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*Gold Medal Recipient for the National Scholastic Art and Writing Awards

**Silver Medal Recipient for the National Scholastic Art and Writing Awards

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 June 2008 to form the Missouri Writing Region, a regional affiliate for the national Scholastic Writing Awards Contest sponsored by The Alliance for Young Artists & Writers (http://www.artandwriting.org/). The winning students’ writings from the Missouri Writing Region for the 2010 national Scholastic writing contest comprise this edition of Missouri Youth Write.

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This edition is available online at http://www.missouriwestern.edu/scholastic/youth10.html. For more information about the Missouri Region for the National Scholastic Contest, see http://www.missouriwestern.edu/scholastic or contact Dr. Jane Frick—Regional Coordinator (frick@missouriwestern.edu).
American Girl in Italy

Author: Anna Blanck
Grade: 12
Teacher: Diane Hirner
School: St. Teresa’s Academy High School, Kansas City, MO

The reflections of the moon and the streetlamps compete on the glistening pavement. Earlier in the day, a miserable torrent of rain had rearranged the grime that covers the ancient city. The tall buildings, large enough to swallow entire blocks, afford some reprieve from the wet by their overhangs. A man waits here, in this damp oasis, affecting the Italian stance of stylishly disheveled ease. I, the American girl in Italy\(^1\), walk past him for the third time in fifteen minutes, and, for the third time, our eyes catch.

I had passed him once, escorting my charges to their hotel room; again, from the hotel to the restaurant to pay the tab; and now, finally, to the hotel for the night. As I offer him one last shy smile, I dwell on my regret that I had not somehow learned Italian before my trip—only to be startled out of my reverie as he breaks the mutual silence.

He has so surprised me that I don’t catch what he has said. “I’m sorry, what?” I ask, turning to face the stranger. The man is tall and dark, with shaggy brown hair falling loosely. His face is classically composed with strong, abrupt bone structure, and defined by the shadowing of facial hair. Thick lashes frame his clear dark eyes, which narrow in thought.

“Parla l’italiano?” he speaks quizzesically, and I can only assume he means to ask if I can speak Italian. I spread my arms helplessly.

“English?” I return the inquiry, and at his similar gesture and sad shake of head, the language barrier looms between us. I have found the only Italian man in Rome who does not speak English. A nervous giggle creeps over us both, and we stand in uncomfortable uncertainty of what happens next.

“Español? Hablas español?” I venture hesitantly, for my grasp of the language is limited to Spanish I and II. I had finished those classes more than a year ago, and barely secured a passing grade in the latter. His smile broadens, and as he inhales to speak at me in Spanish, I wonder what I have gotten myself into. I am ready for anything.

I am not ready for anything. I stifle another nervous laugh at my own awkwardness, and slowly relate that I speak very little Spanish. My tongue stumbles over the unfamiliar syllables after years of disuse. I silently invoke God to bless my Spanish teacher, for drilling both the essentials of the language into my skull and, more importantly, the pronunciation. Still, introductions are something reminiscent of Tarzan and Jane; except with Stefano and Anna in a Roman concrete jungle.

Stefano is, I painstakingly discover, waiting for a group of people, but they are very late. I assume they are his friends, but after asking where they had been, am promptly corrected that they are not friends at all. He is here in some group that works or volunteers together.

I am here in a group, also, but a rather large one. The Visitation Choir—“coro,” in my fragmented Spanish—came to Italy to sing.

“No, no canto.” I explain I am not a singer myself. I am here to babysit for the two children of a singer. She not only came to Italy with the Visitation tour but brought her entire family and myself. The conversation reminds me of Charlotte and Ian, the children who I had just left showering and getting ready for bed. With communication so limited, excusing myself to check on them is a slow and dubious process.

It eventually comes down to a simple, “Hasta pronto.\(^2\)” Stefano ducks into the same brightly lit café I had been traversing to and from all evening. He’ll wait there for me to make the short walk back once again, as soon as the children are in bed. I won’t be long.

The Termini\(^3\) clock is banging out midnight as we rush into the bookstore. The children have been asleep for hours now. My duties as nanny completed, Stefano and I had gone back out and quickly discerned the need for an Italian-English dictionary. In true Italian fashion, though, our long dinner at a nearby pizzeria had taken precedence over our dictionary quest. Consequently, we find ourselves to be those irritating people who dart in just as the staff is trying to leave. Even the Termini’s shops close at some time, apparently.

The bookstore is on the second story of the train station that is only a few dark city blocks from our hotel—we had discovered we were staying at the same place. Fluorescent lights illuminate the books from every angle. I imagine Italian translation dictionaries would be a best seller of this particular store, all things considered, yet I don’t see them
immediately. Granted, I can’t read any of the informational signs. Stefano makes a beeline for the dictionaries and quickly selects one. He is already flipping through it to find some elusive word as we make our way up to the register, paying with apologetic smiles to the clearly irritated clerk.

We walk back onto the shimmering streets. The continuous tide of traffic has ebbed, receding to merely the occasional headlight. As we make our way back to the hotel, we develop a pattern of communication that will characterize our contact forever. We banter in uneasy Spanish and a continuous game of charades, while an occasional “Entiendes?” “No...” prompts an urgent flipping of pages; thus, with the addition of English and Italian, we create a trilingual dialect.

The hotel welcomes us into a friendly lobby. The overstuffed, red-leather armchairs and sofas would be tragic in the States, yet here they charm us. We perch on the furniture beneath the windows. The clock ticks dangerously close to one o’clock in the morning, yet the choir has still not returned from whatever performance and dinner they are having. We’re left quite on our own; even the hotel staff gradually drifts off. As we laugh together over some barely communicated story, I realize that it is yesterday at home; my friends are just out of school, not yet eating dinner, and droning away on homework for foreign language and world culture classes.  

“¿Cuántos días le hacen está en Roma?” he asks. I smile as I concentrate. How do I tell him, only a few more days? Nothing would be long enough.

1. Reference to Ruth Orkin’s famous photograph, “American Girl in Italy”  
2. “Even soon,” like “see you soon.”  
3. Train station in Rome  
4. “Do you understand?” “No.”  
5. Rome is seven hours ahead of Kansas City  
6. “How many days will you be in Rome?”
For some, the mind is the only sanctuary. For me, my mind is the only place I can’t escape. Trapped among memories, senses, and stories, my poor soul resides. And I wouldn’t have it any other way. You see, for an author, being thrashed around by emotions, the core of human action, is the only way to live.

Many men greater than I have tried to conquer such emotions. All have failed. Those who can bridle them, put a bit in their mouth, drive them to plow the endless fields and plains of life, they are called authors. Whether through poetry, story, song, or performance, everyone has his own story. My job is to tell it.

It was a cold November day; a day most often spent curled up on a couch at home, watching the soaps, wondering if Domenic is finally going to get the girl of his dreams, or if she marries his father. I had no such time for petty romances. I was an ace detective today. Tall, decaf, caramel macchiato, slight dash of cinnamon on the top; such was the woman and her coffee.

All of the tell-tale signs had appeared not long after her first sip. The batting eyelashes and clumsy behavior, the small talk as he brewed her nectar of the gods. If I wasn’t such a hopeless romantic, it all would have been sickening. But I was, and this story was too good to pass up.

My bag slumped to the floor as I perched in my favorite spot; a small table by the panoramic windows, far enough away that it didn’t look like I was watching, but close enough to watch. I pulled out a small pad of paper and my trusty pen. I waited. Being a journalist had taught me several good skills, like showing up early when you know something is going to happen. Then honing your patience until it does.

Right on cue, the blustery young beauty stumbled into the shop. Frosty air disturbed the heavy aroma of vanilla bean and ground coffee. The smell of new romance. I quickly scribbled notes on my paper: rosy cheeks, flustered expression, big tote bag. Wonderful. She grasped what little poise she could cling to and strode, a little less than confidently, up to the counter. Almost chuckling to myself, I often marvel at the power of simple infatuation. Here she was, an educated woman, teaching the next generation the knowledge of the world, suddenly turned into a foolish schoolgirl herself.

At least, this is what I used to think. It is only when the fool realizes her error that she becomes wise. Such was my story. On that same November day, as the cold winds of winter blew away the soft tremors of fall, a small, corsa red Morgan Roadster pulled into the third parking spot to the left. It was a beautiful car. Sleek, shiny, well-rounded, it was the panther of classics. But what caught my attention was the man who cracked open the driver’s door. In many stories, when a woman sees her soul-mate, her “true love,” three things will happen: fireworks, swooning, and forgetting her own name.

In reality, you can remember your own name very well. In fact, you even have time to hate how simple and un-exotic it is. Swooning is out of the question. Instead, you suddenly acquire acute senses. You realize how horribly you dressed that day, how unfashionably your hair is styled, how nothing separates you and the next young thing walking down the grand boulevard. As for fireworks, the closest you get is how hot your cheeks burn when you are confronted by the terrifying truth: you are in love and can do nothing about it. You feel exposed, naked, empty, and completely vulnerable, as if all can see your secret.

Reality caught me that day, a rough-roped safety net for tightrope walkers. I couldn’t help it. I fell. No matter how graceful, how noble, how impressive I fancied myself, it all stripped away in an instant. I was no longer the elusive, mysterious gypsy author who no one understands. I was a simple, plain, uninteresting girl who wasted her days at a corner coffee shop. Reality wasn’t going to let me forget.

So there I was, gaping at the most wonderful, perfect man in existence. He was tall, which reminded me how short I was. He had lovely, dark, curly hair, the kind only fairytale princes have. My own soft, brown hair seemed deficient and unattractive. His dress accented his Morgan: a white dress shirt with gray slacks, an Italian leather jacket. If his shoes weren’t foreign, I was an ape. Which, at this point, I might as well have been.
I had spent my entire life dreaming about that desperately romantic fairy tale. Now, confronted with the image of heaven itself, I was at a loss for words. The heroine was always supposed to be witty, charming, fascinating. I, however, was as interesting as a rock, not a diamond or some other gem, not even a disgusting boulder covered in moss and bugs. I was a simple, little, gray rock, that held very little significance.

The tinkling of the small bells tied to the door brought me out of my reverie, terrified. I had written these lines thousands of times, and now, when it mattered, I couldn’t say them. Completely forgetting the young teacher, I watched as he walked up to the counter. He spoke happily with the clerk, who in turn began turning machines off and on, throwing adoring glances at this young swan, who had taken a seat at the counter.

I watched as my Adonis paid the clerk, nodding and smiling, then took his coffee and proceeded out the door. I realized I’d been holding my breath. Trying to funnel oxygen to my brain again, I silently prayed he’d come back. And he did. For the next week, he came in around lunch time, ordering different variations of the house special. Every day, I watched silently, waiting for something, anything to draw his eyes to my corner.

Impatience caught me unawares. The fifth day of his visit, I couldn’t help it. The door tinkled with the tell-tale sound of his arrival. I had to at least know his name. How odd humans are. We can love deeply, knowing next to nothing about the object of our affections. I strode, a little less than confidently, up to the counter. I gathered my wits. I had rehearsed for days what I wished to say to him. I could only pray the rehearsed mantra would leave my lips.

As I neared the counter, I gazed absently up at the board. I already knew what I wanted, but I needed to seem somewhat preoccupied. He couldn’t know my intentions... not immediately. I glanced at the various machines of the kitchen. I was well versed in their uses. I drew closer to the counter, each step taking all of my will power.

I was mere feet away from him. He was even more breathtaking up-close. A minuscule scar ran along his cheek. He had wonderful gray eyes, but it was not his face that drew my gaze. His left hand rested on the counter. A glint of gold sat on his ring finger. And there it was: a wedding band.

In the following seconds, my world crashed around me. Shock and disappointment clouded my mind. For that second I hated him. I hated that stupid espresso guy. I hated the young teacher. In the second after that rush of abhorrence toward them all, I settled. For how could I hold them in contempt for that which I had been denied—a chance.
Do Not Dry Clean

Author: Kaitlin Foley
Grade: 12
Teacher: Cheryl Foley
School: Home School

September 14th
Leslie hefted her laundry basket onto a washing machine in the crowded coin wash. The sunlight peered through the front window, tired now from its morning journey.

Her Tuesday-morning schedule was always the same: Get up. Go to the gym. Coffee. Shower. Laundry. Lunch. Off to work. It was comfortable, like worn blue jeans or a Seinfeld rerun.

On this Tuesday, however, they had switched her shift from afternoon to morning, and while paperwork was still paperwork at ten in the morning or five in the evening, Swift Coin Wash had undergone a transformation. What had been a relaxing haven was now a humid crowd.

Leslie was not trying to overhear the young couple. She’d noticed them coming in, yes, but everyone had. It was difficult to ignore their high, unashamed voices.

They wore Ohio State University sweatshirts, she noticed. College kids. She hadn’t thought the coin wash was near enough to the university to be used by students, but then, she usually came earlier in the day.

As she methodically sorted her dirty laundry, the two students chose a pair of washing machines directly across from hers. Leslie frowned slightly. She enjoyed doing laundry. It was a quiet, one-person job that always yielded a satisfying stack of warm, crisp clothing. Now, the silence had been crumpled up and shoved to the side as the two students took center stage.

“Hey, Jeremy?”
“Yeah?”
“You going to the extra credit thing in Wagoner’s class?”
“Maybe.” The young man dumped a bag of clothes directly into the washing machine, not bothering to sort.

“Why, are you?”
“Maybe.” Leslie noticed the girl giving Jeremy a sideways glance. She knew that glance. This could get interesting . . . and was entirely none of her business, of course. Leslie went back to her sorting. White, purple, blue. She remembered extra credit and secret glances—college hadn’t been that long ago, after all. Blue, gray, delicate.

“How’s Ashley?” the girl asked. In spite of herself, Leslie recognized the tone and strained her ears to hear Jeremy’s reply.

“We . . . she’s fine,” he said. He dumped detergent into the machine and closed the door a bit too firmly.

“Oh?” the girl asked, closing the door on her own laundry. Not looking up from her sorting, Leslie smiled. She knew that Oh? as well. The two students headed over to the plastic benches and pulled out their textbooks—philosophy for Jeremy, Leslie noted, and statistics for the girl.

Leslie finished her laundry, comfortable in her mended silence.

September 21st
Leslie tossed shirts and slacks and socks into the washing machine. She wasn’t sure why she’d waited so long to come today; they’d finally settled her into a schedule, one which freed her by noon on Tuesdays. She could have been home by now, folding her freshly-washed clothes in the empty little room that was meant to hold a washing machine and dryer.

As she reached for the detergent, she heard the dull clank of the cowbell that hung from the door, straining on its strand of coarse twine. Loud laughter echoed among the washers, and the two college kids from the week before hauled their laundry bags to the same two machines.

“As if it wasn’t enough that she took my work-study job, now she’s trying to get into the same Western Civ class that I’m taking next semester,” the girl said.

The boy—Jeremy, Leslie remembered—chuckled.

“She’s completely obsessed with you, Nicole,” he said. “Why anyone would be, I certainly don’t know.” As Nicole jabbed him good-naturedly with her elbow, Leslie realized that she was staring. She looked down,
hurriedly changed the settings on the washing machine, and grabbed someone’s abandoned newspaper. The print was damp with spilled detergent, and it didn’t make her any less able to hear the two. Jeremy was talking earnestly now, about a philosophical debate he’d had in class.

“...but when the needs of the many outnumber the needs of the few, isn’t it the responsibility of our government to support the majority, even if the minority is rich?”

Leslie could picture Nicole, nodding along enthusiastically, but she didn’t look up. Such idealism. Leslie fingered the smudged gray ink, running her eyes along the words without reading them. She’d been like that once, of course—everyone had, she supposed. But there was a difference between planning to change the world and having a world that was willing to be changed.

If she’d learned anything in the past two years, it had been about coffee-making and paperwork. Not revolutions, not social work, and definitely not the ideas that were making Jeremy’s eyes shine like fervent blue lanterns.

She was staring again.

September 28th

Leslie timed her arrival differently this Tuesday, entering the coin wash early enough that the sun hadn’t yet moved to the unshaded window. The bubbling chatter of a half-dozen sorority girls barely flitted into her consciousness. She was fiddling with the washing machine dials by the time Jeremy and Nicole arrived, and she slipped over to the benches, a book in hand, as the two chose their machines.

She noticed Nicole standing closer to Jeremy—just a bit. And if their elbows bumped—there, just like that—a rose-petal flush colored the girl’s cheeks. Leslie couldn’t hear the two over the thumping of sodden clothing, but she imagined that Jeremy was rambling again about his metaphysical views, his close-minded professors, his roommates. Nicole’s head bobbed in agreement, naturally, and only Leslie saw that the girl’s eyes never left the quick movement of his lips.

Leslie had never been like that, at least; she was certain. When Robert had finally asked her out, in the middle of their junior year, it had been after two semesters of study sessions that she’d thought were simply sessions of study. He’d said then that half the guys in her dorm had been watching her from across the library, thinking she was coy or playing hard-to-get. But she was at college to study, she’d told him, not to hook up. He’d laughed, but not at her, and pulled her closer and whispered some cheesy line about chemistry.

No, she hadn’t been like Nicole at all. Yet, Jeremy took no notice as the two retreated to their homework, laundry spinning. It wasn’t until Leslie had scooped her still-damp clothing into her flimsy basket—she never dried her work clothes completely in the dryer—that she saw Nicole hand Jeremy a pen, and she saw the girl’s fingers linger briefly on his palm.

And Jeremy’s eyes followed Nicole’s hand back to its resting place on her thigh.

October 5th

The cell phone was heavy in Leslie’s jacket pocket, weighed down by text-messaged birthday wishes. Florida, Maine, Arizona—sisters and aunts, scattered across the country. From her mother, even, had come a text, each letter sturdy from the severity with which the older woman had surely punched the buttons. Leslie had grabbed the mail on her way to the laundromat, and it lay scattered on the dryer. The thin envelopes quivered as the machine shook: a paycheck, two bills, and a sternly-lettered note about her student loans.

When Jeremy and Nicole arrived, it took Leslie a few seconds to register the changes. Jeremy had two sacks of laundry over his shoulder—his and hers. Nicole clutched a stack of homework in her left arm, and the other was entwined with Jeremy’s. They walked slowly, hips touching, eyes downcast.

They didn’t speak, but when Jeremy hefted Nicole’s laundry into the machine, her eyes met his, impossibly tender.

They kissed, and Leslie did not look away.

October 12th

Swift Coin Wash was a jungle.
Leslie made her way through the crowd, ducking between a pair of yammering seniors and stepping over a toy truck. Jeremy and Nicole were already there, holding hands and gazing at the same political science textbook. Nicole moved to turn the page, but Jeremy put a hand over her fingers.

“Wait.”

Leslie could scarcely hear herself think over the tumult, let alone wonder about . . . things. Buying a new toaster, changing the sheets, the new upper management position opening up at work. Things. She wondered why she didn’t wander through crowds more often; the uproar was glorious.

It gradually dimmed, slightly, until Leslie heard a thud and a wail. A toddler had, it seemed, run into Jeremy’s leg.

“Hey, bud, it’s okay,” he said, setting the child upright. “You’re strong, right? Superman, right?” The child zoomed off and Nicole beamed.

“Idiots,” Jeremy muttered, turning back to the textbook.

“Excuse me?” Nicole said, leaning back. “Did you just call that baby an idiot?”

“Not the baby,” Jeremy hastened. “The parents, letting their kids run around like goons. I’d never have gotten away with it.”

“You mean you’ll make your kids sit by your side like little robots?”

“I mean I’ll—that is, if I have kids, they’ll be well-behaved. That’s all. They’ll know better.”

“If?”

Leslie watched the two, slightly concerned. That was another conversation she and Robert had never had. They’d fit so well together at the time, and they’d known their time wouldn’t last, so the subject had never even come up. She began sorting her work clothes from the non-work ones. She liked kids. That was why she’d gone into social work in the first place, really. She wondered if it was an omen, the fact that she didn’t work with actual youth at a center for youth services. There were so many inconvenient steps to have children, after all.

“Ma’am?”

Leslie looked up from her sorting, startled. Jeremy was in front of her, a washing machine’s distance away, his blue eyes focused directly into hers.

“I . . .” Leslie stared.

“Ma’am, could spare a quarter? I’m one short and I’d hate to carry all that wet laundry back up to campus.” He flashed a grin, half-sheepish, half-merry.

It was as though Jerry had stepped out of Seinfeld. Leslie’s words were lost to the laugh track of some far-off sitcom.

“That’s fine if you can’t. Thanks anyway,” Jeremy said quickly, turning.

“Here!” Leslie said, pulling a quarter from her pocket. “Sorry about that.”

“Hey, thanks!” He gave her a sideways smile and took the coin. “I really appreciate it.”

Leslie could feel Nicole’s eyes on her, and she turned hastily back to her sorting with a quick, “You’re welcome.”

She didn’t look back at the pair again. They weren’t speaking to each other, either. The little boy ran past Leslie, almost stumbling over her empty laundry basket.

October 19th

Jeremy and Nicole were holding hands still, though their conversation was limited to discussing homework. Jeremy was pouring over the philosophy textbook from the first week, while Nicole stared out the window, absently nibbling a thumbnail.

There was a new letter rattling on top of the dryer today. Leslie picked it up again, feeling the warmth of the afternoon sun settle on the paper. The familiar logo of her office—how many times had she stamped that logo onto envelopes?—looked strangely out of place at the laundromat.

Dear Ms. Barton, she read. Thank you for your letter inquiring about the open manager’s position. While that position is no longer available, your job performance over the past two years has been exemplary. This, combined with your educational background, suggests that you have an aptitude for social work. We would like to invite you to interview for a position that will be opening up next month at our youth services office in Baltimore, Maryland. If . . .
Leslie set the letter down, then picked it up once more, scanning the rest of the crisp text. She focused on words. *Community. Key element. The future. Youth. Salary.*

Especially salary.

It was ludicrous to move halfway across the country for a job with more responsibilities and less compensation. Ridiculous.

*Youth.* Hmm. *The future.*

She decided to run her blazer over to the dry cleaners today.

As she hauled her clean laundry from Swift Coin Wash, she noticed that Nicole had taken her things to a dryer on the far end of the row, while Jeremy sat, arms crossed, still reading his textbook.

October 26th

The coin wash was slow today, and the letter was still in Leslie’s purse. She zipped the pocket closed, firmly.

She’d heard that a local medical supply company was looking for lower-level management. That fit, and it fit much better than Maryland.

As she forced her gaze away from the envelope, she realized that Nicole and Jeremy were sitting together, studying. She hadn’t heard them arrive.

“But look at his argument, Nic,” Jeremy was saying. “It’s ridiculous. There’s no way that he can justify that.”

Nicole shrugged. “I don’t know. I think it’s decent.”

There had been a change. Leslie frowned, trying to figure it out. They weren’t holding hands—not a couple now? When she and Robert had split, right before graduation, it had been about practicality. There was no awkwardness, because there simply hadn’t been room for it. They’d both moved on with their lives quite cleanly. Yet, Jeremy and Nicole were still sitting in the same laundromat, studying the same subjects.

Her phone buzzed.

Unknown caller.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Leslie? It’s me—it’s Robert.”

Robert. Interesting.

“Hi, Robert,” she said, not concealing her puzzlement.

“Hey, listen—you’re still in Columbus, right?”

“Yeah, just outside it. Why?” Leslie’s breathing sped up more than was necessary. She tried to slow it.

“Well, I’ve just had a job offer there, and I’m thinking I’ll accept it. I’m coming into town this evening. Want to show me around?” Robert’s voice was as tantalizing as it had ever been.

“Yeah, definitely!”

“Great! What time should we meet up?”

Leslie looked around the coin wash for a clock. She saw her clothes, tumbling in the dryer, a baby balanced on a mother’s hip, a medical supply truck driving past. The letter, in her purse. She took an extra-deep breath.

“How’s six-thirty?” she asked.

“Sounds good.”

“And then you can help me pack.”

She heard Robert’s confusion.

“I’m moving. To Baltimore. Soon.”

“That’s . . . that’s great!” Robert said. “So, six-thirty?”

“See you then.” Leslie hung up before he could ask where they’d meet. He could call her back.

She opened the dryer and tossed her sodden clothes into her laundry basket. They could dry later. She had things to do.

As she straightened up, she felt a gaze upon her. Nicole was watching her—had been watching, listening. Their eyes met, briefly, before Nicole looked away.

Leslie glanced around the coin wash one final time. Maybe she’d get her own washing machine in Baltimore.

It was about time.
On Inspiration

Author: Kaitlin Foley
Grade: 12
Teacher: Cheryl Foley
School: Home School

I

We are chaos
in gently-blooming
algae-flowing
seascapes
against numb nebulae.

While rain weeps
confused linear threads
and fern-fingers brush
sky corners,
we fling ourselves
with reckless asymmetry.

In subdued shadows,
we are garish
green-gray-purple-blue bruises
and shrouded in the glow
of sun-moon-man,
we are broken,
and we are perfection,
for we emerged
from a shattered-bottle gash

in a universe
of newborn time-keeping
wrinkles.

II

Lightning inspires receptive fingers,
flows through trembling limbs,
seizes aching ribs,
and sets muscles ablaze.

A pounding hammer beats
in time with marching clouds
as a chisel dances—a
silver butterfly in the storm.

Dust-laden eyelids
rest; sun peers through
a foggy window,
falling upon a masterpiece.
Greasy paper, lit
on a stovetop. Only
stone remains.

III

Find the star-swept thoughts
in far corners
of your mind
and whisper them to me,
and sing them to the trees.

Imagine that time
is a dewdrop drying
not gone,
but gone,
yes,
beyond reach.

Because we are
a sun-fluffed dandelion
and soon our tousled petals will
blow away.

Tell me your star-swept thoughts.
We walked. We walked everywhere together. We walked in the hot July afternoons with salt sweat dripping on our lips, and afterward we ran inside to the lemonade that was waiting for us. Once we walked all the way to your mom’s store where they sell beads like little colored drops of crystal rain. Your mom walked with us next door to L.A. Juice and I got something that tasted like summer.

When I went to your house, we walked in circles around your cul-de-sac at night, which my mom would not let us do. We walked under the damp light of the street lamps and listened to the crickets and the lonely cars and sirens far away. You went barefoot every time, and every time I told you to put some shoes on, and you laughed.

In winter we walked to the ice skating rink. I couldn’t stay upright most of the time, but you gave me your hand. “Come on,” you said. “It’s just as easy as walking.” And with you it was. Walking home my feet thought they were still on the ice, gliding in graceful rhythm with yours.

We walked around our rooms when we spent hours on the phone. We walked and talked about music and God and writing (I talked about writing). We walked footprints into our beige carpets that day you cried about your parents.

We walked together when he asked you to prom, and I told you congratulations with all my heart and never said that I’d hoped he was going to ask me.

After that you started walking with other people. They did not seem to like me very much. I was too quiet, too thoughtful, too different for them. I called you more than once but mostly you didn’t answer. When you did, I never got to ask you what I wanted to. You had a way of turning my thoughts and my words so that nothing was ever really said. You didn’t do that before.

We walked across the stage the night of graduation, watching the camera flashes go off above us like disappearing stars. Row after row of our classmates filed past the podium, waving to their families and playing with the tassels on their hats. We were both wondering, I think, if we would ever see them again. Maybe that was why you came up to me after and asked if I wanted to go for a walk.

We walked through the turquoise darkness, and you took off your high heels. I told you to put them back on, and you laughed, dug your toes into the warm concrete. We looked up at the stars, the real stars, peeping out one by one.

We spoke of college and the passing of time and doesn’t it feel like just yesterday that day we walked to your mom’s store? The time you taught me to skate? Did I remember that? And, yes, of course I remembered. I was surprised that you remembered. But you remembered everything.

Slow like peanut butter, the night passed, and the sun rose tangerine and pink, and my parents would be worried. Of course, yours still didn’t care when you walked at night, when you didn’t come home.

You gave me a big hug, a hug that felt true even though it wasn’t, and we told each other that we’d write. We said we’d see each other on vacations and even go for walks sometimes. You said, it doesn’t have to change that much. And I said no, of course it doesn’t.
I’m set on his blue jean cover-all knee, my strap laid over his back. He perches himself comfortably on a popular brick siding in the square. I see white apron vendors and all sorts of people hustling about: a woman in stilettos, a boy with messy hair, a man in the alley pushing a shopping cart. Shaggy men meander along the sidewalk, and busybody workmen in stiff clothes strut by with iron kneecap steps. There are taxis waiting on the curb, drivers yelling and engines revving. A jogger runs past us breathing heavily, something clinking up and down on her chest. A bus door closes and squeals. Someone behind the massive crowd at the crosswalk laughs, and it carries like an echo across the street. Two women gab as they push strollers behind us. On the bench beneath the brick wall, a man licks his thumb and flips his newspaper to the Sports page. A baby wails. A dog barks. The gawky noises cling to the August heat—Excitement like this pulses along the street.

My strings twitch with a stir of awakening as I feel the kid's chest heave up with a sigh. His coat is rough and big, laying over me in folds. He grabs his pick and places it between his fingers. His hand tenses on my neck. He places his callused hand up, his fingers pressing into a chord. He lifts his right hand and gives me a light strum, soft and slow enough for only his ears to hear. The pleasing chord at once floats against the unceremonious city clamor, like oil shaken in a jar of water. The kid plucks a single silver string like a pulled tight thread and twists one of my keys higher. I pull taut together as the note sings. He shifts his fingers over to a minor and alternately picks a breezy tune. The notes flow out, easy and brisk. I resound bona fide, my strings reverberating brassily. The melody the kid hits coasts all through the square like a fragrance—satisfying and lovely—like a child's laughter. I see a head or two turn to look our way; our playing found their listening.

The pick thrum-thrums against me, relinquishing a copper vibrancy and swanky thuddera-tata. The music we make sways like an aural zephyr surging through the urban corners and up the buildings. It intertwines with the ba-da-da-da-dum drum of shined shoes and bare summer feet, the hum-idy-clack beat rebounding off of us, the music of the bus’s start-and-stop shree-whoosh, the soprano solo: “taxi!” Our music becomes part of the metropolitan masterpiece, all the sounds swimming into another.

The kid's fingertips travel from fret to fret, barring chords—his pick burning, his body swinging to the thuds and palm mutes. I know them all by heart. The sounds come like April rain; free and drinkable. The language of my strings tempts listeners’ ears to soak it in. They venture near us and bob their heads or tap their toes. I watch their pleasant faces, motionless, listening intently, as if we’re retelling a story of their childhood that they had forgotten. The crescendo twang of the bang on my strings ascends over the buildings like angel wings, bathing the city in a song. I am only an old, battered guitar with new strings, but the music of me reveals a lost glimmer within; I am full.

The kid begins to slow his playing. He gives my strings a slap to end the flow of music with a lovely halt. Satisfied, he takes his hand off my neck as the crowd presses their palms together in appreciation. They begin to disperse from their musical reverie, going back into the sync of the city ways, but across the way I hear one say, "Won't you play another?"
“You just have to be different in everything,” Tara says.
I nibble around the edges of a hot dog and lean away from Tara. She is a vegetarian.
“In everything,” Tara repeats. “You always have to stand out.”
Feeling like a moral failure for not tearing at an Asiago cheese bagel like her, I slide further towards the back-
ing of my peeling plastic chair. Uncomfortable. Awkward. Tara doesn’t notice. She tilts forward and does that half-assed eye roll first picked up from me: shut one eye and twitch eyelid. Add skeptical gleam to open eye if necessary. Raise one eyebrow. Let jaw unhinge. Bare teeth. Glance at an angle.
“For God’s sake, I’m not going to freak out just because you’re eating pig,” Tara says. “I have better self-
control. Besides—”
“You’re right,” I reply, my voice now nonchalant because Tara finally addressed the hot dog.
“To what? Me having better self-control or what I was saying before?” Tara asks.
“You’re right on what you were saying before. Clichés bother the hell out of me. I hate them with a burning, fiery passion.”
“You sound like Allen,” Tara says.
“He rubs off on people,” I respond.
Allen is the president of our debate team. He likes to throw around phrases like “if you don’t shut the fuck up now, I’m going to fork out your eyeballs, boil your entrails, and toss it all together before force-feeding it through your throat.” He usually carries through with the more minor threats, but it’s all in good humor, especially to a few sophomore girls, who giggle in their grey sweater sleeves at Allen’s every word. I think they’re not so secretly in love with him.
During practices on Monday and Wednesday and at tournaments like now, Allen walks and talks sufficiently more than a little cocky. We allow this because he went to Nationals last year and is rumored to be at least #2 in our state.
“And I can tell when you’re being sarcastic, Nina,” Tara presses on. Her expression is mordant, caustic, challeng-
ing.
I midway-accomplish that eye roll but decide otherwise since Tara has apparently adopted my habit. I settle for silence.
Tara and I are rivals. We remain friends for the sake of convenience—4th hour newspaper with slues of aloof upperclassmen—despite our occasional open hostility to each other. I, however, know things about Tara that her school friends or Indian community friends or family could never grasp. I know she has steeely determination. Fantas-
tic manipulation skills. I know every lie she creates embodies the best of acting. I know she dresses in her short, short, short high-
waisted skirts to make up for attention she lost as a glasses-
wearig bore in middle school. Same with her wide-mouthed laugh. Deliberate mocking of lesser peers. I know she tries her best to put on a different face for everyone more popular—innocence and naïveté and from-the-bottom-of-her-heart-kindness. I know she really comprehends more about sex than all of us. I know she frets over why so many people hate, no, too strong of a word, dislike her.
“I’m going to my next round. You Flight A?” I ask Tara.
“Yeah. I’ll walk upstairs with you,” she pauses. “I shouldn’t even be here. History finals. History!”
I look at her with that eye-roll. “Really?”
“You’re right. This is worth it.” We thrive from the excitement, the challenge, the spontaneity of verbal spar-
ing. Besides, Tara would come just to make sure I don’t get ahead of her in debate tonight, and vice versa.
“Anyways, affirmative or negative?”
“Negative. I get to do my case that’s mean and unrealistic but easy to argue,” I say. “What about you?”
“Affirmative. I hate this one.”
Tara and I both do Lincoln-Douglas, a one-on-one debate based on values and reasoning.
Our coach, Elli, requires every debater to compete in a public speaking event as well. Tara and I focus on Oratory—a 10-minute memorized persuasive speech. But really it’s nothing more than a lengthy, beautifully-written, superfluous rant with serious drama as an intro (literally anything to get the judge’s attention). And it never hits 10 minutes.

Tara will be in the room diagonally across from mine. We are 25 minutes early for a purpose. We slide down next to each other and meet our opponents, both boys. His name is Cole or something. We flirt.

Tara reaches over me to slide her finger across my opponent’s forehead. You have cool eyebrows, she says. Thick, like a model’s. Don’t you think they’re like a model’s? She turns to me with wide doe eyes. I nod. Cole-or-something’s eyes crinkle, lips convulse in silent laughter. Tara’s antics can be questionable.

Mostly we talk to our opponents about how bad we are and how we’re novices and freshman in high school and don’t know what we’re doing in the regular Lincoln-Douglas pool, which is partly true. This is our first year debating, but Elli moved us up after our success at previous tournaments.

Truthfully, Tara and I banter and tease the boys to distract ourselves from our threadbare nerves more than anything else. We put ourselves down before and after rounds so our hopes can never be dashed on a precariously rocky precipice. It’s twisted, and actually incredibly sick. We know this. Our opponents know this.

Inside the room, I continue my charade of psyching Cole-or-something out by laying out the five dozen pre-written block and counter cards in a meticulous pattern on my metal desk. I never use them. I flip open my black leather binder to the laminated pages of evidence and quotes and definitions. I align two digital timers—Allen said it looks good when I lend my opponent one. I take out my flow (a debater’s note-taking loose leaf). I pick up two G2 pens and click the pen caps impatiently. I throw a smile over my shoulder to Cole-or-something.

