’s shop. He remarked that his wife always liked to check her appearance before she left the house; I heard from his voice and saw from her mural how much he cared for her—how much love my family had. As we sat down for a dinner of fish, fried rice, and fruit, I wondered what I would learn from them over the next nine days.

The Thursday after our arrival, a group of about twenty or thirty of us rented a jeepney and drove to the old pseudo-stomping grounds: Mambucal. The entire day was spent eating, talking, laughing, and bonding as the Azuelo family line. I ate every Filipino dish imaginable: Pinoy-style spaghetti, bihon (a noodle dish similar to Chinese lo mein), scallops, tilapia (authentic, with the heads still on), calamari, and—of course—mangos. With my cousins, I covered most of the grounds. We walked through the butterfly garden; I took in the beauty of the Filipino-native mariposa. I hiked through the forests, watching the flight of tropical bats at the top of the canopy. And together (minus the older adults), we climbed about half a mile of the falls. I felt like the best kind of teenage explorer: the one who treks through the jungle in flip-flops, cheer shorts, and a t-shirt. When I strolled down the path back to our rented jeepney, I vowed to myself that I would return here someday.

Sunday, I entered Bacolod Evangelical Church, where my parents were married on August 6, 1988. I looked at the altar and pictured my mom in her white dress and my dad smiling, trying to bear the lack of air conditioning. On Monday, June 2, I returned to Iloilo City, where I was born and raised for two years. As my mom reminisced with her old friends, I walked around in the empty church, the same one where my dad led Christian students in study and worship so many years ago. This is where it all started, I thought. Mom and Dad met here. We drove by the campus where he ministered, too. I tried to imagine his first thoughts as he arrived here in 1984. Slowly, I felt like I had begun to understand my father just a little bit more than I had before. As we traveled by boat back to Bacolod that afternoon, I couldn’t believe our journey was almost over.

Later that evening, the whole family gathered together. On my great uncle’s terrace, we had our final dinner with everyone present, complete with adobo, watermelon punch, and more rice than anyone could ever consume. Months later, I can still hear and picture it all: the high-pitched laughter of my young cousins, inside jokes that only a Filipino would understand, and my cousin Montano’s rendition of “Like A Virgin” by Madonna. The next three days passed by quicker than I ever would have thought, and before I knew it, we were back at the airport, ready to head from Mactan Island to Hong Kong to Los Angeles for a night. I remember everything about that last morning: my last ride in a jeepney, falling asleep waiting for the plane, my cousins’ smiles, and my grandmother’s voice as she said goodbye one last time.

IV.

As we began the twelve-hour flight back to Los Angeles, my mind wandered. The sights I had witnessed were unlike any other seen in my lifetime. I recalled walking across the same floors and streets that my parents had years ago. Two strangers from opposite sides of the world end up marrying. What are the chances of that?

The world is so big, I thought to myself. I had been stuck in my little shell, living in a city of about twelve thousand people and not planning to venture too far outside it. My simple, small-town dreams ran through my head, and suddenly, they didn’t sound so exciting. I still had so much to experience yet in my life.

When would I build up the courage to really go and find it?

V.

It is November 18. My status has been single for five months now, and I find myself in a happier state than I have experienced in a long time. I am doing my pre-calculus problems, finding the vertical and horizontal asymptotes of an infinite amount of functional equations, trying my best to ignore messages from a boy that I find myself thinking about way too often. I wonder if anything will happen between us, but strangely enough, I don’t really care.
It’s taken me years, but I’ve finally realized that the only special person I truly need in my life is the one staring back at me in the mirror.

I sit and think about how that trip changed everything. My simplified dream still sat in the broom closet of my mind: go to my local university, acquire a degree in clinical lab science, spend time working for various hospitals within the state...find a husband and raise a family. Since the trip to my homeland, the list has become shockingly different: major in counseling psychology, study abroad in France, start my own counseling center, travel with Doctors Without Borders, change the world...and be happy, regardless of who I am with or without.

Graduation is six months away from yesterday. As I organize my scholarships and write down my references, I reflect on the past seventeen years in a mixture of happiness, regret, and contentment. “Painted Rocking Horse,” my favorite song to play on the piano growing up, tinkles like notes from a music box. Memories of my childhood bounce around in my head; I think about how much I have changed. I remember the smiles, the laughter, the quiet places—both literally and not—that I retreated to when no one else understood. I sip my Pepsi and pray fervently that the self-portrait I painted leaves a legacy worth remembering.

I hope it is a masterpiece.
The Sensation of Speech

The words trip
On their way out.
The rough edges of letters,
Sharp endings of words,
The all catch in the shallow
Crevices,
The desert cracks
In my chapped lips.
Each one stumbles
Surprised
From my unwilling mouth
And falls haphazardly
To the ground
Swiftly gathering in a noisy heap
About my toes.
All that remains
Within is a lone question mark.
But he burrows into the warmth
of my tongue
And refuses to venture out.
Even he knows
That there is no
Answer.

An Unraveling Subconscious

sign!
sing for the air
the filthy noxious gas
that rushes
in and out
of your lungs
even as the cold
flickering picture
that should be the sun
creeps out of hiding
from behind the dusty warehouses
and shining skyscrapers
which force the landscape
into an eerie
grin.
dance!
dance on
over the cracked
and cluttered streets
in between the honking taxis
amidst the road rage
while exhaust swirls
around your ankles
and an empty beer can clacks
across the road
adding to the frantic rhythm
set by your desperately
tapping feet
even as you are abandoned
by a favorite decrepit
shoe.

shout!
shout out
your soul
your insane poetical ramblings
that mimic your
artist’s depravity
you copy yourself
folding over and over
twisting in around and out
until you forget your beginning
and you screech like
a broken
classical record
even as other screams fill your ears
and the tumbrel
approaches your imagined
guillotine.

weep!
weep for the ones
who were not so fortunate
who felt the weight
of the universe
falling in on them
making them a vacuum
warping perception
and vomiting
blinding sooty clouds
of hallucinatory mazes
even as their reality
slams into their collective gut
with the crossing of glassy eyes
the dust grit stench
piercing howl of sirens
filth waste
flaming garbage
harsh whispers strongly
echoing pink scars
painful fluorescence traced in
neon signatures
salt in wounds
release.

dream!
dream of the scaffold
so as night falls
you can jump into
the sheets
the darkness
the lights
colors of uncontrollable
ecstasy
the baggy-eyed crinkle-browed
trembling wait for morning
reluctant knowledge of midnight late night
and slate grey dawn
whose misty fingers draw the blinds
and drown your mind
in the icy lake of unconsciousness
snores bubbling and disappearing
into anonymity
with gods and kingdoms
that crash and flash and burn
like water never should
but then
really it’s stone over stone
in your unraveling
subconscious.

sleep.
sleep. sleep.
fall. end. finish.
staccato.
jerking.
jolting.
agonizing.
waking. as. you. dream.
as. you. sleep.
you. want. to. sleep.
sleep.
sleep.
hard. heads.
soft. pillows.
aching. skull.
pounding. ears.
slipping. under.
surrendering. to.
sleep.

    sleep.

    sleep.

    sleep.

    sleep.
The Perilous Waltz

The Sun
is the constant murderer
of the Moon,
and Selene,
the eternal bane
of Helios.
Forever enemies—
locked in deadly combat,
yet unconditional are they
in their love.
Even more so
undeniably
heartbreakingly
frozen in their forced hatred.
Heavenly bodies locked in
the fatal dance
orchestrated
by the celestial symphony
whose cacophony thunders
through the mighty halls
of the gods
and demigods.
On they step,
waltzing
to a beautiful
terrible
melody.
They are ever
longing for each other
yet yearning
for the other’s
destruction.
Never ceasing
to pursue the other,
desperate
for that broken love.
Yet, with each movement,
they are burned,
spearied to the core.
A battle of perfections,
choreographed without flaw,
conformity at its best,
its worst,
conducting the heavens
with brutal
finality.
White Clover

We make chain necklaces,
wrap the stems around the base of the petals,
and trade.

We could do this for hours
until the sun is a sleepy eye,
drowsy on the horizon.
Mel and I sit cross-legged
in a field of white clover;
We let the trees listen in
as we give and take chains,
give and take stories.
The trees, they yearn for hands instead of swatches,
soft hair instead of leaves,
and feet that can carry them
far from their roots.
Mel and I let them have some of our stories,
the ones we can control.
Let them keep on whispering,
what a wonderful life it must be, for those pretty little girls.

The ugly things, the things left unsaid,
we wrap their stems around the base of the petals
and trade.

Five Times Over

The morning after she left the first time,
it rained. The driveway was vacant
of everything but a puddle of rainbow oil
and an earthworm crawling
millimeter by millimeter
towards the mud.
My brother told me that
worms, they have five hearts
in a line down their bodies.
He told me this a few days ago,
while slicing one in half with dad’s pocket knife.
The worm didn’t bleed very much.
Well, worms. Both pieces wriggled.
Infant-worms, forced to grow all over again.

The morning she left, I used a stick
to poke the worm from the driveway to the grass
and whispered:
“Can I have one of your hearts...?”
But before I could say please,
the earthworm slid into the mud.
He and his five hearts going one by one
into the ground. He probably uses them
to love the whole world all at once.

If I had five hearts, I would save each one for later.
That way, even if mom left and broke the old one,
even if I died one, two, three, four times,
on the day she comes home
I’d have an extra in my pocket to love her.

**So Much and Nothing**

Over the breakfast table,
we gaze
at our sections of the morning paper,
eyes caked with crusty leftovers
from our dreams.

Black coffee,
heavy in my throat,
scorches like the echoes
of all the things
I shouldn’t have said.

My darling. No–
love. No,
darling:
sitting on the other side
of the table,
lying on the other side
of the bed,
resting in your armchair
on the other side
of the world,

“pass the sugar?”

You turn the page
of the sports section
and kiss the lips
of the coffee mug.
I sigh loudly,
but the score reports
seem to have
captured your attention
in ways I never could.
I reach over the
hot mugs and cold cereal
to grab the sugar bowl.
Your silence settles
into a film over my lips:

there’s so much
and nothing left
to say.
Once breakfast is finished,
you leave for work,
only remembering to say goodbye
with your wedding ring hand on the doorknob
and your back to me.
The kiss you keep for yourself
leaves my lips
slightly parted,
my breath
slightly stolen,
but only just so.

I abandon the dirty dishes
and trudge back to our bedroom,
to crawl underneath
icy bed sheets,

fantasizing
about the day
we will finally
remember
how to speak,
with some conviction,
those three words
(my darling).

Oak Trees

Her eyes go on for miles. Two muddy trails
cradled in a forest of oak
that beckon for me to follow,
yet warn me to stay away all the same.

Trees murmur softly as I approach,
ugly things, spiteful things,
before hushing one another as I pass.

I find my sister on the banks of a wide brown lake,
hands gripping the grass
as she leans over the water’s edge.

We study her reflection:
the face is distorted, rippling
as if it were about to yell,
the body carries its chest in folded arms,
hugs its shoulders
like they might wash away.

I plunge my hands into the water,
hoping to drag her back onto solid ground.

They come out empty,
green with algae.

Lake water splashes angrily on the banks.
Cattails hiss in my direction: I am not welcome.

The trees close around her, push me away,
until I’m back outside,
searching for the face I know.

I’m standing on the edge of an empty field,
locked out by two gated eyes,
hands dripping stains on my white sweater.

**Reprieve**

I remember my name now.
The one that moved wind chimes,
made them dance Swan Lake.
The one that made golden wheat bend.
The one you
stole and sent floating
downstream, like driftwood.

I chased it along the riverbanks,
trying to capture it in my ear
just one last time.
But it never came back,
retreating instead into a purple sunset,
to a place I could not follow.

But I can remember
the way it tasted in my mouth:
cool peaches in the summertime,
juice running down my chin
like thick, sweet tears.
The Man and His Sand

Author: Curtis Chapin
Grade: 8
School: Delta Woods Middle School, Lee’s Summit, MO

A vague recollection of placement.
Slight hint of normality.
The thick, potent scents of smoggy city streets still haunt his clothing. A very ordinary looking man with an unshaven face, jet black hair, and dark troubled eyes hiding behind circular lenses found himself displaced on a spotless plain of white.
No shadows were cast.
Time, space and all sense of direction, suspended.
He looked towards his feet.
Cradled in his arms was a bright-red plastic bucket of sand.
He noticed the sand.
The bucket’s contents twisted, spun, and danced like illuminated gold diamonds within the confines of its walls.
The thought that had been planted deep within his brain stirred, broke earth and thrived.
A burning lust for the sand clasped its icy hand over his heart.
With the dark pools of his eyes reflecting the sand’s fiery glow, he raised a shaking hand and hungrily plunged it deep into the bucket.
The container plummeted to the ground with incredible force. On contact the vessel shattered into dust, and the sand roared and thundered, rushing to all sides of him as far as he could see.
Trembling with fear, he closed his eyes.
Sounds and sensations buzzed through his body and around him like serpents hissing into his ears.
He opened his eyes.
And immediately closed them to the sharp blinding light of the sun.
Squinting, he dared to peer out into his surroundings.
The previously endless plain of white had been replaced by a tortuous equally infinite dry, desolate, desert oven.
The sea of sand rose and fell in frozen, towering waves.
So, he began to walk.
His wanderings seemed as short as a second yet painfully dragged out for what felt like years.
As the man labored to place one foot in front of the other, the surrounding vacuum of dry sand seemed to sap his soul. For every drop of perspiration that slid off of his shivering body, a little bit of life left him.
Looking down at the sand that lay ever before him, he saw none of the beauty that it once possessed, but now the monotonous noise of hot oranges and yellows that screeched from the sand was nauseating.
Without warning his legs buckled underneath him; the ground rose up wielding a jagged rock and knocked the wind out of him with an earth shattering force. Panicking, he tried to get a breath of air but instead sucked a mouthful of white-hot sand into his lungs.
He could no longer suppress it.
Spitting up sand and vomit, he screamed in bitter agony while tears of precious water flowed down the creases in his distorted face and into the ever thirsty sand.
How completely alone he felt.
As his screams faded away, he noticed another sound slowly taking shape.
It was laughter. But I’m alone, he thought. “Hello?”
That he noticed a strange sensation in his arm. Fearfully, the man lifted his arm to his eyes and found a semi circle haphazardly cut into the beef of his arm by a dull rock.
To his horror the wound opened its blood-caked mouth and proceeded to laugh at his pain. A horrible, sickly laugh as if from the lungs of a life time smoker
“Stop it!” the man pleaded through teeth clenched in pain.
“You have no power over me,” the gaping wound retorted, allowing another stream of blood to trickle to the sand, “You answer to him.”
“Who?” the man asked the wound. His tormentor only continued to laugh, but another sound consumed it. A deep, ominous, groaning frequency came from below him, as the sand sank into a gigantic cavity wielding a serpent tongue of fire.
Feeling now a burning question of anger within him, the man screamed to the sand, “What have I done to suffer you!”

“Oh, but you wouldn’t live without me, you’ve given up everything to ‘suffer’ me.”

“Who are you?”

“I am your child, I am your hidden pride, I am your forbidden joy, I am your darkest secrets...I am your love,” the sand crooned. “You have given up all you have for me and now will have to suffer all that you have for me. I won’t stop until there’s nothing left of you.”

In complete and total despair the man, having understood what had to be done, lifted himself from the ground and methodically approached the gaping hole of the death he deserved, ready to throw himself into it. Standing on the edge, he looked down into the dark, oven chasm, letting his eyes trail the sand’s slithering tongue.

Then something happened.

At first it caught him by surprise. In the midst of a white hot despair, a cool, firm hand took hold of his shoulder. The man looked back and saw two blue eyes staring back at him. Two clear oceans deep with sympathy and love. With a caring force the stranger pushed the man back and threw himself into the sand instead. The sand collapsed over him and then erupted with sea water and every living thing that abides in it. The sand screamed and writhed in pain as the righteous force of the sea completely saturated and consumed the sand forever more.

Once again the man found himself suspended. Only this time above a calmly tossing sea and beneath the gentle, cool blanket of an overcast sky.

The humble creature was so small that at first he didn’t notice him.

But then the man found himself at eye level with a small lamb with a slash in his side carrying the same two ocean blue eyes of a sacrificial love.
**Portfolio Submission**

Author: Luke Christisen  
Grade: 12  
Teacher: Shelly Grimshaw  
School: Francis Howell North High School, St. Charles, MO

A Collection of Poetry, printed in the following order:

- Satellite
- Playtime
- Tightrope
- Walking Barefoot
- Belts
- Storm Drain
- Red Underwear
- Murder
- City Symphony
- Genocide
- Glow
- Hit Me

**Satellite**

Spellbound in orbit,  
Her stone gaze yearning,  
With eyes entranced,  
In an ethereal embrace.

Conceived in chaos,  
Birthed in a battlement,  
Her mother mad,  
With cosmic calamity,  
Estranged and forgotten,  
Except in theory and thought.

Her pull towards her big blue sister,  
Turns tides, washing wakes.  
Living lonesome and locked,  
Face set in stone,  
Her father so far,  
His influence encompasses,  
Revolving her world.

She’s a daddy’s girl.

Her face so familiar,  
I know it well,  
But behind the surface,  
No one knows her.
Porcelain perfection,
Masking mystery and more.
Beyond her father’s features,
Behind her ivory exterior,
Her inner beauty doesn’t
Glimmer, glisten, or glow.
She’s always playing hard to get,
Phasing in and out.

When her features are full,
Ask her a question,
And decipher the dark side,
Of the moon.

**Playtime**

When the wind blows
Through the autumn leaves,
Or spring blooms,

The door to my garage opens
On its own,

Beckoning me to come outside,
To experience what I can’t from the kitchen window.

I miss those days,
When a screen door’s slam
Sent me on a journey
Through imagination and play
Into a new world.

I spend my time working:
Outside working,
Inside working.

Sometimes I want to kick my legs
And swing up through the playground heights,
Regain that which I have lost.

I want to play.

**Tightrope**

Built at birth and erected in earnest,
A tightrope inches along innocence,
Stretches across our lives.
Swaying and swinging, some choose to stay,
Wiggling and wobbling their ways through life,
Watching their steps calculating moves.

Some choose to fall into the net of temptation,
Gently gestured onto ground with ease,
Walking below the struggling strong.

Lives fraught with frustration
Enjoy ignorant indulgence.

With balance pole in hand
I'm walking the wire,
Loving the sense of pride
Dedication brings.

Walking barefoot

Living life confined,
Caged beasts crave
A new life.

Your feet ache to be unbound,
Yearn to tickle, toughen touch.
Smothered in synthetic soles,
They lost their
Souls.

Forced to serve others comfort and sloth,
Their owners determined to live lives of ease,
Forgetting their tender tarsalled vassals,
Forced to carry and degrade.

Understand your feet.
Let your tiny toes touch.
Look before you step.
Toughen to the terrain.

Stifle your friendly feet no longer;
Let your soles stand stained with green.
Let those you surround in cotton and leather free.
Feel the world between your toes,
And never forget your feet.

Belts

The line between embellished and embarrassed
Separated only by a leather length;
Sorted and styled,
Black to blue.

Holding up pants, keeping posteriors covered;
Waistbands around waist not ankles or toes;
Dressed to kill.

Slithering from its loops, the serpent can strike
A child or a wife,
With the helping hand of fury’s might.

Once loose, it can terrorize,
Out of love in discipline
Or a simple bad night.

Instruments of foreboding fear
Chase my childhood dreams.
Noxious nightmares fill
The nighttime need.

Buy them hanging in the store,
Limp and ready to serve;
What purpose will you use them for?

**Storm drain**

Rainwater run,
Rush the runoff across
The slighted streets.

Carry our thoughts away.

Down deep, denial drains, leading
To conscience causeways, entering
Brokenhearted bridges.

Carry our regrets away.

The rain bears down,
Like an acidic tempest,
Eating away at the muddled memories
Of forgotten fights
With the polluted people
Now fouling the clouds.

Carry our fears away.

The same people, now shielded by black umbrellas,
Slosh through our puddle peace of mind,
Kicking the water into our faces.
We blink.
Carry our pain away.

Take it all when you go.
   Rainwater run.
Carry you, carry me,
   Carry it all
   Down.

Red Underwear

As simple as it sounds,
   With anxious anticipation
When confidence runs low,
   I fill up on morale.

I slip on raging red boxer briefs,
   A daring color if ever was.

Nothing can touch me in my red underwear;
   It’s the best thing that I could have done.

Flying high on soaring winds,
   I tackle terrifying heights,
In my cape of crusading confidence
   With big red keeping me aloft.

They hug my every curve and fit me like a glove.
   I love my red underwear;
   I never want to take them off.

   Some may think it silly;
Others say it’s strange,
   But to me it’s just a little way
Of getting through the day.

If I seem a bit more perky,
   With zippy zap and extra pep,
I just might have a bit of red
   Strengthening my step.

Murder

Strategically stated
   With living lives listed,
Still breathing, belly up, bloated.

“Watch carefully now.”
   Check marked,
One down.

Grotesquely gathered,
With several severed, subdued;

“Did you see that one?”
Check marked,
Two down.

Belligerent brilliance,
Gutted, guttural, groaning.

“Your turn.”
Check marked,
Three down.

Anxiously ambushed, amputated,
“Oh you monstrous, monolithic mastermind.”

“Good job.”
Check marked,
No more.

Audaciously assembled,
Winged, wretched, wise men,
I saw them in the park teaching their friends
How to kill.

Are you familiar with crows?

---

City Symphony

Composed in city streets
On lines of light,
Traffic turns green,
Streaking the skyline.

Scaling steel structures,
Precious percussion pulses
Plate glass.

Beating the heartbeat home in
Counted communication,
Symphony sound synergizes sites.

Brass beats blaze the byways.
Eighth notes elegantly emphasize
The final crescendo.

Winding workers like woodwinds waft
Into high-rise rooms.
As the cut off sets in the sky,
Horizon streaks the decrescendo city day.