“Good luck,” I say half-heartedly.

“You too,” he returns even more half-heartedly. It’s past midnight. We all want to go home more than anything.

Our judge arrives 15 minutes tardy. Understandable, because debate tournaments, especially local ones, always run late. We positively beam at the lay judge. She beams back, not knowing in that moment we’re typecasting her: 50s, children in college, conservative, no debate experience whatsoever.

Cole-or-something steps behind the lectern with my timer and begins his constructive speech, “I stand in firm affirmation of the resolution, resolved: public high school students in the United States ought not pass standardized exit exams to graduate. In order to clarify terms, I offer the following definitions…”

He reads at a jilted pace with cracks in pitch now and then. I study his face. Tara was onto something. With blonde hair, clear skin, a straight nose, and nice enough eyes, Cole-or-something has the potential to be cute. But his hiccupping speech indicates a lack of social activity, perhaps, a precious diamond not discovered, not smoothed open by the girls at his school?

We debate. Well, mostly we bullshit. We point out each other’s warrant flaws and logical fallacies when the same ones exist in our own cases, hoping the judge doesn’t notice. We paint outlandish analogies and examples, especially images interfering with political platforms, expecting the judge to roar up in anger and just vote for us on personal beliefs. For three-quarters of an hour, I believe in exit exams! Cole-or-something does not! We fight to the death.

By the close, I am tired, tired. I go through the standard negative mentality routine: I lost that debate. Cole-or-something killed me on the flow. He destroyed my value. He didn’t concede to anything. The judge liked him better. I lost, for sure.

I manage to click-clack in war-torn high heels back to our table, where our team is currently concentrated. We exchange “how did you do’s?” before roll call and walking to the parking lot. I help Elaine carry her Policy tub (Policy Debate requires a giant plastic monstrosity filled with Mt. Everests of evidence). Half of us are clothed in nothing more than blazers and skirts but the December snow doesn’t bother us.

On the bus, Allen goes through attendance again before Elli yells back scores, results, and rankings in answer to the questions hurled at her—questions shouted with crossed fingers and swift prayers to God. Voices resolve into a moderate murmur, coalescing and dividing, rising and falling.

“You just have to be different in everything,” Tara turns to me. Déjà vu. “You already said that.”
“But it’s true!” Tara exclaims.

I know it’s true. I always try to break out of form with everybody else. It’s why I never attend those holiday Asian gatherings. (Why is this a Christmas party when the hosts clearly aren’t Christian? And more importantly, why is everybody as cheesy as their festive garb—magnificently tacky light-up polar bear sweaters? By the way, the battery-powered electricity on your wool vest seems to have gone out.) But it’s why I also persist in learning to read and write Chinese. Being the same annoys me. Being common, being stereotypical, being unoriginal irritates me. In the end, however, I fall not far from the normal majority of society for fear of being categorized as a “rebel”—just like everyone else. I justify my very average actions with the idea I have different reasons than others, then I forget about my contradictions and continue on in denial.

“Whoever says ‘debate is not a sport’ is wrong,” Tara says.

“Yeah, really. This is physically and mentally more exhausting than any sport I’ve played,” I reply, grateful for the topic change. I can brave the truth of my personality defects later. “All I’ve had today is three grapes, half a hot dog, and maybe six gallons of water.”

“Potato chips and a bagel,” Tara says. “You can’t eat when you’re about to throw up from anxiety.”

“Right. And your emotions cycle. Like before a round, you get super hyper. Then you speed-talk for forty minutes. You lie and cheat and make up crap for forty minutes—”

“And your opponent hates you,” Tara interrupts.

“And your opponent hates you. Then you come out and crash. Crash and burn and die,” I finish.

“Rinse and repeat for eight times.” Tara likes her Pantene metaphors.

“Exactly.”

“And start over tomorrow,” Tara and I proclaim in unison.

We do the eye roll. We laugh. Tara, her loud, obnoxious, wide-mouthed laugh. Mine, not much different. In something akin to an epiphany, I realize Tara and I understand each other. We finish each other’s sentences. We know each other too well to put up walls and facades like we do for others, even our own parents. We lay everything bare because we’re so much alike. Although animosity far outweighs accord between us, although our relationship will not amount to great friendship, we will never have to pretend with each other.

I settle against the cold, hard window of my seat. Through the fog on the panes, the wheat fields undulate in broad ripples of grey, sporadic house lights peeking through. At the moment, my identity confusion complex doesn’t matter, because together we are disappearing into the black night. Serene, abstract, numb oblivion shrouds us in the darkest of envelopes and we melt into obsidian velvet. We are all one.

Monday morning: sore throat, blood-shot eyes, and a hell of a headache. Our high school social hierarchy is back in place, and we nerds, geeks, freaks, Goths, and weirdoes of debate stalk silently through the hallways, shoulders hunched, eyes cast down. When our paths cross, even without a hug or wave, we silently acknowledge each other. One glance shares the last tournament and weekends past, the complaining, the cheering, the crying, the clapping. One glance opens up too many, not enough hours of arguing the definition of morality.

Next Saturday we will all come alive again with our G2 pens, iPhones, Greek philosophy, and junk food under the pretense that our rushed, clawing verbosity actually matters. Next Saturday our breathless pursuit of speaking and all things obsessed over, loved, resumes. But for now, there’s something else at hand: final exams.
The Annotated Puss in Boots

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It’s all a load of garbage. *Puss in Boots,* I mean. You know, poor kid inherits cat, cat wins fortune, and kid gets a princess? Well, I suppose you might say that’s true, but it’s rather misleading. The story, when told traditionally, would take up about a page and a half. Told properly, with correct details and explanation, the tale would take someone at least seven, maybe eight pages. Little kids hear *Puss in Boots* and think, “Oh, isn’t it wonderful how that cunning little cat tricked these people so easily?” while their parents or grandparents or babysitters or local librarians quietly shake their heads. They aren’t buying it. They can see all of those holes in the story. First off, the cat can talk.

When you picture Puss in Boots, you imagine him speaking like a furry little gentleman, with a proper British accent, but that couldn’t be further from the truth. Now, I’ll grant you that Puss was an extraordinary cat, with a stunning comprehension of human language, but he was by no means the articulate little trickster that the fairy tales make him out to be. Puss could talk in the way that an old woman’s dog can say “I love you.” Sure, it’s rather cute, and some people swear that they can understand every word of it, but you really wouldn’t be able to recognize any actual message unless you know what you’re listening for before you hear it. Of course, Puss didn’t talk like Scooby-Doo. Instead of “Ruh-Roh!” it was something more along the lines of “Nya-Nyo!” You see, cats’ tongues aren’t properly positioned to make the sounds necessary for proper human language.

Another common misconception about Puss is that he was an orange tabby cat. Not so. He was actually a red Maine Coon, which have slightly longer hair and are closely related to the Norwegian Forest Cat. Of course, the name “Maine Coon” is a reference to the fact that the cats were abundant in Maine and often resembled raccoons and therefore wasn’t used until after the founding of Maine, which occurred long after this story’s estimated setting. Until this point, the breed was known as the “Scandinavian Coon,” which is strange, considering that raccoons aren’t indigenous to the eastern hemisphere.

Anyway, on with the story. The correct one. After the death of Greenshire’s finest (and poorest) miller, Mr. William Joseph Miller, his estate was divided amongst his three sons. The eldest received his mill, the second oldest his donkey, and the youngest inherited his cat. Now the youngest son, a lanky fellow whose actual name has been lost to antiquity but was referred to affectionately by his friends as Crabbers, was a real drama queen. The lad had the uncanny ability to see the worst in any situation and vocalize each and every lamentation that popped into his scruffy little head. So, of course, inheriting a cat was The Worst Thing That Could Have Ever Happened.

“Oh, WOE IS ME!!! I always knew that I was father’s least favorite!!!” the little softy wailed, completely overlooking Rosemary. “Now my brothers will be able to pool their newly inherited assets and start a fantastic and highly acclaimed donkey circus in the mill, but I will be forced to eat this scrawny cat and then starve to death wearing nothing but rags and a horrid little cat-skin muff.” Never mind that he had one of the largest designer boot and bag collections in Britain, the kid was still convinced that he was going to die poor and hungry.

Now Puss heard all of this talk about him being skinned and eaten. As a matter of fact, everyone in Greenshire did except for Old Man Smith, who had been deaf for quite some time, but no one really cared except for Puss because, well, he was the only one that was threatened with death by the statement.

So, of course, he had to do something about it. Now this is where one of the biggest holes in the traditional story comes in. According to the classic tale, Puss takes pity on his owner and decides to help him out of the goodness of his heart. Any cat owner could point out the error in this concept. They would tell you that such an explanation is impossible because cats are created with minimal goodness in their hearts. Even the most obsessive cat enthusiast is well aware that cats are independent little buggers that only care about their owners because humans can work the can-openers. Someone who truly knows the species would explain that cats are the smartest animals you’ll ever meet, whatever those dolphin-loving hippies may tell you, and that they’d be capable of overthrowing all human civilization in an instant if they ever decide that world domination has priority over nap-time. A reasonably logical cat owner may even mention that it would have been entirely within Puss’s abilities to scratch up the kid’s legs and jump
out the window before old Crabby knew what hit him.

Although there is some debate among scholars as to exactly why Puss was inspired to begin his journey of cunning and trickery, it is agreed that his motives were probably selfish ones. The most popular theory is that he had already been planning a rise to power and fortune but needed a human to put the scheme into motion. The suspected catalyst for the plot is a cute little Persian that lived at Richard Miller’s mill down the road. \(^4\)

Once again, I digress. Puss sauntered on into Crabby’s walk-in-closet/emotional breakdown room and requested some supplies for his mission: “Nay nyi naba nairo purruts nyanda nyag nyibba purrawsturrin?”

“I can’t understand you, Puss.”

Puss grabbed a pen and some parchment from the desk where Crabby inventoried his collection and clarified: My deepest apologies. I was requesting a pair of boots and a bag with a drawstring.

“Ah. Grab something out of my box from last season and leave me be then, will you?”

Thank you. …. Do you still have those knee-high black leather ones with little nickel studs along the top?

“They should be near the bottom.”

Will do.

So Puss went out into the field, armed with a nice little burgundy drawstring bag and a pair of leather knee-highs stuffed with cotton balls and paper to accommodate paws the size of walnuts, off to complete step one of his plan.

He set himself up a little trap, placing a piece of carrot inside of the bag and wading through the bushes in his boots to hide within reach of the drawstring. Puss soon bagged a rabbit, and off he went to deliver his catch.

This required a meeting with the king. Now, the traditional story acts as though anyone can waltz on in and have a chat with the king, including a cat carrying a squirming drawstring bag. In actuality, Puss had to schedule a 10-minute appointment a month later, and he was only able to do so because his brother’s friend’s cousin was a barn-cat at the royal stables. So Puss spent his April chasing small animals and putting Crabby’s old bags up for sale at a nearby auction house.

When his appointment finally rolled around, the king was rather disgusted at receiving a rotting rabbit carcass in a musty drawstring bag, but was still impressed at the cat’s ability to pull off its knee-highs with such panache. Puss bowed politely and told the king that the rabbit was a gift from his master, who he called the Marquis de Carabas, hoping that the king didn’t keep track of the nobles in the area. When Puss requested another appointment, the king gave him a sooner one, hoping that the cat would deliver its next catch fresh. This went on for some time, Puss catching small game and presenting them to the king, saying that they were gifts from a marquis. \(^5\)

Finally, the day came when Puss’s plan was to really get into swing, the day that his entire life had revolved around for months. It was game day. The king had scheduled a nice family carriage ride through the countryside about a year back, and Puss had planned accordingly. He had sat in the bushes all morning waiting for a sign of the carriage’s approach, when he finally heard the faint noise of horses trotting along the dirt road in the distance: *Galumph, galumph, galumph.*

He scurried to the walk-in-closet/emotional breakdown room to clue Crabby, who was crying over a glass of spilled milk \(^6\) and crunching on a mouthful of dry Oreos, into his role in the scheme.

Crabby, I’m going to need you to go bathe in the lake.

“Wath awe you stalking abou?”

You know that cunning scheme that I’ve been working on for the past few months? Well, the big day has finally rolled around for me to get things going, and I’m going to need to you play a small role. Just head on down to the lake, give me your clothes, and take a nice little scrub. Oh, and would you mind pretending to drown if anyone comes by? I’d appreciate you swallowing those Oreos before you respond.

“Wath? Oh... Why would I want to do all of that, Puss? That sounds cold, uncomfortable, and potentially humiliating.”

I hear that pond scum has excellent medicinal qualities. All those little bacteria are great for the skin, and frog urine is supposedly filled with all sorts of minerals.

“Well, if that’s the case, I’d be happy to oblige,” chirped Crabby, who then grabbed his bath robe and skipped merrily off to the lake. Puss then grabbed Crabby’s clothes and disposed of them. \(^7\) He rushed outside and listened to for the horses as they approached on the newly repaired cobblestone road. *Clip-clop,clip-clop,clip-clop.*
He ran to meet the king’s carriage, meowing at the top of his lungs. A carriage driver wouldn’t have normally stopped for a cat, but one of the wheels was starting to wobble a bit and he was going to stop soon anyway. While the driver tightened the wheel, the king hopped out of the carriage for a bit of fresh air and was pleased to see his favorite boot-wearing, rabbit-catching, calligraphy-writing Scandinavian Coon bowing before him. Communication may have been a problem at this point, as Puss had forgotten his pen and notepad, but the queen had spent two years living amongst the cat-whisperers on the West Quarter of Constantinople, so she was conveniently able to translate. Puss told the royal family that his master, the charming and irreplaceable Marquis de Carabas, was drowning in a nearby lake. After checking to ensure that the wheels had been properly tightened (Mike, the driver, was new, after all, and was still getting into the swing of things), the group raced off to rescue the faux-nobleman.

Although Crabby seemed to be drowning when the carriage pulled up, he didn’t actually have Puss’s instructions in mind while he was doing so. Getting air into his lungs was actually priority number one at the time. Oh, no, he wasn’t actually drowning in some sort of ironic twist of fate. He was suffocating. You see, he’d slipped while reaching for his soap and had fallen into the water. He’d gotten a wad of pond scum lodged in his throat and was trying to cough it up when the carriage pulled up next to the lake in a patch of soggy grass.

Slish, slosh, slish, slosh.

While the royal party rescued Crabby and gave him some fresh clothes from the king’s emergency wardrobe cart that had been following the carriage, Puss scurried off to complete the next phase of his plan. Running along the road, he came across some peasants who were mowing a field.

Now, the fairy tale version of this story offers a rather weak account of how Puss convinced the peasants to go along with his plan. He supposedly demanded that the peasants say the field belonged to the Marquis de Carabas, saying that things “wouldn’t go well for them” if they didn’t. This is impossible for two reasons:

1. There is nothing that Puss could have possibly done in that moment to make the peasants, armed with scythes, afraid of that little cat.
2. Once again, Puss couldn’t speak in comprehensible English.

He could, however, speak comprehensible Cat. It was his native tongue, as a matter of fact. Conveniently enough, these peasants had also spent a few years learning from the cat-whisperers in Constantinople and could also easily understand Puss. They agreed to help him, and he went on to request the same from the men working at a stable down the road. The stable boys, however, had never learned the art of cat-whispering in Constantinople. They had learned it in Babylon and agreed to help in accordance with the spirit of Babylonian generosity. How convenient was that?!

As Puss went on to complete the final step in his beautiful plot, the king was becoming increasingly impressed as he drove past the bountiful fields and prestigious stables that he was told were owned by the Marquis de Carabas. Crabby, who had been invited along for the ride, nodded awkwardly as the king and queen complimented him on his properties. He probably would have corrected them, but he was a little woozy from the whole “nearly dying after choking on a wad of putrid pond scum” thing, and the princess kept scooting closer and closer to him and batting her eyelashes.

In the traditional tale, the final phase in Puss’s plan is made out to be far more cunning and dramatic than it was in reality. He supposedly outwitted a shape-shifting ogre that owned a huge castle, a pile of jewels, and the surrounding fields by convincing him to transform into a mouse and then eating him. In actuality, the castle, jewels, and fields were owned by a regular old mouse, so the whole climactic monster scene was really more of a quick bat of Puss’s paw and a pitiful little squeaking noise.

Everything really just took care of itself from there. The royal family toured Crabby’s new castle, Crabby was invited to the royal castle for dinner, and he wound up marrying the princess within the month. Puss supposedly became Carabas’s most important lord, but I think that we can all see the fault in that one. Puss’s position as the chairman of the Democratic Greenshire Movement would have preventing him from accepting the position.

1. They are, however, excellent for grooming fur and holding ink pens at the correct angle for elegant calligraphy, both of which Puss practiced frequently.
2. This bit is correct for the most part in the traditional story, although it fails to mention the miller’s daughter, Rosemary. She was not considered in Mr. Miller’s will both because of a chauvinistic culture and the fact that Rosemary’s lack of attentiveness while cooking over the fireplace is the reason why none of the sons inherited a house.

3. This wouldn’t have been so terrible had cat-skin muffs not gone out of style a year prior, or had Puss not been orange, a color that simply didn’t go well with Crabby’s eyes.

4. Their first conversation went something like this:
   Puss: “Hey, Cute Little Persian!”
   C.L.P: “What?! Why do you think I’d be interested in a dirty tabby like you?”
   Puss: “Ahm... I’m actually a Scandinavian Coon.”
   C.L.P: ’Why would a poor miller have such an opulent cat as a Scandinavian Coon?!”
   Puss: “Ahm.... Well....actually....my owner is a....marquis.”
   C.L.P.: “Oh really?”
   Puss: “Really.”

5. You may ask why the king had any interest in a weekly quail, rabbit or pheasant from a cat, or why he didn’t question such meager tribute from a supposedly rich noble. Well, the queen had recently decided to go vegetarian, and this was about all the king was getting in the way of protein at the time.

6. If this were in the traditional tale, I’d mock the use of such a hackneyed expression. But this is cold, hard, fact folks. Clichés have to come from somewhere.

7. He supposedly threw Crabby’s clothes under a boulder, but his tidy nature has led scholars to believe that he either hung them up in the closet or tossed them in the hamper like a nice little kitty.

8. Well, no, it wasn’t really a “regular old mouse.” It was a “regular old mouse that had wisely invested in real estate and the stock market.”

9. You may want me to rip apart how suspicious it was for the princess to fall so madly in love with a man that she’d only just met, but I really don’t have the real story to tell you. The fairy tale says that the king suggested the marriage after “a few glasses of very fine wine,” but it’s common knowledge that the queen was morally opposed to alcohol. So, I offer you this: The princess was a loony-bird.
Before the sun breaks the horizon,
His eyes blink open, crusty from the night and the dry fall air.
No gentle mother or bright
Light rouses him, merely habit. The town
Sounds are stirring. Roosters call out the same
Lines over and over, posturing for the hens at their feet.

Again, today, there is nothing to eat,
So he bites
Down and ignores the grumbling. Outside, light frames
The mountain peaks
One cone sending up gentle puffs of smoke into the air.
He shakes his brothers, who groan.
“Buenos días, monitos,” he says with a smile. “Get up. That’s right.”

As the day grows brighter,
The boys sweep the streets
In search of anything sellable. Brown
Cans and bottles, gritty from the all-pervading dirt, lie
On the dry cobblestones waiting to be collected for the rare
Day they can be sold by the bushel for cheap metal. Claiming

Fatigue, the youngest sits with all the dignity of his six years,
Careful of his ragged raiment.
He giggles as a cat runs by in fright,
A pack of motorcycles in its wake. The eldest ruffles his hair.
“Basta. Let’s go.” The smell of browning meat
Wafts from a street vendor. The might
Of the hunger it awakens is frightening; two brothers moan.

“Vamos,” the eldest orders again and heads down
The road, hoping to extinguish the flame
With distance from the fuel. They move away, eyeing
The steaming pans. “It’s not right.
Some grow fat, but we don’t even eat.”
“Life isn’t fair,”

The eldest intones. “Life isn’t fair.”
Wise words do nothing for their frowns.
He tries to distract them. “Miren, chicos. Over the concrete
Walls. See all the flowers and vines.
It must be a rich person’s house.” They aim
Their eyes. “What does that writing
Say?” A tall form behind them blocks the bright
It’s here for you. It aims to help.”
A man the color of bone amidst the brown
Holds that it is every person’s right
To eat, to learn, and to live before dying.
“This rock formation was formed by water running over and around it for thousands of years,” droned the tour guide monotonously, talking the other tourists and me to death. I wonder how many times the old dinosaur’s said that line? I thought to myself as I glanced at the liver spot on his bald head. I gazed around the huge cavern. The top of the cave was lost in shadow, but the floor and walls gleamed with water. As I absentmindedly snapped a shot of the rock formation the tour guide had indicated, I noticed the label that my mom had plastered onto my camera before she sent me off to these dull caves earlier that morning. It read: Hollie Tyson; the two words that summed up my identity in the simplest way possible. It wasn’t a fancy name, but it suited me well, and I liked it.

My mom was a single parent raising a teenage daughter, so she stressed a lot. Whenever she was overwhelmed by taxes, her two jobs, or rent, she’d send me anywhere outside the apartment so I wouldn’t have to see her breakdown. Usually she had me run errands, but since today was my 14th birthday, she let me take a tour of the local caverns. I loved geology and thought caves were fascinating. It’s amazing how water can carve such magnificent structures out of solid rock.

Shrill shrieking rent me from my thoughts as bats swooped from the hidden eaves of the cave. As I ducked to avoid them slamming into my face, I dropped my camera. It slid down a slope into a small alcove that had, until then, been hidden from view. When I went to retrieve the camera, it became apparent to me that the niche was actually a side passage breaking off from the main cavern.

The tunnel was pitch black. It didn’t look like the kind of place where you’d take a tour group, but it wasn’t roped off either. The geologist in me screamed to go and take a quick look, but my more sensible side said that I could get in serious trouble. I was torn with indecision, but eventually, the geologist won. I decided to go in, look around, and come right back out.

Not far into the stone corridor, my ankle caught on a thin wire. An almighty crash resounded behind me as thousands of pounds of rock sealed shut the opening I’d just come through. The rock fall knocked me to the ground and winded me, plunging me into darkness as thick and velvety as black wool. The eternal night was so compressing that it was almost choking.

Several large rocks at the top of the formidable gray mass shifted and fell, crushing my camera and entrapping my feet. I heaved and pulled, and finally my feet popped out, though my shoes were still held prisoner under the rock. I knew nothing would come of trying to shift the boulders, so I proceeded to look for an exit.

After about an hour of walking as far away from the tripwire as possible, I heard a noise behind me. The noise seemed to be coming from farther back in the passage near the site of the rock fall. Actually the noise was more three noises than one. There was a soft rasping sound, as if something large were being dragged over the rough ground. Then there was a never-ending series of clicks, each one punctuated with a sniff.

Something was on my trail. Something big. So I ran. My feet flew over the frozen ground as my “fleeing prey” instinct kicked into effect. I rapidly developed a stitch in my side, but I pushed through it and kept running. Hurtling through the subterranean tunnel, all I could perceive was running down, down through different layers of blackness I could feel more than see. Some were soft and gentle, while others were hard and forbidding.

No matter how hard I ran, I could not get ahead of the monster. Whenever the slapping of my feet against the ground increased tempo, so did that of the clicking. Ragged, fear-laden breaths tore from my lungs. Breathing in the musty air was like inhaling shards of ice. Cold sweat poured down my face, and I started to leave behind splashes of blood as sharp rocks sliced open my feet.

As I plunged deeper into the earth, the sweat froze to my face, and the patches of ice that dotted my path steadily grew larger. I stole a quick glance behind me since my eyes had finally adjusted to the darkness. I thought I could see a large dark thing behind me, but it could have been a shadow. My foot caught on a rock and I slammed into the ground, breaking my cheekbone. A thin trail of blood trickled out of my mouth as I skidded about twelve feet across the slick ground. Before I could move, the beast was upon me and had scooped me up so it could inspect me closer.
Now that I was near the creature, I could tell it was a giant rat. I blinked. This was not possible. Mutated rats
did not become this big. Yet there it stood, over seven feet tall. Course, shaggy fur was stretched across thick, corded
muscles, knotted from overuse. The beady, black eyes seemed to glow with a light of their own. Rank breath seeped
out from between black, rotting teeth. The rat itself smelled of urine and carrion. Filthy, twisted claws put holes in
my arm where he tightly gripped it. I realized that those were what had made the clicking sound. The source of the
rasping was the thick tail that that lay on the ground swishing back and forth. The rat looked as if it had been dragged
to the edges of hell and back.

The rat sniffed me, squeezing my arm, leg, and abdomen the same way a butcher would test his meat to see
how tender it was. The beast’s wide, slimy tongue snaked out of its mouth and made its way sluggishly across my
face. That set me off. My last name might be Tyson, but I wasn’t about to become anyone’s snack. I thrashed wildly,
but the beast only clenched me more firmly in its grasp. With a sickening crack, I felt one of my ribs snap. Stars
popped behind my eyes. The pain was tremendous. With a shuddering gasp I went limp, a wave of nausea engulfing
me.

Seemingly satisfied, the rat set off down an adjoining tunnel that I had previously failed to notice. The air
grew warmer as the ground sloped upward and soon we were just under the surface, where light streamed in
through large holes in the cavern’s roof. The rat stopped by a wall coated in black slime. He placed a claw below my
wrist and pressed lightly. With a faint pop, my skin burst and his dirt encrusted claw slid into the shallow puncture
wound. He traced his claw down the front of my forearm to the base of my elbow. Blood seeped out of the gash, and
crimson droplets fell onto the uneven rock floor at the rat’s feet.

Reaching out a claw, the rat scraped some slime off the wall, and smeared it over the cut. The black goo
quickly spread throughout my bloodstream. I felt myself growing weaker as the poison’s effects took their toll. Dark-
ness ebbed at the corners of my eyes, when suddenly, blackness washed over my vision like a tide, blotting out all of
my senses. I slumped forward in the rat’s arms, my head lolling onto my chest. Then as the poison hit its climax, I
passed out.

I awoke shivering pathetically, huddled in the corner of the beast’s lair. My head throbbed, but not nearly as
bad as my feet, cheek, arm, and rib did. I lifted my head to get a look at my surroundings. I was groggy, my vision
fuzzy, but I could see well enough. Green light oozed in through a hole in the roof that was covered with foliage. In
the center of the room stood a large, pewter pot with strange symbols inscribed on the side. Underneath it was a pile
of tinder waiting to be lit. On the far side of the small cave, the rat was writing a list on the wall using a piece of char-
coal. The words were written using the same foreign runes that were on the pot. Even so, the list looked frighteningly
like an ingredients section for a recipe.

The rat then shuffled over to a series of rough wooden shelves that were next to a closed door made of the
same material. It swung inward on its hinges and had no handle. The only way to open it was to slide long claws be-
tween the door and the wall, and pull it towards you. It looked like I would be here for a while. I stifled a sob. I didn’t
want the rat to know I was awake yet. It rummaged through the objects clustered on the lowest shelf and turned
around grasping a bunch of blue moss. When the rat dropped the moss into the pot with a dull plop, I realized that
the cauldron was filled with water. I dropped back into my slumber as the rat scratched the first item off the list of
ingredients for a stew that I knew would include me.

I awoke the next day to the bang of the door crashing into the wall as the rat kicked it in, on account that his
hands weren’t free to open it. His arms were filled with the small bodies of rodents, insects, snakes, and a cat. After
adding them unskinned to the pot, the rat crossed off the next four items on his list. This soon became a routine. The
rat’s return would awaken me; he would add his ingredients to the pot, then mark off some article on the list. One
day, the rat returned carrying my sneakers. Taking a large bite out of one, he added the rest to the pot. Then, after
belching loudly, he coughed up what looked curiously similar to what my camera lens might have looked like, had it
been chewed up, slobbered on, and half digested.

Each day after his return, the rat would reopen my cut, and spread his own supply of the black salve over my
wound. Each day I would cry out with newfound pain and intensity until the poison knocked me out. After the fourth
day, the gash stopped reclosing itself every night. On the sixth day I could tell it was infected when I awoke with a
fever and pus oozing out of my arm. I knew an infection was extremely dangerous because if it spread to my bone, I
could lose my arm; and if it spread to my blood, I could lose my life. Death was not the birthday present I had been
wishing for.
I started crying. I’m so sorry Mom. I know you must be so worried about me. After about a week, people expect you to believe that the missing person is dead. I can only imagine how hard that must be. I promise you Mom, I’m not dead. Please believe in me, hope for me. Hope is all I have down here.

On the ninth day, upon awakening early from my drugged state of unconsciousness, I happened to notice that there were dangerously few items left on the list, me being one of them. I decided to take action before the rat could return and give me another dose of poison. I allowed myself a few minutes to build up my strength. During that time, I arrived at the conclusion that I would scale the shelves and, upon his arrival, smash open the rat’s skull with a rock. I scanned the room for anything I could use to bludgeon him with. My eyes fell on a gargantuan, pink gem resting on the third shelf up.

I tossed the fuchsia jewel up to the topmost shelf, and grabbing the second one, I tried to jump up. My hungry weakened legs failed me, and I fell to the floor. Luckily I avoided bumping my rib in the landing. After a few more failed attempts, I joined the gem on the top shelf. Then, I waited. My limbs became cramped from sitting for so long, but after a half an hour, the rat finally returned carrying a wide array of toadstools. The brute swung its stupid head back and forth in confusion after it failed to locate me. I heaved the gem at the huge osculating cranium, but being in the poor condition that I was, my heave fell short, only glancing off the hump on its back. Unfortunately, it only stunned the abomination.

Luckily, that was all the distraction I needed to slip unchallenged out the open door and into the outer chambers. I wasn’t even 50 feet away from the oversized rodent’s lair when I heard the beast begin to pursue me. *Don’t you ever slow down?* I thought despairingly. *I just want this nightmare to be over!* So again, I was running for my life, but this time I was at an even bigger disadvantage than the last time, and last time I was caught. This time I was extremely battered, I had two broken bones, and I was running a fever.

Suddenly, I felt something I hadn’t felt in over a week. Moving air! There was an opening nearby! As I followed the breeze, I glanced over my shoulder to look at the rat. Before I could pinpoint him, the ground disappeared beneath my feet, and I plunged into icy water. I had fallen into an underground river! The freezing temperatures made my muscles start to lock up, but I knew I couldn’t let that happen if I wanted to survive. Frigid water flooded down my airway, but I hacked it back up. The current was strong, and it was a battle to try to keep my head above the surface as I was swept downstream.

Soon, I heard the rat dive in after me. With powerful strokes, it resumed its chase. A low rumble that soon crescendoed into a roar threatening to burst my eardrums distracted me from my pursuer. Unnoticed the rat had glided up to me through the water, like an arrow through still air, and had grabbed me around the waist. I screamed, kicking him. Then the world dropped out from beneath us, and our struggle ceased.

The source of the roar had been a waterfall. As I was free falling along with a rat and millions of pounds of river water, I realized that the network of caves that made up the rat’s territory was set into a cliff. The underground river must originate at a spring inside of the cliff. As the river continues along its path, it breaks through the cliff face and plummets thousands of feet into a different, aboveground, river. I also realized that my skeleton would shatter upon impact with the water unless I found something to shield myself with.

I reached out to my left and grabbed the rat’s arm. Then I swung myself on top of him. Not five seconds later we hit the river. I broke through to the surface virtually unharmed. Much to my amazement, so did the rat. *Will this never stop!* I inwardly shrieked. Knowing I had to end things before the rat tried to seize me again, I dove under water and picked up a fair sized rock. Resurfacing, I hurled the rock at a passing boulder.

The stone shattered into many sharp flakes. I grabbed one just as the rat lunged at me. I plunged the rock shard deep into the rat’s heart. Scarlet blood spurted all over my arm and shirt as momentum carried the convulsing rat onto me, layering several more bruises on top of my older ones. The rat shrieked and clawed my face. With one last spasm, it was swept away, never to harm another person again. Luckily, a tour boat rounded a bend in the river, and I struck out towards it. As I reached the side of the boat, exhaustion enveloped me, and I couldn’t even lift an arm to try to board the boat. Strong hands grasped me and pulled me on board.

“It’s her! It’s that Amber Alert girl that was on the news,” a large woman at the prow of the boat cried. At that moment I realized how I must look to them: sliced up feet, scratched face, black and blue with bruises—the worst one covering the broken cheekbone—one broken rib, a face flushed with fever, one arm dripping with fresh rat’s blood, and the other caked with my own blood and pus.
“Are you okay?” asked a wide man with a gruff voice.
“No,” came the weary reply.
“Do you remember what happened?” he asked.
“No,” I lied. I sat back in my seat and took some deep, calming breathes. My peace was soon interrupted by a shrieking little boy.
“Mommy, Mommy, is that a gorilla?” The boy bounced up and down on his seat pointing at the rat carcass that was caught on a few boulders farther downstream.
“What is that?” the mother wondered aloud. This question was echoed up and down the boat as more people started to notice the rat.
“I could tell you,” I mumbled so that no one could hear me, “but you wouldn’t believe me anyway.”
“Eh, Bentley! Wake up; I’ve brought you something special.” A dove hit the ground near my claws. I untucked my beak from my wing and tore at it. The meat was so tender. Blood and fat dribbled onto my stone chest. If gargoyles could drool, I would have.

“Thanks Eddie, I needed that one,” I said, stretching the sleep out of my muscles.

“You were dreaming about Bonnie again, weren’t you?” Eddie put on that sly smile he always wore when he knew he had me.

“I was not!”

“You can’t lie to me Bent. I’ve known you too long. I can tell. Your tail twitches every time.” Eddie and I had lived together since we’d been carved. We dwelled on the clock tower of some city I don’t care to know the name of. If you wanted to be more specific, then I guess you could say we lived on the northwest corner of the 5th tier, but I digress. The point is, Ed and I were like brothers.

I glared at him. “So what if I was?” Bonnie was a she-gargoyle that lived on the Seventh Avenue Library. She was a goddess. She didn’t let herself go like other gargoyles. When it rained she didn’t sit outside and erode, she took shelter. Of course, that would mean nothing if she weren’t so sweet and modest. We’d become really good friends when we’d taken shelter together under the post office awning during a blizzard several winters ago.

“I think I’m going to go see her.” Eddie didn’t say anything, but his derisive laughter was enough to show his opinion. I ran towards the side of the ledge, and as I sailed into open air, I snapped my wings open and glided on a few strong thermals. I was soaring over the park when I saw a plump squirrel scurrying by a creek. I tucked my wings and dropped towards the creature. At the last second I pulled out of the dive but not before snatching the animal in my jaws and shattering its spine.

It took all my self control not to snap up the animal then and there. I wanted to give it to Bonnie. It was a bit late in the season to find such fat prey. You’re probably wondering why no one noticed a large statue flying across town. We aren’t sure why, and we don’t really care.

Finally, I got to Bonnie’s ledge. When I landed she was sleeping on the far side of a pillar, probably trying to avoid the wind. Setting down my prey, I rapped my tail against the column.

“Who’s there?” she mumbled groggily.

“It is I, King of the Skies, Scourge of pigeons, and your local, not to mention hospitable, timekeeper.”

“Bentley, you came to see me!” Bonnie crowed happily. Now fully awake, she bounded over and wrapped her tail around mine with a little squeeze. I think that’s equivalent to your hugs. I shivered a little at her touch. I hoped she didn’t notice.

“You brought food, too!” She tucked into the squirrel. It was gone in the blink of an eye. “Really, really good food.”

“Oh of course I did, Bonnie. What are friends for?” I knew I was probably leering at her like some creeper dragon, but if she noticed, she didn’t seem to care. Bonnie yawned noisily as the sun warmed her scales. She smiled looking at me with those beautiful eyes that could make flowers bloom.

“You want to go for a flight?”

“Do I ever!” God, Bentley you are such an idiot sometimes. You sound so eager and stupid. Why couldn’t you have said something like, “Sure” or “Yeah I’d like that”? Come on, let’s go.” She took off, expecting me to follow. Which, of course, I did. Like a puppy following its mother, I thought. I glanced over at Bonnie while we were flapping over Main Street. She was gorgeous. The sun glinted off her literally chiseled, marble body.

“Hey, Bonnie, do you ever think of settling down?” It was a big risk for me to put that question out there. If she said no, then what chance did I have?

“Yeah, actually I do. There’s this one gargoyle I can’t get out of my head.” She sighed, staring at the clouds.

“I feel the same way about a she-gargoyle. Anyway, who is this guy you’re so infatuated with?” I questioned,
feeling disappointment well up and form a burning lump in my throat. Looking back, I think it might have been bile.

“Like I’m gonna tell you, rockhead.” Dang it! I was really hoping to know who this guy was. “Your she-gargoyle, do I know her?”

“I guess you could say that.” Oh gosh, when she was looking at me like that, it was so hard not to just tell Bonnie that she was the one. After that, we spent the day delivering bats to the elderly gargoyles (the thin membrane of their wings was perfect for their nubby fangs). At sunset we decided to go to the tavern for some fun. As we circled over the roof trying to find a place to land, I saw the familiar stocky shoulders and round head of my friend Eddie.

Next to him was the slender form of his girlfriend, Carol. Carol was a crazy woman. A real party dragon you might say. It wasn’t surprising that Eddie liked her. He had that kind of taste.

“Hey Bonnie, Bentley; welcome to the party,” shouted Carol. Now human taverns are pretty dead places where depressed single people go to drown their sorrows in alcohol. The only thing ours has in common with yours is the alcohol. Gargoyle taverns are upbeat and lively, but after a day of flying around, Bonnie and I weren’t feeling very energetic, so we went to the edge of the roof to laugh at drunken people.

“I bet you a quail that that guy is going to hurl,” I said, pointing to a wasted man with my tail.

“Oh you are so on.” Not even five seconds later, the man was puking his guts out.

“Looks like you owe me a quail.” I grinned triumphantly. I hardly ever had a victory over Bonnie since she was so much smarter than me.

“Whatever,” she replied bitterly, “let’s see how much you like it when you’re chewing on the toughest, oldest, stringiest quail the world has ever seen.” We took off, our claws scraping at the edge of the building. My flight muscles strained, trying to lift my entire mass into the air. My broad wings grabbed and thrust pockets of air downward as I struggled to gain elevation. Then I hit some strong winds, and my flight became effortless. We sailed towards the only trees in a forest of concrete.

Bonnie was no less glorious in the moonlight. We were supposed to be scouting for quails above the park, but my eyes drifted towards the left to gaze at my attractive companion. The night air was cool and clear at such a high altitude. When I flew I felt like the ruler of the troposphere, as if the sun rose and set on my command and the clouds did my bidding. My thoughts were interrupted when Bonnie suddenly fell from the sky. She hurtled towards the unsuspecting quail, which was caught totally off guard by its plummeting predator. Before it could blink an eye, it had its throat torn out.

I spiraled down, carefully avoiding the trees, and landed beside Bonnie. She was licking blood off her talons and purring. A juicy looking quail lay at her feet. She gazed at me, a look of triumph on her face. Then her eyes grew huge with alarm.

“Bentley, there is an extremely large gargoyle behind you and he looks a little miffed.” I spun around, and I was beak to beak with a gargantuan, surly looking gargoyle. The baleful look on his face told me he was more than a little miffed. He bared his fangs, and I glimpsed sable fur and a name tab reading, “Puffles.”

I snapped open my wings and reared up on my hind legs, trying to look big. A low rumble rose from deep in my chest. Behind the snarl, though, I was trembling on the inside. This guy was massive. Bonnie killed the quail he was after, now he’s going to fight us. I braced myself for the attack.

“You killed Pom-Pom,” he roared, “and for that you must die!” What? That was definitely not what I had expected. I’d thought we were about to get our heads ground to gravel because Bonnie killed his dinner, not his pet. What kind of gargoyle made pets out of prey anyway? Whatever kind they were, this guy didn’t look like one of them.

Pom-Pom’s owner advanced on Bonnie, growling through his mandibles of destruction. She spat in his face, but I could tell she was thinking the same thing I was: in no way could we fend off this gargoylo without sustaining serious injuries. I had to do something. I had an idea, but I was not confident it would work. He took a swipe at Bonnie, but she dodged it and landed a blow to his head. I had to act soon or he would manage to hurt her.

“Hey, um, I think you made a mistake. I see Pom-Pom right over there behind that tree.”

“Really?” Oh yes! The big idiot fell for it! The brute swung his head around to look at the tree I had indicated. That’s when I slammed my spiked tail down hard on his stupid cranium. He collapsed unconscious on the semi-frozen ground. I looked at the big brute. Pathetic. He could have killed us. Of course, I hadn’t exactly taken the most macho
route in defeating him. It was definitely not one of my most brilliant battles.

“Yes, he’s dead?” Bonnie came up behind me to peer over my shoulder.

“No, over the years, I’ve realized you can never quite kill stupid. I bet a freight train could run this feather brain over without him dying.” That one earned me a laugh. She walked up to the quail and rolled it over to me.

“I’m going to offer this to you, but I don’t see how you’d be able to eat it after what just happened.” I mumbled a no thank you and dragged it into the underbrush for some fox to find and eat.

“Hey, Bentley, you know that gargoyle I was telling you about earlier? The one I liked?” She paused and stared at her talons. “Well, it was you. I hope you feel the same way.” My granite limbs froze in shock. Did Bonnie just say she liked me? I broke into a huge smile. The girl of my dreams thought about me the same way I thought about her.

“Of course, I do! Yes! Absolutely! I have for ages!” I babbled like an idiot. She smiled then tucked her head under mine, purring. The rest of the night was a happy blur for me. All I remember was falling asleep under the post office awning where we met.
A stale wind whispered, swirling around particles of debris and rubble, mixing it with the rust-colored dust that laden the air. It was thick and smothering, surrounding and coating everything around it, giving this barren world a smoggy, sepia toned atmosphere.

The breeze soon passed; aside from the bits of debris falling and echoing off other miscellaneous metal remains, everything lay utterly still.

The dull bronze clouds that hung in the sky lightened in their hue, a sign of what little sun still shown through their haze was rising. A soft glare gleamed off a particularly large slab of rusted metal that lay neatly in an otherwise skewed pile of gears and mechanical scraps. This slab, what might’ve once been anything from a car door to the side of an armored tank, creaked and scraped itself against the other scraps by an unseen force until it was completely set aside, revealing a gaping hole in the mound of junk.

From out this hole appeared two spindly hand-like silhouettes that grew in shape and form as their owner stepped from the hovel shelter and into the smoggy light.

This monstrous figure stood at a good six and a half feet tall, dressed in what can only be described as a metal robe. Complete with exposed whirring gears, cranks, and pumps, all buzzing and humming quietly, the solemn-faced figure took in its surroundings. The long spindly fingers twitched delicately, clinking together, their appearance the tips of fountain pens, elongated to fit his tall stature.

The hood of the mechanical cloak was long and slender, fitted together by six long metal petals that’d open and close slowly, as though the hood were somehow breathing amongst the turning gears.

Another quiet breeze shook through the wasteland, the somber face blinking in the hazy dust. From the creature’s chest, seemingly pinned right into the metal, hung two dog tags that chimed together as they were caressed by the passing draft. On one tag in particular, in a scrawl so rough bits of metal still hung shredded from the edges, was a name, written in all capitals, “ABU.” That was this creature’s—his—human name. At least that was what he remembered, and he didn’t remember much.

What he did remember was obscure. He remembered the feeling of clothes on skin; he remembered his hands. They were slender and smooth, in a way much different than the slender and smooth they were now. He remembered when the Soldiers appeared. That’s what he was now, a Steam Soldier, one of these large, immortal beasts of steam-powered technology and war. Abu remembered the draft. It had leaked out to the public that the Steam Soldiers weren’t solely technology; they were once humans who had their entire beings grafted onto the metal of the Soldier’s suits. It was then that the draft was released to recruit new Soldiers. Men, women, anyone they could find with eligible qualities, particularly those that could withstand replacing their human flesh for metal gears, were drafted and began the process of becoming one of these titans.

Abu couldn’t remember being taken from his home, only the pain that followed. In and out of consciousness he’d drift; every now and then he’d catch glimpses of his old body. With blurred vision, he’d try to gain control of his limbs, until suddenly a sharp pain pierced through his spine, radiating throughout his entire body, and then nothing. That moment was the last time he saw his lightly tanned human skin; he woke up with the silver and bronze skin of the suit and was then off to battle.

Abu snapped out of his daydream when he heard a small clinking noise coming from close by. He looked down to see small vermin running around his feet. But these weren’t your average vermin. They were barely a foot tall, yet resembled grotesque forms of people. Their faces were sunken and wrinkled, their gait awkward, yet fast. Their hands worked quickly, despite their mutated appearance. They were one of the downfalls of the Steam Soldiers. Abu kicked them away, keeping his composure as he batted at the fleshy creatures. During the war, these things were designed to tear apart the Soldiers. A bullet shot through that of a Naked Soldier (a suit-less soldier, which there weren’t many of after the Steam Soldiers made their appearance) and that bullet would take whatever particles of human it could and begin to mutate and turn into what Abu saw before him now. Their mission was to disassemble the Steam Soldiers and use any salvaged parts to create more of themselves, or some new type steam-powered war beast entirely
from scratch.

Now that their world was in shambles, the creatures were in frenzy. With all the scraps lying about, their purpose changed, and they were Scavengers. Still dangerous to Steam Soldiers, they weren’t as much a cause for alarm since they’d easily be distracted by a different scrap source. Regardless, Abu took no chances and quickly ran from the mutants until he found himself standing in the middle of a barren street. He could still see the faint outlines of the yellow marks imprinted on the road, but otherwise it was hidden by a moderate layer of dust and dirt that hid the black asphalt underneath. He followed the street for a while, having no direction to his loiter. The war supposedly still raged, but Abu couldn’t guess who’d want to win power over this desolate wasteland anymore. Rather than spending his days hunting other Steam Soldiers, he would now simply wander or sit somewhere and repeat his name, glancing at the dog tags, so he may hold on to that shred of humanity he had left. Abu, Abu, Abu... he’d repeat over and over. But... Abu what? What was his last name? Anyone could have a first name, he’d even heard the Scavengers mutter something that might’ve been a title, but it was a last name that identified who you were. He thought of this now as he passed an old Cineplex. The Deco roof, curved and layered, still seemed to glow red despite there being nothing to power the neon. The Soldier stared at it for a minute. He sort of remembered it. Or at least, he could picture the theatre without the haze, with the lights glowing, people crowding to get tickets, the marquee letters showing what was playing.

Wandering inside, it was dark. Abu flicked on the two small lights geared on the front of his shoulders; dust had greatly lowered the quality of light that shown from them, but it still provided enough for him to see. The concession stand glass was smashed; doors to the showing rooms were unhinged. There was even a theatre seat or two strewn about the entrances. On the walls next to the showing rooms were movie posters of coming attractions and what was playing. On the tops of all of them, Abu noticed the first and last names of all the actors and actresses. Humphrey Bogart, Vincent Price, James Stewart. It may have been a feeble way of describing Abu’s desire, but it only seemed to urge him on to search for his ever-identifying family name. He didn’t know why it was movie posters, of all things, that motivated him. It was as though it were a remnant of how he may have acted before becoming a Soldier. Though he had no desire to pursue any further of his personality beforehand, considering his memories it probably wasn’t one he wanted to remember. He left the theatre and went back into the abysmal streets.

Looking at his feet as he walked, staring at the obscure looking tubes that jutted from the metal of his toe. As he stared at the intricate design laced into the steel, he was completely distracted in his own thoughts. It was a while before he heard to his dismay the whirring gasps from the object he had run into. It was a Scavenger creation.

Huge and hulking, a large grate seeming to come from an old fashioned furnace was welded against the body, as though it were smiling devilishly. The small headlight eyes above the figure radiated a bright, angry red as it glared at the Soldier below it. Its arm, a combination of a tread from a military tank and the teeth from countless chainsaws, started to hum and shudder until they spun wildly. Abu backed away slowly at first, too preoccupied by this tattered contraption. While the Scavengers were created to create from nothing, their contrivances were at best clunky, wild brutes. And their purpose was like the Scavengers—dismantle whatever came their way. Only these were far more dangerous than ten-inch tall flesh blobs. Abu’s fingers quickly retracted into the depths of his sleeve, producing another large piece of machinery. Like a spider weaving a web, the fingers clawed at the mechanism, locking it into place and then closed around the firearm. Abu, subconsciously, as he had done for so long, lifted his arm and shot at the steam Behemoth. Though, this only enraged it. Large clouds of steam billowed from the exposed pipes and the seams of its joints before it charged at the attacker.

By this time, Abu saw his only option was to run. He dashed down the street, quickly realizing he needed to get somewhere his large assailant couldn’t reach him. He passed by several buildings, all of which were far too dilapidated to shield him, until he came to a large tenant building. Its bricks were charred, from either an apartment fire or warfare, it wasn’t certain. In any case, it was the best the Soldier was going to get. The front entrance was boarded up with rotting wooden planks, which Abu quickly clawed his way through. He stumbled his way into the dismantled foyer of the apartment building, puffs of dust clouding around his feet as he stepped. The Behemoth outside attempted to follow his target, slamming the makeshift chainsaw arm at the building. The sound of the saw and the bricks colliding echoed down the street, causing the piles of debris to shudder. However, it was not from the radiating force of the tank-tread chainsaw; it was the disturbance of Scavengers that were awakened. Clamoring, annoyed, as they crawled from their hovels, they made their way to their steam machine. Meanwhile, Abu peered out of a
shattered window at the precarious scene before him. Unsure of what was happening, all he saw were the Scavengers gnawing at the ankles of the Behemoth until it finally backed away from the building. Several shards of brick fell from the saw’s teeth, causing many of the Scavengers to scatter as the Behemoth wandered away.

Abu breathed a deep sigh of relief, though he wouldn’t be letting his guard down any time soon. He turned and looked at the building where he now hid. Dust was everywhere, as though someone had been using the entire building as a broom pan. He ran his hand across a desk that sat off to one side, behind it a shelf of slots and key hooks. His long fingers left small, slender tracks in the layer of residue, revealing the rotting cherry oak wood beneath. It was a hotel, Abu thought. He tried to picture what it might’ve looked like before the dust, the wood rot, and decay. He wandered further into the lobby, where overturned chairs and torn couches lay surrounding a, now barricaded with stones and sandbags, fireplace. He tried to brush off the dust from the couches and chairs as he rearranged them how he remembered. Backing up, he looked intently at the arrangement. The maroon seats had turned dull from age, but otherwise the Soldier could almost perfectly picture how it used to be. Aside from the seating, the rest of the room was pretty much destroyed. Supporting beams and discarded gears were strewn about, detracting from the class the place once had. In the corner Abu spotted a still-standing grand piano. He peered into the dusty innards of the instrument, seeing most of the strings were still intact, and not a Scavenger to be found (as they were known to hide anywhere they could fit). Abu sat carefully at the piano bench and took a deep breath before aligning his fingers to the proper keys. His family being socialites, it was almost necessary he learn an instrument at a young age. However, Abu hadn’t played since he was a boy, and his rustiness showed through a few sour notes, but regardless he had a sense of calm wash over him as he played through his fountain pen fingers. As he remembered the music, he also remembered more of how this hotel once was. People gathered around the fireplace, reading a novel or the daily paper quietly while others chatted thoughtfully with one another. The pianist played with quick fingers, Abu remembered. However, everyone he saw was faceless, their skin toneless, their voices like the soft static of a radio. He remembered a wineglass in his hand, people crowding around his side as he spoke in the soft static voice.

Abu’s fingers stopped suddenly, falling bitterly on the piano keys. The Soldier stood and pondered this memory. He could just make out his home. It had a large front yard that was surrounded by trees. Two large marble pillars helped support the quaint front porch and greeted its visitors to the pristinely polished double doors. That must’ve been what he was discussing through that static. Abu had to find this house. Perhaps, he thought, the hotel must’ve had records of its tenants. Though he soon found the building was so run down, paper copies of any records were reduced to yellowed ash within their bindings. Distraught, he still held on to the memory and left the building. The Soldier couldn’t make out the words to what he was saying, but he remembered more clearly the subject than the exact words. Wandering hurriedly down streets, he came to an intersection. A broken down war tank sat in the center, its treads missing. Abu looked at the corners of the sidewalks, no street names. He sighed, aggravated, and started digging through the rubble near one street corner. The sound of his fingers scraping the concrete was like nails on a chalkboard, cutting through the silence of the waning daylight. Soon, he came to it. The metal pole was bent and rusted, but the street’s name plate was still intact: Sherwood Ave., it read. He remembered that home was down this street. As he rushed past buildings, things became more familiar. An old supply store, a butcher shop, a market, all generally emptied of their wares. He wasn’t sure, but at some point he thought he spotted other Steam Soldiers. It wasn’t too much of an unusual sight, though he hadn’t seen another one of his kind in several days; he glanced at the steam beings wandering through the aisles of the ramshackle stores. Their armor was maroon and gilded gold. Their fingers long, slender knives rather than fountain pens, and the point of one of their hoods was a large drill, while the other’s took the shape of a surgical needle. They were from the side Abu had fought against. So rather than stopping, he continued his sprint down Sherwood Avenue.

Abu’s only idea of time was when the copper smog started to darken in hue. His surroundings were now far behind the town he came from and had slowly melded into a high-class suburbia. The stone walls of the privacy fences were crumbled, the trees were bare of leaves, and the once soft, green grass was reduced to loose, bronzed dirt. Abu peered through the remains of the stone walls, looking for the house he pictured. It was getting darker, making it harder to pick out the details of each home, but Abu wasn’t going to stop until he found the house he pictured. The small lights on Abu’s shoulders flicked on, outlining the details of the houses as he passed them. He continued to walk, coming down to the end of the neighborhood. And there it stood, the polished double doors, the tall marble pillars. Like many of the houses, it was boarded up and full of cracks, but for the most part it had survived.
With a tinge of anticipation Abu squeezed through the crack in the surrounding wall and started hurriedly for those eerily familiar doors. Planks fell to the tiled floor as the measly wooden barricade broke away when the door was forced opened. Everything was still inside the house. Things were toppled over, dust flew about the air.

Abu entered the foyer and started investigating the home. He had vague memories of the house. The chandelier that hung with shattered bulbs as it swung precariously from the high ceiling he might’ve recalled almost breaking while playing there as a child. Abu searched the entire bottom floor from the kitchen to the family room. Though, despite the vague familiarity of it, he still felt estranged. A radio sat against the wall between several armchairs in the family room. He could hear the soft static coming from its dusty speakers. Unsettled by this, he turned it off.

Upstairs he went to the guest rooms, the master suite, and finally… his room. He stood at the doorway for a long while. A canopy bed lay in one corner, next to which sat two nightstands. Bookshelves and a desk stood opposite that, with the doorway to his bathroom. Abu approached the desk. Papers still lay in disarray, as though he didn’t have time to put them away before he left. He leafed through them until he saw the last page of a letter he had been writing. And at the bottom was his signature: Abu Henson.
The Date

Author: Michael Youd
Grade: 10
Teacher: Chanel Burge
School: Gallatin High School, Gallatin, Missouri

1. INT. SCENE- MR. JOHNSON'S CLASSROOM
Scene fades into a school bell, ringing. Change to view of MR. JOHNSON'S ROOM. Filled with a mix of science posters and motivational posters, MR. JOHNSON stands at the back of the classroom. He is balding, with white hair and a white chin-beard. He wears small glasses, and a suit and tie. All other students are talking to each other, including MARK GARRISON, JAKE BROWN, and ROY BRITE. MARK is wearing tight jeans and a Van Halen t-shirt. JAKE is wearing sunglasses, a leather jacket, jeans, and a black t-shirt. ROY is wearing a Nike t-shirt and gym shorts. There is an empty seat right next to them.

ROY: Where is he?
MARK: I don’t think he’s sick.
JAKE: Depressed?
ROY: Does that really matter?
JAKE: Good point. He’s always depressed.
MARK: I wonder why.
ROY: Look at him. He’s 16, never had a girl that likes him, has an involuntary obsession with Star Trek, and looks like a white Erkel.
JAKE: Not to mention that he’s a teenager. I think that qualifies him for depression.
ROY: Wouldn’t you be?

MR. JOHNSON walks up to the front of the classroom.

MR. JOHNSON (Enthusiastic): Good morning, students!

Everyone becomes silent.

MR. JOHNSON: I said, good morning, students!

Everyone remains silent, and stares at MR. JOHNSON.

MR. JOHNSON: Let’s do attendance. Jason Arnold?
JASON: Here.
MR. JOHNSON: Susan Baring bearing her intelligence today?
SUSAN: Here.
MR. JOHNSON: Roy Brite brightening my day?
ROY: Here.
MR. JOHNSON: Jake Brown here to...Jake Brown?
JAKE: Here. And thank you for the lack of pun in my name.

MR. JOHNSON continues to go through attendance, while ROY, JAKE, and MARK continue to talk.

ROY: Mark, did he mention anything to you?
MARK: Not at all.
MR. JOHNSON: Mark Garrison, rhymes with Harri-
MARK: I’m here.
MR. JOHNSON: Billy Hardock?
Silence remains in the classroom.

MR. JOHNSON: Billy Hardock here?
ROY: I don’t know where he is.
MR. JOHNSON (Sarcastically, progressively getting angrier): Well, that’s just great! Another student skipping! I’m sure he’ll do well in the real world! And then when he’s behind, I’m gonna get more calls from parents telling me what a “bad, bad man” I am! This is just what I needed!

JAKE: You okay, Mr. Johnson? What’s the problem?
MR. JOHNSON (Hysterically angry): What’s the problem? What’s the problem? The problem is, I’ve got a bachelor’s degree in science, and I’m stuck here at Johnsville High School! I could be researching aquatic birds in Africa, but somehow I end up in the middle of Minnesota with a group of punks, an ulcer, and an ex-wife who makes my life the definition of “burning in hell!!” (Calmer) And yet, I bring my endless knowledge to this school. (Angry again) And what do I get?? Punk kids who grow more and more rebellious each year, a school board that doesn’t want to support the science program, and a community who’s been plotting against me since Day 1 to get me kicked out! That, Mr. Brown, is my problem!!!

Everyone is silent for a time until MR. JOHNSON speaks up again.

MR. JOHNSON: What??
ROY: I think he’s sick, Mr. Johnson.
MR. JOHNSON (Sarcastically): That’s weird, Roy! I thought I was the one with the degree! I didn’t know that you suddenly had a college degree high enough to talk during class!
ROY: What?
MR. JOHNSON: Silence, everybody! Our Gallileo, Roy Brite, has something to say! Quiet! Anybody make a sound and I will fail you! Now, speak up, my lord.
ROY: I was just saying that I think that Billy’s sick today.
MR. JOHNSON (Embarrassed): Oh...that’s it? Well, class, turn to page 357. Let’s learn about decomposition!

2. EXT. SCENE-OUTSIDE OF JOHNSVILLE HIGH SCHOOL
ROY, JAKE, and MARK all walk out of school, along with all of the other students. They talk to each other as they walk.

JAKE: So what are you guys gonna do?
ROY: I’m game for anything. I don’t have anything better to do.
MARK: I’m gonna go to Billy’s house. See if he’s there.
ROY: Crying himself to sleep and trying to do the Vulcan death grip.

View to JAKE, who is looking in a different direction than MARK and ROY.

JAKE: No need to do that.
ROY: Why?
JAKE (Points): There he is.

View goes to where JAKE is pointing. Along comes a van towards JAKE. The van is green, with flames spray-painted on the side. The speakers from the car are blasting “Don’t Stop ‘Til You Get Enough” by Michael Jackson to the point that everyone can hear it. As the van passes the students, they all stop and stare at him. The driver finally stops right in front of JAKE, MARK, and ROY. The van window rolls down, and BILLY is seen in the driver’s seat. BILLY is a nerdy kid and a dramatic hapless romantic, with somewhat long greasy hair, freckles, thick glasses, and a Captain Kirk t-shirt on.
BILLY: Get in, guys.
ROY: Why were you gone today?
BILLY: Get in!
ROY: Are you high?
BILLY (Joyfully, Dramatic): Only on the powers of love, gentlemen. Now get in!
MARK: Are you high?
BILLY: Only on love!
JAKE: Are you high?
BILLY: Stop asking that! I’m not high! I have a plan! And I need your help!

View points to MARK, ROY, and JAKE. They open the van door, and look at a mysterious item.

MARK: Oh, no.
JAKE: Not again.
BILLY: It’s gonna work this time. I just need you guys to work on some technical things in the background for me.
Now get in, for the sake of love!
MARK: Stop saying that. You sound way too feminine.

3. EXT. SCENE-OUTSIDE SUSAN BARING’S HOUSE
Next shot goes to the VAN pulling up and parallel parking right next to a sidewalk. The van doors all open. ROY and JAKE get out of the back-seats of the car. They turn towards the car and start hooking up mysterious chords in the car. MARK and BILLY start walking up someone’s driveway. BILLY seems determined, while MARK seems nervous.

MARK: Do you even remember last time you tried this, Billy? Do you?
BILLY: That was different. This is different than then.
MARK: It was exactly the same as now!
BILLY: I have this planned out better.
MARK: No you don’t! You absolutely don’t have this planned out better!
BILLY: This time I come, knowing full well what the end of this journey holds.
MARK: So do I. Tears from you, laughter from the world, and a restraining order from a judge.
BILLY: Not 18 yet. No judge can restrain my love.
MARK: How long have you even known her?
BILLY: Long enough. I know her like the back of my hand.
MARK: Really? What’s her favorite band?
BILLY: Nirvana.
MARK: And what makes you say that?
BILLY: She was wearing a Nirvana shirt.
MARK: Billy. Has that ever mattered? Girls wear shirts for bands they’ve never heard of in their life before! I met two girls today with Pink Floyd shirts on. They thought Pink Floyd was a fashion company. It’s called the man. It’s called--
BILLY: It’s called you can’t stop the rivers of love, Mark. Nobody can. Plus, one of her friends told me the other thing she likes. And that’s what I’m using to get her.

BILLY rings the doorbell. As MARK is speaking, the door opens, with MRS. BARING at the front door, and his mood changes.

MARK: Billy, you are insane. This doesn’t even work on movies. You are way too dramatic for real life. There is no way in... (Door opens) Why hello, Mrs...
BILLY (Whispers): Baring.
MARK: Mrs. Baring...Mrs. Baring. Susan’s mom. Hello, Mrs. Baring! I’m Mark Garrison. But I’m not the one that you need to know. This is Billy Hardock. He is here for a special purpose. The purpose of love. Would you mind asking...Susan Baring...if she could come to the door?

BILLY: Actually, Mrs. Baring, are one of these windows out front her window?

MRS. BARING: Um...that one’s the bathroom window. Want her to go there?

BILLY: That’ll be fine.

MRS. BARING (Yelling inside): Susan! Some nerdy kid is at our front door. He wants you to look out the bathroom window! Go up there! (To MARK and BILLY) She’ll be right up in just a sec.

BILLY and MARK head back towards the van.

MARK: Susan Baring? Really, Billy? Have you even talked to her? Does she even know that you exist?

BILLY: Yes. And she is a beautiful, charming, and caring woman. I want nothing more than to be with her forever!

MARK: And I want nothing more than for you to claim you’re at the wrong Susan Baring’s home, leave now, and sensibly ask someone else out without the theatrics.

BILLY (To Roy and Jake): Did you guys get the fireworks ready?

MARK (To himself): Oh gosh.

BILLY then pulls the mysterious item that they were looking at earlier out of the van. It’s a karaoke machine, plugged into the van. He puts it onto the sidewalk, as ROY and JAKE go behind the van. BILLY starts speaking into the karaoke machine microphone. MARK stands at the side of the van.

BILLY (Shyly, dramatic): Hey, Susan. It’s me, Billy. Listen, I just needed to tell you something. I love you. I don’t know if you love me, but I’d like to express my love for you in song. One of your favorites, I believe. (Trying not to talk into the microphone, but still talking into the microphone, points towards a CD sitting on the seat in the car) Hey, Mark, could you put that CD into the machine?

MARK picks up the CD, looks at it, and suddenly becomes shocked. He goes up and starts whispering into BILLY’S ear. BILLY, though trying to only speak to MARK, continues to speak into the microphone.

BILLY: What’s the problem?...no it’s not...Stop lying, Mark!...no, you’re just trying to get me to stop this. Just put it in and hit track 1. Thank you. (To Susan) Okay, here we go.

MARK reluctantly hits play on the CD. The karaoke version of the song “Seasons of Love” from Rent comes on. BILLY starts singing along with it. ROY and JAKE are talking behind the van. MARK joins them.

JAKE: Oh, no.

ROY: Rent?

MARK: Karaoke Rent.

JAKE: In public.

ROY: Serenade.

MARK: Attempts to serenade.

JAKE: Disaster.

ROY: Embarrassment.

JAKE: Fireworks?

ROY: Cut him off.

JAKE and ROY smile devilishly at each other, go to the spots where the fireworks are, light matches, and light of the fireworks. Shot goes to BILLY, who’s singing and dancing with the song. Suddenly, he hears fireworks go off behind him, and while the song continues, he stops singing, looks back, and stares at the fireworks, which obviously went
off too early. MARK sneaks up and turns off the CD. BILLY slowly turns around, and looks at the window where SUSAN is.

BILLY: So what do you say, Susan?
SUSAN (Raising her voice to talk): Who are you?
BILLY: I’m Billy. I was your lab partner yesterday in Mr. Johnson’s class.
SUSAN: Oh...oh, that Billy.

BILLY is speechless. MARK comes up and takes the microphone from BILLY.

MARK: April fools...
SUSAN: It’s October.
MARK: October fools?

4. INT. SCENE-BILLY’S ROOM
BILLY, MARK, ROY, and JAKE all sit in BILLY’S ROOM. The room is Star Trek-themed, having posters of Star Trek everywhere, along with a cardboard cutout of Mr. Spock. There is a desk in the corner, and a window in the other corner. There is a bed with Star Trek bedding, with a small television right across from it. BILLY lays on his bed, moaning and crying in sadness. ROY sits on BILLY’S desktop, while MARK sits on the floor by the window and JAKE sits in BILLY’S desk chair. JAKE, MARK, and ROY stare at BILLY while he moans.

MARK: You had met her before you two became lab partners yesterday, right, Billy?
BILLY (Dramatic, depressed): I had never seen her before yesterday. I had never lived until yesterday. And now I’ll never live again.

ROY starts laughing.

BILLY: What’s so funny, Roy?
ROY: That was the dumbest thing ever. You know that you’re not in a chick flick, right?

JAKE rolls the desk chair over to BILLY’S television, and picks up a pile of DVDs that are right next to the TV. The DVDs are all romantic movies, including PS I Love You, Titanic, The Proposal, The Holiday, Hitch, and My Super Ex-Girlfriend.

JAKE: I’m not sure he knows that.

MARK walks over and looks at the DVDs in the stack.

MARK: Are you watching My Super Ex-Girlfriend?
BILLY: That has that guy from The Office. Only reason I’m watching it.
JAKE: The Proposal?
BILLY: Ryan Reynolds.
MARK: The Holiday?
BILLY: Jack Black. Plus it’s almost Christmas.
JAKE: Christmas isn’t for another 3 months. Titanic?
BILLY: That’s an American cinema classic! Don’t mock Titanic!
MARK: PS I Love You?

BILLY remains silent and appears to ponder.

JAKE: I think we got him.
BILL: Okay! Maybe I watched rom-coms to ease my pain.
ROY: Never call chick flicks rom-coms ever again.
JAKE: Hitch?
BILL: That’s like a survival guide to women for men.
MARK: Well, Billy, I hate to be the one to tell you this, but in the world of surviving women, you got lost in the middle of the jungle, you lost your balance, fell in the grass, and now you’re getting devoured by a hungry tiger. But I’m glad that Hitch is working out for you.
BILL: What am I supposed to do, Mark? Every time I try, I fail for some reason. Why do I continue to fail?
JAKE: Maybe it’s because you come off as too hard.
BILL: What do you mean?
MARK: Name the last 5 girls that you’ve asked out.
BILL: Well, there was Susan Baring, Jessica Sardinson, Amy Gardner, Sarah Foley, and Helga Olson.
JAKE: Helga Olson? The transvestite?
BILL: I didn’t know at the time.
JAKE: You mean like the fact that she had more facial hair than you?
MARK: That’s aside from the point. How did you ask Helga the Tranny out?
BILL: I sent her flowers and a copy of Phantom of the Opera: Deluxe edition.
MARK: What was in the Deluxe edition?
BILL: 2 Disks, and a replica of the mask that the Phantom wears.
MARK: So you gave the transvestite a mask to cover her face? Smart move.
BILL: Okay, maybe that wasn’t my best plan. It would have helped to know that she was a transvestite.
MARK: Exactly. What about Sarah Foley?
BILL: Found the restaurant that she worked at and paid the band there to play a romantic song. I then asked her to go out with me.
MARK: Nothing special?
ROY: He got on one knee and gave her a ring.
MARK: How long did he know her?
ROY: I don’t think they had ever talked before. Did you guys ever talk before?
BILL: I bumped into her once and said “Sorry for bumping into you.”
MARK: Got it. Amy?
JAKE: I was there for that one. He put flower petals from her room all the way to a piano in the school while she was asleep. He then played Piano Man to her.
MARK: How long had they known each other?
JAKE: Actually an improvement. They became Facebook friends before he did it.
MARK: How did you get into her house?
BILL: Window out back.
MARK: Did you get a jail sentence?
BILL: No. Just got beaten up by her boyfriend.
ROY: Didn’t even check the info on her Facebook to see if she had a boyfriend? You’re a crappy Facebook stalker.
BILL: I’ve improved.
MARK: Something you don’t admit. Ever. Jessica?
BILL: I just waited until a day that it rained, and then kissed her and told her, “I love you, Jessica. I always will.”
ROY: What did she say?
BILL: Well, Zoey Daniels said that even if she was Jessica, she would punch me to the ground. And then she punched me to the ground.
MARK: And then came Susan, who you knew through a forced lab project together. You went to her house, blasted Rent via karaoke machine, and lit off fireworks at 4 PM. Why did you think Rent would work? And more importantly, where did you get the karaoke CD?
BILL: Chuck Ray gave it to me. He said it’d work.
ROY: The gay kid?
JAKE: Yep. And more importantly, the gay kid that he made fun of last year.
MARK: You made fun of the gay kid?
JAKE: He inadvertently used terrible slurs during class.
BILLY: Are you saying that he sabotaged me?
MARK, ROY, AND JAKE (Simultaneously): Yep.
MARK: Do you see a common pattern in these rejections, Billy?
BILLY: Me crying at the end of all of the ordeals?
MARK: You jump to the end at the beginning. It’s like...these romantic comedies. In *PS I Love You*, did Hilary Swank get together with Gerard Butler in the first 10 minutes?
BILLY: Yeah. The whole premise of the movie is her getting over him and living her life.
MARK: Okay, that’s more information about that movie than I needed to know. What about *Titanic*?
BILLY: No, but they end up dead. I don’t want to end up dead.
MARK: Fine. In Hitch, how does he ask her out in the beginning?
BILLY: Wait, how did you know he asked her out in the beginning? Have you seen *Hitch* before?
MARK: Parents made me watch it.