Genocide

Bamboo in my kitchen window,
Mom put it there since it was withering away
In my basement bedroom before I came back upstairs.

Three stalks said to be lucky
Waste away due to a tiny basement window.

Now, two stalks dead,
One thrives spiraling sunward,
Leaving the last two dried and desecrated.

As its leaves sprawl and green grows gleaming.

Life seems to do that,
Pitting friends and folk,
Only letting
The strongest survive.

Glow

Shadows shift whilst light closes eye,
So open the air to dancing we fly!

Hushed to the ears of the listeners around,
We flash for a call without even a sound.

Glowing and gleaming our silent signal does soar,
For a brief moment, yet nothing more.

Fear keeps our lights from burning ablaze;
This is the way of we small prey.

We want to be seen but fear being heard;
Out of this fear, we lose power of word.

We are so alike, but the same we are nigh,
For I am much bigger than a small firefly.
Hit Me

You knock me down,
And you know why.
It’s because it’s right;
I deserve to cry.

You’ve heard from your pages
And family’s eldest sages
That the preposterous imperfect people proved themselves to be evil,
For they’re the unholy symbol of your uneasy upheaval.

Hit me hard,
For you know it will make you a man,
To prove once and for all the strength of your hands.

You’ll bind me with ideals of what I must be,
But it’s a sorry, sad shame you don’t even know me.

You see your beliefs as flawless,
Rightfully so,
For you’ve been told since knee-high to go by this flow.

Difference is evil,
Perfect that does not make,
So it’s been put in your hands to both shatter and break.

You are so flawless, so streaklessly sheen, spotlessly perfect, and dangerously keen.
One like me can’t possibly see, for I must be confused, so you make this scene.

I lay here where you left me in pieces on the floor;
I put myself back together,
But I won’t stand for this anymore.
Horseflies

Author: Maria Doerr
Grade: 8
Teacher: Paula Donoho
School: Jefferson Junior High School, Columbia, MO

With a gulp I reached for the door handle and stepped onto the gray cement. Forest songs filled my head as I observed my new home, a patch of sunlit grass surrounded by green trees that swayed back and forth above us. We had arrived at Yancy Mills Camping Grounds, the most beautiful camping area in all of Southern Missouri. My mind filled with wonder as I looked down to where the river rushed. “I wonder what will happen this year...” I thought. The truth would be almost too much to handle.

“Wake up Maria, come on.” I rolled over; what was the meaning of this disturbance?
“Ughh.” I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and pushed off the sleeping bag. Before me stood my mother, fully dressed and awake ready for whatever the day would throw at her. While I, grumpy in the early morning sunlight, sat in a daze unable to grasp reality.

“Walk time.” She smiled. Unhappily I got up, changed, and made my way out of the old tent that reeked of a lifetime in a basement. I sat down heavily on the wooden table laden with leafy shadows from above. My mom handed me a water bottle, took my limp hand, and we were off. The forest rose around us as we made our way along the small dirt trail around all the overgrown plants that stood in our way.

“Too much green...” I mumbled. Around us green was all I saw, I felt trapped in an ocean of it no matter which way I turned.

“Calm down. We’re almost to the Blossom Rock.” My mother, far ahead of me, called back. On numerous accounts I found myself karate-chopping through unexpected spider webs or stumbling into poison ivy which bordered the trail until we finally reached the rock which was truly many huge rocks jutting up put of the ground. At its top, grass and trees grew above the canopy of the forest. With new found stamina of the hope of an adventure, I pulled myself up and up the mossy rocks until I was at the very top. The foliage of vines and trees encircled my view as I sat pushing the highest trees limbs out of my face. From far below I heard my mother calling muffled tones through the trees.

“M...ra! ...one down! ...Not...afe!” I looked down in awe, had I truly climbed that far? With a gulp I slowly scoured down the rock face and ran after her. The rest of the walk was in silence as we traveled along. I looked ahead, just the same path, over and over; how boring. I peered down at my feet for new scenery. I blinked my eyes, what was that I saw? I stopped in my tracks and bent down to take a closer look at my ankle. A hundred little red dots were walking up my leg!

“Gaahhh! Help!” I hopped over to my mother and grabbed a leaf to try to scrape off the little deer ticks who hunted for my flesh. With pushing effort we raced back to camp to get the rest off.

After the terror with the little red beasts, we decided to check out the river. With blow-up boat and swimsuits in tow, we pushed through the reeds to the water’s edge. The sparkling water gleamed in the sunlight while down at the bottom brown tadpoles swam lazily. We jumped into the little boat and did our best to paddle down the shallow river. Not long after we had gotten in, we turned a bend to find two families sitting on the beach next the “swimming hole.” I sat in front trying to look important as I paddled, but then my weight started to shift. “Please no. Please,” I thought, and I went head first into the deep, cold water. My skin was met by the chilly, spring fed water that sucked the air out of my lungs. Trying to stand up I ran into the boat, only embarrassing myself even more.

“Colder than you expected, right?” One of the ladies smiled on the beach.

“Very,” I said as I tried to scramble back into the boat. Deciding to dry off, my mom dragged the boat onto the shore and started talking to the two mothers as I sat grasping my towel.

“Hi.” One of the boys smiled, and before I knew it we were carrying on a conversation. As the day progressed, Jessie (the boy) and I became friends as we gittered our teeth and jumped into the frigid water. Late in the afternoon, the horseflies started coming out, so as soon as we heard their evil buzzing we’d scream and I’d hide under the boat while he went screaming through the water. Soon though, the sun began to sink behind the horizon, and it was time for him to go. We walked up to where our cars waited, (my mom had brought our car down to the parking lot). “We come here every Sunday afternoon, you know.” He stared down at his feet. “So, bye. See ‘ya later.”

“Yeah, bye,” I looked down, my face a deep mulberry blush. I watched as he got in his truck and drove away before Mom and I headed in the opposite direction.

The next day passed in silence, going on a walk, swimming once more, and eating macaroni and cheese made on
a little green camping stove. That evening my mother sat by the fire trying to pluck out a song on the guitar (she can’t play), so I snuck away to the river with the boat. Fog was just starting to appear above the sunset-colored water.

Pushing the boat out to where it reached mid-calf, I jumped in and lazily, inch by inch, moved down the river. The night seemed eerily quiet as I noted the beauty of silence around me. Already the possibility of swimming was gone, too late in the day to risk jumping into 50 degree water. It was finally a time to relax and be calm. I thought of the many adventures I had already had: hiking, Jessie, swimming, horseflies. My eyes widened in disbelief...There on the boat sat the fattest and biggest horsefly I had ever seen. ‘I will not be bitten,’ I thought, ‘It is a bug and I shall squash it,’ I reminded myself.

With lightning speed the horsefly (despite its huge size) took to its wings, surrounding me with its horrendous song. I jumped over the edge of the boat to the only safety I could find in the very shallow and fast-moving water and covered myself with the upside-down blow-up boat.

“Mom!!! Help!!!” I screamed in terror; around and around the monster flew as I lay cowering in the freezing water. One of my water shoes came loose, and I was not quick enough to grab it. My mother came rushing down.

I’ve got it!” She stood above me waiting for the fly to land, and then as if on cue, it landed on the boat right above where my head was. BAM!!! I received a brutal slap to the head.

Now my head hurt, I had lost a shoe, and I was frightened to death, freezing and unhappy.

I jumped up and hobbled as fast as I could back to camp, stepping on sharp rocks all the way.

Camping, it is the joy of summer, the burden of summer yet always anticipated. What will happen this year? It always seems to change, but last summer’s trip was the best so far, a jewel to be treasured a lifetime. With a gulp I reached for the door handle and stepped into the car, the forest songs now silenced. “Till next year,” I thought as we drove away the next morning. Time flies when you’re having fun, on little horseflies’ clear wings.
you stand there, glued to the television
  f-f-Flashing
  Spider-man 3.
red and blue spandex suit
  on
  computer-enhanced muscles.
as motionless as a statue
you stand.
I wonder what you see in this, why a seven-year-old with
  Clark Kent glasses
  needs a fictional superhero to look up to
I could tell you that you are
  hero enough.
  Vanquisher of bedtime
  Defender of little sister
  Destroyer of the stutter
Spiderman shoots silver silly string
  and you gasp as he falls
  (though you’ve watched this movie 17 times already and
  know
  that he catches himself and you are, in fact, saying his lines with him as he’s falling)
the final credits roll, and
  (like a twig)
you SNAP!
  from your TV-induced stupor
to grab the remote, and
  (using your super button-pushing powers)
go to the menu... and watch it AGAIN.
Hiss, Beep, Flutter, and Crunch

Author: Alice Floros
Grade: 12
Teacher: Noeli Lytton
School: Nerinx Hall High School, St. Louis, MO

The first sensation she felt every morning was a pain in her legs, tapering at her ankles. She heaved herself onto one side, trying to find the comfort to sleep. It had always struck her as bizarre that one slept for a numbing comfort, but to sleep, one needed to be comfortable. Verging upon eighty-five, Leona found comfort to be increasingly unattainable, always slipping and sliding away from her.

Outside, a boisterous chorus of birds cajoled each other. During her Midwestern youth, Leona struggled with a fear of birds, a fear she never overcame. It was fated now, she thought; she was utterly destined to hate birds.

Swinging her legs over the bed, she waited for her head to stop spinning. She tried to face her aging scientifically, fastidiously noting every ache and pain on an hour-to-hour basis, evaluating the changes. During her morning routine, she had to remember to stretch out her legs and wait for her head to settle. Remembering was part of the battle, too, these days.

Loathe to change her habits, Leona always fixed oatmeal for breakfast. She maintained that she like its mealy taste, but in reality, she consumed it purely to avoid constipation. She’d even begun to add prunes to the breakfast oatmeal, proud that she had accepted her bowels as they were. Her mother never would have, she thought with a giggle.

She pretended that she was hosting a cooking program; “Making Delicious Oatmeal with Leona Harris.” First, she measured out the oats and water, pouring them into a clean bowl she’d set the night before. Next she shoved the whole mess into the microwave, which hurt her hands considerably. Thankfully, the stiffness lessened perceptibly by eleven-thirty, but was known to lurk until three, much to her chagrin. Finally, Leona pulled out the steamy oatmeal, which was mushy to her satisfaction and located a crusty spoon.

Was “living room” really a proper moniker for this space? Leona infrequently counted herself among the living, about as lifeless as the dust bunnies on the carpet, she believed. Her collection of overstuffed armchairs also collected dust on top of her ill-received mail. Jerome, her eldest, had recently taken a liking to assisted living and senior home articles from the local paper and had begun mailing them to her. She wondered how he felt inserting those insulting articles in the envelopes and sealing them with his tongue. Did he look closely enough at the brochures to see the grimacing seniors propped up by walkers and underpaid nurses? Or did he take “Happy Oaks,” “Pleasant Gardens,” and “Gentle Groves” at their names, picturing his own little mother on the cover of future brochures?

Leona forced the thought out of her mind and cleared a space for herself in an armchair to watch her morning supplement of televised rubbish. She had become a routine TV watcher since her husband, Carl, died. This practice of hers was unexpected; she and Carl had strong objections to television and never owned one until all four children had moved out. This lack of television was the talk of their little New York suburb for weeks when the children were young; kids and parents alike were morbidly fascinated. After school, neighborhood kids charitably allowed the four piteous children to watch Bonanza or Gilligan’s Island on their three precious channels until dinnertime. Parents met at their mailboxes to gossip about “those parents who refuse to buy their kids a television.” Adults were flummoxed at the decision to deprive the children, as though it were a fundamental American right to bask in the unnatural televised glow.

In her armchair, Leona rapidly flipped between channels, passing with a shudder thought those containing violence. After the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs, Leona experienced night terrors that tore screams from her unconscious body. She visualized tiny Asian children in orphanages and in markets toddling after their mothers and then blown to bits by bombs much smaller than they were. The ones that survived would be horribly mangled, she knew, and they who would rebuild proud cities from the body-ridden mess. She saw in her dreams that babies would grow up without parents, and adults would lose hope that their children, by some miracle, survived. She woke up with sodden pillows after especially bad visions. All this was brought on by the gruesome pictures on the television screens in the appliance store window downtown after the war. Walking home from work, she consciously avoided the store, shielding her sanity from the terrible scenes projected into the American people’s homes and living rooms.

It was an ominous act, buying the television she now watched. She had begun to take interest in television as her husband Carl’s health waned. When he was in the hospital belaboring his breath, she would perch on the bed
with him, watching utterly worthless talk shows (her favorite) or histrionic made-for-TV movies (his). The morning after Carl died at home, Leona went to Sears and bought a television. It was almost like having him there with her.

Mesmerized by the flickering pictures and sporadic noises, her finger stamping through the channels, Leona didn’t hear the phone ring. She did, however, hear the blip of her answering machine recording a familiar voice.

“Mrs. Harris, this is Chelsea Bordeau from the Manchester Public Library. We had you scheduled to volunteer in the Children’s Section at ten-thirty today? Could you call me please when you get this message as to whether or not you are coming in? Thanks.”

Alarmed, Leona shuffled to her room and got dressed, choosing what her son affectionately labeled as her “Kwanza outfit” for its broad, colorful stripes and coordinating hat. She would not be calling Chelsea, she decided then. She tugged at her tope purse and checked that her keys were safely tucked inside. Finding her shoes, she wedged her feet in and wiggled them a bit. She ran a comb through her stiff grey curls, grimacing at her tugs.

Vanity persuaded Leona to examine her reflection in the door mirror before leaving. Standing at a distance, she saw mottled legs encased like sausages in yellowed nylons, stuffed into sneakers beige as skin. Other mornings, she might have wept, but she was late and couldn’t be bothered to be disgusted by her body before heading out the door and locking it.

Outside, Leona heard the birds chattering again as she maneuvered down the stairs onto the broad sidewalk. She turned left and proceeded out of her neighborhood of apartments onto Main Street, where she turned right, crossed the street, and hobbled over a curb. She vigorously pounded at the worn button on the light post, pleading with the lights to allow her to cross the street. The voices and thoughts of old women are heard and answered, Leona mused; the white chalk person appeared on the sign across the street. The street was lined with small pieces of litter: bottle tops, cigarette boxes, candy wrappers. Leona noted them all and started up the steep library steps, checking her footing before shifting her weight onto each step.

Leona had been using this library since before the children were born some fifty years ago. When the children grew up, she volunteered at the library almost every day, watching children pull piles of books from the shelves and nap in the stacks. She watched them grow into teenagers and recommended books for them about angst and loss. Frankly, she became the go-to volunteer about Young Adult fiction, a fierce reader of school crushes and lofty ambitions.

The library was almost perfectly circular. On the outset, it had stacks, desks, tables and chairs, but it also had a section for children with dozens of beanbag chairs and a rocking chair for Read Aloud Story Time. Leona’s favorites to read to the children were The Cat in the Hat and Jam for Frances. Leona Harris shuffled behind the checkout desk to the week’s volunteer clipboard and checked her name off the date next to Christina Rosenthal and Thomas Kippin. She collected her “My name is Leona Harris. I’d love to help you find a book!” pin and stabbed it into the stiff fabric of her shirt and secured it.

She hiked over to the children’s book section, alert for Mrs. Bordeau’s bossy footsteps. Leona lowered her backside into a chair and shifted a bit until she was comfortable. As comfortable as she was going to be anyway, she thought cynically.

Behind the romance novel section, Chelsea Bordeau saw Leona Harris come in the library. Chelsea altered her position subconsciously to prevent Leona from seeing her. Leona was an overweight volunteer with bad vision; she wasn’t exactly threatening. But Chelsea was wary of the old lady for thick and incomprehensible reasons. Perhaps it was her devotion—she came to the library every single day—even when she was not scheduled to volunteer. Perhaps it was her constant allusions to her children, the eldest of whom Chelsea had dated.

Jerome Harris and Chelsea Kendall, as she had been then, had even been engaged at one time, but in a man’s fickle and feckless way, Jerome met his future wife, Sarah, that same summer and married her right away, utterly drenched and sopping with love. He twittered apologies like a tireless bird when he came home with his bride, and Chelsea felt as though she would vomit during the entire sordid conversation. She’d had the strange urge to feed him birdseed and let him eat from her hand, this birdy man she had loved. A month later, she married the new businessman in town, a man with a greasy mustache and hairy feet.

From her hideout behind the shelves, Chelsea saw Leona’s head tilt and heard the soft snuffles of an old woman asleep. Anxious about his mother’s health, Jerome had called her earlier that week, imploring her to watch Leona. Watch her for what, Chelsea had wondered. Jerome wanted her to watch for signs of senility, signs that his mother was losing touch with reality. Chelsea gazed at the lumpy figure flopped on the armchair. Her own sweet mother had slept like that sometimes, lulled to sleep by the TV’s drone and flicker.

Chelsea saw the floppy rabbit that the library kept in homage to The Velveteen Rabbit. It was folded in half at the waist, sitting on the ground. It was completely defenseless and could be scooped up by a small child any moment; it was at the whim of anyone. Leona was no more of a problem for Jerome than that rabbit was for Chelsea.
So why was he itching to put her away?

Jerome wanted to put his mother in a nursing home “more than he had ever wanted anything in his life,” he had confessed to her. He had cited that “the safety is superb in many such places,” an idea which seemed irrelevant to Chelsea. Immobile folks are rarely capable of violence, though Leona was capable of nasty insults. But Jerome seemed to be booting her out for his own health and safety.

Leona had been late, and it wasn’t like her. She had fallen asleep while on duty, which was also a first. Chelsea dappled her fingers along the metal library racks as she walked toward her desk, indecisive and pensive. Jerome wanted to know if his mother was acting strange and showing her age, and yes, she was guilty of both. Once Chelsea’s mother had descended deep into Alzheimer’s, she was packed off to Happy Oaks, a place where the old woman’s only companions were her bedsores. Leona wasn’t delusional; she was just old. Did that warrant the call to Jerome?

Now sitting at her desk, Chelsea frowned with a memory. When she and Jerome were dating, Leona hovered over them, bringing them snacks and blankets when they were watching movies together. It was like Leona was terrified that he would leave her little nest, Jerome used to jokingly say. He also said that she was terrified of TVs, but that clearly wasn’t true, as she had just bought one. She talked about television frequently, the hypocrite; it was a chief topic of conversation while reshelving books at the library. She was beginning to irritate even the other elderly volunteers. It wouldn’t hurt to ask her to leave for her own good, Chelsea concluded firmly.

Chelsea grabbed at the phone on her desk. She dialed Jerome’s number from memory and waited impatiently for the phone to ring on the other end. She stood up and prowled around the desk, stretching the corded phone line like a slinky. Finally, she heard his voice on the other end and felt her blood calm. Unfortunately, it was only his answering machine. She steeled herself to leave a message and waited for the beep.

In her chair at the center of the library, Leona’s eyelashes fluttered like wings as she woke. She looked down at her body, perched sloppily on an armchair. Like little mushrooms at the roots of a tree, a collection of children was gathered in a semi-circle at her feet. She groggily wondered what they were doing. A number of them looked at her briefly before drawing pictures with crayons on scraps of paper. Others simply stared at her legs for some bizarre reason; a few even touched her timorously. Realization bathed her in its luke-warm light; she knew what the children were doing. They were staring at her legs, marbled with veins and fat, and feeling a combination of fascination and budding disgust at her. They couldn’t get enough or look away from the awful sight.

She knew these children, knew their names and parents and favorite stories, and yet, here they were, impartially viewing her body as if she were already dead, just a relic for them to look at in amazement. She was like a museum piece for them, “The Oldest Woman in the World” with God as the artist. A scrawny one named Noah poked a bruise-colored vein on her knee and giggled when she gasped in pain.

They were not children anymore, she thought looking down on them despairingly. No, children were unsuspicous, harmless; these little beings were something else entirely. She had read “The Library Mouse” to children yesterday; these little vultures gazed at her legs with piercing judgment. She was old, and they knew it; they were just waiting for her to die.

Seeing that she was awake, the vultures snatched up their papers from the floor and dispersed. Their little bodies crouched and crawled, eying her for attack. She would need to control them, she realized with a start. They could spiral quickly out of control as children do. She planted her feet and rose to her full height, pleased to hear that the crack in her bones aroused muffled gasps from the audience. She seized a book from the multicolored table near her and opened it, cracking the spine for effect. Leona announced the title of the book, and, licking a quavering finger, she turned the first page and began to read.

Like with the smell of cookies, the children came closer. The girls left their crayon portraits and scampered together, sitting with crossed-legged civility in clusters near her. The boys, peaked with interest at the story, slithered on their fat bellies toward her, as though she were the Pied Piper or Christ. Leona puffed out her chest with pride; she had regained control of the mob for precious minutes.

Now she was safe, sitting in the familiar rocking chair. The children could not harm her, she had seen to that with the book. Children were not bad; they simply needed to be restrained was all. Now that she had enchanted them with The Ugly Duckling, they were sweet darlings again, waiting for her voice to impart the book’s wisdom to them. They needed a firm hand to be good. They needed her, and they needed this library. Without it, what would they do? Leona smiled with pleasure, relishing every page that she read to these young ones who craved knowledge.

It was overwhelming, so many children dependent on this library for safety. Her children grew up here because they couldn’t watch TV and didn’t want to go home to their already-boring mother, she realized. Did children come here to be safe from violence as she had years before, or was that innocence gone from these children who watched those violent shows with accustomed eyes? How long could she mesmerize these children before they looked at her
like critical adults again? How long until she herself was like a book to them, cryptic and ancient like hieroglyphics?