JAKE and ROY start laughing at MARK.

MARK: Shut up! Billy, the question.
BILLY: He starts out cool and casual--
MARK: Exactly! Does he give his undying love?
BILLY (Getting excited): No!
MARK: Exactly! Does he claim that she was the love of his life from minute 1?
BILLY: No!
MARK: So next time you ask a girl out, are you going to be casual or severe?
BILLY: I’m gonna be casual!
MARK: Good.
BILLY: And then severe!
ROY: Not what we were looking for.
MARK: But in the mean time, are you gonna lay low in order to hide your eternal shame?
BILLY: Yeah! Who needs girls? I am single and happy right now!
MARK: Yeah! Be single! Be happy!
BILLY: I am so single and happy about it! I’ll be right back. I have to go to the bathroom.

BILLY skips out of the room. The expressions on the faces of JAKE and ROY go from happy to angry, almost immediately.

JAKE: Are you insane, Mark??
ROY: Why would you convince him that he’s single and happy?? Now one of us is going to have to be the therapist. You get to buy whoever he wakes up in the middle of the night.
MARK: Oh, crap. I forgot about that. I’ll pay for whichever of you two he calls.
ROY: I hope it’s you. I’ll be right back.

ROY walks out of the room. As ROY walks out of the room, JAKE starts laughing.

JAKE: You watched Hitch. (Starts laughing)
MARK: Shut up, Jake.....
Salt of the Hunter

Author: Jessica Ball
Grade: 10
Teacher: K'Lea Snyder
School: Benton High School, St. Joseph, Missouri

Sunlight filtered in soft rays
Through branches onto deer that graze
On a salt block white as snow
Surrounding it, placed there so
Kinsmen watching without guns
Can witness them in gentle sun
Glittering in ice-robed trees
Stretching, bare of fall’s bright leaves
And now bedecked with winter’s gems,
Rainbows trapped in ice prisms
Dancing on the feeding does
Calmly moving in fresh snow,
Unaware of kinsmen’s eyes
Following each fall, each rise
Of their bodies as they breathe,
Serenely bobbing as they feed
On salt crystal block placed there
By kinsmen’s hands with utmost care
When I was little, I always tried to look up to my grandpa. He was my role model and inspiration. I knew that when I grew up, I wanted to be just like him. Yet, I was so short, and he was so tall. I despised the forces of gravity that hindered my viewpoint, prohibiting me from seeing his features clearly. Luckily, I had a great view of the ground, which held other features. I had a great view of my grandpa’s boots.

His boots were reliable. They were as steady as time itself. I could always expect him to have them. In fact, every time I would visit Grandpa and Grandma’s house I would see them. They would be perched on the stairway leading to the front door. The boots held a place of honor. They were seen by all who entered the doors of a loving household. The boots were a symbol of love itself. They represented the heart and soul of the people in the house.

Sometimes when Grandpa wasn’t looking, I would try them on. The boots engulfed my childish feet, surrounded my toes, and reached nearly to my knees. The soles were comfy and well worn. The texture of taken-care-of leather was comforting against my skin. I felt as though I could walk across the whole wide world in my grandpa’s cowboy boots.

In fact, his boots had traveled many miles. At first glance, even at a tender age, I could recognize that. I could tell the boots were well traveled yet were valued by my grandpa. He was raised in an era where the value of an object was not based upon the price tag. In our day and age, it seems as though everything has tangible worth. My grandpa was taught that anything of worth is earned with your own two hands. You had to work hard to gain not just something, but something that mattered to you. In the Great Depression, people were lucky to have shoes on their feet. This was a lesson Grandpa taught me: to be thankful for what I have and take pride in what I earn.

Grandpa took pride in his boots. I would often see him oiling the leather. Thanks to years of care, the leather offered minimal scuffs. Grandpa’s boots appeared a dull brown at first glance. But I knew better. To me, they were the shade of sand on a beach. Sand has freckles of tan, small pieces of dark browns, and even hints of black. When they were new, they must have been store-bought-brown colored. Now they held a story. They held an occasional crease and blemish, but I thought that added character. Just as my grandpa’s face had many lines, I liked to believe that each line held a story. Like each wrinkle in the leather of his boots, there was a story.

My grandpa told many stories. Mostly he told stories about his life, about how he grew from an impoverished young boy, living in one-room house in Oregon, to a young man living in Missouri who met the love of his life, my grandma. He told me how he wanted the best for my grandma. His love for her was endless. Their brand of love lasted a lifetime.

My grandpa traveled to provide for my grandma. He visited nearly every state working on the pipeline. Grandpa would often be gone for long periods of time, but when he returned, he would always bring my grandma back a plate. She loved to collect the state plates. Grandma was a homebody, staying behind and raising their family. Her plates proudly adorned her kitchen walls and encircled her doorway, looking down upon the very doorway where grandpa’s boots would proudly rest after they had traveled the continental United States and back. Back to his love.

Grandpa’s boots held him through many travels for his work, and he made many memories in them. He often told stories about his travels, his life during the Great Depression, his experience at being drafted into World War II, and his family. Some stories were harder to tell than others. Being a soldier is never easy. Luckily for my grandpa, the war ended soon after he was drafted. He still had to face it though, marching in a soldier’s boots to the unknown, leaving his wife for possibly the last time. That’s the kind of fear that eats a person alive. Thankfully my grandpa was strong. When it was story time, Grandpa avoided the stories ridden with a soldier’s glory of bombs, trenches, and fear. Instead, his favorite stories to tell were fish stories.

My grandpa lived to fish. It must have been raining the day he was born because he couldn’t leave the water. Water ran in his veins. He would wake up at dawn, hook up his boat, and take it to the river. Grandpa spent many a day on the river. The waves would lap softly against his boat as he reeled in his fishing line, hoping as always for the “big catch.” Some days, he wouldn’t catch anything. The water would be silent, tranquil. He felt a sense of
peace. He was at home on the river.

In fact, fishing became a family tradition. It was my grandpa who placed my first fishing pole in my hand, helped me bait my line, and reel in the “whopper” I had caught. I loved sitting with him on his boat, looking out at the seemingly endless pool of water before me and thinking it was all ours. My love for my grandpa was endless. It was like the Missouri River, with many loops and turns, but endless. The lessons I learned while fishing were infinite, the most important: never forget my boots.

Grandpa’s boots saw him through many fishing trips. He loved going fishing with my grandma. Who knew his love for the water would take him from me?

It was one of those accidents, the kind that made the front page of the local paper and even the radio station. My grandpa went fishing and didn’t come back.

Grandpa thought he was still young. It didn’t register in his mind that he was no longer a young man. He refused to acknowledge that he had a heart problem, going fishing like usual. Fate struck, and his boat got away from him just as he stepped onto the shore. Without a second’s hesitation, grandpa swam after his boat.

That was the last time my grandma ever saw her husband.

She watched the love of her life swim off, while she was left behind—like she had been so many times in the past, all the times Grandpa had gone off across the country to provide for her. But this time, Grandpa never came back.

Grandpa happened to leave his boots home that morning.

At this point in my life, I was tall enough to see my grandpa’s face—almost eye level. I had his features memorized. Every time I closed my eyes, I could see the loving outlines of his face, the countless wrinkles that came with wisdom and perhaps age as well, and the blue eyes filled with warmth. I refused to let my memory of my grandpa disappear. I feared the bandits of time would steal away my memory and force my grandpa to become forgettable.

It’s the love we discover in this life that keeps our souls alive for a lifetime. Grandpa loved fishing, just as I loved flower arranging. I loved the beauty I could create. The love I felt for Grandpa created a wildfire of creativity within my soul. I was amazed at the ease in which simple silk flowers could be transformed into a masterpiece with a few carefully placed stems. When I had sorrow in my heart, I could often be found creating arrangements. It was how I dealt with my emotions.

Now, I will not forget the memory of my grandpa. His boots proudly stand by his picture with the catch of his life: my grandma. Grandpa wears a loving expression on his face—and his boots. Between the timeless couple hangs the largest fish I have ever seen. It was always his dream to catch a hundred pound fish. Not long before he died, he succeeded.

The boots now hold flowers. Each reminded me of how full of life my grandpa was. The burnt red blooms engulf the boots and bring them to life. Brown tinged twigs peak out from the top of the boots, yellow blossoms overflow from the sides, and autumn shades of orange accent the entire arrangement. I turned my pain and sorrow into passion.

It turns out, my passion was rewarded. At the Missouri State Fair, my grandpa’s boots gained fame in an over-sized, royal purple, gold trimmed ribbon proudly proclaiming, “Missouri State Fair Champion Horticulture Centerpiece.” I always knew my grandpa’s boots were the best. Now the whole state knows it.

My grandpa’s pride now rests on my family hearth. I used to look up to my grandpa. Now I look to his boots. I believe he would be proud of his boot’s purpose now. True, they haven’t traveled many miles since my grandpa has gone, but his boots sure have been loved.
I am a leaf.
I am battered about by the wind of time,
Of any breeze floating by.
I am subject to it.
Without a will to wield myself,
I am not my own.
I am lost in the endless skies,
A life I do not lead,
A space I cannot fill,
And on this dark, grey clouded day,
I cannot see the way.
Oh, where is the sun to warm me,
To guide and show me?
Where I land, I know not.
It is lost, behind such impenetrable clouds.
If I could only find that sun,
The cheer would be double-fold,
For I need the sun as it needs me.
Why would the sun come out if there was nothing to shine on?
So many other little leaves pass me by;
Some hitting, some flying on,
Some seem to know where they’re at, where they’re going.
They are not lost, like me.
Oh cruel wind that tore me from my tree,
That hides the beloved sun from me,
That brings the raging clouds before me,
Why must you bludgeon and tear me,
Break and bear me to somewhere new,
To somewhere I have never been?
I am a leaf, what can I do?
How did I come to such a state as this?
I did no wrong.
Sinned, not I.
But I am caught in this wind.
It is folly to fight it, so I am blown
And blown and blown over land and sea.
The sea! Oh, this is far, so far from anywhere I’ve seen before,
And I am tired of being blown.
So tired, I need rest.
Oh those cool, crystal waters,
That dark abyss,
Could not I lay there, just briefly?
Could not I pause, and here!
The faintest glimmer, the tiniest sparkling of the sun!
Blessed water, embrace me, take me to the sun...
Angst Throughout the Ages

Author: Edwina Cooper
Grade: 12
Teacher: Tracy Bouslog
School: Parkway South High School, Ballwin, Missouri

Cast:
NARRATOR
SIR GUY of Gisborne (Robin Hood)
HAMLET, Prince of Denmark (Hamlet)
HEATHCLIFF (Wuthering Heights)
ERIK (The Phantom of the Opera)
EDWARD CULLEN (Twilight and the following series)
FANGIRLS 1, 2, 3

Character Descriptions:
NARRATOR – a decently dressed young-ish man with a good speaking voice, somewhat short temper, and a dry sense of humor. He has not been having the best of days and is a little frustrated with this symposium thing he’s been dragged into.

GUY – late 13th century to early 14th century, should be dressed accordingly in dark colors. Originated in Sherwood, England. He is the most notable and vivacious of Robin Hood’s foes.

HAMLET – late 16th century to early 17th century. Title character of W. Shakespeare’s longest play. He is the somewhat-insane Prince of Denmark.

HEATHCLIFF – mid-19th century. Emily Brontë’s romantic anti-hero from her only novel, Wuthering Heights. From the moors of Northern England, has some money so should be dressed accordingly. Very dark in demeanor and personality with a vicious wit.

ERIK – late 19th century. Gaston Leroux’s famous Parisian ghost, the phantom of the Opera Garnier. Dressed in full black mask (if possible), elegant period French clothing, and cape. French accent optional, but does habitually speak in the third person due to questionable sanity.

EDWARD – current, early 21st century. MUST sparkle (suggestion: body glitter), dressed very dashingly in casual clothing. All in all, exceedingly good looking, personality is more or less nonexistent.

FANGIRLS 1, 2, 3 – fangirls of EDWARD. 1 is the leader, 2 is the follower, and 3 alternately moans and squeals. None of them are very smart.

Author’s Notes:
This play is based on the underground society, the DBCA (Dramatic Black Cloak Addicts) and their belief in their idols, commonly referred to as ‘Angsts’ after their angsty natures. Each character in this play has one such notable Angst which has been accepted into his repertoire of idolatry, or, as the play goes on, isn’t. I wish to provide all due credit to them and the loving home they have made for me and my twinned insanity. Thank you, guys!

But, as we are an underground society of barely 200, I feel it is prudent concerning the success of this play to explain in greater detail what qualifies as Angst and who each specific character is. Though, as the learned play-reader no doubt has noticed, each character is a famous male protagonist, or antagonist as the case more often is.

Angst – (n.) in existentialist philosophy, a feeling of dread arising from an awareness of free choice – according to Encarta Dictionary or – a feeling of dread, anxiety, or anguish – according to the online Random House dictionary, commonly referred to as dictionary.com. In reality, or at least for the purposes of this play, the definition will read thusly:

Angst – (n.) a man (definition thereof flexible to include most ages and hominid species), typically of literary renown, that possesses certain dark and dismal personality qualities as befits the verb to ‘angst’. Ex: James’ wife has hung
herself because she believes he has been adulterous with another woman, but actually said woman wanted to
jump James’ bones as a means of revenge against his wife because his wife stole the said woman’s hairbrush in
first grade. James is angsting, ergo; James is an Angst, at least temporarily. Run-on sentences are not required
for an Angst and are, indeed, frowned upon.

For further details, search the DBCA Wikipedia page

A casting note:
It is possible for all the Angsts to be played by the same actor, except Edward; it is, of course, up to the director.

Setting: Black, blank stage, no lights until the NARRATOR walks on

Time: Present - near future

NARRATOR: (walks on stage; no lights; once he has reached center, single spotlight; in a tired and sarcastic voice)
Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to the next part of today’s symposium on ‘Infamous Cults
of the 21st century.’ This exhibit is of the Angsts who were worshipped by the DBCAs, who took over the
world for twenty-four hours last November. (sigh; with some venom, resentful) The department decided it
would be most enjoyable for you, the audience, if we did a skit featuring some of the most inspirational
Angsts of the notorious cult. They will be presented in chronological order beginning in the late thirteenth,
early fourteenth centuries and ending in the recent past. We will begin with Sir Guy of Gisborne, the con-
spicuous (improvises a big word in an attempt to confuse the audience whom he sneers at) foe of Sir Robert
Hood, more often called, Robin Hood. (exit NARRATOR; lights down)

SIR GUY: (sound of arrows flying, people cheering; rushes on stage in dark, find center; in angry, gruff tone) “I’ll get
you Hood!” (spotlight comes up; stands in agitated state) Every time, every time! How? He has a
band of no more than six lowly peasants with no brains or training and yet we are constantly defeated!
(envious) It’s bad enough that the people love him and rebel against us. It’s bad enough that… Marian loved
him. (shoulders droop, no longer agitated; long sigh) Oh Marian… I couldn’t…! I couldn’t stop! I wanted to,
when I felt my arm lunge forward, when I saw the blade… (in a different tone) There’s nothing I can do about
it now… (suddenly crushed by misery) Oh, forgive me, Marian, forgive me! I didn’t mean to! It was Hood, he
made me! (angrier) I must avenge myself… I’ve come so close, I’ve killed him at least twice and yet some-
how… (desperately) Is God punishing me? Can He not see how I suffer? Please, oh God, if you have mercy,
let me die… but not before I take that Saxon dissenter with me! (exit SIR GUY; lights down)

NARRATOR: (walks to center; spotlight) Sir Guy was the first historical figure of true angst, according to DBCA schol-
ars. He killed the woman he loved out of his furious jealousy that she was betrothed to his enemy. (aside,
sarcastically) The DBCA has such a wonderful taste in wholesome, balanced men, the ones you want to take
home to your family. No wonder Jennifer was one…
The next Angst comes from the mind of William Shakespeare as the title character in his longest tragedy,
Hamlet. (exit NARRATOR; lights down)

HAMLET: (walks on slowly) “I have of late, but wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth…” (spotlight comes up; HAM-
LET stands in a slight slouch looking grieved and thoughtful; speaks in a proper English accent) Lost all my
mirth… what a funny phrase is that. So… (searching for the word) I lack words to describe it. Self-analysis is
not my forte, you know. (blinks at himself; paces within spotlight) What’s this? Speaking to people who are
not there? Perhaps I truly have gone mad… ’t would be a blessing if it were. Only the mad can live in peace,
not knowing what goes on about them. Oh, what a folly living is, living as a man in any event. At times, I
envy the women not having half so few responsibilities and dealings outside their tiny circles. Like dear
Ophelia, she will never know… she must never know. If she knew… bah, but it is done, why think on it now?
(heaves a sigh) There is so much chaos in a world of order. But, I must carry on, whatever. (pause, sound of
people walking) Hark; methinks I doth hear a footstep approach… I will leave; I am in no mood for an audi-
ence. (exit HAMLET; lights down)

NARRATOR: (enters quickly, snickering; spotlight up) Heh, Hamlet… he was a funny guy. Tragic story of course,
incredibly confusing, didn’t really have much of a stomach for it… but he had some good points. What a strange quote to start with though, as it morphed more into the ‘To be or not to be’ soliloquy. (cricket sounds from audience) Anyway, our next character is possibly our most angry, certainly our rudest, that rogue Heathcliff. (exit NARRATOR; lights down)

HEATHCLIFF: (ominous church bell sound) (moaning) Nooooo! “I CANNOT LIVE WITHOUT MY LIFE; I CANNOT LIVE WITHOUT MY SOUL!” (spotlight up; HEATHCLIFF is collapsed in sorrow) She loved me! She loved ME! It was that wretch Linton with his money that drove her from me! Why couldn’t she have waited? I would have gone to the ends of the earth just to prove to her I would do it! She should have left him; she wouldn’t be dead now if she’d come with me! HE KILLED HER! (gets up angrily; fists clenched; wild eyes) DAMN YOU LINTON! (shouting at sky) You see what you’ve done? (voice cracks; collapses again) I won’t, Cathy, I won’t… but I swear if he ever… he never loved you half as much as I love you. That bastard couldn’t have loved anyone that much! (looks up, thinking he’s seen Cathy) Come back to me, Cathy! Come back! You don’t belong with him, you belong with me! (quietly, miserably) Don’t leave me alone out in the cold… (hangs head; immediately lights down; exit HEATHCLIFF)

NARRATOR: (enters quietly) Heathcliff… one of the most controversial romantic heroes in literature. No one can agree whether he is good or bad because despite the fact that he does atrocious things without any indication of remorse, he also has an incredible capacity for love… which then drives him on to more violent crimes (mocking sigh). It’s a never ending cycle.

Our next Angst is the most beloved of all of the DBCAs… his legend inspired several books and a multi-Tony award-winning musical Lord Andrew Lloyd Webber. He is… (dramatic pause) the Phantom of the Opera! (lights down; exit NARRATOR rapidly)

ERIK: (sound of a chandelier crashing, people screaming) “AHA AHA AHA AHA AHA AHA AHA AHA AHA AHA AHA AHA AHA AHA AHA!” (spotlight up; ERIK rushes onstage, looking intense) Erik shall have his way! He is the Opera Ghost! NO ONE defies the Opera Ghost! Christine is his! (glares around at audience) That fop Raoul could never compare, he is but a boy! How dare Christine betray me with him! HE WILL PAY! (snarl) Erik loves Christine, she is his… but she is afraid of Erik, she does not like me. (anger fades into hopelessness) What is Erik to do? Erik must make her choose! She cannot see this little boy any longer! She must stay with Erik! She must! (looks desperate; paces within spotlight) If Erik cannot have her, no can have her! Erik WILL make her choose… turn the scorpion, and she will be Erik’s bride; turn the grasshopper… and she dies with her lover… and Erik. Oh poor Erik! (hands tear at mask) It is his face! If Erik had been born with a face… Erik would have been great! Erik would not be living underground; Erik would not have to threaten for money… Erik would not have to wear a cursed mask! (throws mask away, but covers face so audience can’t see, as if crying; sits down) Everyone thinks Erik is a monster… therefore, a monster Erik shall be! (rises; turns back to audience to avoid them seeing his face; replaces mask) (sound of a splash and a girl weeping; ERIK glances stage L) Must be the boy, come to rescue her… (lip curls) He will not succeed… (exit ERIK; lights down)

NARRATOR: (walks on; spotlight up) Erik was… certifiably insane, obsessive-compulsive, manic-depressive, a musical genius, architect, magician, ventriloquist, noseless, facially distorted, has mismatched eyes that glowed yellow, anorexic, an insomniac, a master of the Punjab lasso, a cat person, and French. (breath; critical tone) Given all that it’s hard believe that the DBCA would even allow this next Angst into their idolatry. (with a sour look) The next and final character is the vampire who stirred up so much interest of late… Edward Cullen. (lights down; NARRATOR walks off, but pauses stage R)

EDWARD: (stage lights up, catch NARRATOR pausing stage R; sound of screaming girls) (runs across the stage, frightened)

NARRATOR: (blinks after EDWARD)

EDWARD: (louder sound of girls screaming) (runs back across stage in opposite direction; sees NARRATOR) You! You have to help me!


EDWARD: (swallows) Come on, please! They’ll be here any second!

FANGIRL 1: (from backstage) Come on, I think I saw him go this way!

EDWARD: PLEASE! (leaps behind the NARRATOR) Hide me!
NARRATOR: Oh, this is classy... chivalrous bravery in action. (FANGIRLS 1, 2, and 3 run onstage from stage L)
FANGIRL 1: (anxious) Have you seen Edward Cullen anywhere around here?
FANGIRL 2: (giggling) We heard he was going to be here!
FANGIRL 3: (has been rendered mute from her brain melting, she only alternates between moans and squeals) (moan)
NARRATOR: (blinking innocently while shielding EDWARD) Edward who?
FANGIRLS: (in unison) EDWARD CULLEN! (FANGIRL 3 squeals instead of speaking)
EDWARD: (cringes)
NARRATOR: (continues feigning ignorance) Hmm... Edward, Edward... no, I’m sorry, can’t help you.
FANGIRL 1: (irritable sigh) Well, let us know if you see a sexy, sparkling vampire.
FANGIRL 2: (squeal) He’s so dreamy!
FANGIRL 1: (impatiently) What?
FANGIRL 2: What? That’s what everyone used to say!
FANGIRL 3: (moans)
FANGIRL 1: SO not cool! No one says ‘dreamy’ anymore! He is hott! (pronounces two ‘t’s)
FANGIRL 2: Oh... wait, what?
NARRATOR: (coughs) As riveting and intellectually challenging as a fangirl’s conversation is, I believe you were looking for a (with disdain) ‘sexy, sparkling vampire’?
FANGIRLS: (squeal and run offstage the way they had come)
EDWARD: (crawls out from under the NARRATOR) Thanks. Do you really think they’re gone?
NARRATOR: (as an answer) Would I prefer an eternity in hell to this job?
EDWARD: (stares blankly)
NARRATOR: (without feeling) Yes, yes they’re gone.
EDWARD: (relaxes) Oh, great... how did you keep them from seeing me, anyway?
NARRATOR: It’s an old narrator trick, comes with the title. Besides, I wouldn’t credit them with an overabundance of brains...
EDWARD: (confused) What’s that supposed to mean?
NARRATOR: (pointedly) Well, being fangirls of you and all...
EDWARD: (offended now) Hey! What have you got against me? I’m only a book character, you know.
NARRATOR: ‘Only’ being the key word in that sentence.
EDWARD: (didn’t really get it) Hey, that was... that was mean!
NARRATOR: Ouch... that hurt.
EDWARD: (glares)
NARRATOR: Oh yes, the famous ‘death glare’ of Edward Cullen, Mr. Sparkle-Gloom.
EDWARD: What?!
NARRATOR: (snorts) Come on! You’re a two-dimensional love interest from a story about the author’s personal fantasy... you can’t get much lower in the literary world than that!
EDWARD: (genuinely, but overly, shocked face)
NARRATOR: You have absolutely no right to be here, in no way do you qualify as an Angst!
EDWARD: (recovers a little dignity) Oh yeah? How do you know?
NARRATOR: (angry) I’m THE NARRATOR! I automatically know everything having to do with what I’m narrating, that’s my job!
EDWARD: (slightly deterred) Oh... yeah? So then what’s the DBCA definition of Angst? I mean if I don’t qualify, you have to back it up.
NARRATOR: (in a bored tone of voice) A man, definition thereof is flexible to include most ages and hominid species, typically of literary renown, that possesses certain dark and dismal personality qualities that befits the verb ‘angst.’
EDWARD: I fit perfectly!
NARRATOR: You do not!
EDWARD: (confidently) I’m a man, I’m of literary renown, and I’m dark.
NARRATOR: You are not a man. You are not of literary renown. And most of all, you are not dark.
EDWARD: (cockily) Do explain.
NARRATOR: *(coolly)* Gladly. You’re not a man, you’re permanently eighteen and have been for roughly one hundred years. Moreover, you’re a vampire.
EDWARD: You said the definition was flexible.
NARRATOR: *(icily)* Not that flexible. Despite being some hundred years old, you have not matured; you’re a hormonal teenager just like that Mary-Sue of a girlfriend you have.
EDWARD: WIFE! And what do you mean, Mary-Sue?
NARRATOR: *(sigh)* That’s a discussion for another time. Secondly, you are not of literary renown.
EDWARD: What do you call those fangirls then?
NARRATOR: ‘Popularity’ and ‘renown’ are not the same thing. Example: Britney Spears is popular, but she does not have renown. Besides, renown amongst pre-pubescent girls is hardly renown worth having. Furthermore, the definition states ‘literary renown,’ as in a well-known and well-respected book in literary circles, which *Twilight* is not.
EDWARD: *(glare)* Fine. You can’t deny that I’m dark, though!
NARRATOR: Oh, can’t I? Could Heathcliff please come out here again?
HEATHCLIFF: *(enters moodily, stage L)* Aye?
NARRATOR: Heathcliff, would you care to give us your opinion on Edward?
HEATHCLIFF: *(glances at EDWARD)* I’d say he’s a faint-hearted, lovesick pansy who could no more pass for a man than I for a pansy. *(smiles sardonically at NARRATOR)*
EDWARD: *(looks offended)*
NARRATOR: Thank you, Heathcliff; you can leave now.
EDWARD: Wait minute, that still doesn’t prove I’m not dark! *(HEATHCLIFF and NARRATOR dryly eye EDWARD, then roll eyes)*
NARRATOR: Edward, Heathcliff is a dark character. You are not.
EDWARD: *(examines HEATHCLIFF)*
HEATHCLIFF: *(glares at EDWARD, then advances with a slight growl)*
EDWARD: *(flinches)*
HEATHCLIFF: *(laughs cruelly)* What’d I say? Faint-hearted pansy! *(punches EDWARD on the shoulder; exit HEATHCLIFF)*
EDWARD: *(glares at floor)*
NARRATOR: *(unconcernedly)* Do you give? Or should I bring out Erik and his magical lasso? Or perhaps Guy, he hasn’t had the chance to spill blood yet today...
EDWARD: *(cutting off NARRATOR)* I give.
NARRATOR: Hmm? What was that?
EDWARD: *(louder)* I give.
NARRATOR: Thank you, you may leave now.
EDWARD: *(glares; exit EDWARD; stage darkens until center spotlight is the only light up)*
NARRATOR: *(walks into spotlight)* Ladies and gentlemen, I hope you’ll forgive that interruption. I don’t know how some of these characters make the billing. *(half a beat) We have now reached the end of this segment of the symposium; exits are to your left and right. Have a pleasant evening of angst.*
March 12, 1836

Dear Diary,

Though Ma protested, I have start writin on some old papers I found in the barn. She say I sap more than I do my work. I aint suppose, but words have such a ring to em. Ever since I found those old newspapers in the barn, I cant stop. Ma say Im the first one in the family who can use proper words. Me, at only fifteen. I aint been caught and I know if I do, Im sure to get a smack. The Big Gun sur is shifty. I gotta hide each words and the knowin that I can read em to. I cant wait to tell you all my thoughts. I cant do that to nobody. Ma dont got the energy to hear my jabber, and my brother is to much of a crank. And the animals aint got the wits to know what I says. The Big Gun is the Master Burns. I dont think hes got a brain in that chowderhead of his. Though he sure is bogus, I got work the barns. Ma says its one of the best out there. Its where I stay all day with the horses and cows and swine. I get to talk to em and feed em. It aint so bad, but somethin just aint feeling right. Ive done this work ever since forever start, but I know there must be somethin more. Im not even sure what I means by that, but is gotta be somethin.

March 27, 1836

Dear Diary,

Old Joseph Smith died yesterday. He was one of the only mans still with a backbone. He was Ma’s oldest friend and had worked on the same plantation all their lives and even was sold together. The Big Gun is gonna go into town (says the overseer) and get some new hands by tomorrow. Im just wonderin who they gonna be!

March 28, 1836

Dear Diary,

They finally comes at dusk. We all got a looks at them, there be three of em. Two men and a boy my age. He came to stay in our cabin, his name is Jack Hathaway and he sur is slick. I cant kuiet from smilin. He got a face like polished ebony. His eyes are the brightest golden-brown I ever did see, like the first leaves that fall. And when someone makes a joke, he gets a smile from ear to ear. I kept gettin stuck when I looked at him. He would look straight into my eyes and I aint be able to keep my legs from wobblin. Its gettin late though, so I gotta get ready for sleep.

April 13, 1836

Dear Diary,

I aint believen what Im sayin. Jacks been talkin bout leaven every since he came. He’s got a song of his that has me believen every word. He says this aint right. He says there’s a Promised Land out there, one where you aint gotta work all day and there aint no Big Guntellin you whatta do. And he says he gonna take me with him. We gotten close, since the day he come. Everytime I see him I cant help but smile. I think I get what he’s sayen, just like I used to think, that there is better out there; that what we doin, it just aint right, and there is a world somewhere out there for us. Where you put on the clodhoppers for ‘ya own peace of mind, and not no one elses. Not no place that a Big Gun is, but a place where I got the right to say what I gotta do. I told Jack I wouldnt be seein him vamoose alone, ‘sides, I gotta bug for him I just cant shake. I cant tell Ma or my brother cuz they would make me scrub the hole thing, and Ma would have a river that there aint be no stoppin. No, we gotta leave quite, so no ones get blamed for our doings. I think for the first time I got hope that I aint have forever, and I think it all came from Jack. I aint at sea no more.

April 27, 1836

Dear Diary,

Jack says we done good. We left the plantation a week ago, and I aint have the chance to write nothin. We been runnin all night and slept with one eye open the entire time. When it gets still durin the night and sleep takes over, I can
swear I hear Ma’s voice callin for me. Then when I awake, I can hear the far off voices of them watch dogs. Them dogs scare me, only when I look in Jack’s eyes do I feel better. When the dogs get close we hide in them trees and hold each other. I pray to God while he be holden me steady. I got hope in his eyes, and the songs he be whisperin to me. He say we got a bit further to go before we reach part of the Underground Railroad and we can be free. I never did think of a word so much, now, its all I got my mind on. Free, so light like a bird rolling of your tongue it is. And all we gotta do is follow the drinkin gourd, though Im startin to find, it aint quite that easy.

May 12, 1836

Dear Diary,
We’ve been hidin out with a Band of Angels for a near 6 days. But I know we is lucky, havin a place to stay and all. I wasn’t so sure when we came up to the house, but Jack pointed to the slave and the lantern and told me everythin was alright. He said it was in the song, and that meant it was okay. They welcome us like we was old friends, they did, like they be expectin us and all. Never did warm food ever satisfy me more, and them smilin faces tellin us it’d be fine. We finally have made it. Im on the Underground Railroad, and I feel prouder than ever. In the pitch darkness, they let us come up for a bit. Mrs. Frankling says that there was a lady who passed by here once with 10 people. Her name was Harriet Tubman. I feel so honored to be doin the same thing Moses done, just to be where she once was has given me more hope. I showed Mrs. Frankling my diary and she say I can write better than many. She even taught me how to write in cursive. I loved stayin up with her and talkin bout the world and what I hope I can show and be in the world. I just know it gonna be grand. She says there have been some runaways in the area, so thats why we gotta stay down in that stuffy rattrap, we got another two days ‘fore we gonna get goin. I remember the plantation; Bessy the Cow always there with me while I shoveled the hay, and Ma always stroking my hair at night and singin me songs. Maybe someday I could go help em get to freedom. The Promised Land is out there, I can taste it on my tongue, and I know I aint have been here or so close to that land, without Jack and these Bands of Angels helpin us. Mrs. Frankling even taught me a poem while we was here. I’ll write it in cursive (it truly is a looker for an old slave hands work). Mrs. Frankling says it be by a Quaker like them named John Whittier and I think its one to fit what we is doin.

The Eternal Goodness

O Friends! with whom my feet have trod
The quiet aisles of prayer,
Glad witness to your zeal for God
And love of man I bear.
I trace your lines of argument;
Your logic linked and strong
I weigh as one who dreads dissent,
And fears a doubt as wrong.
But still my human hands are weak
to hold your iron creeds:
Against the words ye bid me speak
My heart within me pleads.
Who fathoms the Eternal Thought?
Who talks of scheme and plan?
The Lord is God! He needeth not
The poor device of man.
I walk with bare, hushed feet the ground
Ye tread with boldness shod;
I dare not fix with mete and bound
The love and power of God.
Ye praise his justice; even such
His pitying love I deem:
Ye seek a king; I fain would touch
The robe that hath no seam.
Ye see the curse which overbroods
A world of pain and loss;
I hear our Lord's beatitudes
And prayer upon the cross.

Aint it grand? Mrs. Frankling says it be talkin bout how there aint good things sometimes, but God is there to guide us home and so is the Bands of Angels. We all His children, and He gonna do what He gotta do, but only if He knowin it will make you stronger and let ‘ya make your own minds words. Im gonna miss Mrs. Frankling when Jack and I steal away. We gonna head towards Deep River, and from there, all the way to Canada if we must. They got hearts as big as the sun and I will never forget the love and eternal goodness that they got for all people. They in my prayers now. That they never get caught and that they can continue helpin this world. They be part of God's Eternal Goodness, they be.

May 26, 1836

Dear Diary,
We have made it to the Deep River. It got the most beautiful hue I ever did see. I know that across it we gonna be safe, but now we just gotta cross it. It is still light out now, and when we got here. Somethin is tellin me to cross now, but Jack says we gotta wait till dark. We gotton strong. I think, when we reach freedom, Im gonna marry him. Never did I met someone I loved more. There is an air about him, like a golden sun in my dark place. He says he gonna find me a house and we gonna work our way up. It is like a dream, ever since the Big Gun came back with him. It was the first good thing I think that owner done for me. Well, it aint any more. Lookin back, its hard to think peoples bein owned. I got no owner now, and I hope never again. We be eaten some dried ‘n salted goobers the Franklings sent us along with and some cornmeal, I keep smearin it on the pages like somethin awful. We left them Franklings 12 days ago. I am sittin in a tree while Jack is makin a raft for our journey later on. We finally have made it, freedom is so close. We been on this trail for nearly 2 months now and it seems like it be a year. I grown up out here I feelin older and matured, just think what Ma would say of me, if she could see me now. Well, its gettin late, and we betta get our sleep before we be headin across that Deep River. Right now, the moon sparkles across it like a thousand diamonds. Good night, may the ‘morrow bring what our hearts is needin.