It wasn’t at all how she had pictured it, getting old, Leona thought miserably. She saw double, her hands pressing her wet eyes together. Shuddered sobs reverberated in her chest before spilling out. The children whispered and giggled in confusion; some prodded others to comfort the old grandma. Unaware of her audience, Leona began to rock the chair, mightily building momentum. Her feet lifted high off the ground, yet Leona kept furiously rocking. Her arcs grew wider as she grew more hysterical, more frenzied. She didn’t know how much longer she had before she would be carted away like a broken television set, like a terrible, insane old bird who’d lost her last bit of sense. She pressed her back into the rocker’s cushion as hard as she could and the chair catapulted her forward much too fast, throwing Leona to the ground violently and falling on top of her with a sickening crunch. When Mrs. Chelsea Bordeaux heard the shrieking of the little ones, she walked quickly toward the sound, expecting to see a fight over a picture book. She found Leona, whimpering and crying beneath the ruined rocker like a bird with a wounded wing alongside the highway, aware of her utter helplessness.
The Importance of Volunteerism

Author: Lauren Fuller
Grade: 9
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Some people see volunteering as a chore and not an act of good faith. Others volunteer in order to receive something in return. True volunteerism is the willingness of people to work on behalf of others without the motivation of personal gain. Unfortunately, many people don’t realize how much satisfaction they can gain from the experience of volunteering. Many people will never realize how it feels to make a difference in someone’s life. Volunteerism is something very important to me, not for the praise I get in return, but for the difference I get to make in someone’s life and the many life lessons to be learned from others.

Many people volunteer not to benefit themselves but to benefit others. I consider myself a true volunteer. The past few years I have volunteered at the local food bank, food pantries, The Wardrobe, and the Veterans Affairs Hospital in Columbia, Missouri. My high school softball team goes to the VA hospital every year to help out and visit patients. The joy I get when I enter some patients’ rooms doesn’t compare to any other feeling. To think, just stopping by and saying hello to a patient can make his or her day, week, or even month.

The real reason to volunteer is to change someone else’s life, not one’s own. If I were a sick patient in a veterans’ hospital, wouldn’t I like to visit with people other than my nurses and doctors? Yes, I sure would. Whether the patient is there for a little while or an extended stay, it would be a great feeling for someone to come and show that he or she cares. The smile on faces that come from a gesture as small as a hello is rewarding; it’s moments like this that remind me of why I volunteer.

When our softball team visits the hospital every year to pass out simple gifts like toiletries and socks, it makes me realize how lucky I am to be healthy. Many of the patients have been injured or ended up in this hospital because they bravely fought for our country. Being a veteran alone is a huge act of bravery, and those men and women deserve our care and love. Through volunteering, I have come to realize many important life lessons. Even though I am the one who volunteers my time, these veterans are the ones that teach me valuable lessons and how to make the most out of what you have.

More people should volunteer and make time for others less fortunate. Yes, it takes time; yes, it might not be the most enjoyable thing to do in one’s spare time, but consider helping out others who are less fortunate. I believe that people need to think less about themselves and more about everyone around them. Volunteers have made a large impact on their communities and for people around the world. Making a difference in the world is very important to me, and I would hope it is to everyone else as well.

“You make a living by what you get, but you make a life by what you give.” —Winston Churchill. Unfortunately, some people do not see volunteering in the same way that Winston Churchill did. Sadly, sometimes people see volunteering as a chore or a waste of time. Many believe that it is impossible for one individual to make a difference, but not me. I know the patients at the veterans’ hospital enjoy the volunteers who give their time and brighten their lives. I volunteer because I know I am making a difference. I see volunteering as a chance to change someone’s life forever.
Loyalty

Author: Atreyo Ghosh
Grade: 8
Teacher: Paula Donoho
School: Jefferson Junior High School, Columbia, MO

John ran down the city slum, his heart pounding. The King had spared his life for stealing a loaf of bread but on an impossible condition; John was tasked to annihilate the Rebellion Leader, who was known by no other name. John had tracked him down here, but, now, his heart got the best of him. What if I can’t do it? What’ll happen to me?

A silent thought answered him. You have no option. You took on the mission, and, if you don’t complete it, you’re as good as dead. John took a deep breath. Way to think positive...

The sound of a door creaking sent all other thoughts out of John’s mind. As he hid behind some barrels of rotten garbage, the leaders of the Rebellion came out. John caught his breath as he saw the Rebellion Leader. He was tall and lean, with a sheathed sword hanging off his belt. A long angry scar ran down the side of his cheek, marking his grave expression. John felt an odd sense of déjà vu. Had he seen this man before?

“You are sure of what you heard?” the Rebellion Leader spoke.

“Entirely, my lord. The King has sent a beggar down on his luck to kill you; we must find and enlighten him before he gets the chance.”

“Too late!” John yelled. He took the dagger and jumped from behind the barrel and quickly disarmed the Rebellion Leader; when he prepared to stab him, John felt his strength leave him, as if he had been doused in ice water. He dropped his dagger and hung his head. “I can’t do it; I’m not a killer…. When you kill me… please make it as painless as possible.”

The Rebellion Leader arched his eyebrows. “Now why would we do that? Why would we want to skewer possible recruits?”

“Why would I want to join? You oppose the King! You’ve tried to kill him countless times!”

The Rebellion Leader’s face was thrown into relief revealing his facial features. He had countless long white scars across his face. “You think you know the King? He is not who you think. He is a ruthless conqueror. Many nations have fallen under his sword, and the prisoners were not better off. He kills them brutally, the ones who cannot be enslaved or have their wills broken. Your King kills the children, women, and men of the tribe who oppose him; he is incapable of mercy.”

“How… how do you… how do you know all this?” John was shocked. Their King, do all of that?

“I am his brother. I was next in line for the throne, and I had so many plans for helping our people and the people of the surrounding communities. I offered him to be King alongside me; two brothers working together for a greater good. He agreed, until the eve of our coronation. He had me bound and gagged and struck me with his sword many times. I formed this rebellion to end his reign, once and for all. He will not harm any others!”

John felt something rise in his chest. Anger. Wrath. Sorrow. He felt something else rise as well, deep in his heart: the urge to kill, the urge to put things right. “I want to join you. I want to put things right.”

The Rebellion Leader responded. “I sense a change in you; you no longer are afraid of killing. You want to help; you may join.”

John felt one question pushing at the back of his throat. “What exactly is your name?”

The Rebellion Leader laughed. “I realize that most people call me ‘Rebellion Leader.’ My true name, however, is Matthew.”

***

John sat on the tree, armed with a bow and scores of arrow. He scanned the English countryside, looking for signs of his enemy. A voice cried out, “There!” John looked closely and saw the King’s soldiers approaching. Not today, scum. John pulled back on the bow, and fired an arrow. The arrow flew true, killing one of the soldiers easily. That’s 30 I’ve killed so far… and I don’t regret it. They are blindly loyal to him; I have no other option to restore justice. No one ever said that what was right wouldn’t result in death. At that moment, something whizzed by John’s air. He pulled it out of the tree bark. No… it can’t be! Our sources told us that they exhausted their supply! Another arrow narrowly missed him. Well, clearly, our sources were misinformed.

“We’ve got poison arrows! We need to end the battle… now! Use the fire arrows!” Following their captain’s commands, the other archers, along with their captain, John, fired arrows with blazing arrowheads at the ground on which the enemy horses trotted. Perfect! “Desist! We’ve done enough now. Matthew’s forces are expecting us in the
city soon, march on!”

By the time the archers reached the city, Matthew had already commenced the siege. “You’re late. No problem though, we have them on the run. They’re being forced, gradually, towards the King’s tower. I’m leading a small task force to infiltrate the castle and assassinate my brother. Would you like to join us?”

“My? Of course!” John then appointed the temporary captain and took his horse’s reins. The King will die today! ***

John dodged the silver of a sharp sword. Leaping to the left, he unsheathed his own sword and charged at his opponent. Metal clashed upon metal, and, after a swipe, John’s opponent fell to the ground. John wiped the sweat off his forehead. “Matthew, more of the King’s men are charging towards us!”

“Then we’ll fight them! Onward, my army!” Matthew shouted. He unsheathed his own sword, embroidered with golden dragons, to meet the men. Within moments, all of the King’s soldiers had fallen victim to his sword. “Go, fast! Storm the castle!”

The grand rebellion ran through the castle, securing key posts. At last, while the two armies fought, John, Matthew, and two other rebels made their way to the King’s courtroom. “Are you ready John?”

John looked down at himself. His body was armored by hard steel, and he held a silver sword in his hand. He took a deep breath and spoke to Matthew, “Let’s overthrow this tyrant.”

With those simple words, the four men battered down the door.

“You have taken far too long, Matthew. I expected you much earlier. Had I not wished to kill you personally, I would have already fled the castle,” the King informed them.

“Luckily, you haven’t. You will die with your legacy today. Not another citizen shall fall victim to your harsh laws.”

“What harsh laws? The streets of my kingdom are devoid of beggars and poverty does not even exist. In what way are those conditions ‘harsh?’”

“Ha! You pose such high taxes on them that they die within months. Why do you think there aren’t any beggars? They have all been killed off by your soldiers and laws.”

The King had enough; he ordered his knights forward into battle. John ran forward and struck his sword against the knight’s. Matthew had already run forward, prepared to kill his dark brother. The King drew a death-black sword and met Matthew’s jab. After moments of fierce fighting, Matthew let out a yell and fell, pierced by the black sword.

John, seeing this, sliced the knight’s head off and ran forward to Matthew’s side. “Sir!”

Matthew breathed heavily. “No… My time… has come… John, carry on the battle… you are the only one, now… who could possibly kill him.” Tears clung to John’s eyes as Matthew continued. “Now… go my friend. After you kill Draco… take the throne. Rule our country into a new age.” With those last words, Matthew faded away.

“So, do you truly intend to kill me, boy? Remember, it is I that gave you the chance to live again! You dare betray me?”

John clenched his fists. “Yeah, I do. You killed your own brother in your mad attempt to power; that’s the lowest anyone can go. You gave me another chance? Bah! It would have been impossible for me to kill Matthew.”

“Perhaps, but, now, I have a proposition for you. Forsake your rebel friends. I give you a chance of a lifetime; train under me as a grand knight. Your skill will be unmatched.”

“When hell freezes over, Draco.”

With those words, John unsheathed his sword and ran forward. In a clash of steel, the King struck John’s sword. The two continued checking blows for what felt ages to John. Growing tired, the King found an opening and slashed John’s chest. Falling back, John collapsed onto the ground.

“Prepare to die, John.”

Images swam before John’s eyes. He remembered Matthew’s faith in him. I let him down…As the King prepared to slam his sword in John’s body, John rolled out of the way. No! Matthew had faith in me and I will NOT let him down! As the King’s sword embedded itself into the ground, John leaped at the King. In a second’s space, John slashed through Draco’s chest, and followed up with a stab. The King’s eyes widened as he looked down at his blood-sputtering wounds. He collapsed to the ground, blood still flowing, dead.

***

John was then crowned the ruler of England. His rule was just and fair, the opposite of King Draco’s. He eventually married a beautiful woman, and, in time, his wife gave birth to a baby. He held up his first son, and spoke. “My son, this land is yours to rule in time. I know that you’ll have a better reign than I.” In response to his father’s grand words, the baby merely sneezed.

“What shall we name him?” his wife, Queen Vivian, asked.

John looked at his son with great pride. “We shall name him… Uther. Let us behold Uther Pendragon, the future king of England.”
To End Is to Begin

Author: Kevin Hallagan
Grade: 12
School: Hickman High School, Columbia, MO

My name is Alice Enda, and about two years ago, just like you, I was reading. Sitting on the ledge beneath a window in our relatively new ranch house, I sat reading a book. I can’t remember what it was called, but I know it was about horses. Back then my name was Angela Ropehouse.

“What are you reading?” A short, balloon-faced man had walked into the room and was interrupting the train of thought that comes with reading a book.

“I’m reading blabla,” whatever it was. Being the round man that he was, my father waddled over to the couch and flopped onto it, causing its wooden frame to creak, and turned on the television to some sports game. I was attempting to get sucked back into the book but found myself reading the same paragraph perpetually, distracted by the din of the television, accompanied by my father’s grunts and sighs.

“Oh c’mon!” he shouted, tossing a nearby newspaper at the television.

“How could you please try to be a little bit quieter? I’m trying to read,” I said, trying to stress the politeness of the request.

He paused, turning his head to look at me with narrowed eyes. “What did you say to me?”

“Sorry,” I said, timidly turning back to my book in the childish hopes to be ignored.

“Don’t you take that tone with me.”

“Okay,” I had most certainly not taken any tone with him.

“I have had it with you disrespecting me,” he said, raising his voice.

“I wasn’t disrespecting you. I just asked if you could maybe turn the TV down so I could read.”

He got up off the couch and moved in my direction. “You little brat, don’t you talk back to me.”

“I did not talk back to you!” I sad, letting my feelings flow from my mouth.

He raised his fat arm, and as if time slowed down just for me, I saw it begin its plunge. I felt his open palm contact my left cheek, followed by his fingers against my jaw. I felt it with my whole face, as my head turned to the right.

For a wonderful second I felt nothing but shock and loathing, as if God had granted me a moment of clarity before I was hit with an aftershock of pain.

He pushed me over and began paddling me with something flat and almost flimsy. Thank God my horse-book was paper backed. Harder and harder the object contacted my backside, and harder and harder I cried. After a while the blows softened, and I heard the deep, ragged breathing of lungs struggling to expand. Thank God for my father’s obesity.

He sat back on the couch, turning up the volume to drown out my sobs.

The following Monday, as always, I sat with my best friend, Marissa, in the front of the bus, “Hey Angela, how was your weekend?”

“It was uneventful; how was yours?”

“Well, I went to the movies with my parents, and we camped out in the back yard, and we…”

How lucky to have parents that want to be around her. I wonder how good it feels.

“…and last night we had a pizza. I had a cool weekend, I guess. So, how’s that book you’re reading? The um… one about the horses?”

I burned it. “I don’t know. I just really couldn’t get into it.”

School is pretty boring. I don’t listen to the teachers or do my homework or study or any of that, but I still manage to get As in all my classes. I guess some would call me lucky, but without any of that stuff, I had nothing to occupy my time at home.

That Monday we had a test over the presidents in history class. History was my favorite class, but I was distracted by the fact that when I sat on the cold, hard, unforgiving desk-chair, my butt still hurt.

Mr. Duffy, my teacher, pulled me aside the next day. “Angela,” he said, “are you having trouble with this unit?”

Nope. “If you need help you can ask me. I’ve been noticing that you don’t turn in homework…” I don’t need homework, Mr. Duffy. “…and I was a bit surprised when I graded your test last night.” I always get A’s on your tests; you
should have a little faith in me, Mr. Duffy. “You didn’t do as well as usual…” He let his sentence trail off and looked down at his desk. Following his gaze, I saw the off-white coloring of a history test; my eyes began to move up the page. Wow, there’s a lot of red ink on that paper; somebody really sucks at knowing things. When I saw the three pen-strokes of a taunting F, I felt almost bad for whoever earned it. Then my gaze fell on the beautifully scribbled Angela Ropehouse on the name line.

Mind-numbing panic.
My brain exploded with a rush of anxiety and everything was blotted out to a distant din.
Mind-searing fury.
My inner voice let loose a scream, how did this happen? How am I going to explain this? What am I going to do? Stupid, stupid Angel! That litany was the only thing I could hear.
As I took the paper from his desk, I said something about being sorry and about studying more. The test was difficult to carry, as though weighted by the impending hell that awaited me that night. I didn’t hear a thing anybody told me that day; my mind was stuck, as if by glue to that officious F in my backpack.

When my mother got home, I made my way down to where she was unloading the groceries. Compared to my father, she usually took bad news relatively well. I started helping unload the food, getting them out of the car and handing them to her. She put them in the refrigerator or cabinet.
“Mom,” I said as I handed her a gallon of milk, “I had a test yesterday… I didn’t study for it, and I… I got an… an F.” I stood rooted to the garage floor holding two grocery bags, crying.
She started yelling, and it felt like the room had become cold, like I was empty, hollow.
“Go to your room until your father gets home!” Forgetting grace and dignity in my shock, I ran up the shag-carpeted stairs, made my bed and began cleaning. I had gotten into trouble before for being disorganized, so I made sure every paper my father might want to see was where I could find it without looking through worksheets, notes, doodles, letters, and whatever else happened to be in my backpack at the time. After I could find nothing more to tidy up, I sat on my bed and stared at the pages of my history textbook.
Around five thirty I heard my father pull into the garage. I sat stock-still, not moving, not breathing, not thinking, straining my ears to hear muffled voices from the kitchen, but through the thick floor I could only hear the bass of my father’s voice getting deeper. I heard some cabinet door bang shut as he helped put away groceries. Everything he did was louder and more abrupt, signs I had learned.
I did not have to wait long for the sounds of heavy muffled footsteps on carpeted stairs. The door to my room slammed open, and I jumped off my bed to stand, ready. My face contorted with my best attempt to look sorry, and honestly, I was. Even before he spoke, I felt a prickling sensation neighboring my nose. I willed my tear ducts to stay firmly shut and dry.
“What did you do?” he shouted, gripping the front of my shirt, bunching the fabric and shaking me. I didn’t say anything; he wouldn’t be in my room right now if he didn’t already know what I’d done. He continued, his voice changing from barks to low threatening grumbles, but I stood there, locked in eye contact. His breath smelled rotten; his hands, sweaty. Oh, how I loathed that face with its sunken in pores and greasy complexion. “Why didn’t you study?” It was more a statement than a question, but I answered anyway.
“I don’t know,” I said, disgusted at the plea in my voice. He pivoted and slammed me into the wall, holding my feet off the floor.
“Don’t you lie to me!” he threatened with a thrust of his chin. He lifted me a little farther off the floor, pushing me harder against the wall, asking snidely if it hurt.
I answered with a glare.
Rage.
I flexed my tongue in a wave pushing all the saliva to the front of my mouth. I pursed my lips and sent spittle spraying through the air, covering his face. Why not add a little more moisture to that greasy face? I smirked.
His lips thinned, nostrils flaring as he backhanded me, let go of my shirt, and dropped me to the ground. “Don’t you dare leave this room,” he said. “No reading, no music, and no dinner. Just sit there and think about how stupid you are for not studying.” He stepped out of the room, slamming the door behind him.
About half an hour later, my mom opened the door. “You father wants to see you in our room,” she said before walking away. I made my way out of my room and down the hall to my parents’ bedroom.
He finished putting on some black socks, sitting on the corner of his bed, and began to talk. Although he was talking in normal tones, his body language was stiff and jerky. “…and if you thought that was bad, there is much worse coming, and I swear…” he said with ringing words, “…if you ever do something like this again, I will not hesitate to beat you to within an inch of your life.” At this he held up his hand, his thumb and forefinger pinching a small
amount of air in front of his left eye.

I imagined myself lying on the edge of a dark cliff, the hint of a rocky shoreline beneath it, having been kicked there by my father. I launched myself at him, my fist smashing his nose. Immobilized, he was shocked, weak.

Taking advantage of this golden moment, I planted myself on top of him, grating his face with my fingernails. My spine began to tingle as I felt his skin building up under my nails. I scratched harder and harder. I was dimly aware that my lips had curled away from my teeth, revealing my gums, allowing wolf-like snarls to escape my throat.

He regained control of his body and struggled to push me off, but my legs were secured around his gluttonous midsection. He screamed as I continued to rip and tear at his face. I clutched his entire head in my hands, pushing my thumbnails against his screwed up eyelids, hungry for what awaited them just past those thin flaps of skin. My fingernails dug into the unscathed skin at the back of his head with the counterforce of my thumbs.

As I savored the feeling of my wide thumbs squishing around in jelly-like eyes, he went limp in my hands. I then noticed a set of arms wrapped around my middle. I dislodged my legs from beneath his folds of fat, whipped around, and with a great push, extricated myself from my mother’s grip. Unbalanced she fell backward, and with the loud crack of something breaking, her head connected with the thick corner of a heavy wooden dresser.

The limp, pale look on my mother’s face mimicked those I have seen looking out at me from unnecessarily handsome caskets. I looked at his father; he was dead as well. I guess he had a heart attack or something because I definitely didn’t push my thumbs far enough into his head to kill him.

It hit me: I just committed murder. I just killed my parents. What am I going to do? I’m a murderer now; they’re going to put me away for life. I’m going to jail. I’m going to jail. My life is over at the age of twelve. What am I going to do? I can’t go to jail.

 Wait.

People get away with murder all the time. If they can do it, so can I. Think of movies; think of books. How can I get away with this?

“I’ve got it,” I said. Looking around, I shook my head and walked out of the room.

After making sure all the windows were closed, I turned on the gas to our two fireplaces. I rushed into the kitchen and lit the stove, blowing out the fire.

I went up to my parent’s room to re-position their bodies in their bed. The covers were made of cotton and nylon, so they would burn and melt at the same time, hiding all evidence of what I’d done. I crumpled all the old newspaper I could find and stuffed it under the bed. Slightly light-headed, I ran to the basement, breathing as little as possible. I pulled out all the deer meat from the freezer and hauled it up to my room. I never thought I’d have to do this. I quickly unwrapped the meat and positioned it between the sheets in the shape of a person, stuffing the wrappings under my bed. I flung all my school papers around the room, ripped all my books, and stuffed them into my bed. I dumped my backpack before stuffing it with two pairs of pants, three shirts, two sets of underwear, a pair of stockings, a pair of socks, a tennis ball, a penknife, and my wallet.

Hurrying to my parents’ room, senses dulled from the gas, I took their wallets and a lighter from their dresser. My last stop was the basement where I stumbled down the stairs, turned the corner into my dad’s workshop, and fell to the cement floor. Get up! The room began to spin, but I dutifully pulled myself up with the doorknob. I have to hurry!

I grabbed some electrical tape and a rag, stashing them in my backpack. Difficult to breathe. Terrible headache. I wish everything would stop moving. I wish...stop moving...hurry!

I stumbled from the room and up the stairs, leaning against the wooden railing for support. In the kitchen, I slung my bursting backpack over my shoulder. I felt the floor move as I stole a bottle of something alcoholic from the liquor cabinet. I found the door, turned the handle slowly, and was out of the house. I carefully closed the door behind me, stumbling for the woods.

Relief.

I took deep breaths of clean, cool night air and relaxed. It was midnight; three hours had passed since I murdered my parents. As soon as I blew the house up, I needed to be ready to run. I needed to be ready to start my new life.

Beyond the woods lay a golf course; on the other side of it a road marked the edge of a forest. That’s where I would go. I would make a temporary shelter and stay for a few days. After that, I’d thumb a lift to wherever and check myself into an orphanage or something. That’d be good. I’d just cry a lot and wail something about how my parents abandoned me on the side of the highway, and they wouldn’t ask any questions. I’d be set.

I’d become thirteen-year-old Alice Enda. My parents were abusive addicts who traveled the country in a mobile home. We had stopped for the night at a truck stop nearby, and I woke up on the side of the parking lot with them.
gone. I waited for two days before setting out on my own.

At twelve fifty-eight, I pulled the stockings, a sock, the tennis ball, and the penknife from my backpack. I looked at the alcohol. *Crap! It’s wine. I hope it has enough alcohol to burn.*

I uncorked the bottle and sliced the tennis ball, squeezing it open to fill it with wine. Then I soaked the sock in wine and stuffed the tennis ball into it before stuffing the sock into the stocking.

It’s time.

*I’m ready.* I flicked the lighter and put flame to sock, lighting it. *Yes!* Winding up, I flung it toward a window.

In the silence of the night I could hear the sock roar as it sailed through the air. With a ground shaking “bang,” fire lit the night, highlighting the debris showering the neighborhood.

*Jesus Christ! That sucks for whoever’s house that was. At least their parents didn’t abandon them.*
A Drawing of Emmanuel

Author: Ian Huyett  
Grade: 12  
Teacher: Skip Graham  
Student: Shawnee Mission East High School, Prairie Village, KS

Sara and her daughter Jess were both beautiful, with wide, piercing blue eyes that reminded me of the deep, salty ocean. Jess, who had just celebrated her seventh birthday with a delicious lemon cake, had an adorable habit of blushing and shuffling her feet when she was embarrassed or anxious. And her smile, God, she had such a beautiful smile. Whenever the two of them laughed, the sun seemed to light up my dusty world. In a way, I had come to love them. And they loved me too; they just didn’t know it.

Deep down, in the darkest and most silent corners of their souls, they must have known I was living with them. I was visible in all the little things that disappeared. The half eaten candy bar from the freezer. The pair of socks from the drawer. The deck of cards from Sara’s nightstand. I’d seen Sara pause at the family picture that was facing the wrong way. I’d seen Jess’s nose crinkle when she breathed in the musty scent I’d left on her pillow, but, like most people, they both dismissed the small oddities that didn’t make sense.

I lived in the crawlspace of Sara and Jess’s apartment. It was filthy and three feet wide. I ate just enough to keep myself alive and too little to give myself away. I urinated and defecated into a broken, defunct pipe that lead to god knows where. I did what could loosely be called pushups to keep myself from withering away. I’d become a master of solitaire, but my greatest joy came when I pulled the long, rank hair from my eyes and gazed through the rusty grates and tiny peepholes at Sara and Jess.

I watched Sara tuck Jess into bed. She pulled up her downy blanket, embroidered with hearts. She lifted the pink teddy bear, the one that never lost its perfume scent, and set it on the pillow next to Jess. She kissed her daughter gently on the head. I sighed. Then, to my amusement, I watched Sara turn and look directly at me. Unknown to Sara, I was looking directly at her too. She held my gaze for just a moment and then dismissed it, flicking off the lights and delicately closing the door.

I thought of them not as a lover but as family. I was, after all, always there. As I did every night, I listened carefully to Jess’s breathing and watched the fluttering of her eyelashes. When I was sure she was asleep, I whispered quietly, “Goodnight.”

Jess sat upright. This had never happened before. I froze. Jess slid from her bed, walked over to me, and pressed her hand against the wall. I slowly pressed my hand against the other side. I wanted to cry out, to tell her that I loved her, but I held my tongue, as I had for months. I was sure then that at the bottom of her innocent untainted mind, she knew I was there and she loved me too. As I watched her crawl back into bed, I fell asleep, satisfied.

I woke to the sound of a thundering cascade. The pipe I was using as a headrest shook violently. I could also hear a droning wind. I made my way through the crawlspace to the bedroom. As I peered through the grate on the wall, Jess turned off the bathwater and slid into the tub. I smiled. She was going to be a beautiful woman someday. Sara stood at the bathroom counter wearing a robe and holding a hairdryer as she looked at her reflection in the medicine cabinet.

“Mommy, can we get a dog?” Jess asked, cocking her head.

“We can’t have a dog here, honey,” Sara laughed, pulling a comb through her hair. “They shed and pee.”

“We can get one that doesn’t shed,” suggested Jess. “We could hide it. I could teach it to pee out on the balcony.”

“We don’t need a dog,” said Sara. “I like that it’s only the two of us.”

The phone rang.

“That’s Randy,” said Sara, setting down the hairdryer and dashing out of the bathroom.

“I don’t like Randy!” Jess called after her. “He’s stupid.” I snickered in approval.

Then my eyes shot wide open.

The hairdryer slowly turned on the bathroom counter, its cord caught on the trash can. Sara babbled away on the phone in the living room while Jess relaxed in the hot water, humming. Not her, I panicked. Not my dear, sweet Jess. It couldn’t end like this.

My heart thundered like the four horsemen. Blood raced through my veins as adrenaline pumped into every inch of my body. I knew what I had to do. I slammed the grate out of place, tearing through the wall. I ripped
through my dark cocoon, bursting out into the light. As the hairdryer fell off the counter, I snatched it out of the air before it could fall into the water below. A wave of relief washed over me; Jess was safe.

Then came the piercing, ear-splitting scream, the most horrible sound I had ever heard. A sound so vile and desperate, it could only be produced by a little girl who just watched a filth-ridden, long-haired man with tattered clothes plunge through her wall like paper as she took a bath.

“No, no!” I hissed. “It’s okay, please, shhhh!” But the scream didn’t stop, vibrating through every inch of the building.

“Jessica!” Sara screamed in sheer terror. I heard a phone clatter against the floor. I reached out and slammed the door shut, locking it. Then, I wrapped my hand around Jess’s mouth.

I heard Sara crashing against the door. She banged again it over and over, rattling it violently.


“Shh,” I pleaded as my mind raced desperately.

Then a metal baseball bat tore a hole in the door.

“Jessica, it’s okay, honey. Mommy’s coming. Don’t be scared,” she cried out as the bat tore again and again through the door.

That was when she saw me standing there grasping Jess’s head. As I let go, Jess’s head banged against the wall. A wave of nausea washed over me. She was dead. I’d suffocated her. I’d killed her.

I jumped back as Sara lunged at me with the bat. It struck the bathroom wall, and I kicked her into the bathwater. As she clambered back out, I tossed the hairdryer into the tub. In one short moment, she was gone.

With tears running down my face, I walked into Jess’s room. On the wall, on the spot that Sara had been staring at, on the spot that Jess had touched, hung a drawing. A crayon drawing, stuck to the wall with strips of masking tape. They had not known me in some secret part of their souls. They had not loved me. I was not their family. They were only looking at a crayon drawing.

Three days later, a plumber repaired a leak in the damp basement of the apartment complex. After cutting through an insulated wall, he discovered two months of dried human feces. The police searched every apartment directly above that spot. On the seventh floor, they discovered the bodies of Sara and Jessica Abilene, decaying in a bathtub. Authorities determined that Jessica had been killed by asphyxiation and Sara by electrocution.

In the apartment’s exposed crawlspace, the police discovered empty boxes of food, candy wrappings, and water bottles. A deck of cards was arranged in a game of solitaire. In the bathroom sink was a cesspool of long, dirty hair and shaving cream. Missing from the house were a business suit and passport, both formerly belonging to Jeffery Abilene, Jessica’s father, who had died two years before.

Tests conducted on the feces and hair revealed the remains belonged to Emmanuel Hendricks, an escaped prisoner convicted of embezzlement.

Police also located a crayon drawing on the wall of Jessica Abilene’s bedroom. It depicted three people playing outside on a warm spring day: Sara, Jessica, and a man with long, shaggy hair.
Hunched over the table,  
staring down at her plate,  
the girl had no desire  
to consume the meat in front of her.  
A week ago,  
it would have made her mouth water,  
but not today,  
not after what had happened.

Barely tilting her head,  
her eyes shot to her mother  
sitting upright between her daughter  
and her husband at the round oak table,  
much too big for the three of them only.  
The woman did not return her daughter’s gaze,  
nor did she feel tempted to do so.  
She simply glared at her food  
as she sliced tiny pieces of meat,  
chewing thoroughly,  
her pearls bouncing along her collarbone  
and her lipstick smearing just slightly.

The girl mirrored her mother,  
straightening her spine,  
throwing her shoulders back, chest out,  
pursing her lips,  
squeezing together her cheeks,  
straining her jaw.  
Her eyes traveled  
to her father’s plate.  
His steak,  
almost identical to her mother’s,  
its bones outstretched from its sides,  
lay peacefully,  
like the man she’d learned about  
as a young girl.  
Her father attacked the meat  
with his fork and knife,  
forcing the girl to look away.

Her eyes turned downcast again.  
She grimaced resentfully  
at her swollen breasts,  
their shape visible under the sweatshirt  
taken from her father.  
She slouched further in her seat,  
shrinking them to normal
so that she was again staring at her plate.
Smaller.
Her mother had cut
out the cross-bone,
leaving only a small,
helpless square.
She knows my stomach
is not at its best,
but the girl knew better.

Poking at the food with the prongs of her fork,
blood pooled under the meat.
The sight of blood
made the smell seem stronger.
Foul, uncooked animal;
devastatingly beautiful life
cut short
for her and her alone.
She felt a surge of guilt
for prodding at the animal
which had died to nourish her.
Then it left as suddenly as it had come.
These are her morals. Not mine,
though she knew it was only mostly true.

She could almost see the image
of herself
lying in her dark room,
body motionless,
bleeding pooling on her sheets,
staining the cotton under her
and dripping onto her carpet.
She had tried to listen for the drips,
tried counting,
but it had all gone black
before the dripping had stopped.
She could almost imagine
the look on her mother’s face
as she strolled into her daughter’s room.

Perhaps her mother had been talking to her
on the way up the stairs,
down the long hallway,
where she may have stopped,
straightening the last real smiles
of her perfect family,
stroking the cheek of her youngest daughter,
stuck at the age of two.
Maybe her lip had quivered,
like it always did when her eyes
met those of the child.
Forcing a smile,
she must have appeared
to have had grand news.

How long had it been before she’d noticed her daughter?
Had she had time to put clean clothes away?
Straighten her bookshelf?
Leave a peanut butter sandwich on her desk?

Or was that all after?
After she’d seen her daughter’s pale face,
pieced together
her body, the blood, the coat hanger.
Had she screamed?
Cried? Prayed?

The girl knew it was no use.
Her mother would continue on like this;
maybe they would never speak again.
The girl’s eyes started watering
as she lifted her fork higher
and thrust it into the meat.
Her mother looked at her then,
surprised.
She watched her daughter
Lower her hand to the pool,
dip her fingers,
dye them brown,
suck the blood off with a sneer.
Tendrils of memory swirl just beyond my reach
On the edge of sleep still teetering
Drips into blue and then soaring high on white
So out of touch, insubstantial
This eerie world where sleep won't come
Where consciousness eludes
Not quite joy these feelings
But sorrow is well known
Never quite happy, always tainted blue
White sears judgment beyond repair
Drifting in and out
Lethargy pins me down
Though I cannot quell this urge
To scream, am I really alive?
Rays of copper crimson and gold stream down
Saccharine melody rise as a symphony begins
Dew gathers on leaves I'm sure
I sign, I stretch, the day is here
Purring slowly, contently
The cat lies curled on
His old lady’s lap, her hand
Laid delicately on the soft
Hairs of his back.

The woman,
Frail, old, small,
Found the cat
Abandoned, deathly, matted.
The care she had
The love
Was all that mattered
To the loyal creature.

A slight twitch of a muscle
And her hand slips off.
The cat peeks one eye open
And closes it again,
Sleep overcoming his tired
Body.

The purring was rhythmic,
The breathing deep.
His sigh of contentment
Fluttered the small hairs
On the arm of his old
Lady.

But it didn’t tickle.

The hand, now next
To his head, is silent.
No warmth.
No pulse.
The American Dog’s Dream

Author: Cade Lyon
Grade: 9
Teacher: Tyler Carlson
School: Savannah High School, Savannah, MO

I knew enough about humans to know that they were beastly natured people - mean, cruel, and bossy. They did things to me that I will never forget, but I wish I could. I didn’t have a name, and I didn’t even know who my parents were. I just woke up one day – in a cage. I had no food, no water, and no idea where I was. They had zip-tied my kennel shut. Every moon, when no one was around, I chewed on the kennel, and every morning, the big man smacked me and threw me back into the cage. I was about two feet tall and very skinny from the poor diet I was fed. I wanted to go anywhere but there, anywhere. One night, I worked with all my strength and managed to get the zip-tie off. I opened the cage and ran, ran as fast as my legs could carry me.

I found myself at the door of a house that I didn’t even know. It looked like a nice house, but who was I to judge? When the humans did not open the door for a long time, I got kind of worried. “Maybe I will never have a life,” I thought to myself. I saw two young children. One was a boy; the other, a young girl. They were yelling to their parents inside of the house. Luckily, from the three or four months I was with my previous owner, I had picked up on the human’s tongue.

They said, “Mom, Dad, it’s a mutt!” instantly insulting me. How dare they call me a mutt! I am no mutt, I am a pure breed...I thought. I muttered quietly to myself. The children started oohing and aahing at my glorious stature. They started to come back at me with their big hands. My instincts kicked in, and not a moment too soon. I jumped and ran away, cowering under a tree. I would never go near those sick humans ever again. I knew from my past experiences that those hands could cause pain.

Well, after I had suffered my minor attack, they put out some food for me. Completely starved, I ate hungrily, but I was still very hungry after I finished the meal. When I scratched on the door to get more food, they wouldn’t let me have anything. Did they want to hurt me too? I didn’t think so, but I couldn’t trust anyone. I turned around on the porch, confused as ever, and fell into a deep sleep.

I woke up. “What was that?” I looked around the darkness. The hard concrete of the porch was not very comfortable to sleep on in the cool summer night air. There it was again. I knew that sound, but I couldn’t put my tongue on what it was. I sniffed the air and caught a whiff of something familiar. A coyote! I instantly sprang into action. My legs moved as fast as they ever did before. The wind whistled in my ears as I ran lightning bolt fast. I didn’t see anything, but I was running and barking in the direction of the howling. I stood in their back yard barking towards it.

The father came out of the house with a flashlight, yelling, and screaming at me to quit barking. Instantly memories of my old home flooded back to me. I remember when my old owner beat me. He carried a flashlight and yelled just like this new man. It scared me, so I ran right back up to the front yard and cowered under the tree. I didn’t even get close to any of them the next morning. I just sat under the tree all day, and didn’t do a thing. This went on for the next couple of weeks. I started to catch on that they didn’t want me to bark at any old thing that I smelled or heard. Yet, I felt it was my duty to protect them from the things that I knew were in the dark shadows.

They started to call me “Hank.” I wasn’t too fond of it, but hey, what was I going to say to them? The family slowly showed me that they wanted me to stay. I started to let my guard down and let them get close. The kids taught me how to behave and perform tricks, or at least I let them think that they taught me. I now sleep in a little dog house in the back. It is very windy here, and I get cold occasionally. In the morning I always see to it that the adults and children get out of the driveway safely. I escort them out of the driveway, make my rounds around the house, and go back to sleep. When they get home, I wait for them to press the button in their automobiles that opens the big door that they drive into. After that, I make my usual circuit around the house, chase the occasional rabbit, and go to sleep. I repeat the process in the morning. Man, I have a good life here, don’t I? I’m living the American Dog’s dream, to have my own place, and do what I love, protecting people. I think I might stay awhile… wait, what was that? Oh, that coyote is gonna get it!
The Fight

Author: Megan Mitchell  
Grade: 10  
Teacher: Lorraine Burns  
School: Sherwood High School, Creighton, MO

Anyone driving on the highway who looked to the old cemetery where a large mass of black loomed would have been unaffected. For most of the universe, it was a normal September day. Of course, it wasn’t for me, or any of the others in the Carver family, or any of the family friends.

I was dressed in black at the Greystone Cemetery. My hands were in the two beside me; to my left, my father in his best suit, silent tears streaming down his aged face. To my right, Chris Carver, my older brother, sobbed. The wind blew, smacking my face with my short, blonde hair, and rudely drowning out my Grandma Carver’s voice at Kara Lynn Carver’s funeral.

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“Abbey Lynn Carver. You aren’t going,” my mother said as she walked around the island counter in our kitchen, gathering her things for work. She bustled around hurriedly, trying to find-

“Where are my keys?!”

“I don’t know. Why can’t I go? It’s Friday night, what else am I supposed to do?” I raised my voice at her, always a mistake. From my mother, I inherited my looks, along with my stubbornness.

“No, and that’s final. I don’t care if you spend every Friday night at home. In fact, when you come home from school, you’ll have a chore list to keep you busy tonight. And if I find out you went tonight anyway, you will never step foot out of this apartment for the rest of your life.”

My anger was bubbling.

“Why are you being like this?!” I almost yelled.

She looked at me, silently telling me she was resolute, unwavering. She didn’t answer, just stared at me, until I could stand it no more.

“I hate you,” I said quietly, then turned and walked towards the door.

“What did you say, young lady?”

I murmured, “Nothing,” and went to catch the bus. I almost apologized.

The bus screeched around the corner, making up my mind.

The first few hours passed uneventfully. When my friend Rainee who was going tonight asked if I could go, I sourly told her no. Sitting in Biology II, we griped about my mother’s ways until the class phone rang.

Mr. Greene picked it up, and put it back on the receiver.

“Abbey Carver, they need you in the office. You’re leaving. Make sure to get your homework,” he told me dismissively.

As I shoved my things into my messenger back, I was puzzled. Why was I leaving?

A sick, unwelcome feeling that I couldn’t understand balled in my stomach. I now know that it for the instinct indicating that something had gone very wrong.

Going to Jersey City High School all my life made navigating the halls easy. Today, the trip seemed long. The uneasy feeling intensified when I saw my dad in the office. He had never picked me up from school before. He never left the office during the day.

As I opened the door, he turned around. My heart stopped. My father, crying? He walked out silently, the lady in the office looking on with pity. What was going on?

Once in the car, he silently turned the key in the ignition but never moved from park

“Dad?” I asked cautiously, “What’s wrong?”

Without looking at me, he replied, “There’s been an accident.”

Oh no! I thought of my brother, my partying hard, no consequences brother who was only twenty-four years old. I started to hyperventilate.

“Is Chris okay? Oh God, Dad, what happened? What happened to Chris?”

My dad choked. I had a feeling I wasn’t going to be able to handle what he said.

“Abbey, honey, it wasn’t Chris,” looking at me with his wet, bloodshot eyes.

My dad’s parents had both already passed away, and my dad was an only child. Who was left? My dad had friends, but why would he take me out of school for it?

“Then who, Dad?” I asked, selfishly comforted Chris was okay.
“Your mother.”
My mind went blank. “Who?”

“Your mother, Abbey.”
The three words didn’t make sense. Try as hard as I could, it was impossible to fully grasp what my father was saying.

The tears stopped streaming from his face as he studied me with the eyes that knew me so well, only second to my mother. The thought brought me back to what he was saying.

“Abbey, your mother was on the highway headed to a conference, and some drunken idiot hit her head on. The police say the man must have entered the highway on an exit ramp and was fighting against traffic. The police think your mom may have been looking for something and didn’t notice the drunk coming straight at her.” His voice broke, and he didn’t say anything else. The way he was talking...

“So... are we going to go see her in the hospital now?”
He sobbed, and managing, “No.”

Huh? Something wasn’t clicking.

“Dad?”

“There’s nothing they could do. After the drunk hit her, she got hit by another person behind her. The car flipped and caught on fire. There was nothing anyone could do.”

My mind was still foggy, desperately trying to grasp what my dad was saying. “What?” I asked again.

He finally raised his voice at me, to break through my stupor, to make me understand. “She’s gone, Abbey.

Dead.”

It clicked, like a light bulb turning on to show me reality.

No wonder my brain refused to grasp this.

I realized I was not breathing, but I didn’t really care at the moment.

“Abbey?” My father’s voice called, growing distant. “Abbey?!” He called again, going farther away.

I eventually realized I should start breathing, but it was too late. Everything went black.

***

I was dimly aware I was lying on the couch in my living room. I could feel the cool leather through my clothing. It was pitch black.

From another room, I heard my dad’s voice, and Chris’s. Why was Chris here? He was supposed to be at college.

“Why hasn’t she came around up yet? It’s been, like, seven hours,” I heard Chris say, in his casual-yet-worried voice. He sounded very upset.

“The doctor said her mind is protecting itself. She’ll come around when she’s ready. She’ll have to face it eventually,” Dad replied solemnly.

“I suppose...”

I realized why it was so dark; my eyes were closed. They flew open.

So, Dad and Chris were closer than I thought, in the two armchairs opposite the couch. I couldn’t pretend I didn’t wake up; they were watching me, cautiously, waiting for something.

In a flash of images, the situation hit me. This afternoon, all of it. For a moment, I was sure my dad saw the catastrophic change in me. I’m sure, for just one moment, the pain had shown on my face, for my dad’s pain seemed to mirror mine. Before my brother could catch it, I composed my face and sat up slowly.

Chris looked worn, his eyes red as if he had been crying for hours. His long, curly brown hair was disheveled, not looking unnaturally cool like always. The brown curly hair was our Carver signature, for my dad had it as well as my mom, and as a result, Chris and I had the most beautiful brown, wavy hair.

Dad and Chris looked nearly identical, except for the wrinkles in Dad’s forehead. They had the same strong jaws, thin lips, and big, brown eyes coated with thick lashes. They were both very handsome; most of my friends had a thing for Chris.