June 7, 1836

Dear Diary,
I be writin hurredly, but since I havent been able to for so long I just gotta now. We was caught. We was gonna make for the far shore in pitch darkness, but suddenly from out a nowhere, two giant men with guns stopped us. They said they got a warrant for a Hathaway and a Burns. I trembled as I held Jack close. I shut my eyes and prayed. There was yellin and shoutin and I was kicked hard. I got bruses that would shame a boxer. I cryed out for Jack but he couldnt hear me over the curses of them Catchers. Where was that Eternal Goodness? Why did God let them catch us? Them horrors grabbed my hands and looked for the letters “RB” and now I been dragged back to the Burns Plantation, but Jack aint came with me. I dont know where he is. I aint breakin for them. Not a thing in the world could stop me from wishin for that sweet freedom even more. Oh Glory, Glory Alleluia! I know God is there and I know now that there is people workin to help me. Me. Not some Big Gun, but someone out there is tryin to get me freedom and someone out there loves me more than day itself. Jack aint dead. I know it in my heart.
Dear Diary,
It must be fate. Dear God, hear me and I pray You let what has happened be. Jack came for me. He was workin at some plantation down the road, the hardest fields in this area and somehow got wind of where this plantation be. He aint gonna leave yet, he’s tryin to win his Master’s favor so he can figure out where to get a gun. He says there is freedom and he aint lettin me down that easily. Thank God he is alive. He says to give it a month, and then we gonna try again, but with a gun to ward of them Catchers. This time, we aint goin the same way; we goin to follow that North Star over to a lower part of the Deep River. From there, Jack says we gonna go straight up into Illinois. I got hope again. My Jack is alive and he gonna get me home. My heart is beatin so fast. No work in this month will be in vain. I gotta smile that there aint be no stoppin to. I got hope that aint stoppin. It was by God’s Grace I still be alive, and my Jack too. That Eternal Goodness is never ending. He got a plan for me, He alone gonna guide me where I must go. God gots a reason for lettin them Catchers get us. To keep us up and save us. Oh Glory, Glory Alleluia. I gonna marry Jack. We gonna be free, I am so sure of it. It seems our life has already started here, but we arent gonna let ‘em end it here.

February 16, 1837
Dear Diary,
Today is the day. We been free for several months now, but truly today, my every wish is comin true. The white dress fits me perfectly. I got butterflies that would put a fairy to shame! To think right now, I’m just Ms. Louisa Burns, and in several hours, I’ll be Mrs. Jack Hathaway. We are free. I am not a slave anymore, and all of our children will never have to taste their own blood and have the sun beat down upon them from such labor in the fields. They, along with all their children, will be free. Jack will protect me as he always has, and I will follow him where ever he goes. Ma seems like a distant memory, yet her tears of old still hit me like acid rain. I did tell her of our flight this time, she goes, “Oh yes my child, you gonna make it. Your Ma will always be here, listen at night my baby, and sing listen closely to the wind, ‘cause there aint be a day or night I wont sing for you or hold your face in my heart. I love you my child, now go, dont let the sun catch you up.” And I aint gonna let it.
With my head down, I slowly walked across the dew-laden grass, my long skirts trailing under foot. The golden moon shone down, lighting my path. I cautiously peered around the silent streets, all fast asleep in their uniform wood cabins. Cold sweat ran down my forehead; if only it had not come to this. If only I lived somewhere in the East, if only I did not care, if only I had not secretly fallen for the boy.

I stopped, hearing a muffled cough behind a nearby closed door. If only.

My grip tightened on the rope I held in my hand and with a worried sigh I continued across the town.

I headed straight for the abatises that lay on the southern side of the town. The nine oddly designed barricades sat cowering, while behind them, the dark forest rose up. All nine of them had held Outsiders freshly caught by the Ward and awaiting departure to the twin cities, where they would be put into hostile, un-named centers “for their own good.” I squinted into the smallest abatis, unable to make out the being I sought. I let out a hoarse whisper, “Adonis? Pssst.” A head popped up; even in the dark his sharp features were visible.

He smiled, “Yes?”

I gulped, not ready to explain my news, “They plan to take you tomorrow, if the cities’ centers have room or not. They’re anxious about you being here so long.”

Adonis’ look was far away as he tried to compute what I had said.

“We have to do it tonight then.” he whispered, “But are you sure you want to do this? If you got caught...”

I sighed. If I was caught smuggling an Outsider I would be shoved in a center along with Adonis.

“There is no other way. This has gone on for too long,” I stated. The forest was too dangerous for a single boy and the centers spelled death.

Adonis nodded, and I threw him the rope. Together we heaved him out of the wooden cage. He landed with a thud on the wet grass and slowly stood up, the first time out of the abatis since he had been shoved in it two and a half weeks ago.

“This way, and mind your step,” I whispered.

We tiptoed around the cabins until we reached my own which I shared with five other girls all of whom were daughters of Relocation Officers.

“Around this way,” I mouthed, not wanting to wake the girls. We shuffled around to the back where flowers and large bushes grew covering the building. It was behind the largest bristle bush that I had found a rotted out section of wood and behind that was a good-sized opening to a three-foot high crawl space under my cabin, a secret cave. I ushered Adonis in and lit a candle so he could take note of his new home. He flashed a smile when I pointed to several buttered rolls on a plate.

I began to remove the planks above my head and stuck my head up into the cabin; all the girls were fast asleep. I pulled myself through the opening, waved good-bye, and silently slid into bed. I closed my eyes and drifted to sleep listening to the quiet humming beneath the floor.

I had done it; I had taken on Adonis, an Outsider, and saved his life (for the time being). My life was separated in two: one where I dress in skirts and learn of my father’s profession and another where I was free to be caring and help those my father tried to catch.

It was my journey between my double identity of Anna Mira Watson and traitor.

The next three weeks passed quickly, and once the Ward had searched the whole town over for Adonis and could not find him, they just assumed that he had escaped and was eaten by wild beasts. As each day came and went, I found my heart speaking up more and more. The traitor in me grew each moment I spent with Adonis. With my newfound-self came the apprehension of being caught, the chance that someone happened upon the boarded hole haunted my dreams. I learned so much about Adonis, each night crawling down there with the days’ leftovers for the mahogany haired youth. The sweet boy who was grabbed from his village by the very people I called kin became my first real friend. He was almost 15 years of age, he loved raspberry truffles, and he missed his sister Cheyenne who was five years old and had been out when he was taken away.
One night when the moons were shielded by clouds, we went for a walk around the perimeter of town, making sure the Gate Master didn’t see us.

He looked at me and said, “How was it that out of a town of rich, small-brained people, you decided to save me?”

The answer came immediately, that first moment I had seen him, grabbed by the hair, his arms tied behind him, being dragged into town. I had fallen utterly in love with him. From that day on, I had known I had to save him, but I knew I would never be able to say that to him.

“Well,” I started, “I couldn’t bear to see a peer dragged to a center, and I have always known this Relocation business to be wrong. When you came along, I finally mustered up enough courage to do something about it.” I sighed; it was all true, but I had left out the vital detail.

Three days later the Ward classes started up again, and I was forced to leave Adonis alone and learn about our fathers’ important job to “keep our country’s security.”

We were listening to a boring lecture of why Outsiders needed to be relocated. The stout, cherry-faced man stood at the front of the class, his high-pitch voice ringing out.

“You see, they just cannot take care of themselves; simple as that. If they tried to, they would just end up hurting themselves. That is why we gather them together and send them to a better place where they can be helped.”

The cherry man looked around the quiet room, happy with his answer.

“Now the next—” he began; I raised my hand fiercely, my face a crimson red with anger. “Yes Anna?” he piped.

I stood, “Officer Grubb, if this truly is for their own good, then why are they unwillingly forced into cages with no food or drink? And then why, Mr. Grubb, does no one leave the centers, yet more are constantly shipped into them? Do you know, Officer Grubb the reason that none of this is discussed in our classes? Hmm, Mr. Grubb?” my voice rose.

The whole room was silent as my peers looked from Grubb to me.

The cherry reddened into a plum.

With a shaky voice the petite man opened his mouth, “Class....dismissed,” and stiffly walked out.

The traitor had smushed the plum.

As I walked out of the building, my heart began to soar and a smile played on my lips. It didn’t matter. I was invincible.

“I miss the wind,” Adonis looked weakly at me in the candle light, “I owe you my life, but I cannot stay here forever,” he sighed. “I miss the sun shining...” he looked up as if the sun would suddenly appear there. “I think it’s time I leave for good.”

In my heart I knew I wanted him to take me with him. I had finally learned the truth about my people: they were walking horrors that locked good people into wrongly governed, over-populated cities. It was that and the sad truth that I couldn’t live without his eyes.

As if he had heard my thoughts Adonis stated, “I heard a girl in the cabin this morning say that she thinks you had something to do with my escape. She said that you’ve been acting peculiar, speaking up to her uncle in the middle of Ward class. She thinks you should be locked up with the rest of them.” His face grew dim, “It’s not safe for you or me,” his brow crossed with worry.

I looked down at the candle in front of me, “I feel I am no longer part of this world. Father does not care for me, all others believe I am a freak of some sorts.” I looked up and caught Adonis’ gaze. “I have no future here...let me come with you?”

My heart stopped. What would he say? A smile spread across his face, his brilliant green eyes sparkling in the candle light. He gently reached over and took my hand in his.

“Yes,” he whispered.

I looked away, “I, I should go. It’s practically dawn.” I pulled myself up into the room and like that first day Adonis had come, I fell asleep to the sweet humming below the ground as the birds outside began to sing.

For the next several days we planned our great escape that we hoped to take on the fourth of month. When
all the other girls went to the hall to sew, I stayed at the cabin pretending to be ill but really packing. At every meal, I ate little and saved as much as I could for the trip. Butterflies grew in my stomach with each passing moment.

Finally, the fourth night came, and with nimble feet, I maneuvered through the cabin full of snoring girls to the door and, as quietly as possible, stepped out of the musty cabin for the last time. I met Adonis next to the bristle bush, and with my lead, we headed for the Gate Master’s building; beyond it and the gate lay the open forest. It was Adonis’ job to “borrow” the key from the Gate Master so we could escape. He went into the dark one-roomed hut as I waited in the cold. Suddenly Adonis emerged with the key in hand and a wide smile. We unlocked the gate and silently passed through the unnoticed.

I stopped a few steps out and looked back, a lump forming in my throat. I was leaving the only home I had ever known, the people I had grown up with. I was leaving one life behind for another.

“Anna? You ready?” Adonis called back.

I breathed the cool night air and turned to face him,

“Yes, Adonis, more than ever.” I caught up with him and placed my hand in his and let Ms. Mira Watson slip away like the gray wispy clouds being blown away, leaving only the bright golden moon in their place.
“Hey, Will? Will!”
William woke with a jerk, knocking his head on the top of his soundproof sleeping pod... supposedly sound-proof, at any rate, though his roommate’s high voice was quickly dispelling that claim.

“Will!”
“I’m up,” William mumbled, raising the lid of the pod. “Whassamatter?”
Alexis danced from foot to foot, her freshly-scrubbed face shining in the glow of the artificial sun. She was overly perky today, William decided. Perhaps irritatingly so.

“Are you ready?” she asked.
“Ready...” William ran a hand through his hair, trying to rub the sleep away. Ready? “Ready for what?”
Alexis gave a bubbling laugh. Definitely irritating.

“The D2200, of course!” she said, yanking open William’s closet and rifling through his clothing. “Three times as much access as the D2100, and an entirely revamped D-TECH operating system! It’s fantastic!”

“And I’m supposed to come with you and watch while they implant it directly into your spinal cord?” William asked, climbing out of the pod.
“You could stop living in the last century and get it, too,” Alexis said, touching the small gray chip on back of her neck. She tossed a sweater at him. “Or are you still using the old handheld system?”
“I prefer things that I can touch,” William said. He reached instinctively for the small screen on his wrist, checking the time. Early. Too early. “Call me a traditionalist.”

“I’ll call you a caveman,” Alexis replied, skipping towards the door. “Get dressed and hurry out. Caveman.”
As William dressed, he scrolled through the messages on his wrist screen. It wouldn’t be long until his handheld system would be an antique, he realized. They weren’t even repairing them any more...just replacing.

Outside of the dorm, William squinted in light of thousands of windows gleaming upon hundreds of skyscraping towers. He and Alexis stepped into a crowd of morning commuters, each of whom was enveloped in a personal world. Alexis halted, forcing the surrounding businesspeople to navigate around her.

“Will, look,” Alexis said, pointing to a scrap of yellow and green.
William peered at the object. Somehow, some bit of dirt and dust had collected in the sidewalk crack, missed by the street-cleaning bots, and a lone seed had found the spot.

“It’s a dandelion,” Alexis said. “We had them in botany lab once, remember?”
“Yes,” William replied. “They were a weed, I think.”

“Really?” Alexis’s quick fingers brushed the bobbing yellow mane of the flower. “I like it,” she announced.
“It’s got spunk. I hope the bots don’t clean it too soon.”
Alexis rose suddenly and hopped onto a moving platform. William followed her. The sun blazed at the horizon, reflecting off endless columns of glass and steel.

“I wonder what the deli’s serving today,” William said. He reached for the screen on his wrist, but Alexis flicked his fingers aside.

“It’s pastrami,” she said. Her eyes glazed over and darted from side to side as she gazed into nothing, navigating a screen that only she could see. The chip on the back of her neck glowed. After a moment, she blinked.

“Looks like pastrami,” she said. “But gosh, that took forever. I can’t wait until I get this chip updated.”
They stepped off the gliding platform and into a D-TECH building. William frowned as they entered the waiting room—it was filled with people, from primary school kids to elders, all waiting for the D2200.

They didn’t have to wait much longer, William noticed. The neon clock on the far wall was counting down to store’s opening.
Three more minutes.
Two more.
One more.
As the seconds ticked down to zero, cheers filled the room. Alexis darted to the front of the line as white-robed technicians and white-suited salespeople magically appeared.

“Are you ready, sir?”

William jumped, startled by a voice at his shoulder. A technician with white-rimmed glasses was already swabbing the back of his neck.

“I…no thanks,” William said. He held up his wrist. “My old communicator’s fine, thank you.”

The technician looked slightly taken aback.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she said, briskly. “The D2200 is a technological revolution in communication and information access. It is easily affordable and, I assure you, sir, perfectly safe.”

“No, thank you,” William said, firmly.

“I really must insist, sir. I promise that you won’t feel a thing.”

“No, thanks, really…”

“I must insist,” the technician repeated. “It is the way of the future.”

“I’m sure it is,” William said. “I’m allergic to technology, however, and I—”

A second technician was approaching, this one a man with muscles bulging beneath his lab coat.

“Don’t be frightened,” he said in a low voice. “It’s the way of the future.”

“It’s not the way for me,” William said.

“We must insist,” the two technicians said together. “It won’t hurt you.”

“Don’t touch me!” William said, raising his fists.

The first technician smiled. “Of course we wouldn’t hurt you, sir,” she said. “No one is ever forced to adopt our technology. It’s your choice.”

The second white-robed figure raised a silver chip-implanting device. William ducked beneath a counter and fled. He looked frantically through the throngs of customers, searching for Alexis.

A third technician began approaching William, holding a D2200 chip and an implanter. William jumped as a hand grabbed his arm. It was Alexis.

“Coming, caveman?” she asked. As she turned to leave, William noticed that the new chip on the back of her neck was bright silver.

“This is positively fantastic,” Alexis raved, as the two of them stepped onto the moving platforms. “I can find anything. Aristotle’s Metaphysics? Got it. Book II? Here it is. In Pig Latin? Certainly. ‘Or-fay as-ay e-thay eyes ay of ay ats-bay are ay—’”

“Did it hurt?” William interrupted.

“The D2200? Not in the slightest,” Alexis replied. “Anyway, it would be worth it if it had. The whole world’s brighter!”

“Really?”

“Yes. And, now that they mention it, I do need to pick up some D-TECH vitamins.”

“Wait…” William looked around. “Now that who mentions what?”

Alexis rolled her eyes. “The billboard over there, genius.”

William looked at the building that Alexis was pointing at. It was completely blank.

“What billboard?” he asked, as they stepped off of the platform.

“The one right there? With all the lights?”

William heard a soft snap and looked down.

“You stepped on the dandelion,” he said. Its proud blossom dangled from a broken stem.

“I stepped on what?” Alexis looked at William as though he was trying to pull a lame joke on her.

“The dandelion?” William frowned, confused. Was Alexis pulling his leg? “Right there, on the ground.”

“What, like the weed?” Alexis peered concernedly into William’s eyes.

“Are you okay?” she asked. “You’re acting a bit strange.”

“I’m acting strange?” William repeated. “Who’s pretending that there isn’t a dead dandelion on the ground?”

“There isn’t a dead dandelion on the ground, Will. I don’t know what kind of joke you’re playing, but there’s nothing there. It’s clean and shiny and just the way it should be, just like everything else. Maybe you’re the one with the problem.”
Alexis strode off, sunlight glinting off of the silver chip in her neck. William reached down and plucked the limp yellow flower.

As he ran his fingers through the petals, his wrist screen gave a brief buzz. *New message*, read the screen. William tapped it.

*Congratulations, William,* it said. *Based on the age of your current D-TECH-900 communicator, you qualify for a free D2200 chip. Please pick up your D2200 at your local D-TECH location. Use the code FLAWLESS when you arrive.*

William looked from the message to the dead flower in his head, and then to the billboard that wasn’t there. Now that he stopped to look, he realized that other sidewalks had dirt, caught in chipped and cracked concrete. The steel towers bore a faint tarnish, and the endless windows were spotty. He watched the commuters trudging on, each one staring off into space, reading from a personal screen or an ad that did not exist.

As each person passed him, the sun illuminated a glint of silver on every neck.
An older man, graying in the hair and quite farsighted, dug through his closet attempting to find suitable clothing to stuff into a suitcase that was wide open on the bed.

“Uhg, you or your mom could have told me I have such terrible fashion sense,” he said, throwing aside the seventh floral print shirt.

His daughter squirmed in the chair beside the window. “You have a lot of nice ties,” she offered.

“Really? Should I bring them?”

She gulped and attempted to flip the hair away from her eyes. “Will you really need all of them? Just take the ones that are the best.”

“And which are those?” he laughed. “Surely not the ones that I got in the airport in Hawaii.”

“Surely,” she weakly agreed.

“Hmm, I’ll run them by you, okay?”

She nodded, forgetting he couldn’t see her. It didn’t really matter anyway; it wasn’t like she could disagree.

“Okay,” he turned to her. “The purple or the blue?”

“Both. Those two are your best.” Her eyes strayed to the rack containing the rest of those strips of silk. “The gold’s nice too. Maybe you should try getting one of each color.

“Yeah, that sounds good.”

She watched him stow away ties in the suitcase’s many pockets. She stayed silent, keeping her light brown eyes on him the whole time. Every so often he would look and smile at her, but she couldn’t help but doubt his sincerity. It looked real, even reached his eyes, but whatever the reason, it wasn’t a “good” smile.

When he finished he returned to the closet to look at his pants. “If I’m bringing so many ties, I suppose I have to bring at least one pair of slacks,” he sighed. “I think I’m over packing. What do you think?”

The girl who had let herself fade out into wide-eyed daydreams, jumped and looked back at him. “What?”

“Am I over packing, bringing too much stuff?”

“Uh, no. I don’t think so. It’s not like you can come back for it, after all.”

“True,” he nodded. “You’re so smart; I’ve never noticed. I feel like such a terrible father for not knowing such obvious things...”

“You’re not. You’re just busy, right? Work keeps you busy, I’m sure.”

“It did, but I quit.”

“You did? When?”

“Oh, maybe a month ago. I had all that time to take an interest in your life, but I never did. I feel terrible about it. Well,” he dropped the clothing and sat on the side of the bed closest to her, “no more. Better late than never, right? How’s school been?”

“Er, fine I guess. I got a thirty-one on the ACT.”

“Really? That’s great! I wonder where you got this intelligence from. Not from me and definitely not from your mom.”

“Thanks...I guess. I was going to start applying to colleges soon...”

“I’m glad I stopped you then! College is a huge waste of time and an even bigger waste of money. I personally got nothing from it.”

“Okay...”

“How’s your personal life been? No boyfriends, I hope.”

“No, none. I haven’t been as close to my friends either.”

“Well that’s a shame but who needs them, right? The only person anyone would ever need is himself. You’re learning some good adult skills. I’m proud of you.” He patted her blonde head, returning to the act of packing.

“I’ll take two nice jackets. I have no real need for more, right?”

He wasn’t turned to her, so the girl remained silent. It was probably a rhetorical question anyway.
Halfway from the closet to the bed, the man let out a frustrated growl and threw the clothing onto the bed. His daughter stared wide-eyed as he reached to the floor and grabbed a pair of pants and a shirt. He eyed them distastefully.

“I’m sick of stepping over these. What do you think I should do with them?”

He was looking at her this time. It wasn’t rhetorical.

“Uh, uh…throw them in the wash,” she suggested.

He looked confused. “Why?”

“It wouldn’t be in your way anymore, and you could get the stains out.”

He thought it over for a while before smiling and nodding. “Good idea. You’re so smart. I’m in awe about how smart you are. I can’t believe I never noticed.”

He continued to ramble about her intelligence and she waited until his voice was nothing but a vague hum below her feet to start twisting in her chair. She made sure that the chair did not actually move, convinced that he would hear it, but it might have been her downfall. Her father returned to the room before she had done much of anything.

“The clothes are going in the wash. I’ll probably leave them there. No use waiting for them after all.”

“Wouldn’t it be better to take them?”

“Hmm?” he furrowed his brow and frowned. “Why?”

She shrugged and mouthed helplessly. Her motives were probably not something he would wish to hear.

“Hmm…well, I’ll think about it. I’m almost done packing as it is. I just need…underwear, duh,” he laughed to himself. “I’m just so out of it today. I swear.”

Thankfully he made no questions about underwear or even socks. He finished on his own and looked at the contents of his bag satisfied.

Despite herself, the girl nearly panicked. “Don’t you need belts?” she said, leaning forward in her chair.

“Hah, I suppose I would. I don’t know where my mind is today.”

He grabbed two or three straps of leather and threw them on top of everything else in the bag.

“That should be all I need,” he said, looking over all the things he planned on bringing.

Deeming it acceptable, he muscled the suitcase shut. Slipping a pair of shoes on his feet, he loosened his tie, checked his glasses, and then grabbed a gun off the bed and walked over to stand in front of his now trembling daughter.

“Well,” he amiably said. “This was nice, but—”

“Can I come with you?!” she blurted out.

He blinked. “What?”

“Can I go with you on the trip?”

“Uh…” he looked around wildly, trying to gather his thoughts. “Wouldn’t you rather stay here with Mom?”

She almost sobbed. “No! I don’t want to be with Mom! I’d rather be with you!”

He gaped at her, but slowly his jaw tightened and the corners of his lips slanted upward. “R-really? You want to be with Daddy?”

“Yes! Yes, yes, yes, yes! I don’t want to be with Mom! I want to go with you…Daddy.”

He smiled, and pleased tears rose to his eyes. He seized her in a hug, accidently pressing the gun against her shoulder. She stiffened but was in no position to try to move away.

“I knew you loved me. I always knew you preferred me to that mother of yours. I never should have doubted you; I never should have thought you would be angry.” He pulled away, still giving her that watery but incredibly happy smile. “Of course, you can come with me. I would love to have your company. I’ll go downstairs and get a suitcase for you and a knife so we can get those ropes off of you.”

He practically skipped in and out of the room. Her bag was left at the door while he sawed through the ropes attaching her to the chair. She noticed that the gun had been shoved into his belt. The safety was probably on; it no longer threatened her.

“I’m so excited now. I thought I would be traveling alone, but I know it will be so much better now that you’re coming with me. It’ll be nice to have someone so smart traveling with me.”

She attempted to return his smile as she rubbed her wrists.
“You need to pack,” he said, gently pushing her out of the room. She reluctantly moved her legs in the way of his cajoling.

As she passed the closed door of the guest bedroom, her eyes accidently strayed to a dark stain that was creeping into the hall from underneath the door. Her eyes quickly jerk away, focusing once again on her own room.

“I can’t help you pack much probably,” her father rambled, sitting down on the bed. “Just bring whatever you need. Not those skirts, though.”

“Right, Daddy,” she answered with her back turned to him. The long black skirt that she had been forbidden to bring was being crushed by white knuckles.

“This’ll be a lot of fun. When was the last time we went on a trip? Three years ago? Four? All I really remember about it was that it was horrible. But that was because Mom was there. A father-daughter trip will be much more enjoyable, don’t you agree?”

“Yes, Daddy.” The skirt was pressed to her nose and eyes. The tissues were too far away.

As soon as she finished packing, they left the house, not bothering to lock anything behind them. The clothes were left churning in the washing machine, the stain stopped growing on its own, and the mother was left in the guest bedroom without a single goodbye.
It stared back at her with cold, hungry eyes. It yearned to be delivered; it yearned to spell the disaster of the bird people. As Raven lovingly eyed her life’s creation, a brown shadow crept closer. “Won’t my parents be proud,” Raven retorted aloud. Oblivious to all but her life’s labor, the shadow crept closer to its unsuspecting prey. Raven sighed to herself; she had work to do. She looked up at the silver sky signaling her departure when the brown shadow revealed itself above her.

Ever since Blessa joined Natalie’s Academy of Flight exactly 231 days ago, a little brown shadow in the back of the room had been obsessed with her. Blessa’s creamy personality was flawless to all but one. Who could suspect anything was wrong with the beautiful bald eagle girl? At this school, all the students looked like a certain kind of bird. The school’s mission was to educate the bird students so they could eventually grow into their inner feather and (literally) turn into their soul bird. Blessa’s topaz hair covered with a snow overcoat, her intelligent sky blue eyes, her cute rounded features, her nose hooked slightly under, and her gorgeous nut brown skin made her the most sincere bird at the school. On the other hand the little brown shadow of a bird was indeed called Sparrow and was the shadiest and slyest of the students. She had bark brown hair, skin that looked almost woody, small ordinary features, and eyes that were diagnosed brown-hazel; nobody knew her name. Even the teacher forgot about the little girl in the back of her classroom.

Sparrow’s eyes narrowed. Something felt wrong, no, something felt distinctly malicious. The boys that flocked around the perfect Blessa weren’t as close today. Blessa’s smile looked less sincere and her beautiful sleek brown hair looked nearly black. Once the final bell’s ring faded, Blessa hastily jumped up, bid her dreaming suitors adieu and morphed into a glorious bald eagle. Sparrow laughed out loud when Blessa missed the escaped bolt hole in the ceiling, smacking the roof. For her effort, she received an angry glare from the bird that was forced to sit next to her. Still chuckling to herself, she strode out the human exit in pursuit of her quarry.

Ah, why did Mya make her so popular? It took her five minutes to make the swarm of boys grudgingly disperse. By the time she reached the beginning of the taiga that led to her home, her temper had risen to a forte. Just inside the forest with a call of triumph, her feathers turned black and she gained the pointed features of a raven. With a cackle, she took off at top speed towards her home that housed the secret that was about to be revealed.

It took no time to reach the camp on the tip of Mt. Spire. It seemed that pristine Blessa lived in an army camp. There were three main buildings on the summit of Spire. There was a giant house that could be considered a one-story mansion, a little building that was heavily fortified, and a shack. The Girl That Was Once Blessa (GTWOB) gracefully flew in the door of the shack. She came out in human form a second later cradling a glossy black feather. In human form, GTWOB was even more terrifying. She was extremely tall, had long hair as dark as midnight, and all her features seemed pointed; dressed in black she was night in day. Even night can be terrified. GTWOB nervously scuttled to the mansion, paranoid at every sound. But she still forced out a happy face and entered the mansion to carry out her diabolical plan.

Raven sung the opening words into the speaker. Today was a happy day for Aunt Mya, because she was about to get her part of the bargain. Ever since the day, twelve frightful years ago, she landed on Mya’s doorstep, the old spirit told her she’d have to do something for her to live here. That something came when Raven was three. When dusting Mya’s gorgeous house, Raven accidentally broke Mya’s prized black ant farm. Mya went mad with rage, and when she tried to spank her clumsy servant, the terrified little girl made a dash for the kitchen and locked her out. Mya had to use a lot of black magic to open the door. You see, when birds’ hearts are completely masked by evil they turn into black spirits. Black spirits can only turn into crows, and they can’t be human at all. Mya’s furious brain thought of a brilliant plan. She could turn back into her original bird, a California condor. She could give the girl a disguise, and then the cunning little girl could go to the school to learn the secret. Well, now Raven knew the secret and Mya was about to get her wish.
It took Sparrow an agonizing amount of time to get under the mansion’s firewalls. When she finally blacked out the cameras and copied GTWOB’s voice, time had passed. Perched on the roof above the living room in a blind spot, she could strain her hearing to catch the conversation in the room. “Aunt Mya, the pieces are finally mine,” Raven crowed.

“Really,” groaned a low scratchy voice, “do I dare believe you?”

“I have been nothing but a faithful servant to you. Besides, you don’t want my life’s work to go to waste.”

“Don’t I,” the voice muttered. The words hung in the air like a magic spell causing silence to invade the land. Raven grasped her preset image like a life preserver. Mya was rocking her poor body so hard it took every ounce of will to hold on. Mya was worming her way through Raven’s soul looking for anything that traced danger. She passed right over the plan’s minor defect (lets just say the realm of imagination wasn’t in her danger category). When the spirit finally untwined herself from the body, Raven flooded back in. That was more horrible than she could’ve ever imagined was her first thought. Still, an evil, real smile lit her face in shadows when Mya put her old condor feather in next to the crow’s in her slimy black heart. But, the worst was yet to come.

A loud thump finally broke the silence. Sparrow jumped. She had been trying to get in the building to prevent the disaster of Mya, but the spells were too strong. She screamed inwardly when she smelled the woody scent of a fledgling. She was too late. She had just decided to abandon her mission and warn everybody to save themselves when GTWOB emerged with a smug smile and an empty vial.

Raven could’ve jumped for joy. She had outsmarted her evil aunt! Part one of her plan was complete without any flaws, and now all she had to do was deliver. The rest of twilight was hers to enjoy. She entered her shack and grabbed the replica key for the dining hall. It was time for a final feast.

Sparrow entered the shack once GTWOB was long gone. Unlike the rest of the camp the shack had no protection spells or armor of any kind. Still, Sparrow expected the shack to be richly furnished, but it showed the status of the poor servant girl. The shack had a nice soft dirt floor and a comfy straw mattress in a corner. Sparrow walked around looking for something that explained GTWOB’s crazy behavior. After five minutes of searching, her attention span had curled up on the floor and died, so she started to fly out the sky exit. Instead of tasting the cool air, she flipped through a trapdoor into an attic. The attic was bare, too, except it had a little chest in one corner and a desk in the other. The desk was abandoned but the chest seemed to be bulging.

The wind tickled her feathers. The sun massaged her back. It was the best day of her life, and she was enjoying every minute. The pointed trees of the taiga welcomed her to a new route, a route that led to an abnormal, metallic tree. That is where the machine was going to go; it was going to be her little “present” to the race that lived there. The only thing that slightly dampened the sunshine was that the machine was made of dense iron, so it was dang heavy. But, she was strong; she could bring the fatal blow.

Sparrow was waiting for her turn to strike. She knew, she knew everything now. Mya was just a parent, a person who had to be taken care of. Sparrow had seen the old coot sprawled on the floor. She was a big boned woman with a mane of black hair but Sparrow sensed an air of vulnerability around her. Now, Sparrow was racing to save that woman—and every other bird for that matter.

Raven was starting to get annoyed. It was taking too long to get this heavy chunk of metal delivered. Now she had to stop for a rest. She landed in a convenient circle of ground in the dense taiga. She looked down at the thing that caused her so much trouble...... it stared back at her with cold, hungry eyes. It yearned to be delivered; it yearned to spell the disaster of the bird people. As Raven lovingly eyed her life’s creation, a brown shadow crept closer. “Won’t my parents be proud,” Raven retorted aloud. Oblivious to all but her life’s labor, the shadow crept closer to its unsuspecting prey. Raven sighed to herself, she had work to do. She looked up at the silver sky signaling her departure when the brown shadow revealed itself above her.

With a wailing battle cry, Sparrow launched herself at the machine. Raven stood there for a second before swiftly dodging aside. The little bird did a face-plant into the frozen earth. When she finally popped back up, the giant raven loomed over her. “How dare you try to attack me!” screeched the raven.

“I know who you are; I know that machine will kill the birds,” Sparrow countered breathlessly. “You are Raven, a girl who was disowned by her famous parents Frostilla and Henry. You were sent to live with your aunt who was supposed to raise you. Unknowingly, this aunt was a black spirit, and you became her helper. This aunt sent you on a mission to find out how to change her back to her original California condor form. You found out the secret and
changed her back. But, she didn’t know it would wipe all her memory, power, and strength. So, that allowed you to have free reign for the night. Previously, you built a machine that would put an extra filament in the bird’s heart feather. That filament would respond to a mini-screen you built that could be controlled by the humans. That would spell the extinction of the birds. All I ask is why?"

“Why,” growled Raven, “I’ll tell you why. My wonderful parents discovered the heart feather, and they came up with the school’s curriculum. When I was very young, I remember going into their room and reading dear Frostilla’s journal. It told of the heart feather, how it is what made the bird people bird people. When I was discovered a raven, my parents (as you know) were so appalled they decided to give me to Aunt Mya. My revenge started from day one at camp. I did it so my name, just like my parents’, will go down in the history books.” Sparrow stood rooted to the spot.

Raven didn’t know who this pest was, but she did know that she was a complication. Raven hated complications. With a high pitched keen, Raven called on the little pool of black magic she stole from her aunt. It soothed her wild spirits with icy blackness as Raven whispered the fatal words, “I have no idea who you are.” The tiny bird froze and cocked its head. “Where am I,” it called to her. Raven let out a diabolical laugh and took off without a glance back. The spell only lasted half an hour, so she would have to fly.

Sparrow didn’t know what hit her. One moment she pooled confidence; the next moment she was drained. A strange raven was in front of her. “Where am I,” she called. The raven let out a laugh and went soaring away. Sparrow had the strangest feeling that she knew her. The weird sense made her watch the raven go. In that instant the muffled clouds parted and the sun shone. It particularly shone on the raven that let out an annoyed squawk. It also gleamed brightly on the machine tied to her feet. The silver flash hit a chord in Sparrow. The spell’s fuse was lit, and it all started rushing back. She had to stop the raven! With her fire shining, she was either going to stop the raven or die.

Raven didn’t see it coming. Out of nowhere the little bird started to attack. It pecked and scratched at the metal bonds that strapped her legs to the machine. Raven cursed herself for being so cocky. Now she would have to fight for real. The little bird seemed to have forgotten about her, so it was almost too easy to peck her wing. With a screech the little bird fell, grappling onto the machine. Now all Raven had to do was to get her off.

Sparrow could only see silver. Raven wasn’t there; it was only her and the machine. When Raven retaliated, the pain was so fierce she landed with a clunk on the machine. Her wing ached so bad it felt like there was poison…..the red wound had turned black! It was like a black hole sucking all her energy. The first time Raven shook the machine only her beak saved her. High up in the clouds, Sparrow dangled from her beak. Still the shaking continued; still Sparrow held on. Ice crystals soon formed on her beak; she couldn’t hold on any longer. With a shriek she fell from the sky.

Victory! Raven’s genius had come through for her. The paralyzing poison that she installed in her beak had immobilized the victim. The little bird fell and fell and fell. Just as Raven turned away, she saw the little bird coming once again. This could not be possible; the potion lasted for a solid hour! It wasn’t the bird it was the wind. Raven could feel it too, the strong updraft. She tried to keep going forward, but she was in a funnel cloud. She was forced to give in, and she and the little sparrow shot into the heavens.

It took a while for the school to realize two pupils were missing. Blessa usually was gone for a day or two but not for weeks. The teachers didn’t care that little Sparrow was gone until she was gone for a month. The school rang the pupils’ parents (and guardian). They knew nothing. A search was commenced nationally. Frostilla and Henry, after a call from Mya found out ‘their darling’ was out there. For an entire day the bird world stopped what they were doing and turned over every rock and beat every bush. Nothing was found.

In a circle of bare earth deep in the taiga rested a silver machine, surrounded by a circle of brown concealing sparrow feathers. Jutting out of the top though is a proud, defying black Raven feather and a note: Dear humans, This machine will be the turning point. If you follow my instructions carefully you may be able to conquer the birds. Good luck in capturing the last of the birds. A great horned owl and a snowy owl, tell them this was compliments of Raven.
Like middle school children, they felt nervous and stupid, clustered together under the oppressive fluorescent lights. Men huddled towards the right, women towards the left. Both groups were compressed, convex – no one gets in, no one gets out. “Does everyone have his or her number?” the middle-aged woman behind the podium asked in her spearmint voice, sickly-sweet, reveling in the circumstances that had inexplicably brought her into authority. She ran five impeccably manicured fingers through her thinning reddish hair, smooshing back the curls to reveal brittle gray roots. July noticed with a slight swell of satisfaction that the woman’s ring fingers were naked. Tapping the microphone – as if anyone doubted it was, indeed, on – the woman repeated, “Does everyone have his or her number?” Silence. “Excellent! Now, everyone, take a seat. Women on the left, men on the right. We’ll begin momentarily. No, no, number forty-seven, my left!” That last was said with a mirthful giggle.

Number eleven, July Taft, stowed her purple nail file in her purse and surveyed the room. Lots of bald spots. Some men her age or younger – but those had impatient greed in their eyes. Perverts. Sex freaks. She weighed her chances of leaving this session happy or at least with some semblance of self-esteem. One in five hundred? Ninth time’s the charm.

Two long wooden tables spanned the length of the room. Grasping the paper sign hanging around her neck tightly between her fingertips, July selected a sufficiently inconspicuous spot a few seats down from the center of the table to her left. Prime location, she told herself confidently. Desperation begets self-delusion.

As July took her seat, the woman at the microphone tapped it again. “Settled?” she inquired breathily. A fleshy sea of faces squinted up at her, trying to block out the flaring white lights. No one said a word. Not even a polite murmur. July eyed the still empty seat across from her. She looked around. No remaining unseated men. Wonderful.

“Excellent,” said the woman at the podium. She grinned, rosy cheeks puffed up like a chipmunk’s. “Welcome to the fifteenth bimonthly Cupid’s Arrow Speed Dating Seminar.”

July had been to nine. A year and a half, she thought numbly. Oh Christ. What am I? Shame clogged the air like mucus. July glanced from side to side and saw men and women taking an interest in their own laps. She wondered how many of them had attended all fifteen sessions.

“A huge thanks to the Pine Valley Community Center for having us here again, at the same discounted rate.”

July felt the beginnings of nausea stirring in her stomach. Something dark shifted in her peripheral vision. She looked up. A man was sitting down across from her. July turned back to the podium, nausea twisting into hope.

“Each date will last exactly five minutes.” The woman raised her left wrist to display an ornate silver wristwatch. This woman’s joy in the process of monotonous instruction dizzied July. She’d make a perfect SAT proctor. “After that time has elapsed, a...special bell will ring over the intercom. The men will move down a seat. Over the course of the session, you will have five minutes with each participant of the opposite sex.” Hearing this particular voice say that particular word, July shuttered. “You may write comments on the sheets in front of you. Beside each comment box you’ll find space to write your date’s number. At the end of the session, you may submit your favorite ten numbers. Any two participants who submit one another’s numbers will be sent an email with the other’s phone number, as well as a fifteen percent off coupon for your next session. Everybody understand?” She did not pause for a reply. “Then let’s begin!” She thumbed a button on the podium, and a thick, wet, smacking kiss sounded over the intercom.

After a shudder of revulsion, July looked up at the man opposite her. He was tall. Skin the color of chalk dust and half as substantial. His eyes sunk deep into his skull, as if retreating from the sight of something vile. The shaggy mane of black hair sprouting from his head was bound into a tight ponytail by means of a hair tie. Bright pink, adorned with small hearts the color of tangerines. It seemed to July too dainty to control such an awesome mass, and thus out of place. He wore black dress pants and a black dress shirt. No tie. It occurred to July that he looked
more prepared for a funeral than a date. Hanging from a chain at his throat was a small golden cross; he kept his
hands in his lap. 42, read the sign choking his neck, the two slightly obscured by the cross.

They stared at each other blankly, each one’s gaze narrowly avoiding the other’s. July, faced with the choice
of taking the initiative or letting this awkward encounter continue, selected the lesser of the two evils. “Hi,” she said
and extended her hand. With a nod, the man shook it. His grip was firm and dry. July smiled with relief. Her first date
at the previous session had a handshake she could only describe as soggy.

“How,” the man said. When the ritual was complete, his right hand rejoined the left in his lap.

The threat of a return to awkwardness looming dangerously overhead. July blurted, “Longyoubeens?” The
man raised his eyebrows. July cleared her throat with some difficulty, wondering how the organizers of the Cupid’s
Arrow Speed Dating Seminar, who had the care and optimism to install makeshift condom dispensers in the women’s
bathrooms, did not see fit to supply their terror-stricken clients with water glasses. She clarified: “How long have you
been single?”

“I’m not single,” the man said.

This was a new one. “Huh?”

“I’m not single,” the man crescendoed, as if controlled by a TV remote, raising his volume word by word. Like
he truly believed July had simply not heard him.

“You have a girlfriend?” July asked, glancing down the table at the other couples, suddenly missing Soggy
Shake.

“Oh-huh,” the man said briskly, apparently irritated by her nosiness.

“Well. Um.” July frowned. What the hell was he annoyed at her for? “What does she think about you coming
here?”

The man shrugged. “She doesn’t think much about anything any more.”

“Any more?” The man nodded. “I don’t understand,” July said. I could’ve gone out with Margaret’s friend,
she thought. What was it he did? Pharmacist! He was single, at least. “She doesn’t care?”

“She’s dead.”

“She’s dead,” July echoed. He nodded. July looked around to see if anyone else had heard this revelation.

They were all too engrossed in their own dates to notice.

“What’s your name?” the man asked.

“July. How’d your girlfriend die?”

“My name’s Damon Wallace. Visiting her grandmother. Hit by a truck on the way home. Drunk, they think.”

He shrugged. Unsure what else to do, July stared at the comments sheet. Damon leaned forward, intruding into her
peripheral vision. “Have you come here before?”

July’s head snapped up. “What the hell gives you the right to ask that?”

“You asked how my girlfriend died.” He raised a hand from his lap and showed his palm. Gesture of caution.

Jerk. “My question was far less personal.”

July shifted uncomfortably in her seat, wondering how many minutes remained. “A few times.”

“A few?”

“A few.”

“Four?”

July said nothing.

Honestly. And so on.”

“What are we, fourteen?”

“We met,” Damon checked his watch, “four minutes ago. Isn’t the immature game stage kind of where we
should be. Socially?”

The suggestion made July uncomfortable and slightly nauseous. But the feeling was different from the loath-
some disgust she felt at, say, the woman at the podium. This was something closer to excitement. Slightly. Damon
was something intriguing, an onion with all its layers hidden by the skin. The detective in July longed to peel it back,
peel them all back, examine the pulsing alien core within. “All right,” she said, frowning to make her reluctance clear.

Damon smiled. “How many sessions have you done with this particular organization?”
“This is the ninth. How many sessions have you done?”

“Original. First.”

July leaned forward, brow furrowed. “How many speed dating sessions total – ”

“My turn.” July forced her mouth closed, swallowed the question. Damon’s hands came up from his lap, his forearms leaning onto the table at forty-five degree angles. “Your hair. When’d you cut it short? And why?”

The bell sounded – not a kiss, this time, but a longing sigh, straight out of romance novels. Up at the podium, the red-haired woman giggled into her palm, glanced up at the daters, and returned to the book she was reading. On the cover was a shirtless man, sword in hand, abs sweaty from battle.

Damon did not move. The next man was short, with beady eyes and putty cheeks. When he approached the seat Damon currently occupied, Damon shot him a cool glare, indicating he’d best move on. Nose wrinkled in confusion or distaste, the man shuffled to the seat Damon was supposed to be taking. Damon looked back to July.

July was turning his last question over in her mind. “How?” she said. “You – ?” She thumbed the end of her short auburn hair. It had once spanned the length of her back; now it barely dusted the top of her necklace. “Nine years ago.” She countered backwards in her head. “Twenty-three. I was twenty-three, I guess.”

“How?”

“Seemed more businesslike. To get a job. Accounting. I had just gotten my degree.” She wrenched her hand away from her hair and placed it on the table, where she could keep an eye on it. “That was two questions,” she said. “So, I get two.”

Damon considered this for a moment. “Fair enough.”

“What’s your girlfriend’s name?”

“Tilly.”

“How long’d you date her?”

“Seven years. Age seventeen to twenty-four.” He didn’t need time to calculate. “Always want to be an accountant?”

July’s hand abandoned the table. She wrapped her hair around the tip of her index finger. “I wanted to be an artist.” For a moment she bit her lip and stared past Damon, eyes unfocused. “Why did you come here,” she said, feeling somehow more secure, blanketed in hazy vision, “if you’re not ready to move on?”

“Because I’m not over it. I can’t do anything until I put this behind me somehow. I need…to talk it through with someone. Why didn’t you go to art school?”

“I did. Sophomore year I started to run out of money. Panicked, dropped out. Picked something more acceptable…stable…reasonable.”

“Accounting?”

“Got the degree from a community college,” July said. “Why’d you come here to talk to someone? Why don’t you get a counselor or a therapist? Psychologist, psychiatrist?” Parent? Friend?

“This is cheaper.” He smiled sadly.

“You have to answer honestly,” July insisted. “Those are the rules.”

Damon’s smile quivered into a grimace. “This is the only place where I know I can find people as miserable as I am.”

July’s grip on her hair tightened. “What makes you sure we’re all so – ?”

He pointed up at the fierce, blinding fluorescent lights. “Anyone who’s lonely enough to come here of their own free will is definitely as miserable as I am.”

“As lonely?”

The bell again – this time a brief female moan, pornographic enough to turn heads, discrete enough to evade censorship. Damn, and July snubbed it. Presumably, the next man got the message.

“You shouldn’t have dropped out of art school,” Damon said.

“You don’t even know if I – “

“You shouldn’t have cut your hair.”

“You don’t even know how it looked!” July countered, tugging at her split ends.

“I know how you thought it looked,” Damon said. “You shouldn’t give up on the things you love.”

“It’s your turn to ask,” July said. She let go of her hair and shoved her hand under the table. Was that gum?

“Did anyone tell you not to drop out of school?”

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“Yes,” July said without thinking. Memories she’d sealed away flooded back into her conscious. She bit them back, blinked back the salt water on which they rode. She worked herself into anger, to master the sorrow and fear. “Did you love Tilly?”

“Too much,” Damon said quietly. “Like I’d put all of me in her. Two years are gone, and I still can’t remember who I am. Without her.” The anger sank back into July’s heart, pity bubbling up in its place. She did her best to hide it; she wouldn’t wish the pain of a stranger’s pity on anyone. “You ever love anyone?” Damon asked. July nodded, clenching her teeth and breathing through her nose. “Still alive?” She shrugged. “Do you still love him?”

“How could I know that?”
Damon kneaded his forehead with his palms, elbows digging into the table. “Wanna hurt me for mentioning him?” She nodded. “Then you do.”

Again, the moan over the intercom system – this time accompanied by a man’s gruff, exultant sigh. “I’d better get out of here,” Damon said. “Sucked up enough of your time. Could’ve missed two soul mates already.” He stood.

“We’ll be short a date,” July said.
He waved aside her objection. “They would be anyway. I’m taken.”

“Did this help? Do you feel . . . better?”

“Yes,” Damon said. “And no.” He turned to go.

“You’re not alone, Damon.” July shifted uncomfortably in her seat. There was a smacking sound as the sweaty undersides of her thighs parted from the black plastic. “We’re all grieving something.”

“You should grow out your hair,” Damon said, though he didn’t turn back to face her. As he left, July watched his ponytail bob up and down. She focused on the small pink tie binding it, wondering if it was Tilly’s.

“Hello,” said Number Twenty-Two, the man overtaking Damon’s seat.

“Hi,” July said reflexively. She looked at him, but saw nothing of him. Her thoughts were in the past, with her sketches and her scribbles, and her eyes saw only the white of the fluorescent lines.
The morning sun's rays studded the window with a diamond glare. I blocked it with the palm of my hand as I wiggled my sandy toes into stained red flip flops. The waft in the condo was salty and crisp. I closed my eyes and breathed in earth's perfume.

Silently, I opened the off-white front door to the parking lot. The path to our rented van was paved with rust brick, complementary to the green sky-high banana trees. Their leathery leaves swayed sleepily to the distant lullaby of crashing waves. We climbed in the maroon van, one by one. Soon I was reading a white-washed withered sign with cracked paint: Boat Tours. We slid the van door open and walked up onto the dock. Our footsteps on the wood boards made a mysterious hollow thumping. We all had sandals on and were not used to the gravel hopping between our toes. Beach terrain was new to us. We probably looked inexperienced with our waddling steps in the open-toed shoes and with white sun block smeared unevenly on our red faces. Across from us sat the grand sea, a bed of navy resting below the intense skyline. The water lapped noisily at barnacled beams, and a constant pull and push invaded the quiet ship deck.

We found our tour boat. The sleek lines of the mast rolled down to the front of the boat where it edged into a shiny point. Thick ropes held on dearly to the dock to keep it from escaping. My sun burnt brothers leaned on their stomachs over the posts of the dock until the heels of their tennis shoes lifted off the ground. They began to wander aimlessly around, gazing at all the coastal wonders that were far from our home, studying each one. Curious and inquisitive, they began to speculate the depth of the water.

Mom warned my brothers to stand still, but they couldn't take enduring anticipation with the boat simply sitting there, waiting to be taken away from the dock. Questions like, "Where is our captain?" and "Why isn't he here?" or "Where are we going?" were answered countless times before the complaints of itchy toes and heat got to them. The boys stuck their brown legs through the posts into the water for relief. After that lost their attention, they began to question why the tourists beside us were speaking in a different language. Luckily, our captain finally arrived.

We glided across the rippling sea-glass. My brothers saw pelicans in the trees. They looked like bits of white paper adorning the glade branches. Glee and wonder were shouted as they pointed and hung over the edge of the boat to get a better look. "Hey, a shark!" and "That wasn't a shark!" and "Yes-huh!" drove conversation. The simplest wave in the water raised them with exhilaration. A gull in the sky, a boat hopping along the sea—to little boys, these are great discoveries. They adhered to the cushioned side seats and squinted against the water's glare. "I think we're almost there!"

After looking out in every direction, at every viewpoint of the boat, they came over hot and tired, asking for water. They lay down beside me, asking only to be disturbed if there was a shark lurking in the water.

When we reached the island, the tour guide led us through a sandy forest to a new shore uninhabited by humans. We, in a long line, followed our guide over unmoved fallen trees with white bark and dusty branches. Little bits and pieces of rocks and unknown things were hardly hidden in the sand and soon sticking to my wet feet. I took off my shoes and avoided the green briar bushes. The air around us was still and new. Small finch-like birds fluttered here and there, but they did not sing loudly, as if they knew this island was to be different than others—more perfect than the ones across the shore. The sky was balmy and smooth and stretched out in a way so that it made me wish I could stretch across the horizon too. Foamy curls soaked up against the shoreline in quiet rumbling coos. Our line began to disperse across the long sandy bank. My family and I took plastic grocery sacks from our beach bag and began to eye the sand, looking for shells that we were not sure how to look for.

The sun was hot on my back, and a new tan line was burning along my jean shorts’ cut hem on my legs. An all-over glimmering sweat dotted my forehead and bare shoulders. I felt native, like a natural being produced by the land, a flower, friends with the elements like the sun's glare and the water's salt. Before long, my foot hit something thin and strong in the sand. I wedged it in between my toes and lifted it out of the water. Out protruded a gray sand dollar. I smiled and added it to my grocery bag. I knew I already had found more than my brothers. Inside my plastic
bag were five perfect sand dollars, and a slightly chipped one. I felt like a little kid at an Easter egg hunt, greedy for more than I needed.

Shortly, I joined my brothers. We waded through the shallows on our stomachs, taking pleasure in the fresh feeling of the ocean’s spit filling our bellybuttons and taking handfuls of sand and throwing them into the ocean while discussing who had the best sea shells. My youngest brother claimed that he had found a pirate’s sand dollar, because it had an ‘X’ on it. Zach, of course, did not know then that all sand dollars do. The sun glistened on his hair like coconut oil on a car, and his cheeks were becoming tanner and more freckled as he held on tight to his bag as if someone might try to steal his treasure. The sight made me feel light.

"What are those birds doing?" he asked.
"They're gulls," I informed him. "They're eating some of those big fish we saw."
The little boys' dark eyes widened. "Really?" he asked.
"Yep. Really." I answered.
"But wouldn't the gull choke?"
"Nope," I replied.
"How? The fish are so big." My brother leaned closer.
I squinted my eyes against the sun, "I don't know...Just the way God made them."
"You always say that," Zach said looking away for his bag of shells.
"That's because you always ask hard questions." was my reply.
Zach suddenly stood up.
"Look! Look what Jared found!" he yelled pointing at my running brother.
"What is it?" I asked half interested.
"It's a starfish!" he yelled incredulously. Zach's eyebrows went up to his hairline.
"A starfish?" he asked, amazed. "Lemme see! Lemme see!" he jumped up to see the discovery in his brother's hand. "Wow! Just like pirate treasure..." Zach whispered.
"Look at this...right there. See those? That’s mermaid hair." Jared explained.
"No it's not." Zach said.
"Yeah-huh! Look at it!"
"How do you know?"
"Because this is where the mermaids live," Jared gestured to the ocean.
"Did you see one?"
Jared looked down. "No," he glanced out at sea. "But, I have proof." he said putting the starfish back in the water.
"What?" Zach asked watching the starfish bury himself safely in the wet sand.
"See that?" he pointed to the horizon.
"See what?" he looked around.
"The sun on the ocean."
"Yeah?" Zach looked at Jared. I watched and listened closely.
"That," he announced, "is because of mermaids." Jared walked into the water, and Zach followed.
"You see, the mermaids have mirrors because they like to look at themselves because they're pretty, so, at sunset they all get out their mirrors and look at themselves because they look good in the light. But then, the sun goes through the water and shines on the mirror and comes back up on the water," Jared said in his scientific sounding voice.
"No. That's not how it is." Zach walked and sat down beside me. "God does that," he said matter-of-factly looking up at Jared. "God paints it on the water."
Jared speculated this. "Could be...but what does he use for paint?"
Zach's eyebrows went up. "Paint?" he murmured. The little boy pursed his lips together and looked out to sea.
A Basketball Game Society

Author: Shelby Hill
Grade: 12
Teacher: Kelly Hill
School: Home School

The coach: His face is really getting red now, and it’s only first period. He’s flipping his arms like a magician, as if he points around enough, maybe his spell will take effect and he will be able to control number three’s lay-ups. He kicks his shiny heel against the laminate flooring. He looks like a corporate madman dressed in a nice grey blazer and slacks—whilst wiping foam from his mouth. His thinning hair is flattened to the side of his egg-like head but is beginning to creep onto his sweaty brow. He paces towards the sub table and away, like a caged tiger being taunted with antelope meat. He crouches to his haunches only because he has nowhere else to go. He seems uncomfortable here, like he’s holding his breath, counting backwards from ten, or letting his anger rise so he might spring up like a jack-in-the-box at the opportune moment. A pass is stolen, and he begins a terrifying sort of dancing, convulsing, hopping, and jolting about, like a dry, tortured earthworm in a skillet. He’s screaming now, and the veins are bubbling out of his neck so far I can tell they are flesh or pale blue colored. He’s going to die, I’m sure of it. Once the first period buzzer strikes, he will fall onto the floor, and everyone will let out a held-in breath, thankful that he’s out of his misery. He’s just standing on tip-toe there now, gesturing and yelling and throwing his anger out like spears towards the players. He yanks a skinny tall kid who is still wearing a jersey cover-up off one of the end chairs. He pushes him toward the sub table in desperation. The kid runs out, and number three comes in. The coach screeches something at him and slams his fist into his palm, as if he’s telling number three what he will be getting when the game is over.

The cameraman: The cameraman is listening to the referee as the coach yells out about another one of the ref’s bad calls. He slips his chuck of technology down from its perch on his shoulder and listens to the referee. He looks like a kindergartener comprehending why his teacher is sending Jimmy to the other side of the court for bouncing the ball over a black line. His brows are all clumped together, and his mouth is pursing in concentration. He’s the only quiet man in this court at the moment. He seems baffled as the player runs off, but follows the action through his eye piece, not wanting to miss a moment.

The young boys: Two preteens nearly trip the cameraman as he runs down the court. They laugh it off like it was a pre-planned joke and waltz to their seats, squeezing quickly past the others in their bleacher row. They sit down and begin to gorge on their nachos, laughing every few moments like the basketball game is a comedy show. But, they never glance up at the scoreboard, nor do they ever turn to watch the game. They are just there to be there, to bathe and immerse themselves in male pastimes that seem so important to their fathers; thus, it must be important to them. The seats are comfortable, the nachos are everything their mom would not want them to eat. If they’re lucky, the game will go past ten, and they’ll have broken their curfew without even trying.

The over-the-hill guys: Two rows up from the young boys and just a row behind me are about four fifty-ish year olds from what I can hear. They are lined up behind me, squished shoulder to shoulder I presume, like a happy company of hogs. Their long, fat knees are just touching my back. I can feel their scruffy breath on my neck, and it makes me think of Pepsi-Cola and dirty hands. They are happy men. Boisterous, proud-bellied, knee-slapping men, the kind God must create just for eavesdropper’s entertainment. They’re playing off of each others’ comments to see who can conjure a funny good enough for a wheezy chortling session. Their giggles sound dangerously like a choking car in the wintertime—making me feel like I myself need to cough up a little something—but the roughness adds to their unusual joy. They rotate from reminiscing, to laughing, to watching the game and making comments about number so-and-so’s passing skills and free throws. From their conversation I see these men as those who find the best parts of life come when sitting on a cushioned armchair watching ESPN and late night comedy shows. I slip around in my seat to look at one of them who is laughing so heartily I fear he will shower me with spittle. He has a bouncy belly and a lovely double chin. His eyes are crinkly from laughing. The line of men struggle up in their seats like laterally squiggling trout when one player makes a dunk. They shout and laugh and elbow one another and carry on for about seven minutes or so like that. This is what they live for...this—and making up wisecracks.
The girls: The girl at my knee turns to look over her shoulder, bothered at the loud men. Her hair falls across her jacket in pretty wisps and her earrings twinkle in the fluorescent light when she turns back around. I notice her jeans. They’re dark-washed and lightly bleached at the knee and stitched with big white strokes of thread at the seams; they are expensive. About five others like her sit in the same row. Surprisingly, they are quiet. They’re not like giddy junior high girls who go to the game to watch cute sweaty dudes jump around. These are young women in high society. They sit like ladies on the lawn of a Victorian croquet game, watching with emotionless, yet pleased, faces. Leaning back into their chairs with their hands lying gracefully atop their little perked up knees, they pass around a tube of lavender hand lotion. Were they there to watch their courters beneath their pink umbrellas? Or just to do as society does?

The used-to-be players: A man takes up the open seat beside me, never lifting his gaze from the court. He’s skinny and tall like number seven and has a shaved kind of cut like thirty-eight. Another one follows in his trail to the seat next to him. He’s more buff, a little like twenty-two, but fatter and his hair is less blonde. They clasp their hands across their knees, leaning forward into the game. One says, “Aouw. Needed to lift that elbow more. Looking rooky tonight.” The other squirms his lips and says, “yeah,” as if the player was his own son in whom he was disappointed. “Back in ’78 Luper wouldn’t-a let us git away with that, huh?” The other smiles. “Nu-huh.” Then, they sit there for a moment, and when the teams run down to the other side of the court, their eyes don’t follow them for a moment until they’ve broken from their trance. “Nice shot.” They clap heartily and watch like they are detectives, waiting for the clue that will solve the mystery whose case they’ve been on for years. I feel sorry for them. They didn’t come to watch a game. They came to relive their memories. I can see them replacing number seven and twenty-two with themselves in a uniform; I see ’78 in their eyes, passing through their hungry focus. No wife is there to remind them of what they are now. No kids could interrupt them anyway. But it’s alright, because they just want a moment back, even though they know no amount of basketball-watching will retrieve it quite enough.

The old men: On my other side, there are two other men, both about seventy years old. They’re leaning back in their seats, watching leisurely and talking quietly all the while. Their white, white hair and almost tan wrinkles seem out of place among the others here. One says, “Keeny’s headed to NBA, I’d say.” The other looks at him after a moment. “Oh, I’ve been watching him. I went up to his game in Rogersville, and he was shooting like that one guy from the Lakers—you know, that real, real tall one? Kind of Asian or Chinese-looking? Well, he was just shooting like a master. I was pretty proud of him.” The other nods and makes a satisfied grunt. “Me too. His dad’s not gonna be able to make Nationals, he said. I was surprised.” I wonder for a moment if these men actually know Keeny, or if perhaps they are just avid readers of the local sports section. They keep talking about each and every player like two girls discussing celebrities. They clap for the players’ best shots like they are gurus watching their students take part in a new sort of battle.

The players: The five on the court are focused. Their mouths are agape, and they’re brushing sweat lines away from their heads, shaking their shirts loose for air circulation on their backs. The really tired ones put their hands on their knees and take two seconds to inhale a real breath. Their shoes squeak, and they run and make odd faces when they leap into the air. Some are ordering calls, and others are darting around looking like deer scattering away from harm. They begin passing at a fast rate, like they are playing extreme “hot potato.” I’m waiting for one hand to slip and cause a bloody nose. A noise that explodes through the auditorium seems to chase the basketball as it bounds for the hoop. It hits to the rim, and the crowd suddenly releases a gush, falling back onto their seats that they did not realize they were clinging to. The players look sad. The look of determination dies in their eyes. They walk down in a line and off the court. They walk away without a clue. All they know is they lost; they know Fletcher missed that pass in the second period. They know Keeny shouldn’t have fouled so much. They didn’t see their coach growling on the sideline for two hours, nor did they notice the poor confused cameraman who was stalking them around. They missed the young boys sitting near the front row and never heard the fat men up in row forty-five laughing. As for the girls, they would have cared less anyways, and the used-to-be-players are really them from the future, so they would have ignored them. They don’t know the old men like the old men know them. They have no idea who was watching them.
The Truth

Cry, little boy.
Cry until you can’t cry anymore.
Let each tear gently caress your face,
Within each-
An inkling of your sorrows.
All I ask
Is that after your pain has eased
You discern a most comforting truth:
You will have joy again.
Let the thought of a blissful life swell within your mind,
Engulf your spirit,
And crown your very being.
Cry little boy-
But cry for the truth.

Hate, little girl.
Hate a world that shunned you
And failed to see your limitless potential.
Hate the ones who have looked at you,
Blinded,
And declared you an outcast.
Hunger for their suffering
As they have hungered for yours.
All I ask
Is that once you’ve grown tired of hating
You recognize rage was meant to fade.
That the constant ridicule shall be lost to the infinite realms of time
And you shall one day emerge from the abyss of exclusion
More proud of your differences than ever.

Fall, weak man.
Come crashing down to reality in an abrupt fiery explosion.
See your effort
As the imperfect star it is,
Falling helplessly to earth.
Seek your needed solace,
And in its place,
Discover a barren wasteland of inevitable defeat.
All I ask
Is that after you’ve tasted life’s greatest misfortunes,
You realize an ideal truth:
That through your trials
You will find the strength to press on.
That in your deepest despair
You look not to your falters,
But seek the wisdom that most certainly follows.  
Like the fiery phoenix lit ablaze  
You shall be reborn from your ashes.

Fall, weak man.
Hate, shunned girl.
Cry, little boy.
All I ask is that, in the end,
You realize that what you thought was your undoing,
Undesirable experiences that made you weak,
Shall be unmasked as ultimate enlightenment.
Every hardship
Instills a most uplifting truth.
Julia hated when an alarm clock fulfilled its duty. Not because she wanted to sleep more—Julia always woke an hour before 6:30, hyperactive mind, as usual, working at a tremendous speed—but because the moment prior to that wavering shriek gave Julia invasive shudders of foreboding and anxiety. Yet, she was powerless to stop it; she refused to walk three feet and hit a switch before her alarm sounded. Julia liked not choosing control.

On similar grounds, Julia hated the siren of an ambulance. She hated the abnormal pitch intervals, the sheer audacity of the volume. She hated the A-minor key, the undulating of the noise patterns. She hated knowing someone was probably dying in the ambulance and not feeling guilty about it. Damn those ambulances for making her politically incorrect!

But now, as Julia detected the faintest whiffs of strident ambulance tremor, as Julia tried to prevent a deep sense of something-bad's-gonna-happen from consuming her, as Fords and Hondas slowed to a tiptoe and curious bodies twisted and turned in their car seats, Julia hated the siren of an ambulance for an entirely different reason: it was making her late. Three of her competition-winning watercolors were being showcased in a junior art gallery downtown Seattle. Her mother was supposed to wait for Dad, her little brother Cable, and Julia at the art gallery entrance with the tickets. And for once in her life, Julia thought, her mother was going to be on time and she, Julia Mackelyn, Student Body President, was not!

Mostly, Mother was terribly scatterbrained. She always forgot doctor’s appointments and the location of her car keys. Hundreds of orange Post-it notes and to do lists filled with various scrawlings were strewn across the house, but not one ever proved to be useful. Part of Julia was disgusted by her mother’s lack of organization and overall loose self-discipline. The other, dominating part liked being comforted by someone with forever-open arms.

Julia pictured Mother standing outside the doors of Roq La Rue Gallery, wearing a long turquoise dress and a beige cashmere wrap, sable hair twisted into an indecisive French roll. Mother’s constant sighs from glancing at the watch would be juxtaposed against her papaya orange toenails and small ankle tattoos. Her face would be knit in annoyance save for her upturned lips. Julia knew Mother was usually falling apart at the last minute, but she also knew Mother had made a sincere effort this time. Mother had cancelled her “Italia for the Famiglia” cooking class and had decided to wear her cherished wrap of infinite sentimental value. She had set two alarms, one on her phone and the other on a timer. She had laid out the usual missing and mischievous items—car keys, GPS, sunglasses, photos of Julia and Cable—in a neat assortment by the garage door. This gallery mattered to Julia, and Mother wanted to be there to support her daughter. She was not going to be late!

Julia peeked at the time. Seven minutes late and fourteen more miles to go. This was bad. Very, very bad. Julia would be tardy to her first big opening.

People were often surprised to learn Julia took art seriously. Art was, after all, for crazy geniuses and creative druggies, or at least, the willowy French college girl majoring in Impressionism. In a way, Julia agreed. Her cynical view of the world captured every detail, seen and unseen, on canvas, but only because she approached every new work with painstaking perfectionism. Her mechanical, perfunctory methodology and attitude towards art made up for her talent insufficiency. Sometimes, Julia wondered how long it would take for judges and artists to recognize her actually bleak potential.

Julia viewed all other activities—piano, debate, academia, horseback riding, volunteering, and cross country—in the same light. Precision made perfection. And perfection made for a plethora of awards.

She watched with slight satisfaction as Dad maneuvered the car out of the ambulance’s path, noticing this action delayed the red cross-emblazoned truck seven seconds. The grating wails resounded in Julia’s ears indefinitely, maddeningly, tauntingly.

Julia looked at the dashboard. Nine minutes late and still fourteen miles to go. For the love of God (or maybe not since she was an atheist—so much more practical), why of all times now for someone to fall down the stairs or do too many shots of cocaine or drink and drive or whatever stupid people do to need an ambulance?! Julia supposed it was partially her fault; after all, today was the first day she silenced the alarm before the digital reading
came anywhere close to 6:30. Life could not progress without subjecting her to at least some sort of machine-induced torturous scream.

Ten minutes late and a little less than fourteen miles to go. Julia calculated the ambulance’s wasting of so far five minutes of her life cost her $78. Her answer factored in the variables of possible missed opportunities, what she could be doing, and the efficiency, efficacy, and production results of the past 300 seconds, all paramount to her resume for college, which would determine her career salary.

The more Julia thought about it, the more concerned she became, until she was unquestionably convinced that that ambulance was the source for her future failure. And then finally, finally, traffic cleared up as if parting like the Red Sea (what was with her and Bible references today?), and Dad shot forward, speed increasing exponentially. “Can’t keep Mom waiting,” Dad explained, chuckling.

Julia settled back into her seat with a little exhale of joy. Yes, let’s not keep Mother waiting, Julia mused. Behind her, the tumble of blue and red lights hurtled away, the outline of the vehicle hazing and shrinking against twilight.

And on that ambulance Julia so desperately despised, vague, gauzy shadows of paramedics hovered over a woman fast slipping away—a woman with sable hair, papaya orange toenails, and small ankle tattoos. “I have to… Julia’s art…” the woman mumbled, before freezing into an eternal sleep.
Shades of Magenta

Hidden Melody

Fiery sunsets dissolve—
Earth is shrouded in navy.
Crickets twitter and hum,
paint the stars electric.

This is freeze-frame life;
This is invisible beauty.

Children giggle and squeal
as fireworks lace the air with smoke.
Tongues tamper with popsicle-slush,
tints of ruby and blue.

This is freeze-frame life;
This is invisible beauty.

We count our blessings like cash,
collect them in lint-filled pockets—
We never notice:
leaf crunch,
bird chirp,
water ripple,
and the rich earth-aroma...

but this is freeze-frame life;
This is invisible beauty—

The world is in song;
We don’t know the lyrics.

Colorful Cacophony

I am electric-blue Earth,
highlighted by frigid Michigan waters.
Feet flirt with beach-sand,
cackle with crashing waves.

I want to be:
awkward pirouette on dreams,
haphazard heptagon—
splattered perfection.
My soul clatters
like a llama-driven gypsy cart:
I long to leave loneliness
on the crest of my mad wolf-howl.

I am 83 shades of love
(with green hope undertones).
I share my heart’s color
with violin wails,
violet bongo beats.

My technicolor blood
pumps through fluorescent veins,
stains pages
with neon aura.

I am youth yearning—
elusive and infinite;
Evergreen.
The eerie silence covered the early morning Chicago streets. The darkness of the summer evening had not yet broken, and there was only the muffled sound of vagabonds scuffing their sole-less shoes against the grainy sidewalk. Workers coming off the nightshift drove to their homes before the city awakened, the tires of their cars exhaling against the dark, smooth tar of the streets. In a quiet, dilapidated apartment, Alan Grear slept a heavy, alcohol-induced sleep. His whiskey flask, silver and gleaming, lay on its side next to the simple mattress that looked as though it were flung carelessly in the corner. The dingy sheet was rumpled in corners, leaving the mattress partially naked, revealing its off-white color and spots of dirt. A woman’s body left an imprint on the mattress next to Alan. The sheet was still formed to the curves of the newcomer who had spent a single night and who will never return again. The sheets were used to this, however, and so was Alan. He liked it this way. No attachment, no love, no pain. It was quite simple.