I looked like my mom. We both had natural beauty that didn’t require make-up to look attractive. I had a small, delicate face with exceptionally long, wavy brown hair that many admired. My eyes, the perfect almond shape, were green with hints of gold, exactly like my mother’s. My lips were full. Mom and I had the same small, petite build, with long legs. She was occasionally confused for a sister.

I saw my mother’s face as clearly as seeing my own reflection, and the pain rippled over me. They both saw it this time, and their eyes teared up.

“Abbey?” Dad asked, breaking the silence.

“What happened to me?”
“You blacked out honey. The doctor said it was shock, to let you come around on your own.”
“Oh,” was all I could manage.
He cleared his throat. “The funeral is scheduled for Tuesday and visitation tomorrow night.”
I nodded.
“Are you okay, Abbey?” Chris asked, concerned.
Although his words were meant with kind intention, something inside me snapped.
“Of course not!” I screamed at him, at the world. I got off the couch and flew to my room, slamming the door
behind me, feeling like a prisoner to myself.
I went over to the corner and grabbed the guitar, which had gotten me through anything; fights with friends,
broken relationships, unrequited love... I unplugged the amplifier, went into my small walk in closet, and turned on
the light.
Sitting on the floor, I played the songs the band I would have seen tonight played. Remembering the last conver-
sation I ever had with my mom ate at my heart. Thinking how I’d been so childlike almost made me vomit right
there. I played until my fingers ached. Afterwards I played harder songs, concentrating on hitting perfect notes, not
caring how loud I was playing, not caring if I woke up the whole town or the grouchy old man who resides next to us.
It could have been minutes, or hours.
Either way, I stowed away carefully my feelings, repressed them, until I had no emotion at all. I then fell asleep,
my head against the closet wall, light on, and guitar resting in my lap.
The next morning, I awoke in my bed. Dad must have moved me.
I looked over at the clock. It was Saturday. I should not be awake at eight in the morning. A dull, aching feeling
in my chest echoed all I had felt in the last twenty four hours. Subconsciously I decided to store away my feelings and
go on. I walked into the kitchen in the clothes I wore yesterday, unsurprised to see Dad and Chris sitting at the table
in their pajamas, sipping coffee. They looked at me expectantly.
I fake-smiled. I went over to the refrigerator and faltered. Our family smiled happily out of our Christmas card
from last year taken at Grandma Carver’s house. Under the picture was a message: “Greetings from Kara, Chris,
Chris, and Abbey.” Chris had been named after Daddy. The similarities between my mother and me were painful, so I
looked away. The rest of the refrigerator was decorated with pictures, tests, notes, and lists. My attention was
drawn to a particular yellow post-it note. Luckily, I wasn’t facing the others, so they could not see the new dampness
in my eyes.

Abbey,
I’m sorry. I know you are too.
We’ll talk it over tonight.
Love,
Mom

I carefully lifted it off the fridge and crammed it in my stiff jeans pocket. I exited quickly and quietly, running to
my room.
I sat on the bed and wiped away my tears. Putting on my head phones to my iPod, I turned it up all the way, the
exact way Mom had hated me to do. I did not cry another tear. I had closed my eyes and was startled when someone
shook my shoulder.
“Abbey, I know you’re devastated, but you’re not handling it well. You’ve got us concerned,” Chris said.
“I’m fine,” I said in a cool way.
“Abbey, you can’t ignore your feelings. I know you’re crushed, we all are.”
“No, you’re not. I know you better,” he said, getting frustrated.
“Chris, just leave me alone.”
And so he did, telling me with his eyes just how hurt he was as he left. I couldn’t apologize.
Once he was gone, I dragged myself to the mirror. I wasn’t coping properly; I knew that. How was one to cope
with a lost mother?
Looking at myself, I suddenly hated my reflection. Not really knowing what I was doing, I picked up a shoe and
threw it at the glass with my image, an image too like my mother.
Looking in the broken shards, I got an idea. I grabbed my purse, put on my shoes, and headed to the salon.

***

I went in with long, luxurious, wavy brown hair, and left with short, choppy, bleached blonde hair. The hair
dresser looked at me as if I was terminally insane when I told her what I wanted. I said it was time for a change.
When I looked in the mirror, I was nearly unrecognizable. When I got home, Chris wasn’t pleased. “Dad! Look what Abbey did to her hair,” he said, horrified, as soon as I walked in the door. My Dad emerged from the kitchen and dropped what he was holding. The full drinking glass made a thud. “Abbey?” “Yes, Dad?” “Well... wow? I guess that’s where you’ve been all afternoon. Um, you need to go get dressed for your mother’s visitation.” “I’m not going,” I replied defiantly. His face got hard. “Yes, you are. I can’t believe you’d even say that.” I didn’t bother arguing. Chris looked at me, baffled. I got that look all night from others at the visitation. Several of our family members asked kindly who I was and didn’t care to hide their shock when I told them. Seeing them cry was hard. Seeing Mom was harder. I held her hands, crumpled inside, but didn’t let a tear escape.

I had never despised someone as much as I despised Grandma Carver when Dad told me the brilliant idea she had planned for the funeral on the way home. “She thinks you should write a song for the funeral. And she thinks it should be the last performance. I agreed.” That was the end. Chris ignored me because of my cruel indifference to him and everything else.

After watching the ceiling and a midnight trip from my room Sunday night, Monday morning rolled around with Chris screaming. “What did you do with them?! I know it was you, Abbey.” I knew what he was referring to, but pretended I didn’t. I just looked at him, not speaking. Dad came in, putting his hand on Chris’s shoulder. “Chris...” he muttered softly.

He ignored him. “What did you do with them? Where are Mom’s pictures?” The previous night, I had taken them all down. Each one was now in a box under my bed. I still didn’t talk. I hadn’t spoken since Saturday night.

“Chris, she’s coping in her own way. Let her be.”

“She’s going about like Mom never existed! Is that coping, Dad?” He nodded, and Chris threw me a dirty, calculating look, spun, and left.

I sat on the bed, still and quiet. Dad sat down on the edge of my bed. “We’re all sad, honey. My sweet, loving Kara is gone, forever.” He choked, and his eyes started to tear up. I knew if he cried, my wall could break.

Instead of trying to comfort him like I yearned to, I seized up. I looked at him through dull eyes, wondering how he saw me.

He reached over and patted my hand.

I found my voice. However, the words I spoke to him were not kind ones like I wished they could be. “You’re right, Dad. She’s dead, not coming back. But I’m not going to mope about it,” I said, attempting weakly to appear strong.

He looked at me, extremely troubled. “Maybe you need to talk to someone else about this.” I didn’t respond then—nor when he told me I was going to write Mom a song or poem to be performed at the funeral—nor when he slammed the door behind him, finally fed up with my lack of communication.

Thinking back, I realized why I was acting this way. If I pretended she was still alive, she would be alive.

Monday night, without really knowing it, I started to write on a sheet of paper, a piece called “Dear Mom.” Playing it on the guitar, it sounded good to me, very in tune and appropriate, but I realized I could never play this in front of people. So, I crumpled it up and threw it on the floor. I didn’t think I could stand one more minute of being someone dealing with the death of Kara Carver. I put in my headphones and willed the ceiling to fall.

I don’t think I slept an hour Monday night, but during the early hours of Tuesday after rereading my mother’s note with her love, sleep caught up with me.

I awoke with a jolt Tuesday afternoon, around one. “What are you doing?” Chris shook me.

“What?”

“Ugh! Get dressed. It’s Tuesday. Remember, a funeral?” I didn’t want to go. But something told me I should. I washed my short hair, put on a black dress, and was ready to go within twenty minutes.

Dad had apparently been crying, as had Chris.

“Wh-where’s your guitar?” Dad struggled to say. I almost argued but went and got it. I didn’t plan to perform, but I grabbed the crumpled up paper just in case.
For the beginning, someone had prepared a slideshow. I watched picture by picture without a tear. Some spoke, but I didn’t break down. Dad and Chris both did. Finally, we left for Greystone Cemetery, and lowered the casket. Just then reality hit me, worse than ever, and huge sobs escaped my chest.

Dad put an arm around me. “Honey, you couldn’t pretend it never happened forever,” he whispered, wiping his eyes.

I put my hand in his, and Chris’s, all family tensions forgotten. We held hands firmly as the final speakers talked and then Grandma Carver.

She spoke briefly, saying, “And I’d like to introduce the most special young lady I’ve met, next to Kara, who is going to play a song for you.”

I met Dad’s eyes, then Chris’s. This song could help them as much as me.

Appearing strong is hard, but dealing with things is much, much harder, I realized as I walked to the microphone, guitar in hand. I had fooled no one, not even myself, pretending my mother had never died. But I also realized she would always be a part of me, and I could learn to live with that.

At the podium, I began to play my first notes.
Headstone

Author: Chelsea Muzar
Grade: 10
Teacher: Jennifer Gross
School: Park Hill High School, Kansas City, MO

It was Grandma Lynn, but it wasn’t. Her skin was a waxy glaze that dulled with every passing minute. The make-up the mortician lathered on her face didn’t create the warmth or gentleness I was promised. It made her look hollow. Cold. Dead.

On the morning of my grandmother’s death she told me she had been visited by a strange man in the night. “He had the prettiest blue eyes I’d ever seen,” she mused. “Such a nice boy told me that everything was going to be all right.” At first I thought she was talking about my father or the doctor who put up with the novel full of questions my mother asked every time he entered the room. It wouldn’t be until much later that I realized that she wasn’t talking about the living at all.

All day people wandered into the wake to gawk at the grieving family and whisper about the sideshow freak granddaughter. “She doesn’t care.” “I heard she’s made of stone.” “She just needs time, I think.” When they came to console the family they avoided eye contact and mumbled their apologies. I never understood the saying, “I’m sorry for your loss.” What did they have to be sorry for? They didn’t kill her; cancer did.

Sometimes people would whisper to her, telling her secrets like she could still hear them. I wanted to yell at them, show them she was gone, that she couldn’t hear their sorrow or confessions. Tell them that they needed to move on with their lives and let the dead lay. But I couldn’t do it. It would involve me turning around, and I didn’t want to see that thing lying in the wooden case. That dead thing. It wasn’t Grandma Lynn. It was only her shell.

During the sermon, I expected her to sit up. I wish she had. Then we could stop this nonsense, and everything would go back to normal, no bawling mother, no pill-popping aunt, no drunken father. Everything would just melt back to normal and Grandma would call me up and ask if I wanted to bake cookies for the homeless.

On the move to the cemetery, my heart seized in my chest and a sharp pain rang out in my abdomen. We were on our way to place her into the ground from which she would never come back. My world crashed into a kaleidoscope of colors; she was dead, gone, never coming back. The car suddenly became a human oven. I needed to get out, to go somewhere, anywhere that was away from here, but there was nowhere to go except back to my memories.

The day we went through Grandma Lynn’s things, we were trying to find “the perfect outfit” for the wake. I had just sifted through a pile of roaring twenties style clothing when I found it. It was a golden strawberry hand-stitched diary. I had never known my grandmother to keep a journal, but as I read each entry I realized she thrived on the pages she wrote. Toward the end of the entries the flowery descriptions of her hopes and dreams began to fade and a stale pattern began to erupt. All solemn and cold, all talking about him. The entry struck me the most was also the last: He visited me again last night. Every time he visits I want to leave with him, and I’ve remained strong for Daphne’s sake, but I can’t do it anymore. There’s so much pain. Tonight when he calls upon me I will dive into his deep blue eyes and leave this world behind. Stay strong, Daphne, my darling. I love you.

“For God’s sake, Daphne, she’s your grandmother. Suck it up and show some respect,” my father’s voice brought me back to reality. He was sneaking sips of brandy as we turned into the gravel driveway of Moral Bates Cemetery. We passed lines of gray stones, symbols of the equalizer, the end.

Wails of torment filled the graveyard as her last resting place was filled with dust. When I looked up from the opened ground, I saw him standing in the shadows. I could only make out the black of his suit, but I knew it was him.

“Daphne, can you take the car home to get the food ready? I’m going to stay here and make sure everyone gets proper directions,” my father said unscrewing his flask and grabbing my blubbling mother around the wrist to pull her toward more people who were ready with more apologies.

Without my father’s body heat, the car was now a freezer, but I didn’t bother with the heater. As I backed down the gravel driveway, I caught a glimpse of the man in shadow again. I slammed on the brakes, shooting gravel in every direction and jerked the car into park. The air outside the car was colder than I remembered and with trembling lips, I called out to the man I knew had taken my grandmother.

“Who are you?”

He didn’t answer. He only glanced at me as if I were some inconsequential shadow, so I tried again, stepping
closer this time. “Who are you?” The air surrounding him was like ice. My body betrayed my mind, and I began to tremble.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, probably hoping I couldn’t hear.

“Who are you?”

Annoyed by my persistence, he answered, “I am nothing. I am everything. I am the equalizer.”

A shrill wind echoed through the tombstones and time ceased to matter. I didn’t want to believe it, but this man, this towering, soul-stopping man was really death.

“Why...” I struggled to find my voice, “why did you take her?”

“It was her time.” My heart grew heavy with every breath. I was lost. He answered my questions, but that didn’t make the pain vanish like I had hoped. I wanted to argue with him, pull out charts and diagrams, and prove to him that it wasn’t her time to go, but I couldn’t. I was prepared to fight death for her sake, but I froze. He frightened me. My entire being wanted to jump up and run from the destroyer of civilizations, but I couldn’t. I could not fight him, but I would not leave my ground.

“I’m sorry,” he said again. He was like everyone else apologizing to me. His back was still facing me, but the hairs prickling on the back of my neck told me he was smiling. “I’m sorry about how cold I’m making you and how afraid you are of me. But,” he turned, his eyes blue and as vast and open as the sea, gleaming down on me, “I am not sorry about taking your grandmother.”

A switch flipped and what was once fear of death was no longer filled with anger and resentment. “Why would you be? It’s all part of the job description anyway, isn’t it? You just take and take and take. Never caring about who you affect, never once realizing that the life of the person you just took....” Tears were flowing from my eyes now.

The days of dry spells had ended and now the rainforest had returned, “that the person you took was the one person that....that,” I couldn’t speak. Visions of my grandmother blocked my rage, and I did what I had been neglecting to do since her departure, cry.

My knees buckled with despair, but strong arms intercepted my appointment with the ground. I buried my face in his silk Armani suit, smearing mascara on its crisp lapels, but death just kept telling me that it was good that I could finally let it go. “Don’t stop,” he whispered, “just let it all out.” His stiff movements made it clear that, although he was trying to help, he was uncomfortable with the situation. It wasn’t like death to console the grieving.

After my tears dried, he lifted my face to meet his blue gaze again. “I can’t explain to you why I had to take your grandmother, but I can show you.” He lifted his hand out toward me.

It was not cold like I expected. It was soft and warm.
Portfolio Submission

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Grade: 12
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Contents
Mercy (Short Story)
What Where When (Poetry)
Someone for Anyone (Poetry)
Pearl (Short Story)
Never Trust Appearances (Science-Fiction/Fantasy)

Statement of Purpose

I have been writing ever since I could hold a pencil, and it only seemed fitting that I continue that passion into my adult life as well. I hope the selections in this portfolio are able to convey to you my love for the craft.

I have always been fascinated by irony in names, and “Mercy” was my attempt at carrying it off. Whether the irony works well or not, it is a very haunting story that manages to stay away from the supernatural forces I am so fond of working with. “The Introspective” is probably the one piece that requires the most explanation before reading. The story comes across as a very fragmented and confusing stream of consciousness, written from the perspective of a Frankenstein-like creature whose mind has started to fall apart. While not the best piece included, it was very different from anything I’d written, and I just couldn’t leave it out. Poetry has never been my strongest writing, but I enjoy it and think that my poems show a side of my voice that tends to get lost in longer works of fiction, so I have chosen to include the poems “What Where When” and “Someone for Anyone” in my portfolio. “The Price of Life” was submitted to Scholastic in 2005 and did well, but I was never happy with the ending. It has grown into what is now a 180 page work in progress, so the section included here is only a piece of the larger work, which explains the cliff-hanger ending. This story is especially important to me because it was my first real work, and years have been devoted to improving, expanding, and revising it. My portfolio would be incomplete without an appearance by main characters, Miriel and Lucian, from ’The Price is Life.” I have taken music lessons for most of my life on both piano and flute, and that music has always been an inspiration for me in my writing. “Pearl” was a story inspired by a particularly melancholy piece of music I was assigned, although I have to admit I spent more time on this story than on practicing the music. “Never Trust Appearances” is a classic ghost story and was extremely fun for me to write. As a reader I have always been drawn to mysteries and ghost stories, so it seems only fitting that I should write and include a piece from my favorite genre.

After looking at the pieces I have compiled, I noticed a common theme. Each main character undergoes an almost ’Adam and Eve’ like moment of revelation when their true place in the story is revealed. Each of them has been used, either through manipulation, fate, or a force within him/herself, to fill a role that doesn’t become apparent until the story’s end.

I hope you enjoy reading through this portfolio as much as I enjoyed putting it together.

Mercy

“Well! Mercy Thompson! Is that you?”

Mercy didn’t need to look up to know who the voice belonged to, and in a panicked moment of aversion she busied herself reading a bottle of something she had no intention of buying, hoping her act of false concentration would end the conversation before it had a chance to start. Like it had ever stopped that woman before.

“Well hey there, hon! Don’t you remember me?”

Mercy had no choice but to look up as the perfectly manicured hand clamped itself around her arm. It still amazed Mercy that a woman with seven children could find time for manicures, hair straightening and bleaching, and primping herself immaculately all before noon. Mercy had had cheerios in wine for breakfast and forgotten to brush her teeth – let alone her hair. She guiltily put back the bottle of fabric softener and forced a smile.

“I see you’re back without our William. He have another show? You wouldn’t have broken our boy’s heart and
William was everyone’s “boy.” It was hard not to be when the town was so small. Mercy was the perfect example of an outsider, moving to the town a year before in a vain attempt to get away from herself and live as a hermit for awhile. Instead, she met and fell in love with William, a home grown protégé, and spent her free time being examined, stalked, and picked apart by the rest of the town’s natives.

“No. William did have another show, I just wanted to get back to work.”

“Oh. What is it you do again? It must be so hard to be away from him. Hope you can trust him; plenty of girls who’d want to snap him up,” the woman gave Mercy a disapproving once over, “but you don’t look half bad today. Did you lose some weight?”

Mercy laughed politely while simultaneously imagining her unfiled nails digging into that unnaturally clean neck. Luckily, a small child started screaming, and Mercy was saved an embarrassing display of emotion in front of the grocery stock-boy. Mercy headed quickly to the liquor section of the store, now in desperate need of a drink, and grabbed a bottle to replace the one that had served as breakfast earlier that morning. William didn’t have another show. He was dead. It was only a matter of time before the whole town heard the news from his parents, and Mercy knew they’d somehow find a way to blame it on her. Mercy had convinced William’s agent to call down Will’s parents without giving them a reason until they arrived, but they would be getting home today. Everyone would ignore the details surrounding how William died and just make up excuses for how Mercy had corrupted him. After all, Mercy was the outsider; it would be easier to run her back to where she came from with pitchforks and torches than to have the memory of William stained. She was really starting to hate this town.

William had died with a needle in his arm and a cheap blonde in his bed. The classic death for a musician. She would have gone so far as to say it was cliché, but William was a classical pianist. Just like William, she couldn’t help but laugh, to live like a rock star and play like a maestro. After simultaneously finding her boyfriend dead and discovering he was cheating on her, Mercy was in desperate need of someone to talk to and horribly aware of the fact she had no one. The one time she needed the people she had left behind. As she walked outside to the greeting of a blinding sun and a gentle breeze, she decided it was time to see just how much damage burning her bridges had done.

Mercy and William’s house was tiny and devoid of almost anything that stated William lived there. Mercy had repainted the walls, torn up old carpet, and refurbished the wood flooring. She decorated every room, kept the kitchen fully stocked—although never actually ate anything—and paid the bills. All William did was stop by when he had the time, and even then most of that free time was spent catching up with his parents and extended family of neighbors. When he wasn’t sharing inside jokes that left Mercy feeling more out of touch than ever, he was practicing on his Steinway—the only thing he had ever contributed to the household—and God forbid Mercy interrupt him as he ran through a Bach fugue or Beethoven sonata. Still, Mercy somehow managed to love him, in spite of him never being there, never really caring about her, and seeming embarrassed to be seen with her in town. Mercy loved him.

Looking at her cell phone cautiously Mercy scrolled through names she had never deleted but hadn’t thought about in years. She picked what she thought would be the most recepitive number and watched the phone start to call.

“Hello?” the voice sounded hollow over the phone, not at all what Mercy had remembered growing up, but it was still ironically her mother’s.

“Mom?” Mercy began to cry, she’d tried to hold back all day, but after hearing her mother’s voice for the first time since she left there were too many emotions for her weakening will to suppress.

“Who is this?” The voice was as annoyed as it was angry. It wasn’t asking a question but demanding a confession that whoever this was confess their prank and hang up.

“Mom.”

“Mercy?” the voice started to crack with realization this was, in fact, the lost daughter, but it still maintained a hint of anger.

“I need help.”

“Help, Mercy? Don’t start coming to me with what you need. You swore up and down you hated me. You stole from me so you could get away. You told me to stay the hell out of your life. Well, now seems like the perfect time to start listening to you. There’s nothing you can get from me you can’t get for yourself, I believe those were the last words you screamed to me before you left.”

“Mom, please. You know me better than that. I wouldn’t be asking for help if I didn’t really need you!” Mercy screamed through her tears as if her volume could overcome the obstacle of time.

“No.”

“Mom! You have to help me! They’ll kill me for letting him die; I need someone to fight for me. I’m so sorry for
everything, but you’re my mother!” Mercy was shaking so hard the phone almost fell from her hands.

“Yeah. Whatever you’ve done now you can dig yourself out of. You deserve whatever they’ll do, whoever they are,” her mother’s voice was calm now, anger extinguished and love no longer existent.