Alan opened his eyes groggily in the shining sun that bled through his window. “Shit...” he said, knowing he was late but accustomed to no longer caring. He grabbed his brown slacks that were slung across the edge of his mattress and pulled them on, the fabric running quickly across his bare legs. He put on all the same clothes from last night: black business socks, a black belt with a silver buckle, a white undershirt, and a short-sleeved white button up.

He smelled sweet and masculine, the smell of sweat, cigarettes, and women’s perfume still lingering from last night’s outing. A small red lipstick stain sat on the collar of his shirt, and he considered changing it. He began pulling it off but changed his mind, satisfied with his badge of lust. He sauntered to the bathroom, unfazed by his being behind the clock by at least thirty minutes.

The jaundiced wall paper of his bathroom gave the place an aura of nausea and shabbiness. Alan turned on the bare light bulb that hung precariously from the ceiling. The false light only intensified the yellow, making Alan look sick himself. He sighed, his green-gray eyes tired from life repeated in cycles, and turned on the faucet, dunking his hands in the freezing cold water, splashing some on his face and using his damp hands to slick back his soft dark brown hair. He stared at his layer of shadowy stubble, realizing his desperate need for a shave. He fingered the small razor in his medicine cabinet but stopped, closing the mirror cover of the cabinet and returning his slightly unkempt face into the spotlight. Nah, already on bad terms with his boss anyway, why change his record?

He grabbed a box of Marlboro Lights and stuffed them in his pocket, along with his apartment keys, car keys, and some spare change. The yellow taxi he drove sat in the apartment parking lot and reminded him of the disgusting yellow walls in his bathroom. Opening the driver’s side of the taxi, he began his morning route. He’d clock in with the boss later at the end of the night. He didn’t want to face the reddened flabby cheeks that shook and the spit that hung on his boss’ lips during his eternally repeated wrath about Alan being the “worst fuckin’ cab driver in all of Chicago.” Yadda-yadda-yadda. He hadn’t had enough to drink to deal with that.

Alan rolled down the window, and the cool mid-morning breeze comforted him as he took a long drag on his cigarette and blew a thick plume out of the taxi. A beautiful woman stood at the corner, waving her arms frantically for Alan to stop. “Obviously she is from somewhere else and has never hailed a taxi in her life. Probably north California or somethin’...” Alan chuckled to himself, pulling his taxi to a slow stop, yanking the shift down to first gear, and braking at the curb. “Thank you! I couldn’t get anyone to stop! Everyone’s in such a hurry!” the woman said in a grateful tone, still catching her breath from her wild hand movements. “West Jackson Boulevard,” she said sweetly, moving her pink-tinted California lips. Alan stared her up and down. He liked her honey waves that fell halfway down her chest. She wore a bright ocean-blue dress with white flowers that hit her just at the knee and scooped low across her cleavage. Alan perused the sun-kissed freckles upon her face and chest from the rear-view mirror. He licked his mischievous lips and curled them into an attractive yet sly smile.

“West Jackson. You got it.” He slowly set his hand on the gearshift and pulled away from the curb into traffic. “Are you visiting family here? That’s a lovely dress by the way.” The young California girl smiled shyly at his compliment and flicked her hair back over her shoulder, revealing more freckles.

“How did you know I wasn’t from here?” she asked naively, playfully fluttering her forest green eyes. He knew she was hooked.
“Oh that pretty California skin wasn’t made from this windy Chicago weather, I’ll tell you that much,” Alan said jokingly, flashing his fatally charming smile.

“Oh I see... well you’re right about that. I’m from San Diego, actually, and yes, I like the sunsets and the beaches just like any golden state girl should. But something about Chicago pulls on my heart. Do you ever look out of your taxi window at these big, ugly gray skyscrapers?”

“Sometimes,” Alan responded. “Why?” “Oh, I suppose you don’t notice them anymore... but you know what I think...?” she paused, “I think they look like metallic human fingers...reaching up to touch God’s...trying to grasp a mystery they’ll never know...” The forest green eyes gazed longingly up past the buildings, far, far away. “Oh look at me, I’m getting way too ahead of myself. It’s what all that sun will do to you, hunh!? I’m sorry... I haven’t even asked your name.”

Alan was lost in thought from the words that escaped her pink lips and that now danced around his head with a cloud of secret and intrigue. Had he ever heard a woman speak to him like that? Had he ever heard anyone speak to him like that? He knew now that she was nothing ordinary and that she wasn’t hooked. He was. Her words inspired him and choked him. He wanted to say something equally as poetic, as intelligent, as deserving of life and happiness. “Um...Alan, Alan Grear... and yours?”

“Alan...nice. Simple and warm. Easy. My name is Kate.”

“Kate” he repeated barely audibly to himself. The word sat on his tongue with a burst of invigoration and excitement. Like fresh green mint, earthy and awakening.

“Well, Alan, since you guessed I was from California, is there anything else you can guess?” Kate asked.

“Well...is your favorite color blue?” Alan said thoughtfully, in his embarrassingly thick Chicago accent. He wished he sounded as sweet and refreshing as her.

“Oh Alan, that’s easy! Look, I’m in a bright blue dress. You have to pick another one!” Kate nuzzled her head on the back on the passenger seat. Her face was beautifully and dangerously close Alan’s.

He stared back at her while attempting to keep his eyes on the road. Those peach-pink lips glistened and invited him. He wanted to kiss them and absorb all the beauty and mystery she radiated. She was so different than anyone he had ever met. He fumbled for something, something to make her smile, to make those coral lips turn upward in his favor. “Your favorite flowers are daffodils. You hate roses because they’re cliché, but men give them to you anyway, from lack of thought. You place them in vases because you’d hate to see anything die, but the red garishness of them makes you sick...” Alan waited nervously and tensely for her response. “Damn that was stupid! What if she loves roses, what if she—”

“Why Alan, that’s oddly specific,” Kate said, her calm voice interrupting his internal roar. “But I like that idea...and it is close. I like daffodils, but only in the spring. My favorite flowers are violets. And sometimes poppies... Ha, I change my mind so often. But definitely not roses. I’ve decided...I like you Alan. You think, unlike other men I know. You take things more seriously.”

“How little does she know?” Alan thought to himself. I’m a failure and a drunk. He wiped his cheek with his hand, wishing he had put in the effort to shave. Suddenly he looked up and was at West Jackson. He dreaded the right turn coming up and the Board of Trade building that loomed over his moments with her. “Kate” he mumbled, sweetly savoring it, mulling it over with his tongue. He pulled to the curb and parked the bright yellow taxi regretfully. Kate stepped out of the car and to his surprise, opened the passenger door and sat in the black leather seat, close to him. He could smell her, the sweet perfume permeating his nostrils, a wonderful intoxication. She grabbed a magazine from the floor beneath the seat, meant for his more fleeting passengers and tore out a sheet. It was mainly white, a Coco Chanel advertisement, he believed, something elegant and simplistic, and she wrote her name, address, and telephone number without saying a word.

It was then that he saw it, the gold flash on her fourth finger as she held the paper down to write. The sight hit him with an unimaginable force, right in his chest, and for a minute he could barely breathe. He shouldn’t have thought for a second that there was something between them but why did it come as such a surprise when he saw it. And why was she leaving her number? She set the paper slowly on the passenger seat and smiled at him sweetly. She grazed his hand as it was set on the gearshift, grabbed her white purse, and left. Alan watched intently as she moved beautifully through the crowd, her bright blue dress a relieving contrast to the business suits and homeless men, both in black and gray. Then she vanished.
Alan turned off the engine and stepped out of the car. He thought about following her, going after her, yelling her name. “KATE!” But nothing, not even a whisper escaped his lips. He walked slowly down the city street and turned in to the first bar. O’Malley’s was a familiar place for him, and the bartender began filling a glass of his favorite beer as he settled in a seat alone in the corner. The bartender brought the foaming substance quickly without much interaction, as this had become custom, most like everything in Alan’s life. Alan fumbled with the white paper in his pocket. He brought it out to the bar table and rubbed over it with his fingers as if to feel the touch of her skin once more. “Kate...Kate.” Alan stared at the liquid in front of him, deep, brown, and inviting. The blow that had just hit his heart urged for him to use the drink. To heal, to forget, to stop saying her name, to stop having unfathomable hopes and wishes of being with the mystery in blue and white. He fingered her note once more and shoved it in his pocket as he pushed the drink aside. The liquid now appeared dark, muddy, and bitter, suggesting no sweet, memory-erasing charm. He left some change on the bar for the owner’s trouble and walked out into the perfect mid-afternoon air. Maybe he would call or write. Maybe he would start trying, start caring. He shoved his hand in his pocket, feeling the torn edges of the note for comfort and looked up at the sky. Bright ocean-blue.
“The sea holds every man’s dream,” Cooper used to say as we watched the sky burn red on the docks of Chesapeake Bay. Those summers are gone now, but I can still remember the sweet summer mist dancing along the shore to the beat of water’s drum. We would watch the world change as ice melted down our necks like soft butter. We had stolen the ice from the parties on the beach. We only went to take the ice, never to party. Cooper said the parties were corrupt and that they would ruin my innocence. So, we only took the ice and watched. Like gods on high we predicted whose relationships would unravel and which arguments would turn physical. Their world was naïve, a stranger to me. It was a world I would never fully understand. But that didn’t matter then; on those summer nights all that mattered was how soft Cooper’s hand was in mine.

When my family came to the Bay for our annual summer vacation, the first thing my mother would do was make a strawberry pie. It amazed me how she could take a few ingredients, each so different, and make a symphony of bliss. The crust was thin and flaked to the tiniest of touches, but it was strong enough to hold the pounds of heated strawberries sitting below its surface.

The morning we found him felt just like Mama’s strawberry pie. A thin layer of clouds covered the steaming streets, slowly cooking berries inside it. The heat was soothing as Cooper and I walked hand in hand under the dock. His name was William or so we were told later. He washed up against the shore pink and raw. In some places the sand scrapped him to the bone.

“He must have partied too hard,” Cooper laughed.

“He couldn’t help it,” I said. “He’s not like us.”

“No, he’s not like us,” Cooper said. “Now let’s leave before he taints you anymore.” “Shouldn’t we call the police?” I asked.

“It’s like you said: he’s not like us, so he’s not our problem now is he?”

“I guess not.”

“No, you don’t guess; you know because I told you.” Cooper squeezed my hand harder. It hurt, but I knew that it was punishment for questioning him.

“I’m sorry, you’re right,” I said staring at the body the waves were pushing toward the shore. The sea was naïve like the people who swam in it, trying to save something that was dead.

The police contacted us the next morning. They said that William was Cooper’s friend, that he was the last one to be seen with William. Cooper just smiled at the officers. He grinned like the reverend did when we delivered him Mama’s pies.

“Yeah, I saw Willy a couple nights ago,” Cooper continued to smile at the officers, “but he took off, and I came here, been here for days. You can even ask her.”

The officer looked at me. “Is that true ma’am?” he asked.

I wanted to tell him the truth. He seemed like a nice man. I wanted to call the police in the first place. Cooper hasn’t been here. Cooper’s never here. But I just nodded my head. Cooper doesn’t let me tell the truth.

“This is the third body this month,” the officer’s partner said, “and I’ve got my eye on you two.”

I loved Cooper, and he loved me. So, I followed him to the top of the cliff where we spent so many of our afternoons baking underneath the setting sun. When we sat down Cooper asked if I loved him.

“Of course,” I said.

“But take these,” he said placing two tiny white pills in my hand.

“What are they?” I asked.

“They’ll take us to a better place,” he said, “somewhere where beautiful girls like you are not tempted by evil. Just put ‘em in your mouth and swallow. It’s as easy as that.”

“What will happen then?” I asked. I didn’t like this idea.

“Well, first you’ll feel heavy, like your whole body is made of rocks—"
“Or Mama’s holiday cake?”
“Yeah or that,” Cooper continued, “then things will start looking fuzzy and your head will hurt real bad. Your body will try to reject the pills, but you have to keep them down. You have to promise me you won’t throw them back up.”
He looked at me, his eyes burning into mine. I nodded my head, “I promise.”
“Good. Anyway after all of that business, you’ll drift away into a peaceful sleep.”
I looked at the tiny white things in my hand. I really didn’t like this idea.
“However,” Cooper reached for something on his left, “before all of that, I thought we should have one more picnic together, like old times.”
I looked at the small basket Cooper had pulled out, but I couldn’t concentrate on it. The only thing I could focus on were the small pills in my hand. What were we about to do?
“I even brought ice.” Cooper reached into the basket and pulled out a baggie holding the ice. There were only two pieces.
I loved Cooper, that’s what I told the officers when the paramedics finally came. They told me that the drug he had taken was what killed him.
“He was avoiding the law,” someone said. It was the same officer from days before. “We finally got evidence on him, and he goes and does this. What a piece of work.”
“What kind of person does this?” his partner asked.
I looked at the white sheet that covered Cooper’s body, and I remembered walking along the beach hand in hand. I remembered staring at the night sky, thick like black frosting coated in a layer of white sprinkles. I remembered the first time he kissed me, so soft, sweet, and shy. And I remembered him cursing the people of the world, calling them corrupt, trying to convince me that one day he would see that this society would fall. From its failure, he said, I’ll create something new. A perfect world filled with innocents, people without sin, people like you.
“He,” I said turning to the officer, “was naïve.”
Choice

Author: Chelsea Muzar
Grade: 12
Teacher: Sara Capra
School: Park Hill High School, Kansas City, Missouri

You crawl across the black pavement struggling to get out of the sun that is burning you. You can feel the heat against your skin, so hot, so overpowering. If only there was a breeze. Anything to take away this burning. Because you know that you are baking. You have to get out of this heat.

As if by some miracle a shadow appears above a section of the black lake. It is the only relief from this scorching heat and a blessing that you won’t pass by. You head for it immediately. Soon you will be free from this horrible weather. Just a few more inches and you’ll be there. Finally you reach the shade. Finally you’re out of this heat. Finally you are safe.

You sure are a stupid bug, walking right under my shoe. You would have been better off roasting in the sun. I’m going to squish you, bug. I wonder what it will feel like have all of your bones break at the same time. To have all of your organs crush one another. To realize you are dying. What horror does that hold?

I bring my foot down stopping just above your body. The body I know will make a crunch when I step on it. I wonder, can you sense my foot hovering above you? If you can then you’re stupid and naïve for not running. If you can’t then you are equally as dense. Perhaps this is what it feels like being the head of a corporation. What it feels like when you have to lay people off. Some of them know that they are going to be canned; however, they do nothing to improve their situation. Others are blind to the reality. Yet, I wonder if a CEO takes this much pleasure in watching something horrible unfold.

I bring my foot a little closer, just barely touching your antenna. Now must you know that I’m here and that I have your life in the palm of my hands, or rather at the base of my foot. Why don’t you run? My foot is hovering just above you. Run, so I don’t have to do this. Run, so you can live another day. But you don’t run, you stupid bug. You stay stationary, trusting in the heavenly shade. Fine. If you won’t run then I’ll finish you. I’ll finish you before you can crawl back to nature and have something bigger kill you instead of me.

Just a little closer and crunch a green smudge against the pavement. Just a little closer, a little closer, I can’t move. My foot is frozen. I can’t bring it down. I can’t land the final blow. Why? Why can’t I do it? You’re just a bug after all. Only a bug. What is so significant about your life that prevents me from bringing down my foot just one notch closer? Just a little closer that’s all.

I can’t. You may be a disgusting stupid creature, but I am not the CEO. I don’t have that power. I can’t make that decision. So, I’ll let you go. Yes, I’ll let you crawl away. For now.

I brush my shoe against your antenna. I lie to you about my intent. And finally you sense my foot hovering above you. You realize that this may not have been the wisest place to rest. You scurry out from under my shoe, sighing in relief that nothing happened. I watch you venture off onto the blazing concrete, rushing toward the cool meadow, as I’m left alone in the blazing sun.
Inspired by Brigit Pegeen Kelly’s poem: Iskandariya

Author: Jackie Schechter
Grade: 10
Teacher: Betsy Schechter
School: Mary Institute and Country Day School, St. Louis, Missouri

It was not a wealthy husband I asked for
nor a squealing baby with the purpling face of an open violet.
I did not ask for the child to have a sense of morality
or to have the straight blonde hair I always wanted.
I did not ask for the loyal golden retriever
with the pink lapping tongue
to run over my skin like balmy water,
and I did not ask for him to jump with excitement,
his wagging tail
like a broken second hand of a clock
when I opened the door.
I did not ask for an old Victorian brick house,
the color of crimson mud,
with ivy leaves mounting the sides,
scaling all the way to the blacktop of the roof.
I did not ask for all the white marble counter tops
and all the long winding staircases
that didn’t seem to lead to anywhere in particular
and the salt water swimming pool
that matched my child’s eyes
and thin coffee colored freckles.
I did not ask for my daughter to grow
like untrimmed hair,
no longer needing her mother.
Nor did I ask for spring break vacations in the Virgin Islands
or to sip martinis and cappuccino’s in my spare time,
to lounge in the vast white bed
when I wanted to.
No, I did not ask for any of these things,
these things that would make a person happy,
or should have.
I instead found loneliness my companion
and was left
in this old Victorian house,
sipping coffee,
from the china doll tea cup.
Since the Monster came
I feel... different
He came unwanted and
Before I knew it,
    he had
    eaten
    me away.

He ate my fat first
(I’d wanted to be thin
but not this way)
    I became
Skin and bones
    Down
    Down
    Down
went my weight
Half my body
    D
    O
    W
    N
the drain

A Hero in a white coat
Said he could help
But his help made me sick

My hair went next
Clumps of me
Fallen on the battlefield

As the war in my body
Rages on
I feel like a feather
Blowing
Away

My life withers
Away

All because of a
Monster
The sounds of our giggling voices ricocheted off the forest trees as we chased each other through the dark. A tree root closed on my foot as my body spilled forward toward the muddy earth, but before I could hit the ground, I felt two strong arms wedging their way around my body and steadying me once more. “Love you, Sissy,” I whispered as I realized I was safe again. That’s how it always was with my sister; she was my big sissy, the one who fought off monsters and soothed my fears. I looked to her as though she were invincible; she could conquer the world without hesitation. I never anticipated a day would come where it would be my turn to fight off the monsters, to make things right again.

My sister was always my best friend, the one I told everything to. Broken heart? She could fix that: two tubs of ice cream, one pound of cookie dough, and a night to remember. Grounded? She could fix that too: five minutes of standing guard, slipping through the back door at my side, and making me laugh until I couldn’t breathe. She was the master at making things right again: my own personal Bob the Builder.

One thing that she could always fix without fail was her face. Sad day, happy day, lonely day, she bore them all with a bright smile. It was as if she had sewn a mask to her face, a mask that was only able to portray one type of emotion. Because I did not understand this then, I simply thought she smiled because that was the only emotion she felt. She was a superhero in my eyes, a superhero with a smiling face and a core that was festering with every emotion imaginable.

The night I found out the way she was able to get out all of her other emotions completely unraveled me. My feet pitter-pattered against the cold, wood floor as I made my way to her room to ask her a simple question. After hearing her music boom through her door, I decided knocking would be pointless, so I removed the bobby pin from my hair and fiddled with the lock. As the door swung open, I saw her huddled in the corner. She turned her head to where I was, and her face bore a look of guilt. I curiously walked over to where she sat and moved her body to face mine, despite the screams of “Get out!” that escaped her quivering lips. The sound of a razor blade hitting the floor seemed far off in the distance as my gaze lowered to where she held her eyes.

There were so many cuts that lined her arms! Those were the arms that used to partake in handclapping games with me, that used to flail about as she ran from me in games of tag. How could she have ruined those perfect arms? The once smooth arms that housed porcelain skin, the arms that now housed jagged lines that stretched across her former perfection. Those lines seemed to penetrate into the depths of me, shredding my insides to pieces.

I was able to feel my arms scrape against the walls as I ran to my room. Locking the door, I ran to my bed and hid underneath my covers as if that could remove the newly received information from my head. Lying on my side, I could feel each tear fall across my face and soak into my sheets. The image of her pained face was burned into my mind. She was my sister, my other half. It was as if I could feel the sharpened razor glide across my skin; the taste of rusted metal and blood filled my mouth and was all I could seem to focus on. Childhood memories encompassed my mind, and images of my sister and me began dancing across my closed eyelids: her motherly hands smoothing the tangles in my hair and tucking me into bed at night, her angelic voice filling my ears with beautiful lullabies as I dozed off to sleep. She had always been the one that fixed me when we were young, the one that made things right again. We weren’t kids anymore, though, and for once I wasn’t the one that needed the fixing.

Everyone breaks at some point, I realized. Sure, she could still conquer the world, I was sure of it; she just couldn’t do it on her own like I always expected.

I removed the covers from my head, climbed to my feet, and walked to my sister’s door. Opening the door, I turned off the light and climbed into her bed, wrapping my arms around her trembling body. “Love you, Sissy,” she whispered. At that point I realized that it was my turn, my turn to make things right again.
An answering machine sits idly on a small nightstand supporting loose change and picture frames and a tacky lamp. The machine begins to play.

**Digitalized Male Voice**

You have ten messages. Message One

**Heather**

[Yelling] I am going to murder Sophie Sullers! I mean it. I am going to cut that ho-bag. Who does she think she is anyways, with her corduroy jump suits and her hemp back packs and those damn bamboo shoes that always click on the tile! And I told my Michael, my poor, innocent Michael, how new age yuppies like that always carry the worst venereal diseases! I bet she gave him the clap, the poor thing! And to think that I was going to invite him back to my room after the company All-You-Can-Eat Pig Roast Luncheon! If you get this message, try and talk some sense into him for me and tell him just how vile and revolting that yoga master, free-to-be-you-and-me prostitute really is! I was really beginning to think he was the one. This is Heather by the way...

**Digitalized Male Voice**

Message Two

**Heather**

Hey, it’s Heather again. I just wanted to apologize for freaking out earlier about the whole Michael thing. I mean, we’ve only been texting for a week now, and he won’t even send me a picture of his back. I know it’s weird, but there’s something about the male back that’s so incredibly arousing. With the broad shoulders and the rippling muscles and the soft dusting of freckles and...Oh, I’m going into a tunnel.

**Digitalized Male Voice**

Message Three

**Heather**

[Sobbing] I just don’t know what to do anymore. I mean, I continually put myself out there, and all I get is big, fat NO! [High Pitched] The entire world is a NO! I swear, if things don’t start looking up for me, I am going to quit my job at the Aunt Jemima plant and move to Toronto! [Calming Down] I hear they have a really nice school district there, and I’ve always wanted children! Anyways, I’m just glad I have you. You’ve always been such a nice friend to me! Oh, like that time that you invited me to Thanksgiving with your superintendent and that homeless lady with all the birds! If only all guys could be like you...

**Digitalized Male Voice**

Message Four

**Heather**

[Flirtatious] Hey, you. It’s Heather. I feel like a total uber-bitch for crowding up your machine like this. You’re gonna come home from work and think I’m a total schitzo. [Laughs]. Anyways, I was thinking we should do something later. There’s this new restaurant downtown, called You Moo, everything they make has beef in it, even the ice cream. It’s real fancy, so wear that purple sweater. Your back looks amazing in it. I’ll be waiting...
Message Five

Heather

I’m watching “Friends,” and I can’t remember Phoebe’s sister’s name for the life of me! It’s something weird like Gwendolyn or Guinevere. If you remember, you can tell me on our date tonight! I’M SO EXCITED!!!

Message Six

Heather

[Rushed] Oh my God, so I was watching Oprah, and it was about STDs, and she had this girl on that looked exactly like that frizzy-haired Sullers chick. Is that a sign or what? Seriously though, you should get Michael in for a check up before his penis corrodes away or something...

Message Seven

Heather

[Angry] I’m at the restaurant, where are you! Everyone’s staring at me and whispering things at me. “Oh look at that girl, all by herself. She got stood up! I wonder why, SHE’S SO UNIQUE LOOKING AND BEAUTIFUL!” I AM A SPLENDID HUMAN BEING!! I have feelings and emotions. I have dreams just like you! Just because I’m this caricature doesn’t mean you can treat me this way! I JUST WANT TO TOUCH A MAN’S BACK!”

Message Eight

Heather

[Drunk] Hi again. It’s Heather. [Repeated Quietly] Heather. [Refocusing] So, I just wanted you to know, Mr. Busy Man, Mr. I’m-too-good-for-Heather, that I do not need a man to be happy. I am moving to Toronto tomorrow morning. And you know what? I might just become a lesbian. It’s Canada after all, and I’m an open minded woman! So, you can just take your broad back and your scrappily facial hair and your soft, warm eyes....and, and...

Message Nine

Heather

[Mumbling Incoherently]

Message Ten

Police Officer Bradley

Hi, this is Officer Bradley from the Tulsa Police Department, and I have a situation here involving a Ms. Heather Langstrom, who says you’re her husband? It appears that Ms. Langstrom broke into the apartment of a Ms. Sophie Sullers, took her cats hostage at knifepoint, and is now threatening to throw them off a nine story apartment building. She says she’s not willing to negotiate unless you’re here. Also, she says to wear the purple sweater...
The Viking’s Farewell

The wind, which had long been absent that day, picked up in a sudden burst as she kissed her husband’s forehead. Curious, she raised her head to the wind rippling across the sea. Her hair blew across her face, but she merely bent down to touch her husband’s cheek and whispered a farewell in his ear.

A call sounded behind her, and she knew it was time to leave. Picking up her skirts, she waded back to shore, the water heavy upon her clothes. A line of somber people littered the shore, and one of them, an older woman, beckoned her with open arms.

She held her mother’s hand tightly and gazed steadily at the little boat cradled upon the waves in the shallow sea. Her husband, with no hint of gray in his hair yet, lay peacefully inside the boat, in his clean white tunic and old, battered armor.

A middle-aged man, clad in his armor with his helmet held at his hip, strode forward into the water. He waded to the boat, grasped it at the bow, and looked down at the peaceful face, his mind wandering back in time.

Before his eyes he saw a huddle of drunken men sitting around a campfire in the snowy month of January, celebrating a victory. He remembered he had been somber that night; news had just reached him of his wife’s birth of a stillborn daughter, but then he had felt a hand on his shoulder and had turned to look at the only understanding face.

Leaning against the boat, he uttered softly, “Farewell friend.”

A torch, held at first by a young warrior, was passed from man to man, each of whom bowed their heads over the fire before passing it on. Finally, the middle-aged man received the torch. He carefully set it down at the very end of the boat and, as it slowly started to eat away at the wood, he leaned forward and pushed the boat out to sea.

At first, the sea’s strong waves struggled with the small boat, sending it closer to shore. The man in his armor, still in the midst of the waves, hurried forward to give the steadily burning boat another, firmer push. Perhaps the wind shifted just then, though none of the gathering noticed a change, but the boat altered its course, suddenly heading swiftly towards the heart of the great sea.

The dead man’s widow turned her back sharply, breathing through her mouth to escape the smell of the smoke. Her mother laid a hand on the lady’s shoulder, and murmured, “Come now, dearest. We should be getting home.”

She paused, waiting for her daughter’s body to respond, but she still stood as a stiff and stubborn as she had as a small girl. Continuing, she said, “You’ve got your ill son to tend to now. He’ll be waiting for you to come home and comfort his poor ailing soul, while he lies in his sickbed, mourning his father. It’s a crying shame the boy wasn’t even able to attend his own father’s funeral.”

At the mention of her only child, the lady, whose young years were marred recently, stirred, a new strength holding her fragile spirits together. Together, the lady and her mother walked up the hill, away from the beach, beginning their journey home.

The walk was short, for from their house they could see the ocean, but the progress was slow as the mother helped her daughter make her way up the hill.

As the house crept into view, the mother saw her other daughter standing outside the house, her eyes holding some kind of warning.

Before she could really ponder this, the door opened and two men walked out, carrying a small body, a sheet lightly draped over the small thing.

At her side, she felt her daughter collapse against her.

The wind that blew strongly earlier that day shrank to less than a whisper. The surface of the water was calm and cradled the boat lightly. The wind had set the fire roaring across the vulnerable wooden frame of the boat, but now the calmness of the air sated the hungry flames’ appetite, and its progress slowed.

The man in the boat, his face set in a peaceful expression that belied the flames that were moving towards
his vulnerable flesh, was dead. However, he began to experience a peculiar stirring of the mind, an awakening of his afterlife soul. Though he had been told of this occurrence, from a little boy on his father’s knee to the warrior in his final battle, he was not wholly prepared for the strangeness of it.

When he first came to see the flames, his eyes remained closed, yet he saw clearly. He willed himself to sit up, but his body stubbornly retained its motionless form, though his memories from his life were slowly coming back.

When he chose to open his eyes again, he saw the flames consuming his legs. Curiosity and revulsion fought with each other, and curiosity won when he realized that he could feel no pain, no sensation. He watched with a sense of peculiar detachment as the flames smothered the softness of his flesh, and turned it to black ash.

The wind grew stronger, and he turned to look at the direction the wind blew. With a sense of discovery, he realized he could now turn his head. Intrigued, he tried to sit up. Joyfully, he sat in the boat and stretched his surprisingly flexible and agile limbs. However, the more he moved, the more he sensed something was amiss. As he looked about him he soon realized that the remains of his body still lay motionless at the bottom of the boat, while he was crouched on his knees. Perturbed, he tried to touch his torso, but his hands passed straight through his body. For when he looked down at his chest he saw the faint, gray outlines of his armor and the hair on his arms, but he could see his body and the bottom of the boat through his chest.

He carefully stood up in the boat, and gazed to the shore at his right. Trees were thick, and to his surprise he thought he saw something moving. It appeared to be a line of men, of warriors, hurrying to some destination.

A wave of recognition swept over him. He knew that was where he belonged, and he gave his forlorn boat not another thought. To his surprise, when he clambered out the boat, he did not sink into the water. Instead he seemed able to glide across it, with deep, graceful strides, reaching the shore quickly.

As he came closer to the men he realized that they were not flesh and bone men but men in the same form as him. They walked in an orderly line, their expressions varying from confusion to happiness. Uncertain, he joined the line.

The men in front of him showed no surprise or alarm, but one turned around and asked him conversationally, “Where are you from?”

Without hesitation his mouth opened to give the correct response, but his mind gave none. Feeling foolish, he said, “I can’t remember.”

At this, the man offered a kind smile, “Don’t worry about that. None of the rest of us can either.”

When he saw the man’s smile, a memory flooded back of a time when the man had smiled at him with that same smile. Glad at this recognition, he started to greet the man by his name, but then promptly forgot it.

So, instead he said, “Do you know where we’re going then?”

When the man didn’t answer, the man behind him in the line interjected, “Well, we’re going to Valhalla.

Where else would we be going but our afterlife?”

At his words, the men in the somber line became excited. While some men just shifted to listen closer, others leaned in to add their comments and questions. His own heart was suddenly beating fast.

“Are we really? It’s hard to believe it’s actually here.”

“I don’t even remember dying.”

“They say Odin himself will feast with us!”

Amidst the clamor, however, one quiet voice was heard.

“But if all of us warriors travel to Valhalla, where do our wives and children go?”

The men grew quiet, but the man’s mind wandered back to the life he had just left. He recalled the house that he and his wife had lived in. What he loved most about it was that it overlooked the water in such a way that if you stood outside the door you could feel the breeze off the ocean, especially in the deepest hours of night. He remembered a time when his wife and he had been arguing about how often he was away from home, and she had been pregnant and very angry. They had squared off across their bed, her face red and furious and her belly swollen under her nightgown. She had cried at him, “You’ll never be around to see your child grow!” He tried to remember what else she had said. Was it, “I think you prefer to be in the midst of war than home with your family?” He paused. Perhaps she had said something different. In the beginning of their marriage, he had tried to explain to her the honor being a Viking warrior held, but she had always scoffed. How could he explain to her the importance of reaching Valhalla? It was every man’s dream, and he had not been an exception. It was the greatest honor a Viking could be given.
He recalled his son. The brightest, blondest hair and a strong build for one so young. He could perfectly re-call the freckles on his nose and the mole on his ear and the way his small voice got higher at the end of sentences. Whenever he was home, he’d play with his son, his greatest joy, and tell the boy war stories. He taught him how to swim once, in the shallows of the water, while the boy’s mother watched. He’d hold his son up, making sure he was safe, and both of them would wave at her. She would always…it was something she did. Smile and wave? Or warn them not to swim out too far?

He had taught his son how to swim, with their house still in sight. No, that wasn’t right. Their house faced a forest. Yes: it was a forest just like the one they were walking through right now.

His reminiscing stopped, however, when someone spoke again, “The women and children reach a different afterlife though, don’t they? They just don’t get into Valhalla.”

A man interrupted, “I thought they journeyed to a limbo afterlife.”

Discontent followed the man’s words, and a sense of unease filled the air. The men grew quiet and thought-ful, and they walked in silence. His own conscience was facing an unsettling situation. He thought of his wife and son and of living forever apart from them. The idea was painful, but he remembered that his wife and son were alive and enjoying the life they had been blessed with. When warriors traveled to Valhalla and the women and children to somewhere else, it was a natural separation, something that everyone must accept at death. Reaching Valhalla was a warrior’s reward for his years of fighting.

Through his internal struggle, however, he began to see the change in atmosphere. Suddenly, sun was reaching through the clouds, glossing the forest floor. The grass was lush and thick, while the trees seemed to reach the sky.

His look of wonderment must have shown on his face, for one of the men said to him, “Yes, that’s right. We must be getting close,” he smiled genially, “I can already taste the glory!”

Another man paused and said, “Wait, I can hear something.”

A few other men nearby also hesitated and listened. One cried out, “It sounds like women!”

Voices and shouts filled the air, tinged with disbelief. Wasn’t Valhalla supposed to be for the warriors, not the women? Despite their resentment, most of the men felt excitement. Again, they’d be able to touch the warm flesh of a woman, just like in their earthly life.

The trees thinned and then abruptly disappeared. They were standing on the edge of a large, open field, filled with little blue flowers. And playing in the field were fully fleshed women and children and a few men. He looked down at his own body and, to his delight, saw that he was no longer colorless and transparent. He could feel his own, warm, blemish-free flesh.

Many of the men cried out happily and hurried out amongst the happy women and children. No one was a stranger. All were friends.

He smiled to himself and slowly walked around the field, smelling the fresh air and rejoicing. Past the field, off in the distance, stood a towering castle, formed on top of jutting rocks, and its highest turrets seemed to touch the clouds.

As soon as he had sighted it, several others did also, and sighs issued all around.

“Now look at that. It’s actually Valhalla.”

“Can’t you see it? Just like I imagined.”

“It’s all been worth it. It’s really all been worth it.”

The mass of men began blindly walking towards the monolith, the women and children already forgotten.

His anticipation returning, he turned to follow but was stopped by a blonde bobbing head rushing towards him.

He felt the warm arms around his waist before he truly saw the face. The brightest blonde hair was placed under his eyes and he knelt down and held the little boy at arm’s length, taking in the full sight of him. The little boy didn’t like being held so far away and began to cry, “Papa, Papa.”

The man began to cry, tears that splashed into his beard. The little boy didn’t like to see this and took his father in his arms, patting him consolingly on the head. “It’s all right, Papa. We’re together again.”

From very far away, the man heard another voice. He stood up and sought the voice that called him.

A warrior, who had stayed behind out of concern, called to him, “They’re all leaving. You need to come now,
or you’ll never be able to leave here. You won’t ever be able to reach Valhalla.”