“Mom!” the phone beeped to signal the end of the conversation or in Mercy’s case the closing of a door she thought would never be locked. To make matters worse someone angrily banged against Mercy’s door.

The knocking persisted, and in spite of her better judgment and the fleeting thought that the angry villagers were coming, Mercy opened it. She was greeted by a hard slap to her left cheek by a grieving mother who had obviously made it back home. The woman shoved a letter against Mercy’s chest; she had no choice but to take it.

“You killed my son! You ruined him and every chance of a future he had, you no good whore!”

Mercy could have come up with a sarcastic response involving William and whores if she had been more herself. As it was, she just settled for trying to slam the door.

“You read that letter. He left it for you! Like he knew this would happen. I hope it makes you wish you were dead in his place! I hope you rot in hell for what you’ve done.” The last sentence was said in the cool manner of a woman who had gone insane and chosen to come back and take the rest of the world with her. Mercy couldn’t really blame the poor woman, but she did feel the need to defend herself.

“I loved him,” was the only response she could think of.

“You seduced him! Drew him away from his people and those who really did love him. He was infatuated with you, and you were using him for...for,” William’s mother slapped Mercy again for lack of any other response, and as Mercy closed the door she caught more than one angry look from passersby. The storming of the monster’s lair by the angry village people had begun. Instead of dwelling on that status, Mercy sliced open the envelope.

By now, my dear, you will have noticed I haven’t come back when you expected. I told my mother to deliver this letter if you came home without me. I’m sorry I lack the courage to tell you this myself. I’m getting married to Aerie Smith, Ruth’s daughter. Mercy laughed, Ruth had been the first person she ran into after coming home, at the grocery store. It was only fitting that woman would question her about William’s faithfulness while knowing her oldest daughter was engaged to him. I never should have gotten you involved in this, but I was having cold feet about the wedding. Aerie’s the only girl I ever really knew, and I thought having a relationship with someone else might help make up my mind. Mercy choked back a sob, whether of rage or despair she wasn’t quite sure. I never loved you, dear. Mercy forced herself into the kitchen to find something that might numb the pain before she had to keep reading. I hope you can understand. Well, you’ll have to understand. As you know, the house is in my name, so you’ll have to leave. I’ll give you plenty of time to move out, dear, but it would be inconvenient, to have you here for too much longer. You never really belonged here anyway, I’m doing you a favor, letting you get back to the kind of life you’re used to.

Mercy was spared the last line of the letter for a moment by a new furious banging on her door. It was her door now. William couldn’t claim it anymore. Maybe she’d stay here just to spite his ghost.

“You. Killed. Our. William!” Ruth screamed in Mercy’s face, a pleasant change from the slaps William’s mother had given her. Mercy just thought it was funny the woman still managed to look immaculate as she was trying to look enraged.

“Your William died in your daughter’s bed,” Mercy wasn’t really sure who the cheap blonde was, but it might as well have been Ruth’s daughter. It didn’t make a difference to her anymore, “Maybe you should be screaming at her.”

“Well,” Ruth smirked, “What did you expect, really? My daughter comes from good stock, just as good as William. You just blew in from the city. I’ll admit I was worried for a bit, you being such a novelty and all, but my Aerie’s never lost a man yet. Especially not to a girl like you.”

Mercy couldn’t respond, she had just realized her fate. By coming to this town she had stepped into a game, becoming the unnamed antagonist of the girl next door. She had given the well cropped families something to fight with, and they lived for a fight, whatever appearances might say otherwise. Everyone in that town needed something to hate because, if they began to hate each other, the utopia would fall apart. They needed someone to blame all of their problems on, from bad crops to bad blood, and she stepped in as the unknowing sacrifice. No one in this town would show her sympathy. If they did everything would fall apart. She had to be ruined for the town to remain. No pity, no love, not even from her mother – though how they had worked that out, Mercy had no idea. She cackled as she slammed the door, and carrying an empty bottle, she sat on William’s piano bench to finish reading the letter.

It isn’t your fault, my dear. These things happen, and things end. Don’t try to hold on, dear, for your sake let me go. I assure, so you can be free of me, that I never loved you, Mercy.

-William-
“I never loved you, Mercy,” she spoke the words out loud to herself as if making sure they were real. “Never loved, Mercy,” she stood up and realized that the world had begun to spin. “Never, Mercy,” she tried to walk but found the floor moving faster than she was. She started to fall, her head striking the end of the piano hard enough to draw blood.

“Mercy.”

**What Where When**

Is what we are
just what we were,
when once
we were
but true?

And what is
truth,
but mystery,
yet to divulge
a clue.

Come with me
back to that place
where midnight’s
bright
as day,

and maybe then,
we’ll scarcely
see
the world
from where we came.

We’re gone from now,
and gone from
then,
but hopeful for our
tomorrow.

Clarity begins
when life is lived,
and hope
may end
our sorrow.

**Someone For Anyone**

He asked
who she was.
No one,
she replied.

For no one
is anyone
as
everyone
knows.

Unless
anyone is someone,
to
somebody
else.

Yet no one
is someone
in
everyone's
eyes.

So
everyone is
someone
to anyone
willing
to see.

All it takes
is you
to make
a
someone
of me.

**Pearl**

She pressed her head against the glass, the side of her face almost immediately succumbing to the frosted pane, but she did not remove it. The outside world was covered in white, but to her it looked grey, and the sky dressed to match both through her eyes and the rest of the world’s. The train continued on, not pausing to mourn the weariness of the world as she did. But trains rarely notice these things, so that can be overlooked.

A flute case lay across her lap, and a bag filled with sheet music rested at her feet. These were her only companions in the train car, and silent ones they were too. She sighed and shifted in her seat, leaning her head to the opposite side with eyes closed and attempted to fall asleep. The motion of the train sent her swiftly to sleep, but even in semi-consciousness she remained altogether morose looking.

“Ma'am,” the conductor gently tapped the woman’s shoulder, he was polite, but it was obvious he wanted nothing more than for his shift to be over and the train to stop so he could get home.

“Here’s my ticket,” she held out the slip of paper and then turned back to her window.

“Thank you, ma'am, but I actually just wanted to let you know your bag tipped over. The man who got into your car, he knocked it over.”

She looked up at the man across from her who smiled sheepishly as he bent down to help her pick up her music. She smiled, shoved her music back into the bag, and turned back to her window.

“Sorry about that,” the man smiled, obviously trying to start a conversation. “Are you professional? My wife used to play.”

“Oh?” the woman tried to be nice while giving him the subtle hint she wanted to get back to sleep.

“Yes. The clarinet's a beautiful instrument.”

“Mmhmm,” she didn't look at him this time.

“How long have you played?” he asked, still oblivious to her hints.

“Never. I don't play clarinet,” she glanced at him and went back to her nap, the hint finally sinking in.

The next time the woman awoke, the train had stopped, and the man had left her compartment. Blinking open
her eyes she reached for her luggage and gave the conductor a weak smile before running onto the platform.

“Pearl,” a man dressed in a smart business suit, the only one on the platform actually, walked towards her and dutifully picked up her heavier bags.

“Hello,” Pearl smiled and kissed him on the cheek, eyes still retaining that sadness from the train.

“Have a good trip?” the man wrapped his free arm around her waist, either not seeing or ignoring the sadness in her eyes.

“All right,” Pearl looked straight ahead, her eyes blank, covering whatever emotion might have been hiding there.

The two sat together in the car, neither one of them speaking as they drove slowly home. The landscape outside had not improved; everything was still grey, except now houses instead of fields were blanketeted by the dark and morose clouds. Pearl rested her head against the window, eyeing the small houses with sweet, warm looking fires enviously, before closing her eyes and feigning sleep. Her husband glanced at her only once before keeping his eyes glued to the empty road. It seemed like an eternity before the two arrived home, and there was no real joy when they did. Home was a pleasant two story house, yard perfectly maintained – just like every other house on the block. The inside of the house matched the outside, perfect and sterile, giving it that Stepford quality. Each house seemed dark, even with the lights on, like the outside had somehow infiltrated into what should have been a place of refuge. Pearl's husband shook her awake, recently used cell phone blinking off in his hand, impossible to know how long he'd been talking. It could easily have been hours while Pearl slept in the car. He never bothered with her until after business was done.

“Should we order out to celebrate your return?” Pearl's husband suggested with very little enthusiasm.

“I'm not hungry,” Pearl turned and walked to her music room without another word. Her husband merely shrugged, returning to his office to do some more work from home.

It was almost unbelievable that in a house so large there were so few rooms being occupied. The kitchen never saw food, the dining room never saw a meal, and the bedrooms were almost never occupied. Pearl stayed in her music room practicing when she didn't have a performance, and her husband worked in his home office when he wasn't out working in a 'real' office. There had been love once, both in the house and between them. They used to love the days when the weather was too dreary to venture out, and they could think of nothing better than to stay home with each other. But that was when home was actually a studio apartment, and money had been more of an elusive myth than a way of life. Now they had no time for each other in a comfortable home and no hard times to blame for it.

Pearl glared at the sheets of music in front of her. Once she had been able to look at those notes, and they would unfold before her eyes into pictures and stories. Now all she could see were notes on pages. No magic anymore. No secret to uncover. No mystery to solve. These were just more notes to play, as she'd done for years, so people could pay high prices and hear things they forgot about by the time they arrived back home. Pearl set her flute down in disgust, eyes wandering to the guitar case standing silently in a corner. She always stared at that guitar on days like this, and she'd been having days like this more and more often.

“Pearl, I have to work, might not even make it home tonight.”

“Good night then, I won't wait up,” Pearl pecked her husband on the cheek and returned to her own world, not hearing the door close as he left.

Tonight was the performance of her life, she had been playing so listlessly recently that she was in danger of losing her job. Pearl shook when she thought about it but wondered why she really cared. What was work anymore? Still, she picked her flute back up and began to play, not knowing how she managed to carry on the motions.

***

Pearl sat down in her section, flute to her lips, playing the music automatically as her mind wandered off.

She was sitting on a crowded train, guitar case covered with stickers from all the places she'd played...and all the places she hoped to go. Everything was pressed up close to her in an attempt to make room for other passengers. Her hair was uncombed and hanging loosely around her shoulders, and she gazed out the window anxiously, rushing into the arms of the man known today as her husband. The pair couldn't afford a car, but they always claimed to like walking better anyway, content with what they had. Simply happy.

Pearl had traded that all in for security, so had her husband. Finding a good job, a good home, everything they thought they never needed. Pearl admitted to herself that she was scared back then, worried about how they'd make it week to week. So, they gave up on their dreams. Her husband became the businessman he always was, and Pearl traded in her guitar for the classical flute.

Pearl stood up with the rest of her section, bowing automatically before realizing the concert was over. She couldn't remember how she played or even if she'd played anything. All she knew was that she couldn't go on like this. She would have to give up part of herself. Either give up the past or give up on the future. She drove home too
fast, quickly shutting and locking the door behind her before rushing into her music room and grabbing her guitar.

Pearl walked slowly into the unused kitchen, looking around the room that stood halfway between her world and her husband’s work. Her glance caught the stove and she smiled to herself. Perhaps that stove would finally get some use.

Never Trust Appearances

“Do you hear that?” Dee looked around the room and then back at her friend, expecting him to immediately realize she hadn’t been hearing things for the past two months.

“No. I think your going crazy,” Aaron nudged her arm jokingly, but his eyes still held a slight pang of fear.

“Seriously? They’re getting louder! I can barely hear myself think anymore.”

“Dee, there’s nothing to hear.”

“If this is some kind of sick joke you’ve got to stop. I can’t handle this anymore. You’ve been trying to mess with me right? Like when we were kids?”

“Dee, do you honestly think I’d pull a prank for two months straight while watching you drive yourself crazy? Give me some credit.”

“Aaron, make it stop!”

“Dee, I think I’m gonna go. There’s no point in me staying here and getting accused of this crap. Call me if something starts going really bad, but try sleeping. When was the last time you actually slept through the night anyway?”

Aaron backed out of the room, throwing a quick concerned glance at his friend, and then closed the door. She never listened to him.

It had been two months now since Amanda had first started hearing things, little things at first, whispers she couldn’t quite make out, that could easily be explained by a radio being on in another room, a car driving by with the bass turned up, or the neighbors having a loud argument with the windows open. Then the music started. At first it was quiet, easily dismissed as a radio left on or something going on outside, just like the whispers. Now it was different. The noises were almost inescapable, long drawn out noises, fully orchestrated pieces filled with all the terror and misery of hell. Dee was going crazy. She couldn’t get away from the sounds, couldn’t block them out, couldn’t turn them off. Some days she wouldn’t hear anything. Other days it would just be the whispers again, but there were always the bad days, like today, and her mind would be filled with these sounds leaving no room for anything else, especially not rational thought. There was no explanation, no family history of anything like it, and no reason for her to be haunted, yet here she was, hearing voices like something out of a Stephen King novel.

“What do you want with me? What did I do? Just tell me, and I’ll fix it! I’ll do anything. Just please, please let me be,” Dee pleaded with her bedroom wall, looking at cracked paint that seemed to smile at her and pleading with whatever possessed her now to let go.

“Listen,” for the first time Dee could understand something. These voices were talking back. She couldn’t help but smile. At least this was progress – to what end didn’t really seem to matter.

“To what? Tell me what you want; I’ve never been good at cryptics.”

“Just listen!”

“I do! I have no choice but to listen; I can’t hear anything else!” Dee screamed out at her wall, for once wishing she could see this ghost, if only because it would seem saner to be talking to a face than a pattern that looked like one.

“Listen!” the voices seemed frustrated now; they were all crying out together.

“I am!” Dee screamed back, collapsing onto her bed, body twitching with sobs and shock.

Slowly any traces of noise started to dissipate; they seemed almost regretful that they had reduced her to such a state. As the noise stopped Dee looked around her, took a few deep breaths, and waited for it to start again. All she heard was a bird outside the window. Minutes passed and still a blissful silence. Dee sighed with relief, maybe they were finally gone. Closing her eyes she instantly fell asleep.

At noon the next day Dee finally awoke. The voices hadn’t troubled her all night, and she was feeling optimistic. Maybe it was over; maybe it had all just been a bad dream and all she had to do was sleep it off. Unfortunately, bad dreams are never that simple. Shuffling into the kitchen Dee realized, probably for the first time in two months, that she had no food in the house. She hadn’t left the house since she started hearing the voices, not trusting herself to drive anywhere, but she felt awake and hungry. Time to go shopping.

***

“Oh, dear, I am sorry,” an older woman bent over and picked up the can of salsa Dee had dropped after the woman had hit her with a shopping cart.
“It’s all right,” Dee smiled, laughing lightly to show there were no hard feelings.

“Then here you are, my dear,” the woman handed her the can and patted her arm in the way all old women do to girls who remind them of their better years. The second the hand touched Dee’s skin the music came back, louder than she had ever heard it. Her head pounded with it, and Dee was amazed the woman couldn’t hear it seeping out. Life seemed to be draining out of Dee’s heart, and she fell to the floor, holding her head as if she could cover up the problem.

“Child? Are you alright?” the woman bent down and felt Dee’s head, gently touching her arm in an attempt to comfort her. The music reached a crescendo, and Dee moaned. The woman removed her hand and glared, eyes flaming, “What do you hear, child?”

The music stopped as the woman backed away, Dee, still on the floor, found herself staring into eyes that seemed to rip into her soul; she decided she preferred the music. Dee remembered having a vague suspicion at the woman’s immediately asking her what do you hear instead of something like “are you having a heart attack,” but was too disoriented to make the connection. The music started again, softly, like the soundtrack to a movie. “It’s horrible.”

“What do they tell you?” the woman demanded, her voice hard and cold.

“They?” Dee looked confused and pushed herself up onto her elbows in an effort to feel more in control of the situation. It didn’t work.

“Do they speak to you?” The woman looked like she wanted to scream, but someone else had walked into the aisle.

“It’s music,” Dee decided to leave out the part about making contact with them the night before.

The woman smiled, her face softening back into the little old lady. She seemed satisfied somehow, almost relieved, “Come, child, let me help you up.” She extended a hand to Dee and pulled her up with surprising force. “I used to hear them too. Until I learned how to get rid of them.” The woman winked. “I could do it for you.”

Dee was so desperate for someone to think she wasn’t crazy that all the warning signs faded away, and she nodded. Walking outside with the old woman Dee started to spill out her story, about the voices starting, the music that never seemed to stop, how it seemed they were trying to tell her something but their voices were muffled like they were covering their mouths. The woman slipped her a piece of paper with her address on it, assuring Dee that her ghosts could be gone in an instant; the woman would cleanse her. Excited about seeing the end of this catastrophe, Dee agreed to meet with the woman next week. In fact, Dee was so distracted by the prospect of everything being over for good she never realized the music stopped as the woman disappeared into her car.

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“Dee, I don’t think this is a good idea. Going to some strange woman’s house just because she claims to know what’s happening to you?” Aaron’s skepticism was easy to hear over the phone.

“Aaron, you know this might be my only hope. If this doesn’t work, I’ll probably be sent to undergo psychiatric treatment, be told I’m just plain nuts.”

“What’s wrong with talking to a doctor? This might just be stress,” Aaron sighed heavily into the phone, not willing to tell his friend he thought she was going completely nuts. He had to be there for her now; he might be the only thing that could keep her from putting all of her trust in this old woman.

“She can help, Aaron. I really believe it.”

“The voices didn’t seem to like her, and up to this point they haven’t tried to hurt you, just annoy you,” Aaron tried to be reasonable.

“You know, I’m kind of tired. I’m going to go to bed. You’ve been telling me this might just be a lack of sleep right?” Dee sounded angry now. Apparently Aaron had said the wrong thing.

“Just be careful, Dee. Please?” Aaron reluctantly set down the phone after hearing the click from Dee’s end, he decided he’d just have to research this woman himself. Dee didn’t seem like she was going to do anything about it.

Dee hung up the phone and got ready for bed, rolling her eyes to herself in the bathroom mirror as the noises continued their never ending din. It was getting easier for her to ignore it; she just pretended the radio was on. The noise got louder as she closed her eyes, something that usually didn’t happen. Dee jumped up and reached for the Advil bottle by her bed; maybe this was just a combination migraine-haunting. She walked over to the light switch and flicked it on so she could see well enough to undo the child proof cap. Staring back at her through the bedroom window were the eyes of the old woman. Dee screamed and fell to the floor. The face was gone by the time she revived, and so were the voices.

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Aaron came to the conclusion that the only way to reach Dee was to discredit her savior; he hoped the events of last night would have been enough, but Dee seemed to prefer the theory that the voices were just trying to keep her
from getting rid of them. He found himself across the street from the woman’s house mid-afternoon. Dee had been scared enough to give him the address, at least, and he prayed he might find something that would scare his friend out of going there at all. The house seemed normal enough; obnoxious garden gnomes littered the lawn, the curtains shielding the inside of the house from dog walkers and joggers were overly frilly, and the birdhouse resting in the branches of a tree was full of stale breadcrumbs. All it proved was that this was, indeed, the house of an old woman. Aaron was disappointed; he had hoped for pentagrams and cauldrons, even a mysterious looking mound of dirt in the back yard would do. Hoping a neighbor might have uncovered something about the woman’s habits that might work just as well, Aaron walked over to the next house.

“Well, hello there,” an elderly couple answered the door, looking kind but confused as to why he was there.

“Good afternoon,” Aaron smiled and tried to think of a good excuse that would get him inside, “my wife and I are thinking of moving into the neighborhood, and I thought I’d check around to see if this was good neighborhood for families. You know neighborhood dynamics, friendliness, things like that,” Aaron chose this lie for no other reason than that he thought the old couple looked nostalgic, maybe remembering their young love would cause them to let their guard down. The more he thought about it the more transparent his story seemed, he didn’t drive here, so he obviously already lived close enough to walk, and he wasn’t wearing a ring. Aaron was about to turn around and run when he realized the door had opened wider; the scheme had worked.

“Well, I don’t really like to gossip,” the old woman smiled as she offered him a chair. The husband caught Aaron’s eye and winked, as if to say there was nothing his wife loved more than to pretend she never gossiped.

“It’s not really gossip though,” Aaron tried to smile, suddenly realizing he was extremely nervous.

“It’s just that,” the woman wasn’t paying attention to him anyway, “she’s just so odd.”

“Who?”

“The woman next door.”

“Really?” Aaron forced himself to suppress a grin.

“Ever since she moved in, strange things started happening. Odd noises coming from her basement. And that music! Whenever she has the windows open you can hear it, awful stuff. I’m sure it must be classical, but it’s just so depressing. And then, there are the rumors.”

“Rumors?” Aaron really had to work to keep that grin from coming out.

“Well,” this time it was the husband that spoke, as if to let Aaron know that this was worth listening to, “the place she told us she’s from, my grandkids looked it up on that Google site after hearing my wife say she seemed strange. There’re all these stories about people in her town going crazy; a bunch of young women, they went crazy and then just disappeared. There’s no connection between any of ‘em either, ‘cept that old woman. They all seemed to know her somehow, but they couldn’t blame anything on her. Guess she got so sick of the talk she moved out. Seems like she’s nice enough, not strong enough to hurt a fly, but I’m sure glad my grandbabies don’t live ‘round here.”

Aaron was pale before the man finished, it wasn’t so much the story as the fact he saw Dee walking into the house next door through the couple’s window. She had lied to him about the day of her appointment. She didn’t wait for the next week. So like Dee, always wanting things finished as quickly as possible.

“Dee!” he ignored the couple’s look of surprise and rushed outside, praying it wasn’t too late. The old woman’s door was shut tight by the time he reached it, and Dee had disappeared behind those deceptively innocent frilly curtains. “Dee!” he slammed his fist against the still covered window, but the glass was too thick for him to break without something more solid than his hand. He eyed one of the larger garden gnomes.

“Did you hear that?” Dee turned to face the window, not able to see Aaron behind the curtains.

“It’s just the voices, child; they don’t want you to be rid of them. They’d do anything to get you away from me,” something about that last sentenced caused Dee’s blood to run cold, and she reached to push back the curtains, but the woman steered her away before she touched the fabric. Then the record player in the corner turned itself on.

“That music! That’s what they made me listen to,” Dee looked at the woman in confusion, not sure whether to bolt to the door, listen to the voices, or keep trusting.

“Stupid girls,” the woman growled as she turned the record player off.

“What?” Dee looked at the old woman, not entering into the room any further and paying more attention to the banging on the window.

“Dee! If you can hear me, get out!” Aaron screamed; the gnome wasn’t making as much progress as he had hoped. The voices decided to help him out, and Dee started to hear a resounding chorus of ‘listen’ echoing through her head.

“It’s Aaron,” Dee sighed out loud, looking frustrated and put out now that the voices had come back and Aaron had found a way to interfere.
“Who’s Aaron, dear?” the old woman ushered her towards a paisley couch.

“My friend, he didn’t want me to see you. He thought I was crazy,” Dee began to relax. She decided all her anxiety was caused by Aaron’s fears. Still, something in the urgency of the voices and the persistence of his banging caused her to wonder.

“LISTEN!” the voices screamed and Dee turned away from the woman, covering her head in pain. She saw something silver in the old woman’s hand but didn’t have time to process. The voices stopped.
My Ambition

Author: Emily Pierson
Grade: 12
Teacher: Janet Jelavich
School: Maryville High School, Maryville, MO

As a professional violinist, my great grandfather played in the orchestra in Bangor, Maine, and also was involved in two other musical groups. He had his own jazz band, Tom Kane and the Jamaica Jazz Band and was a member of another ensemble with Rudy Vallee. So, I guess, I inherited my passion for music from him. My dream has always been to become a snare drummer and a well-rounded player of many instruments, but I have higher aspirations to become not just a member of the band but a professional musician, like my great grandfather.

I started my education at a parochial school where the high school drumline visited our small grade school gymnasium to perform their indoor show. I saw them march in and immediately noticed the confidence and pride that shown on their faces. Taps brought them to attention, and they began to play. The music pulsed throughout the building like a heavy bass while I sat entranced by their movements and the sounds that followed. From then on, I wanted to play snare drum in that ensemble someday, to capture the attention of every eye and ear in the room in the same way that they caught mine.

Being one year away from high school at the time, I was challenged by the idea of learning a completely new instrument. To go from an ill-taught cornet player to a refined percussionist requires a lot of help and ambition, so I immediately began looking for a percussion instructor. I found Erika, a family friend who for one hour per week helped me advance from no experience at all to understanding basic rhythms and technique. Soon, after tons of practice I was ready, but really nervous for the high school auditions. Being an incoming freshman from a parochial school, tryouts were difficult performing in front of a panel of five instructors that I had never met, with my future peers waiting outside, listening. I buckled under pressure, and I couldn’t play the music I had memorized. All I could do was keep playing until I reached the end of the audition and try my hardest not to break into tears. One week later, they informed me that I was one spot away from getting the position I wanted.

Disappointed that I didn’t reach my goal, it still inspired me because I saw how close the auditions were. For the next three years, I continued lessons, practiced, and picked up an extra music class to help me become a better player and work my way up the percussion food chain. I soon found that the more I was around music, hearing, and playing it, the more I desired a career in it. Even though my confidence kept telling me you’ll never be good enough, my hard work finally paid off. At the end of my junior year, I had the best audition and earned the position of center snare. This success has been one of the most important in my life because it made me feel I could aim for higher goals and achieve them. This journey developed a passion and drive for music that will continue throughout my life. Just as importantly, it’s given me the confidence that I need to take the next step toward pursuing an education in instrumental music.

In my dream career as a music instructor, I hope to be able to teach my students everything they want to know about their instruments and instill in them a curiosity for understanding, as well as a work ethic that they can apply to anything. A person can learn the meaning of hard work through music by playing something over and over again until it’s perfect, then playing it one-hundred times more. Patience and persistence is taught when a performance does not go as it should have. Dedication is necessary in order to find the inspiration to wake up for every early rehearsal and play for hours of independent study and practice.

To me, music is a tool people use to express themselves. It allows them to reminisce and recreate the past as well as dream about the future. It can be used to convey things that couldn’t easily be said in regular everyday life. Music is such an essential part of the lives of young people because it’s an outlet for us to think about all of the endless possibilities. One of my favorite quotes, by an unknown author, really explains why teenagers grasp so dearly to their I-pods and MP3 players: “Have you ever wondered why young people take to music like a fish to water? ... Maybe it’s because music is fun. Plain and simple. It opens up their minds to dream great dreams about where they can go and what they can do when they get older."

I understand that I have a huge challenge awaiting me because I’m not a music prodigy or gifted with any natural talent or perfect pitch. I feel that I wouldn’t have been blessed with such a passion and appreciation for music if I wasn’t meant to pursue it and learn to be excellent at it. Being a musician is more than hitting the right notes at the right time, but being a musician is about playing what’s not there. “A musician may suddenly reach a point where all pleasure in technique falls away and in some moment of inspiration he becomes the instrument through which the music is played” (Edwin Diller Starbuck),
Someday I hope to reach that point. Music has been one of the biggest mental obstacles that I have faced. I don’t know if my grandfather came by his playing ability naturally or if he had a similar journey that I’ve had, becoming the legend that he is to me today. But, I do know that along with my experiences and passion for music, his example will be an important element that will give me the drive to become a true musician.
Sometimes Goodbye
is a Second Chance

Author: Mary Beth Rosenauer
Grade: 10
Teacher: Carol Bunse
School: Savannah High School, Savannah, MO

At least once a week every week of every month for the past nine years, I’ve played a movie clip in my mind. Sometimes the clip is different, though it usually revolves around the same general idea. Oftentimes at the end of this mini-movie, I’m crying. Other times, I’m laughing at the memory of what once was. Cringing at the memory of what could have been, and smiling at the thought of what life now is and will come to be in the future. The death of a loved one is a curious thing. It’s hard to grasp the reality that someone you’ve grown close to will no longer be there. We all deal with the thought of death differently. Some of us cry while others are too young to even realize they should be upset, and still some are struck even deeper—so deep that they feel the need to be with their loved one no matter what it takes. If you were a six-year-old child, how would you react to losing the two people closest to you? Flipping through the scrapbooks, memories, and movie clips in your head, you might laugh, smile, and cry, but would you ever be thankful it happened?

It was towards the end of 1999, which means that it’s been almost a decade since I last saw her face. I remember it all too clearly, yet at the same time so many pieces are missing. My childhood is fuzzy because I’ve forced myself to forget, to move on, though I’ve held on to a few saddening little movie clips. I’m not sure if they’re real or not, the memories I do have, but how could I make up memories so painstakingly terrible? I remember my mother not feeling so well after we came back from our usual Sunday bowling trip as a family.

“Daddy,” I said, “maybe we should take her to the hospital.”

“No, she’ll be fine,” he assured me. “Now take your brother and run upstairs.”

I did as he asked but secretly watched. Now that I think about it, I don’t remember what I watched. I don’t remember what happened, if I was at the hospital or not. I don’t even remember crying at the funeral, because as I recall, I didn’t. How foolish of me. How could I not cry? I just sat on my daddy’s lap, knowing that my mother was inside that box, that terrible coffin. But why was she there? My mother, Pamela, had a second heart attack, one that proved fatal. Maybe I would’ve cried if I had been given the chance to say goodbye, to be prepared. Though, maybe it was better this way.

Unfortunately, my father did not take the news well at all. I was kind of mad at him, though. I still am. In my childish mind I blamed him for letting my mother die like that. Why hadn’t he just taken her to the hospital like I begged him to? Now I realize that sometimes adults really do know more than children. He couldn’t have saved her. No medical attention could have protected her. One of the memories that I have after the event is one I believe no child should have to deal with. No person should have this memory buried deep in the back of his or her mind only to have it dug up and played all too often.

A few months after my mother’s death, my father finally broke. He sat me down beside him and asked where I wanted to live. What kind of question was that? I wanted to live with him, of course. I wanted to be in my own house, safe from any more harm. I longed for him to see me grow up, to be daddy’s little girl. Where was he going anyway? How could he leave now? I needed him. My younger brother needed him. I had never realized until I became a teenager why he did what he did then. He missed the woman he loved so much. He had these two children that were a constant reminder of what he had lost. I suppose it’s not that he didn’t want us anymore, though it’s hard not to feel that way sometimes. In 2000, shortly after my mother died, my father passed away. Ron Rosenauer committed suicide.

Until recently, no one had told me what exactly happened. No one said, “Hey, by the way, your dad shot himself with a gun.” I suppose telling that to a six-year-old wouldn’t really go over too well. Somehow, though, I just knew what had happened. The act of suicide is often viewed as a cowardly way to end one’s own life. I hear people around me always joking about it all the time. For some people, maybe it just an easy way out, an act done without much thinking. However, I believe it was different with my father. He knew exactly what he was doing and why he was doing it. He wanted to be with the beautiful woman that he loved and adored. I’m sure he dreaded the idea of leaving his children behind, because from what I remember he was an amazing father. He knew, though, that he would never be able to raise two children on his own. I also believe that he was so in love with my mother that he
was never going to remarry. He understood, better than I did at the time, that I would live a better life in the care of another family, one with a mother and a father to protect me.

So, for a while, I would become an orphan. Okay, maybe that sounds a bit dramatic, but by definition I was an orphan. However, I went to live with one of my aunts. I had gone from a three-story brick house with a pool in the backyard to a one-story house where I often slept on a cot. I didn’t live there for very long, or my life would be drastically different right now. After living there for a short period, I went to live with Uncle Ken and his wife Janet. They had a three-story house and neighbors with children our age. I was definitely excited to move. Or was I? I actually don’t remember how I felt then, only how I feel now. I really do feel like I was completely emotionless throughout this whole experience.

As I sit here writing this, I’m trying to think of where I want to go with it. What meaning am I trying to get across? At the moment, as I read and reread it, this story seems all too upsetting. One that would make the reader feel bothered and sympathetic. That’s really not the message I want. I’ll admit that sometimes it’s nice to hear someone say how sorry he or she is and how tragic it really is. In all reality, though, it’s not a tragedy. The death of my parents was not an ending but merely a beginning. (Often times when I think about this topic, I start to feel like a great philosopher, like Plato or Aristotle. I feel smart, like I know more than those around me. In a sense I suppose I do.)

I recently heard a song by one of my favorite bands. I’d heard the song many times before, but I’d never really though anything of it until now. It’s called “Second Chance” and is performed by Shinedown. The chorus says, “Tell my mother, tell my father, I’ve done the best I can to make them realize this is my life. I hope they understand I’m not angry. I’m just saying, sometimes goodbye’s a second chance.” Now, honestly, that song is about a boy who’s running away from his parents and starting a new life. Though, why can’t it apply to my situation, too? It makes me smile to hear the song, but the last sentence in the chorus hits me the hardest. Sometimes goodbye’s a second chance.

To me, that means that saying goodbye to my parents gave me a second chance, a chance to start over with a new life. Now, why I needed a new life when my old one had barely started is beyond me. I’ve learned not to ask questions, just accept answers. I suppose this could all deal a bit with fate. Religious fate or not, I most certainly believe it was my destiny to be where I am now. Although many people may not like to hear this, I’ve been questioning my religious views lately. I go to church, and I love my church family so much. They’ve changed me for the better. However, do I believe in God? That’s the hardest questions for me, as it is for most of us. I’m just not sure. How could God take away a young girl’s parents both in the same year? On the other hand, why would He then give her such a wonderful new start? My point is: maybe the big man upstairs knows what he’s doing. I want to believe that so much. The death of my parents has actually given me a stronger religious faith. I thank God every day for what he has given me because it’s so much.

I like to think that heaven exists. There’s a big, beautiful, fluffy, white-clouded heaven above that spreads on and on without end. I like to imagine that my parents are up there. (Now, I actually imagine that they are watching me on a big screen television or a small glass ball, both equally strange things to have in heaven.) I like to pretend that they’re not gone but simply in a better place. Whether heaven is just a fantasy or not, it’s where my mother and father are. Mommy and Daddy are in a better place, and one day they’ll be ready to bring their little girl home again.

Now, I believe in happy endings, and so far the ending of this story is making me frown a bit. Anybody else feeling a bit teary-eyed or needing a new box of tissues? (Please note that this is my attempt to add humor to a heavy topic. It’s certainly not easy.) I’m not sure if anyone reading this has noticed, but my writing here is as if I were actually saying it aloud or writing it in a diary. I intended for it to be this way. I was overjoyed when I found out about this essay contest, a chance to do something I’m good at in order to maybe win a prize. That sounded pretty cool, though what I was more excited about was a chance to simply share my story, no matter the quality of the contest.

More than anything, I just want people to hear the story of an everyday, normal teenager. Me. There’s nothing special about me, yet if one thinks about it, isn’t there? How many other teenagers does anyone know with a story like mine? I’m certainly not the only one. Oh, how I would love to just talk to someone with a story similar to mine. How wonderful it would be to connect with someone who knew exactly what I was going through. However, I don’t see that happening for now, so I write. I write a story of a young girl who arose from a “burning building” type tragedy. The cool thing about this story is that I’ve actually lived the perfect nightmare with a beautiful fairytale ending.

I’m smiling right now at the thought of being able to write a wonderful story about a topic that is often quickly viewed and set aside for fear of its awkwardness. If a reader remembers nothing else from what I’ve written, he or she should remember that death is not something to be pushed aside and forgotten because, come on, who really “forgets” that someone they love is dead? It’s impossible (believe me, I’ve tried). No, death is something that needs
to be talked about. (If not for the listener, then for the speaker himself or herself.) Many may forget about a terrible boyfriend or yesterday’s mail still in the mailbox but never forget about the death of a loved one. Keep that person close to your heart because they’re only really gone if you forget them.

I’d like to end this essay with a prayer (pushing aside the whole question of whether “the big man” is really “upstairs”). This is not a prayer to God, but he can listen. I’d rather He hand the phone over to my parents so I could tell them a few things. If they could hear me, I would tell them how much I love them and miss them. How I wish that I really knew who they were. I’d also like to thank them for simply being smarter than I am. I’d ask my father to forgive me for doubting his actions. I’d thank my mother for giving me her stunning looks and assure her that I’ll be careful around those silly boys. (Oh, what I would give for even just five minutes with my parents right now.) Most of all, I’d let them know that they’re still my mom and dad and that I’m still and will always be their little girl. After I’ve said all this, I would say, “Goodbye,” and then wait—for a second chance.
Portfolio Submission

Author: Abby Scribner
Grade: 12
Teacher: Merle Singer
School: Parkway North High School, St. Louis, MO

Contents
Statement of Purpose
My Double Life (Memoir)
My Grandfather’s Book (Poetry)
Metaphors (Short Short Story)

Statement of Purpose

The first work in my portfolio, “My Double Life,” is about a concert venue called The Pageant. I’ve been going to concerts there for years, and it represents an important aspect of my life and personality. Even though I’m seen as somewhat of a “brain” at school, The Pageant is somewhere I can interact with new people who don’t know anything about me, and where I can be a punk rocker rather than a valedictorian. I included this piece because the descriptive details about the venue capture the strange juxtaposition of the physical confinement of being in a crowded place and the freedom I feel when I’m there.

“My Grandfather’s Book” is a short poem I wrote about finding an old copy of Thoreau’s Walden that belonged to my paternal grandfather, Peter, who died when my dad was very young. I’ve never met him, but I feel a connection to him because of my relationship with my dad. His book is a physical symbol of his legacy: my curiosity about his life and the way my relationship with my dad compares to and differs from his relationship with his son.

My final piece, “Metaphors,” is one of the stranger pieces I’ve written. The story came flying out of me all at once, and I simply wrote it down so as not to forget it. It’s my experiment with a more open and modern style, and I included it to show a more abstract side of my writing. Its themes are similar to some in my other works, but the format is unique.

My Double Life

The boy whom I have affectionately dubbed “ska kid” is flailing his arms with his elbows stuck out angularly, jerking up and down as his small oval glasses tip precariously toward the end of his nose. He is not an epileptic but is dancing, and I do not know his real name. What I do know is that he has been at every ska show I’ve ever attended, including this one at the Pageant in St. Louis, Missouri. The smell of sweat invades my nose as it mixes with the stale odor of smoke and beer, and as I try to make out his figure in the dim, shadowy light, I am rammed into by a 200 pound guy with a shaved head, whose wet, heavy shirt saturated with sweat feels rough as it makes contact with the inside of my arm. I can feel a bruise forming already. There is no place I would rather be.

As I look to my right, I see a boy about my age, the tips of his long, shaggy brown hair damp with perspiration. He is wearing a leather jacket with a colorful assortment of patches on it. One of them proudly proclaims his tolerance, showing a swastika with a thick red line crossing it out. He is the combination and embodiment of every guy I have ever wanted but known I was too white-bread suburban teen to ever catch the interest of.

“Are they letting more people into the pit?” he screams to a security guard dressed in a light blue shirt a few feet in front of us. We are at a break between sets, but the booming bass of the second band warming up pierces through my skin and shakes my organs. I lean over the railing and glance into the pit a few feet ahead of us. The floor groans under the weight of hundreds of people crammed into the space between the stage and the bar. The stage looks down on the pit, and so from where I’m standing, the members of the band look like sweaty, alcoholic gods.

“Yeah, man, go ahead!” the guard screams in reply, and the anti-Nazi squeezes by a horde of middle-aged women and disappears into the pit. I quietly follow him past the women whose shiny magenta lips and dark, heavy raccoon eyes are outshone only by their loud, over-exaggerated cackles of laughter.

I lose track of leather jacket boy fairly quickly in the huge mass of people, which is understandable because, as
the next band starts, the crowd's transformation is immediate. Before the music started there was no room to breathe. Once the music starts, there is no room to exist. I instantly become a part of the pack, and as it sways back and forth, so do I. There isn't even room to fall down because, if I begin to tip in any direction, I am supported by the weight of the five people within five inches of me. All sense of personal comfort is lost within the first two minutes. Perspiration forms on my brow and drips off my nose; my clothes become completely soaked, and my mouth goes so dry that I learn what my insides taste like. My body is screaming at me to sit down, drink some water, just to stop moving, but I am supported by the people on all sides of me; we all jump and kick and sing along. I could keep going that way for hours, so I do.

Something is alive here tonight at this fast-paced ska show, the place where huge, hairy men joyfully dance with anorexic hipsters, where middle aged women with their obnoxious laughs and somewhat drunken swaggers bump arms with seven year old kids of parents with questionable ethics, and where bookish band geeks can lead double lives. As the music blares and pushes my eardrums to the breaking point, I see the dim outlines of a familiar cast of characters around me. They are occasionally illuminated by a jet of light coming from the stage, and as more bruises begin to form on my shins and ankles and my body cries out for water, I jump and flail and jerk my elbows back and let myself disappear into the crowd.

“I've seen Streetlight about four times this week,” boasts the guy standing next to me. Between sets, the roadies for the band Streetlight Manifesto test the mics and instruments as feedback rings through the room. “I followed them all across the state, and I'm going with them to Ohio tomorrow. They're my favorite band. How many times have you seen them?”

We somehow manage to casually chat amidst the deafening roar of the crowd attempting to casually chat too. Soon, the booming bass starts up again, and I feel it in the center of my bones. A pale hand near me holds up a solid, forest green slip-on tennis shoe above the crowd. Another hand extends up and makes its way towards the shoe until the two are reunited. This is how lost articles of clothing are returned at concerts. Jake and I dance around each other for the rest of the set. I feel the impact of random knees and elbows crashing into my stomach and limbs. A tall girl with flaming red hair and a checkerboard wristband slams straight into my side, quickly shouts an apology, and returns to the middle of the pit to slam against some other people.

The band strikes its final encore chord, and the crowd goes absolutely insane, yelling themselves hoarse and begging for more. But we all know it's over, so people begin to make their way out. I stick around and call my friends, trying to find out where they've gone.

“We're outside!” they yell into the phone. “Where are you?”

“I'm gonna get a T-shirt really quickly. Just wait for me a few minutes, okay?”

I reach the T-shirt line and survey my surroundings as staff members begin cleaning up the place. Now, with the houselights on, The Pageant looks like a different universe from the one I knew ten minutes ago. The swaying crowd has been replaced by trash and spilled drinks, and my numb happiness has been replaced by the dull ringing in my ears, the aching soreness in my arms, and pictures in my mind of the mounds of homework I have waiting for me at home, but then I spot ska kid leaving, and he gives me a nod. I know that the real world is really just a bumper between shows so that we can get some rest every once in a while.

My Grandfather's Book

Hidden in a chestnut bookcase, seemingly unimportant, I find
Walden, or, Life in the Woods
1893 edition.

My grandfather’s
then my father’s
and now mine.

Its musty pages seem to shy away from the light as I open the book gently. They are yellow and sickly with age, but their ideas are not. The margins are unusually large so the sentences have space to breathe.
Its stiff, sturdy, dark green cover
has attempted to contain monumental thoughts
for over 100 years,
but as soon as I dive into the first page
they all spill out.

On each page I see
the light in my grandfather’s eyes
as he scans the pages quickly, clinging to a rare free moment
in the midst of raising ten kids.

Reading it, he didn’t know he would one day have a granddaughter.
He didn’t know that his life would be cut short
and that my dad would lose him at age 15.
He didn’t know that this book, with its ideas now firmly planted in his consciousness,
would make its way to me and still be treasured
in 2007.

And now, at age 15,
I know
that objects are more than the sum of their parts
and that stiff, sturdy covers can never contain
the absurdity
of being.

**Metaphors**

These are the lies we tell ourselves to get through the day.
Maybe J.D. Salinger found the fountain of youth. Maybe he’s the only one who wouldn’t abuse this awesome power, and this is why he’s a recluse.
Maybe bumper stickers and t-shirts are activism. Maybe there’s thought enough in buying them and wearing them, and maybe all this world is missing is a catchy Bob Marley slogan.
Maybe real art comes all at once. Maybe nothing takes work because true inspiration can’t be stopped and misery isn’t desirable to anyone sensible.

This is what happens today.
Two teenage girls finally perfect their dance routine for the school talent show. A man walks into a café and orders a jelly donut. Someone decides his life is not worth living and jumps off a bridge. An old, frail woman threads a needle, her hands shaking. A mother finds a fashionable hat at a vintage clothing store. A family torn apart by the death of their dog learns to love again.

This is what happens now.
Janine stands in the shower, the water rolling down her scalp and passing over the kinks in her spine. Her salty tears mingle with the streaming water until finally she turns the knob and stops the flow. She brushes aside the shower curtain, her body glistening with water droplets, but her wet hair makes her look like a drowned rat.
“What are you doing in here, Kurt?” she asks.

This is a story-poem. It’s a story and a poem. You have to extrapolate. The water dripping out of the faucet, it’s a metaphor for the human condition. Yes, the chaotic nature of being, you’ve got it! The absurdity of living, you’ve got it! The alienation of human beings, you’ve got it! These are dark times, my friend, but you’ve got it, you’ve got it, you’ve got it!

My name is Kurt because my responses are often curt. My tempter is curt. I have harsh, jutting, angular sounds in my name, so I’m predisposed to violence. It’s a sad thing to be predisposed to violence by harsh, jutting, angular
sounds, but I’m telling you it happens every day.

Janine and I had a fight today. It’s always my fault because of her soft, flowing vowels and because I am the creep who is sitting there when she comes out of the shower. We moved in together to share our suffering, a terribly romantic notion that we sang to ourselves as we writhed under the covers at night and went about doing terribly mundane things like eating sugary cereals and paying bills. It’s all ironic juxtaposition. Janine would capture it in her typewriter, and I would keep up the façade, working in a cubicle just like they want, but they will never know that it’s all just a joke and they are the fools.

I hope you’ve noticed this spacing because it’s extremely significant. Do you see the way I have a break after almost every paragraph? It’s because I am jumping from topic to topic and rapidly switching perspective.

It’s brilliant, really. We’re brilliant because life works in symbols and metaphors but never similes because those are manufactured and forced. The pigeon picking at the bread crumb on the street corner…symbolism! The old man with the newspaper boy hat sitting in a used bookstore is alone because he’s lonely and we’re all lonely and it really can’t be helped. We use this to elevate our existence and feel bigger than we are because we are small small small and feeling bigger is our only hope and our goal until we transform into rotting carcasses in the ground. We’re always rotting because no carcass just sits there and smells like flowers.

Janine walks by me, a drop from her hair flying onto my shoulder and spreading out into a misshapen blob on the cotton fabric of my T-shirt. I follow her into the living room where she sits down at the typewriter, one hand tucking her towel into itself so she doesn’t have to waste time getting dressed. The freckles on her left shoulder blade condense as she lifts her arms. She punches at the keys, getting it all down until she’s crying so hard that she can’t get out another damn word.

She wants to have children because children are the future and the light and the choice of a new generation. Look at how redemptive they can be! Look at their innocence! We could have one, and it wouldn’t be sold into slavery or anything and could maybe even be happy. She could be a hip earth mom who never gives into convenience and only buys organic foods so that Baby X will grow big and strong and will live the way life’s supposed to be lived.

I tell her, “Janine, baby, we don’t have any money! We’d have to be a cog in the system and sacrifice our ideals. You know nothing in this world is as important as ideals.” Then I quote Plato, who may or may not have had kids, but it doesn’t really matter because I would rather leave her than give up my ideals for some unborn baby.

Did you find the stream of consciousness yet? That’s a technique very popular among modernists who responded to the ambiguity and confusion created by one or both world wars by doing away with the traditional rules of writing. I’ve made Janine cry today, and we create our own misery, maybe, but I’m unhappy, and I don’t know why. Isn’t that a goddamn metaphor?
Divinity

Author: Keiffer Sticken
Grade: 11
Teacher: Tyler Carlson
School: Savannah High School, Savannah, MO

I
The man with no voice
Speaks to men with no ears.
They’re all that matters.
Why are we here?

The man with no voice,
It’s so hard to tell.
When he tries to scream,
Everyone yells.

Why can’t we listen?
We have the choice
To hear the thoughts
Of the man with no voice.

I am the man everyone wants to hear.
Sometimes I wish I wasn’t here.
All other people act so coy.
I am the man, the man with no voice.

Tape my mouth shut, melt my eyes closed.
Encroach on the ancient laws of those
Who listened to all, it was no real choice,
A whole nation of men, who all found their voice.

II
I can’t come out; the sky is falling.
Local news says a storm is coming.
A blood red sky keeps on raining.
The drops are lies; the winds, unchanging.

When all is seen by some as smut.
The mouths of all are kept wired shut.
The colors are sounds of the smell of your footsteps.
You’re leaving again.

We live in a world of no’s and not’s,
Of isolations and second thoughts.
Slow down, slow down, you’re moving too fast.
What more can be done with a stone in a house made of glass?

I’m not ready for the white light and the bang,
But I’m sick of all, of all the same old things.
Society dictates one and one and one is nothing.
I’m happy one minute, deranged the next. Maybe it’s acting.
Every story has a happy ending, unless the story is true.
The only thing we want in life is more than we can chew.
I can see the smell of the sounds of your eyes.
You’re leaving again. You’re always leaving.

YOU’RE ALWAYS LEAVING and no one, no one ever, ever comes back.

Sometimes you know never isn’t even enough
When you wait, wait, wait, and nighttime never comes.
There are times when I wonder if it could be better.
It’s okay to be in a wheelchair, but man you can’t act like a baby in a stroller.

Will we still be here when all the days have past?
Do we have enough time to spend?
Do hopes and dreams really ever last
When nothing can go further than the end?

I often wonder what does it take to come to an end?
We all can find the answer in the place where we begin.
I lay in a bed filled with love, heartaches, and lies.
In the time of just a day, the bed won’t still be mine.
I think, is this it then? Could this really be the day?
When everything I do becomes everything I’ve done?

Bring me devastation, I can’t handle peace.
None of the tall people care when you’re on your knees.
It’s a predictable story with a twisted end.
Happiness is only possible when denial is your friend.

I know it’s all been trouble lately, but look into my eyes.
They’ve never hurt you, yet are hurt by your true lies.
There was nothing to begin with, and how was I to know
That the warm face in front of me hid thoughts as cold as snow?
Salvation is a maybe, with chances growing slight.
The only reason to be alone is to know that it’s all right.
There’s no answer to the question of what’s in it for me.
No one knows and no one cares, so all you can do is breathe.

These trite events lead to one conclusion:
To love and be loved is a faint illusion.
So frown on the thoughts know to be true.
And realize there’s nothing you can fucking do.

Take the knife and stab it in, feel its lovely touch.
And even now, in this bloody time, you’re best isn’t enough.
But there is one gleaming, shining ray of hope
In this dirty room of shit and smoke.

You don’t have to feel it’s always been this way.
There’s still the secular power that turns dawn to day.
My conscious is wiped clear and my guilt is free.
Even as I let your tainted traps consume me.

I still have my devastation, and don’t need the peace.
This time it’s over, and I’ve risen from my knees
Because my experiences will surely stay the same.
And you and only you are the one that you can blame.

Damn, there I’ve said it, and I hope it’s sinking in.
There might not be a god, but you sure as hell can sin.
The tears have caked on my enlightened face,
And sometimes it’s good to know that evil can keep pace.

I don’t need to hear about all this love and hate.
In the end all that matters is how you feel about your fate.
I’ve accepted mine, and I see that it’s unfair.
I hope all of you can still believe, when you find that I’m not there.
Of all the actions in my life
I've tried to separate the wrong from right,
Day in and day out,
Night after night,
Trying to figure, to solve, to find
The difference between
Dark and light.
Confused I am, puzzled even.
People walk, we talk, we love, we fight,
And why, to begin again after each night.
I'm tense; I'm uneasy; I'm confused; I'm distraught.
I look at the purest of pure,
The darkest of night,
And I can't but wonder
Who's wrong and who's right?
For who gets entrance to Heaven or Hell.
An odd thing about it,
We really can't tell.
All the differences in this world
Make it up as a whole.
So who am I to say who's dark and who's light?
How am I to tell the wrong from the right?
Atop the cliff, the stronghold stands,  
Harsh, stone, impenetrable.  
None can pierce the age-old ballasts,  
Or scale the man-made mountain.

Faithful warriors watch and walk,  
For the enemy is near.  
Brave warriors, will your general arrive in time?  
Has he not abandoned you to certain death?  
He has left, never to return.

Three days ago, he set off,  
Promising to hasten back to his ironclad home,  
The well-known haunt of his youth.

And yet  
He has not returned.  
Darkness presides like a judge over the faithful few.  
Now they see and understand.  
He was the beacon from the lighthouse on the shore,  
Illuminating their path, protecting, saving, showing the way.

A shudder seeps through the soldiers,  
Fear, the tempting serpent,  
Slowly steals them away.

Like lightning before the storm, word spreads,  
“The Evil One is in the valley,  
With fiends ten thousand strong  
Ready to scale the mountainside.”

Yet there is no sign of the master.

Darkness cloaks the Evil One.  
They see him not,  
But his sinister drums bear witness.

Surer than the skillful archer’s shaft,  
The men begin to fall,  
Prey to unreasoning terror.

Then speaks one among them,  
The Master’s closest friend, his second in command,  
“Let us run, flee from this cold, stone castle,  
For if we stay, it will become our burial tomb.  
The master will not return, to die has left us.
We must leave, and quickly,
Or the Evil One will take us all,
None to carry the message."

For one moment they hesitate,
Then rises the battle cry of the Evil One
And each fights, though not the enemy.
He fights his fellow soldier
For he himself must be the first to leave.

Finally they rush out into the open air,
Under the beating rain,
Punishing the cowards.

The fortress still stands behind them,
The last beacon of truth they fought so hard to protect.
Now they flee from it like thieves in the night,
Never again to seek safety inside.

If they could only see the face of the Master,
Crawling to mount the lofty wall,
The lone protector of their lighthouse,
With only the rain to wash his rugged, bloodstained face.
If they only heard of his arrival
All would be well,
But the enemy saw to that.
Their newest leader would leave none alive,
Indeed his cords still bind the Master.

POUND! POUND!
Comes the message of doom from the gateway.
SPLINTER! CRACK!
No hope consoles their unflinching Master.
Even could he rise, there is no escape.

Soon servants of the Evil One will find him,
Mock him, spit on him, taunt him.
Like Samson the powerful,
Felled by his trusted Delilah.

Dying lies the Master,
Inside his citadel of old,
His man-made mountain,
His impenetrable home,
Stabbed through the heart by his friend.
Bridge Jumping

Author: Emma Wilson
Grade: 10
Teacher: Kimberly Blevins
School: Mount Vernon High School, Mount Vernon, MO

I stood at the edge staring down at what could become my own watery grave. I looked up from the glossy surface of the water to where my mother lay in her sunbathing chair, about 100 yards up river, trying to turn her fluorescent white legs tan. She was completely unaware of the impending doom her oldest daughter faced.

Suddenly a shadow cast over me, and I glanced over my shoulder to see my father standing tall behind me giving me a big toothy smile on his face.

“You gunna go soon or what?” He asked smiling at the wide look in my eyes.

“I’m mentally preparing myself,” I said.

Just then the rickety metal bridge we stood on gave the slightest shiver, and I turned around just in time to watch a slightly drunk man leap from the bridge supports 20 feet above. He flung himself out over the water and landed not too gracefully in the waters below on his back. When the man surfaced he cried out in pain. His white back was now red. He swore loudly as he climbed the river bank out of the water.

“You turn!” my dad nudged me closer to the edge of the bridge. There was no way I would ever jump from the supports above. I wasn’t nuts, just looking for a thrill.

I took a deep breath and stepped under the metal railing. Now all that kept me from plunging 20 feet down into the merciless water was my iron grip on the railing behind me.

Don’t get me wrong I’m not scared of heights or anything. It’s just that all my life my parents had filled my head with stories of crazed people trying to show off on the river, and winding up hitting their heads on some rock or stump or something and dying. It was my mother’s favorite thing to caution me. Every time we swam near anything that looked mildly interesting in the river, she’d remind me that there were probably snakes or fallen trunks just under the water waiting for you to take a dive right on top of them and break your neck. That’s why she was in the chair facing the other way, unaware of what was going on, and my dad was the one cheering me on.

As I had stood, contemplating my own death, some of the drunk old men on shore had noticed me balking at the jump and decided to lend their support.

“Jump girly! Jump! You can’t walk off that bridge; it’s against the law of the land!” one yelled raising his beer can to me. I swallowed as several people looked up at me to stare. There was absolutely no turning back at this point.

I closed my eyes for a moment and let the words from one of my favorite songs float through my head: “If you jump I will jump to. We will fall together, never looking back at what we’ve done...Leap the edge and flutter by. We’re finally alive.” Then I smiled and took in a breath, ready now for the fall.

As I let my grip on the rail behind me go and took the crucial step, I opened my eyes and watched the world fall out from under me. It was amazing; the summer sun lit everything in the most beautiful way. The adrenalin in my veins pulled everything into sharp focus. As the wind whipped past my head, I watched as the trees all around seemed to grow at a rapid rate.

I felt so alive. This felt right, like me, like if any one had ever wondered what my soul looked like, they need only have watched that moment and felt what I felt to know who I was totally. I was free from everything for just a moment, flying through the air, like not even gravity held me in its grasp.

And then it was over. I hit the water and plunged fifteen feet, my feet grazing the bottom of the river before quickly kicking off to surface. When my head broke free of the water, I gulped the air the moment had stolen when I fell.

“What did you think?” my dad asked shaking water out of his face next to me in the water. He had jumped right next to me.

“It was great! Let’s go again!” I said with a smile that glowed so bright it might have made the sun jealous.
99 Bottles

Author: Crystal Wren
Grade: 8
Teacher: Angela Selinger
School: Hazelwood North Middle School, Florissant, MO

The night I stood up to my father, the world stopped, and I became a forever changed young man at the age of fourteen.

I was lounging on the family room couch, and mom was cooking dinner in the kitchen with my ten year old sister, Jessica, when dad stormed through the front door of our house. He had a nearly empty beer bottle hanging in his hand. Uncoordinated and careless, he stumbled through the doorway with a deranged look in his eye.

My heart leaped as I jumped off the couch, running into the kitchen. Having gone through this drill many times over the past five years, Jessica grabbed my outstretched hand. I led her into the family room for the briefest second to run upstairs to her room.

Before I was able to take the first step up the stairs, though, a big hand gripped my shoulder from behind, pulling me and Jessie back into the family room.

“Boy!” he hollered at me, yanking me forward by the front of my shirt. “Do you think it’s funny to leave that damned skateboard lyin’ around for someone to step on? Do you?” With his face two inches from mine, I could smell the alcohol thick on his breath as he slurried his words.

Mom ran into the room, grabbing onto my father’s arm. The bottle fell from his hand. “Jonathon!” she cried. “Please let Tyrone go. He’s only 14. He makes mistakes!” She tried to pull him away. He ignored her and shoved her off of him, single‐handedly. She flew into a stack of CDs against the wall, sinking to the floor.

“Do you like to try and break your ol’ man’s back boy?” he yelled in my face. As soon as his words were out, he lashed out with a right hook, his fist connecting with my jaw and sending me to the floor, one less tooth in my mouth.

Then Jessica began to cry.

Our father turned on her. “Hush up now, little girl! Quit making all that noise!” When she only sobbed louder, he smacked her across the face with the back of his hand hard enough to send her flying backward, cracking her head against the steps, pitting her unconscious.

I snapped.

“Damn it!” dad shouted, and he turned back to me.

For years I had seen this man storm into the house, wasted, raging around the house, and more often than once, hitting my mother. For years I’d had to make excuses to my teachers for bruises he left on me. For years I had lived in fear for my younger sister.

I picked up the beer bottle.

Never had he touched little Jessie, because never had I allowed it, pushing her out of the way before he could get near her. Never again would he place a hand on her, not on the only sister I had left.

He stalked forward toward me. When he was two feet away, I smashed the beer bottle into his cheek, right when I heard the police sirens at the end of the street.

* * * * *

Three years later here I am, thinking about what I did.

Staring at my father in his hospital bed, my eyes wander to the scar where I made my mark that night. Asleep, he doesn’t look like the vicious drunk who hit my sister, though I’ve made sure it was the last time he touched her.

He looks like the man I admired when I was nine. He looks like the man who played catch with me and lived a happy life working as a carpenter with a writer for a wife, two daughters and a son. This is why I like to watch him sleep.

He didn’t drink before his first daughter, my older sister, died. Vanessa was her name, and I knew that she was his first born, that she made him proud with her 4.0 GPA and her swimming medals. She was killed in a car accident when she was fifteen. I was nine at the time, and Jessica was five. Vanessa was hanging around the wrong crowd, though she had no idea that they were getting high on frequent intervals. They went out for a drive after a little house party and never came back. Vanessa was the only one they found who didn’t have any alcohol in her system.

That was when my dad started drinking.

After the night when I hit him with that bottle, he’s been living in a rehabilitation center...until now. Looking at
my dad lying peacefully reminds me of how we used to get along. Looking around his hospital room reminds me of why we don’t. My mouth tightens into bitter line as he begins to stir. Sitting at his bedside, I stare at him with narrowed eyes.

He sits up and looks at me. “Where is Jessica?” he asks.
“Mom took her to dance practice,” I answer unemotionally. As if he has the right to ask about my sister; he lost that a long time ago.

“Oh, okay.” He groans, holding his side as if he has a painful cramp. “Who would’ve thought that I’d end up in a hospital?” He gives a small breathless chuckle.

I scoff at him. “You have liver cancer; that’s what alcohol does. You put yourself in here, Dad.”
He cringes and looks away. “I know,” he whispers. For long minutes, the both of us sit in an intense silence before he says, “That night, when you hit me with the beer bottle…”
I set my jaw. “Yes…?”

“You did it to protect your sister and your mother.” I nod wordlessly and look away. There is a long moment of silence before I hear his voice again. “I don’t want you ever to stop caring for them like that, especially when I’m gone.”

My head snaps up, and I see the tears streaming down his face as he gazes at me. “I’m so sorry, Tyrone,” he says.

A nurse walks in to check the status of his vitals. Then, out of the blue, dad begins to hum a tune. The nurse looks at him for a second while taking his pulse then returns to his medical chart.

I stare at dad for a few seconds and chuckle at the irony before I begin to hum with him the tune of “99 Bottles of Beer.”
Scholastic Writing Awards

The National Scholastic Writing Awards were launched by the founder of Scholastic Inc. in the 1920s as a way to reward students’ creative work, grades 7-12, and to recognize excellence in teaching. To date, more than 12 million teenagers have participated in the nation’s most prestigious writing and arts awards program for talented students.

Former participants recognized for their creative work as teenagers include Truman Capote, Frances Farmer, Joyce Maynard, Bernard Malamud Joyce Carol Oates, Sylvia Plath, and Robert Redford.

Missouri regional winners and their teachers were honored at the 2009 Write-to-Learn Conference in Osage Beach, Missouri, on Friday, February 27, where winning entries were displayed. Missouri student winners received Gold Key, Silver Key, or Honorable Mention awards and certificates; a copy of The Best Teen Writing of 2008: Selected National Award Recipients from the Scholastic Awards of 2008; and recognition from Write-to-Learn keynote speaker Chris Crutcher, as well as an autographed copy of a Crutcher novel.

Four of Missouri’s Gold Key recipients were also selected as 2009 National Scholastic Writing Awards Contest Silver Medal Winners:

- **Erin Chambers**, Hickman High School – Columbia, Kim Pettilonacopolis, teacher, journalism category
- **Sally Fritsche**, Hickman High School – Columbia, Dean Stover, teacher, personal essay/memoir category; (Sally was also the Missouri Region American Voices Medal recipient.)
- **Jessi Glueck**, Leawood Middle School - Leawood, KS, Amanda Witty, teacher, personal essay/memoir category
- **Cassie Liu**, Lafayette High School – Wildwood, Crystal Maier, teacher, general writing portfolio category
- **Yunshu Luo**, Crestview Middle School – Ellisville, Anne Schirmer, personal essay/memoir category

2009 Missouri Writing Region Leadership Team

- **Jane Frick** ([frick@missouriwestern.edu](mailto:frick@missouriwestern.edu)) Coordinator (Prairie Lands Writing Project Director and Missouri Western State University English Professor)
- **Erin Walker** ([emh6225@missouriwestern.edu](mailto:emh6225@missouriwestern.edu)) Research Assistant/Contest Submissions Coordinator (Missouri Western State University Graduate Assistant)
- **Deb Schwebach** ([jldss@yahoo.com](mailto:jldss@yahoo.com)) Associate Coordinator (Lathrop R-II High School language arts chair and curriculum coordinator)
- **Amy Lannin** ([lannina@missouriwestern.edu](mailto:lannina@missouriwestern.edu)) State Awards Coordinator (Missouri Writing Projects Network Coordinator and Missouri University – Columbia Education Professor)
- **Dana Humphrey** ([dhumphrey@fz.k12.mo.us](mailto:dhumphrey@fz.k12.mo.us)) State Awards Co-Coordinator (Missouri Association of Teachers of English President)
- **Tyler Carlson** ([carlson@mail.savannah.k12.mo.us](mailto:carlson@mail.savannah.k12.mo.us)) – Northwest Missouri
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- **Katrina Tillery** ([nrect80@yahoo.com](mailto:nrect80@yahoo.com)) – Southwest Missouri

Further information about the Missouri Writing Region Awards of the 2009 Scholastic Writing Awards can be found at: [http://www.missouriwestern.edu/scholastic/index.html](http://www.missouriwestern.edu/scholastic/index.html).

For more information about the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards, go to: [http://www.artandwriting.org/](http://www.artandwriting.org/).