Crouched down beside his son, he started and looked up at the other man, as the boy enfolded himself once more around his father, and mumbled, “Oh papa, I’m so glad you’re home.”

His son’s head was nuzzled into his neck, and he could feel the heat of the boy’s cheek and his methodic pulse. Over the boy’s head, he could still see the towering formation of Valhalla, the sun slowly setting behind it.
“How did you die?”

“How?” Tiny murmurs. “I was thrown into a river some several hundreds of years ago. They strapped a big boulder around my ankles to hold me down. The villagers did, I mean. Back then if you were a witch, you would free yourself; if you weren’t, you drowned as an innocent.

“Guess they were wrong seeing as I ended up here.” She shrugs nonchalantly. “My entire family died after failing to endure their ‘test.’ I still remember how it hurt when my lungs filled with water instead of air that first gulp. You know, when you’re trying to hold your breath, your muscles lose oxygen, causing cramping and eventually atrophy. Hurt like hell, no pun intended.”

Tiny sits back in her chair and sips from her steaming cup. Sitting in a corner of this small room, I don’t think I’ll ever get used to seeing her in that four-year-old body and still hear her talk so…sophisticated, let alone curse. She fluffs her blonde shoulder-length curls with a small, pale hand.

“What do you think,” Adrian asks, “is the worst way to die?” He looks around at the circle of dead people in the small white room. Everyone is wearing the same white pants, white shirt, and white shoes, none too tight, or too big.

I’m part of this little talk circle, but I stare down at my hands folded in my lap, trying to will myself into invisibility. “Come on,” he leans back, slinging an arm around his chair. “We’ve all been through it. Who else thinks that theirs was the worst way to go?”

A frail, girl who could’ve been fifteen at her time of death shakily raises her hand. “I died of gastrointestinal cancer. It felt like I was being eaten from the inside out.” Her eyes tighten. “I was glad when it was finally over. But I miss my family. I wish I could’ve fought it harder.”

Adrian nods. “Thank you Vanessa.” As our self-proclaimed “group therapist” goes around the room, he asks people their death story. I hear a number of stories: hit by a car, deadly disease, war, suicide.

Finally, Adrian’s eyes fall on me. Hiding behind my curtain of black hair, I don’t look up even as he says my name, “Maria, what about you?”

I keep my face hidden as I answer his question. “It hurt.”

“Oh, well, that’s death, I guess.”

Now I look up, meeting his gaze. He starts, reacting to my blood filled eyes. “I was thrown into a fire and burned alive…twice.”

Where am I? Not Hell. Certainly not Heaven. Purgatory maybe? I was never much of a religious person when I was alive. I guess it depends on what you believe. I can say one thing for sure: unless it’s what you believe “the good place” is, that bright white light at the end of the tunnel of your dimming life is nothing but a room with white walls.

I have no idea how long I’ve been here. This place is timeless. There is no sense of day or night. I can only remember dates from the past life. Christmas was December 25th. Halloween was October 31st. Winter starts December 22nd.

I sit in this circle, all eyes on me. I avert my blood red eyes toward the floor.

Adrian asks, “How did that happen?”

My tone is brusque. “I was thrown into a fire.” He raises goading eyebrows. “I answered the question, didn’t I?”

He nods slowly. “Why don’t you elaborate for us, like Tiny did,” he prods.

I glance quickly at the small girl whose presence is hundreds of years old. She looks confused.

“Why should I? I think that this is all a load of crap anyway.”

“Were you accused of being a witch, like me?” Tiny asks in her trilling young voice. “Normally in a witch burning you would have been restrained to a wooden pyre and burned alive, once. But again...doesn’t make sense.” She shakes her head, bewildered.

I shrug. “First, my murderers probably were senseless. Second, I was born about one and a half millennium after you.”
“So,” another person, named Drew, starts, “you were murdered?” I stare at him. What an incredibly stupid question. “Yes. I wasn’t crazy enough to jump into a fire of my own accord. My captors threw me into a fire and pulled me out, drenching me with ice water afterward. My body was in serious shock. Then, they threw me back in.”

“Torture 101,” someone mumbles. Macy is her name. “No kidding.” I can remember my body being agonizingly engulfed in the flames’ embrace. Adrian cocks his head to the side questioningly. “Why were you murdered? Who did it?” My face becomes closed off. My voice is hard when I say, “I didn’t see them. They wore masks. It doesn’t matter. Besides, who the hell put you in charge? What makes you qualified to be leading a group circle?” He shrugs, smiling when he says, “I took a psychology class in high school.”

I stand up, scraping my chair on the floor. I walk over to the door, hardly identifiable from the rest of the walls due to the fact that it is completely white.

“Um …I wouldn’t,” he starts, but it’s too late; my hand is already on the knob. My scream pierces the air as violent waves of fiery heat wash over me. No way will clamping my jaw shut or thinking about peaceful clouds of Gatorade mist keep the pain away. It feels like I’m burning, as I was before my last few minutes of life were snuffed out by flames. I grind my teeth and open my eyes.

There is fire all around me, billowing upward like confining walls. I’m standing in the center. The hungry flames lick me everywhere, scorching my skin, lusting for my immolation. When I look up, I can barely see black spots between the flames. Those must be the night sky. I moan in anguish. Ash begins to coat my throat. “No!” My shout is a breathless rasp. A hand latches onto my wrist wrenching me away from the fire. A tear streaks down my face. I touch it with a finger on my free hand. It comes away slick with red liquid. Blood.

I’m out of the flames, no longer burning. I’m standing in the center of the white room. I turn to look at the person who grabbed me and pulled me from the flames and stare into brown irises.

Adrian’s eyes are glazed over and far away. “Adrian,” I cry, “let me go. Please. You’re hurting me! It burns!” My arm still feels like it’s on fire where his hand is locked around my wrist. He blinks once, twice, and staggers backwards, breathless. I kneel, greedily sucking in air. I can breathe again. The ash is gone.

I look around. Yes, we’re back in a white room, but it’s empty. Our circle isn’t in here.

I groan. “I will never understand this place!” Adrian stares at me with uncomprehending eyes. I stare back at him expectantly. “Where are we?” He shakes his head slowly. “I felt it. I was…burning. I touched you and...What was that?” I sigh, picking myself up from the floor. “Me. Dying. I do so hope that was elaborate enough for you.” He scowls.

“So, where are we?” He shrugs. “Heck if I know. It’s just another room to me.”

“That’ll do us a lot of good.” My words ooze sarcasm. I pace the room, exasperated. “Every room here is the same! The same white walls, the same white clothes; it’s all just damn white nothingness!”

Adrian’s voice is serious when he says. “Be careful what you say around here, or you just might end up in the realm of the damned.” I wheel on him, my eyes wide. His serious expression falters, and he laughs. I stare daggers at him. It takes a while, but his laughing slowly subsides. My eyes bore into his, livid. He cocks his head to the side, his trademark gesture.

“You’re quite a bitter person, you know.” I grind my teeth. “Not everyone can be happy here like you are.” He looks incredulous. “You think I’m happy being here? So what, you don’t think I miss music or the sun or even the fries at McDonalds?” He swallows. “You don’t think I miss colors or TV or my life?” His voice nears a shout.

Almost take a step back but instead cock my head to the side, Adrian-style. “You were the only one who didn’t tell the group how you died.” The question throws him off. He inhales deeply and keeps his eyes averted from my face. “I’m coping,” he
says. “By acting as if it were nothing, as if it doesn’t bother me; this is how I’m coping.” I nod, not that he can see it.

“I was a bad person. I did horrible, unspeakable things. Near the end, those things came back to do me in. I was a part of an illegal business. I had to kill a man’s wife. Somehow he found me and just before putting a bullet in the center of my forehead, said that he was finding all those who helped me kill her and returning the favor. He said, ‘maybe you’ll see them as you all rot in hell.’

“The whole time I’ve been—” he stops, frowns and continues, “dead, what I did to that man and his wife,” a look of self-disgust fills his face, “has carried the weight of an anvil on my chest. Even when I was alive, I would hear her in my dreams. I never even got a good look at the woman’s face. All I can remember is her dying screams.” He sags against a wall, sliding to the floor, leaning his head back and closing his eyes. “I’ve just broken my coping strategy.”

I shrug. “It’s better than what I’ve been doing, which probably isn’t ‘coping,’ at least not in a good way. For every person who’s looked at me, I’ve thought back suggestions of what they can go do to themselves.”

He makes a noise that sounds like a cross between a scoff and a chuckle.

“That woman, at least her husband did something, even if he couldn’t save her. I had a husband,” I say. “He was a restaurant owner. I was the head chef. I left work early one night.” I turn my back to Adrian. “I was so close to my car. So close,” I whisper. “Something heavy hit me on the back of the head. I passed out, woke up a few hours later outside in a desert in the middle of nowhere.” My eyes glaze over, my mind lost in my story, excluding my present company entirely.

“There wasn’t a single road or building. The only car within miles was a black, vacant car in which I guessed I’d been kidnapped. Woman-napped. My hands and feet were tied. They didn’t even bother to gag me. No one was coming to help. There were four men, all dressed in black. All but one was wearing something to cover their face. He smiled at me when I finally woke up. He said he hoped he hadn’t killed me already and flipped open a cell phone. He dialed a number and started talking. I heard my husband’s name on his lips. Another man hauled me up, shrieking, by my hair. The one on the phone said that he was going to kill me if my husband didn’t come to that spot, alone, by dawn with the money that he owed them.” I repress a shudder.

“So for hours we waited. The men grabbed wood and gasoline from the car to build a fire shortly before dawn. I was trembling, despite the fire’s heat. I asked, ‘Why are you doing this?’ My husband had borrowed money from some loan sharks about five years before then. I recognized that as the year we opened our restaurant.” I sigh.

“Eventually, dawn came. The guy with the phone called my husband again. He raised an eyebrow, glanced at me, and nodded. Heavy hands yanked me off the ground and carried me, struggling, over to the fire, now blazing. He threw me, unceremoniously into it. My skin burned where the flames molested me. My eyes began to bleed, the vessels bursting in them. The man was still on the phone, holding it up to the fire, forcing my husband to hear my screams.

“Someone yanked me out and dumped ice and water on me from head to toe, shocking my body badly enough that I shied away from it shrieking. The man said something into the phone and smiled almost sadly. He nodded at someone behind me and back into the flames I went.” I turn back to Adrian, tears shining in my eyes. He stares at me, eyes wide, skin blanched, as if having seen a ghost. “My husband never came.” I look down, slowly spreading both my hands over my stomach.

“You were...” his voice trails off.

“I’d been carrying his child for five months. He knew.” Tears roll down my face. I know that they’re red.

“Maria,” Adrian’s voice brakes.

“It was going to be Michael or Michelle. A boy or a girl. We didn’t know which, but we were going to have this baby, and we were going to love it and...” my voice is almost as dead as I am. “He never showed up.” Again, I cock my head at Adrian and say in my dead voice, “Why didn’t he come? I was his wife. ‘For better or worse’ he promised. The lying bastard. Would you have gone to save your wife and unborn child?”

Adrian slowly stands, like a young deer, uncertain. “Maria,” his voice is strained, unsure, “please tell me that your husband’s name was not Chris Kesser.”

I stare at him, shocked. “Yes.”

He drops to his knees. He whispers words too soft for me to hear.

“What is it?”
His head shoots up. “I’m sorry! I’m so, so sorry. I’m sorry!”

Alarmed, I start toward him. “Why—”

Just as I reach to touch his shoulder, understanding crashes into me, making me stagger backward. I stare at him in horror. “You murdered me.”

“I’m sorry,” he whispers.

“You killed my baby.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You destroyed my husband.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“I was that woman you killed. It was my husband who killed you.”

I walk backwards to the opposite side of the room, and he falls backward, leaning against the wall, still whispering. I sag and fall against the wall. We sit opposite each other in this white room, the twenty feet separating us seeming miles. The murderer and his victim. I don’t know how to feel. There are so many emotions right now bouncing around in my head, I can’t seem to pick one. Supremely pissed. Murderous? Confused. Immensely scared.

But the man in front of me isn’t at all intimidating. He’s begging for forgiveness. How is one supposed to feel when their murderer is sitting right across the room, begging like that?

I don’t suppose there is a person alive who can answer that question.

So, I just don’t. I can’t... feel anything. I’m numb. Just as I think ice is about to cover me from head to toe, an overwhelming giddiness bubbles its way up my throat in the form of giggles. Uncontrollable giggles.

What the hell is wrong with me?

That is also the question written all over his face when Adrian stops whispering and looks at me. He opens his mouth to ask the question, but closes it, uncertain what to make of this.

Between my giggles, I manage to say, “Well, I guess that’s that! You killed me!” My giggling turns into laughter. “And then— then my husband, whom I’ve been thinking was an uncaring bastard all this time, killed you!” I snort, as I always had when laughing this hard when I was alive. “And now the universe is playing us! Sticking us in the same room, spilling our guts to each other!” I wave him off, as he opens his mouth, I’m sure, to question my sanity. “Oh it’s all right, I forgive you,” I gasp. “We’re both dead, so there’s no point in dwelling.”

“But—”

“No!” I shout, regaining self-control. “I am moving on now. I’ve met my murderer. I see the guilt he’s been carrying. And my husband actually did care. The whole time I’ve been here, I’ve just wanted to know what’s been happening on earth. With my husband. With my killer.” I shake my head, suddenly light. “I’m...” I dig around for the right word. With surprise, I realize what I’m feeling. “I’m content.”

I stand and walk over to where he sits. I look down at him and offer my hand. He looks at it before slowly reaching up to take it, probably expecting me to pull it back. I help him stand and look him in the eyes. “You are forgiven. There is no sense in going about here carrying hatred.” Nodding to myself I say, “I get that now.”

“Come on,” I tug on his arm. “Let’s try that door again.” He looks apprehensive but follows me. I don’t hesitate to grab the knob. I feel his hand tense. He relaxes when nothing happens. I turn the knob and open the door, meeting a wall of golden light. It floods the room, covering me in a warm golden shroud. I close my eyes and step over the threshold. I know that Adrian steps with me, but as soon as I’m entirely crossed over, I somehow lose his hand and wonder if I’ll see him again.

In the near distance, I can hear a baby cry.

I open my eyes.

I’m home.
Peter McArthur was famous. Everyone who saw him—at school, at the store, at the cinema, anywhere—recognized him as the son of the greatest man on earth. His father, who had won countless science and technology awards, was the inventor of the first robot assistants.

It was a typical day in the bustling city of Metron, with thick black smoke billowing out of the tall skyscrapers and millions of people stuck in heavy portal traffic. When Peter arrived home, he expected to see his personal robot, William, preparing his afternoon snack. Instead, he was surprised to find his father sipping coffee in the kitchen, his eyes bloodshot from lack of sleep.

Peter slid into a chair beside him. “Hey Daddy,” he said, picking up the glass of juice William had poured him. “How’s your project coming along?”

His dad sighed. “I’m missing one very important piece to my robot.” His voice sounded worn and heavy. “Without it, I won’t be able to finish.”

“Well, maybe I could help you get it,” Peter suggested eagerly, hoping for the chance to help his father in another great invention.

He laughed. “No, I don’t think so,” he replied. “The part I need isn’t easy to get a hold of.”

Afterwards, Peter’s dad retreated back into his laboratory, where he would probably stay for the next few weeks. Peter had always wanted to go inside the lab; when he was little, he begged and pleaded to have a peek, but his father always said, “I’ll teach you to build robots when you’re older.” Even at eight years old, he still dreamed of how the lab would look: polished tile floors, a vast metallic ceiling, complicated inviolable machinery, and racks of neatly organized robo-body parts.

It was a long time before Peter saw and talked to his father again, who was locked away working on his assignment. Once, when he was dismissed from school, Peter said goodbye to his friends and took the usual portal that brought him home. Outside the windows, rain was falling steadily, creating a bead curtain that enveloped the whole city. The sky turned a pale gray, making the monstrously tall buildings look dull through the mist. Raindrop splashes bloomed into water flowers, drumming on the glass as Peter was transported through the portal. Eventually, Peter exited at his stop and ran up the stone steps to his mansion.

Inside, it was dark, and the unsettling silence made him realize that William was not there. Tentatively, Peter glanced into each well-furnished room to search for his robot, but instead he discovered that the laboratory door was ajar. He peered inside uneasily; his father had never been careless enough to leave it open. Nervously, Peter tip-toed into the lab, hoping that William was just repairing himself and it was nothing strange.

Walking down a long tunnel, Peter peered around a corner and saw the back of his dad, hunched over a desk lit by a dim lamp. His eyes cautiously scanned the rest of the lab; it was not the modern, whitewashed room that he had imagined. It had bleak stone walls lined with cluttered shelves and a table with surgical tools dumped upon its top.

After a few minutes, Peter mustered enough courage to peep, “Daddy?” His father jumped and whipped his chair around to face him, as if he was caught in performing an illegal act. Past his father’s turned figure, Peter could see that there was a steel robo-body lying on the desk with pipes and wires running through it, except for the empty shells where a brain and heart would be. As he stepped out from behind the corner, he was confronted with the dank smell of raw meat. “I was wondering if William was in here,” he said in a small voice.

Guiltily, his father stuttered, “Oh yes, William.” He motioned for him to come closer, which Peter obeyed. Hoisting him onto his lap, he asked, “Son, wouldn’t you like to be invincible?”

As an eight-year old, Peter’s eyes glittered. “You mean like a superhero?” he exclaimed.

The corners of his dad’s eyes crinkled as he smiled. “Yes, like Superman,” he said. “Wouldn’t you like to help me, like a hero?”

“Of course, Daddy,” Peter snuggled into his father’s arms. “I want to be just like you when I grow up, too.”
Peter’s father gently set him down onto the ground and stood up, picking a few knives from the table. “You know, Peter, that I would never do anything to harm you, and it’s all to your benefit,” he said softly, fingering the knives. “I promise that I will make you live forever, and it won’t hurt.”

Doubtfully, Peter stared at the knives. “Daddy?” he blubbered. “What are you going to do?”

“It won’t hurt,” his father repeated, and as a crack of thunder drowned the sound of Peter’s scream, he closed in upon him.
Hunger Pains

Why do small stomachs cry for bread
When half the world is overfed,
Full of nations filled with food,
Deeply influencing the mood
Of overall economy,
Driven by obesity
And the underlying greed—
Overwhelming desire to feed.
When the other half of the world
Holds children clambering for hurled
Scraps of food, tidbits to eat,
Consuming what’s thrown at their feet
To silence stomachs that complain,
Soothing their sharp hunger pains
Though knowing it will come again,
Know until the quiet end
When their bodies grow too thin
And hunger kills them from within
While reaching up, blindly, towards
The over-privileged of the world,
Coveting the taste of sweets,
Never sparing time to think
That, if they shared fare equally,
They could battle the atrocity
Of children dying from starvation,
Aid the lesser well-off nations,
And balance out the gap in health.
If only they stopped stuffing themselves.
Living the Dream

Author: Montanna Benson
Grade: 12
Teacher: Janet Jelavich
School: Maryville High School, Maryville, Missouri

[Verse 1]
The sound track to my life plays day after day.
I will stand in the center; I will rock out on stage.
I don’t care what you think; I don’t care what you say,
But just because I’m not shy doesn’t mean I can’t share.
So if you feel the music then get on down here.

[Chorus]
We’ve got Dante on the six-string, and Robert on the bass.
Marshall on the drums, and Ben the eighty-eights.
Jon’s our sound and light crew while Brian’s on guitar.
Without our hopes and dreams we’d never have come this far.
With the mic in my hand, look around, take it in.
I am living the dream . . .with my friends.

[Verse 2]
The symphonies of sound we hear every day
Make us who we are; they’re the reason we play.
We’re one in a million; we live our own way.
We have so much to say; so many lessons to learn.
We don’t play for ourselves; we just want to be heard, cause . . .

[Chorus]

[Verse 3]
Music is our life, our heartbeat and soul.
You can’t bring us down; we’re on top of the world.
I don’t need a lot to get me through this life.
Just give me my music, my friends, and a mic.

[Chorus x2]
"How old are you?"
The first question you should ask when you meet a girl. It's the most important thing about her. In fact, it's
the only thing about her that matters at all. Take it from me. I should know. Wanna learn something? Well, listen up.
It was about three months ago. I was at my usual haunt, Bob-A-Rino's, the local venue and best pizza parlor
around. I had just broken up with my latest girlfriend, and didn't really feel like going out. Apparently Little Miss Per-
fected thought I was too immature. A "silly juvenile infant" as she put it. Still, the boys convinced me to go see an up-
and-coming band, Strobelight Mafia. I had heard a bunch of great reviews, and decided to go.

I should have known this night was going to bring me nothing but misery. Even before I left the house things
were going wrong. I couldn't find my razor, and therefore couldn't hack off the beard that was recently replacing my
ex-girlfriend. Then, as I was leaving the house, I managed to step in one of the many 'surprises' my dog loves leaving
me. My jeans were wrinkled, and my shirt needed ironing. But I was running late, so I gave up on appearances and
left.

Once at Bob-A-Rino's, my friends, Kevin and Mason, were nowhere to be found. I went inside without them.
As usual, they were already there, with their steady girlfriends, no less.


I began walking toward them when a cute little redhead put her hand on my chest.
"Do you have a ticket?" she said, popping a bubble of her gum. She was wearing a black mini skirt and a little
red top. And she looked about fifteen.

"Uh, no. No, I do not. I usually pay at the door." I replied, digging in my back pocket for my wallet. Following
the horrible scheme of events today, it was nowhere to be found.

"No money no music." the red head said, obviously annoyed.

"I know it's in here somewhere." I said with a nervous laugh.

"Is there a problem Rachel?" another girl asked, walking up to us. This one had short brown hair falling in her
eyes. Wearing jeans and a small Def Leppard tank, she looked about twenty. At least that's how old I imagined her to
be.

"Yeah," Rachel replied, glaring at me, "this guy's got no money."
The other girl looked me up and down, noticing my disheveled appearance. "No offense," she began, "but
you look like you could use a break." She stamped my hand. Hers was warm in mine, and I didn't want to let go. "Go
ahead and enjoy the music."

"Thanks." I said, still holding her hand. "I'm Mark."
She smiled. "Olivia." she said, ducking her head. "Call me Livy."
I smiled, too. "Well, thank you, Livy." I let go of her hand and walked over to Kevin and Mason.
"Hey! There you are!" Kevin shouted, patting my back.
"We didn't think you would show." Mason said with a laugh.
I looked back at where Livy and Rachel were standing. She was still looking at me, smiling and flirting.
"Already back on the horse?" Mason asked, following my gaze.
"Hopefully," I replied, turning back towards the band.

Strobelight Mafia came on with some poppy punk beat and the crowd went nuts. Everyone around me was
really getting into it. I felt someone run into me and turned around to see if they were okay. I looked down, and there
was Livy, staring back up at me.

"Good aren't they?" she asked, nearly yelling to be heard over the music. Her hair was falling in her face, and
she was peeking out through a couple of strands. My God, she's hot.

"Yeah," I agreed, "they're amazing."
We listened a little longer, getting closer as the show progressed. Kevin and Mason were too busy grinding
on their dates to notice I now had one of my own.
Livy looked at me and started swaying her hips. Every time she moved, her small tee would raise a little, revealing a little bit of skin. She grabbed my hands and placed them around her waist, still swaying. Slowly, she moved them down further and further. She took another step closer to me and our bodies rubbed up against each other as we moved to the rhythm. This was becoming more than I could handle.

"Do you wanna go some place quieter?" I shouted. Livy nodded her head and led me out of Bob-A-Rino's. We drove a short distance before she told me to pull into an empty parking lot. Anticipating what was going to happen next, I didn't hesitate. Before I even turned the car off, Livy was reaching across the seat, engaging me in a series of passionate kisses. I began to take off her top while she unzipped my pants. Suddenly, her phone started ringing and she pulled away.

"Hello?" she said, a little out of breath. "Yeah, I'm still at the show, Dad." Dad? Why does a twenty-year-old's dad want to know where she is? "Okay, I'll be home before curfew." Livy said, rolling her eyes. Curfew? "Alright, Daddy, I love you, too." She hung up the phone and started where we left off.

"Wait a second," I stopped her. "How old are you?"

"How old do you think I am?" she replied.

"Well, I'm twenty three, and if you're not over eighteen, we may run into a few problems." I said, zipping my pants.

"I'll be eighteen next year," she said, unzipping them again, "is that good enough?"

I looked at her for a minute. Her breasts were practically falling out of her bra, a good enough answer for me. We began again, a little more heated this time. When we were finally stripped to nothing but underwear, I heard a loud banging on my window. I looked up to find an angry police officer looking down on our little fiasco. I pushed Livy off me and threw her shirt at her.

"What's going on here?" the officer asked, obviously knowing the answer.

"Nothing, sir, just taking a night drive with my girlfriend." I answered, trying to put my pants on. The officer looked from me to Livy. "I'm going to need some I.D. please. From both of you."

"Sure, officer, just a sec." I said, looking at Livy. As you remember, I didn't have my wallet, and Livy wasn't exactly of proper age.

"Just pull off," she whispered under her breath.

"What!" I asked. She can't be serious.

"Start the car and drive off!" she said, a little more forcefully. I looked up at the impatient officer and smiled.

"Do you want to go to jail?" Livy asked, reaching for the keys that were still in the ignition.

She's right. I thought. This is the only way. I took a deep breath and looked down at the keys.

"Listen, son," the officer warned, following my train of thought.

But it was too late. Livy turned the keys as I put the car in drive. We sped off before the poor old cop had time to process what was going on. With the windows rolled down, Livy and I began laughing and screaming, not caring who heard us. She looked even more beautiful with the wind blowing her hair in all directions. Suddenly, her phone began to ring again.

"Hello?" she said for the second time tonight. She looked at me abruptly, then at the clock on my radio. It read 12:36. "No, Dad, you don't have to come looking for me," Livy pleaded. "I'm on my way home right now." She hung up the phone and turned towards me.

"I have to be home before my Dad gets back or I'll never be let out of the house again," she said, her face growing anxious.

"Uh, okay," I said, thinking about how she just ordered me to run away from a cop but didn't want to defy her father. "Where do you live?"

"Why don't you just let me drive?" she begged. "It'll be faster than me trying to tell you."

Hesitantly, I got out of the car and switched places with Livy.

"Just be gentle," I said as she sped off down a dark, back road. Honestly, I don't think I have ever been so scared in my entire life. This girl's driving felt like riding a rickety old roller coaster. Every turn sent me flying from one side of the car to another. She even hit a mailbox! A mailbox! Those things don't just jump out in front of you, you know. They're stationary. They don't move at all. And she hit one.

Finally, we pulled up to a nice, two story house. Livy turned off the car and said, "Dammit, my mom is home."
I looked across the street and saw a small red phone both.

"I'll keep your mom occupied," I said, grabbing some lose change from under the dash, "you sneak in through the back."

"It was nice meeting you, Mark." Livy said, kissing me on the cheek before she got out of the car.

Yeah, sure. I thought. This has been a wonderful evening.

I walked across the street to the phone both. Picking up the receiver, I began to dial the number Livy wrote on my hand. After three rings, a woman picked up.

"Hello, Jack?" the woman said, mistaking the call for her husband.

"Um, no ma'am," I began, making my voice sounding gruff, "My name is Deputy Matthews. We have your husband here at the station. The state of Missouri looks down on sodomy, ma'am."

"Excuse me?" I heard a voice shriek on the other end. I looked over at the house and saw Livy giving me the thumbs up from her bedroom window. The woman on the other end began yelling something about "stupid prank teenagers."

I'm not a teenager, I thought. I'm twenty-three.

I hung up the phone and backed out of the booth. I felt a hand on my shoulder and turned around to find the old officer from earlier staring down on me. "I.D. please." he said before cuffing my hands behind my back.

And that's how I ended up here. In jail. It turns out, the state of Missouri also looks down on those who flee the cops and have sex with minors. I later found out that Livy never was caught by her parents. Her father came home and found her asleep in her bed. His wife, however, was in a completely different state of mind.

So, remember boys, before you start making out with a pretty girl who could potentially be under eighteen, always ask yourself:

"What's my age again?"
The Disappearing Favor

Author: Mattie Burge
Grade: 10
Teacher: Chanel Burge
School: Gallatin High School, Gallatin, Missouri

My strained, uneven breaths cut through the eerie stillness of the big-city back alleyway. Looking back became tricky, thanks to the pothole spotted ground; my ankles were already swelling to the size of slow-pitch softballs. The streetlights buzzing overhead didn’t offer much light for my frantic eyes to grasp, making it even more difficult to escape the nagging thoughts of my cold mother, six feet under. I couldn’t run far enough, even if I made it to the opposite side of the earth. My black $300 Vera Wang pumps were beginning to fall apart. With every stride, the heals wobbled more and more. Glancing back one more time as the cemetery disappeared over the hill, I flat out fell. No, not fell. Tripped. Looking around, baffled, I realized the thing I landed on was too large to see without taking at least three strides back. The man, lying on the ground moaning, was massive. His dark, baseball glove of a hand reached up as he coughed raucously in my direction.

“Please, help me,” he managed to choke out.

How could I lift something so large?! It wasn’t fat. No, not fat at all – pure muscle. He could pass for a pro-wrestler. I’d never seen anyone like this! My cheeks burned red hot as I debated with myself. So many things could go wrong by helping him.

Finally making my decision, I nervously slid off my shoes and bent down, wrapping his colossal arm around my neck. The weight was significantly less than what I expected, with an almost graceful lightness. As he rose to his feet, mostly under his own power, I suddenly wanted to put my heels back on. I came to his chest, my nose smack dab in between his rock-hard pecks. His bare torso was glistening like a cool glass of lemonade on a hot summer’s day. He was darker than I, perhaps of Arab descent. I caught a whiff of his spicy scent, making my nose tingle. As I glanced down, I noticed the faded blue jeans, the long black hair, and the blood around his old combat boots. Who was this man? Why was he bleeding this much?

“Where to?” I said meekly, halfway in hopes he wouldn’t hear me.

His large finger pointed to a nearby door, surprisingly steadily. I began taking baby-steps but soon was nearly running to keep up with his freakishly huge strides.

As the old red door came within arms’ reach, he shrugged off of me. My shoes still occupying one of my hands, I wasn’t sure if it was my obligation to open the door for him. Guessing I should, I reached across him, skimming his supple but firm skin with my thin forearm. My body immediately erupted into goose bumps. As I dared to glance up at his masculine face, I saw him peering down at me casually, his black eyes not wavering behind his heavy lids. Silently, I opened the door. I could only imagine the face I made when he shoved me gently in front of him.

The room I entered was dim, only lit by a single bulb hanging from a wire in the middle of the cement ceiling. The sagging dark blue couch was pushed all the way into the far right corner, directly in front of the small television. The carpet must have been from the 70’s; the tacky pattern suggested something from around the “flower power” age. The walls were dingy white with darker yellowing spots scattered about them. One thing my mother taught me before she abandoned me – décor. This guy had no idea.

“Sit,” he mumbled under his heavy breaths, still awkwardly standing behind me.

It took me two strides to reach the couch, which is not a lot, considering I was taking much smaller strides than normal due to the pain in one of my hamstrings. His only piece of real furniture felt wet and mildewed beneath my clingy black dress. As he flicked on the T.V., I yet again began contemplating trying to outrun him. Surely he could catch me if I did. I wouldn’t have a fleeting chance.

My racing mind came to a sudden halt as I realized he was peering at me. He was just standing, looking down at me, hunched beneath his low ceiling. For the first time, the possibility came into my mind that maybe this man just needed someone to open the door, take a step inside, and talk to him.

Without thinking I blurted out, “Do you live here alone?”

The corners of his mouth twitched downward ever so slightly.

“Yes,” he said meekly. “Sorry if my home is not up to par for you. I don’t have any reason to fix it.”

“Oh, it’s just fine,” I said, breathing deeply in an attempt not to panic. He lived alone. There was nobody here.
but us, nothing to stop him from doing something terrible to me.

He took one step toward me, which put him less than a foot away. His odd musk once again stung my nostrils.

“I just wanted to say thank you,” he breathed as he collapsed onto the couch next to me, taking up nearly half of it. “You gave me a reason to get up.”

“Why were you down in the first place, and where are you bleeding?” I asked nervously as I noticed the blood drops on his enormous beige boot.

“I’m not bleeding,” he said. “You are.”

The blood suddenly rushed to my head as I gasped in shock. I was bleeding. A lot. I could taste the iron in my mouth, prompting me to vomit. His thick smell was suddenly replaced by the scent of my own inner workings. As my head fell backwards, I could see the shocked look on his strong face.

***

I woke up to the stiff sheets scratching my fair-skinned face. There was a cold sweat covering my body, pooling at my brow. My dark bangs stuck to my head as I tried to wipe away the sticky perspiration. With shaking hands, I tried to pull away the bed covers. Heart racing, body quaking, and tears coming, I realized I was in a hospital. Air rushed into my lungs like water over a broken dam.

The white wash walls reflected a soft glow over everything in the small room. The only familiar thing was a pile of my clothing, stacked and neatly folded on the mint green chair. I soon realized I’d never been in this hospital before. That’s saying something, considering how many times one of my misfortunate accidents took me to one.

As I stepped on to the cool tile, I felt a ripping pain in my left leg. The white garment had small dots of blood on the left hem. After further inspection, I counted 16 staples in the side of my left thigh. Being curious, I decided not to wait for a nurse to come in. I limped over to the doorway, grasping anything within arms reach to hold me steady. The cool metal of the doorway was soothing as I pressed my weary face against it. The narrow corridors were just as white as the room I was in, but had no windows. All the doors were shut with the exception of mine. What seemed like a mile down the hall, I could see the mint green reception desk. The woman seated contentedly behind the computer snapped her head up when she heard me stepping slowly toward her.

“What are you doing? Get back in your room!” she yelled softly, almost as if she was scared of someone hearing.

“I just want to know why I’m here and who checked me in,” I replied with an annoying whine in my voice. She sighed as she pushed back her matching green computer chair and rose to her feet. She could not have been much taller than 5’ 4”—about two inches shorter than me. Her flowing blond hair nearly reached the end of her back, but it was hard to see due to the greenish scrubs she was wearing.

“Let me find your chart,” she said with a slightly malevolent look in her vibrant green eyes. “What’s your name?”

“Erin. Erin Bickford,” I said, trying to enforce my thankful tone. She rummaged around in a pile of clip boards for about forty-five seconds before selecting one.

“Says here you have a pretty good slice in your left leg. Looks to us like you clipped it on something. Nobody checked you in last night.”

“Nobody checked me in?” I said with a pitiful squeak in my voice. “But there was a man. You couldn’t miss him.”

“No, nobody checked you in. Now go back to your room or check out.”

“Check me out,” I said as I turned to retrieve my clothes. “I have somebody to find.”

END OF CHAPTER ONE
Everyone Counts

Author: Maria Doerr
Grade: 9
Teacher: Brian Stuhlman
School: Columbia Independent School, Columbia, Missouri

When I look around at all the faces,
Do I see race, wealth, or superiority?
   No.
I see a seeking people.
I see in each face a purpose and a dream,
Not one worth less than another.
I see in each face
A common dream becoming reality,
A dream conveyed to me by Dr. Martin Luther King
To break those chains of discrimination.
Each mind has something to share,
Each person a song to be sung;
Should one be told not to sing,
   As others sing loud?
A few select voices,
Of those which fit a special class,
Cannot sing democratically, peacefully.
A united hymn must be sung,
Each person unique with vitality;
Contributing in different ways,
Each necessary in our enlightened verse,
   With king-like purpose
   To peacefully state
   Our belief of equality,
   And to rise up as one
To the sunlit path of justice with all people,
   Each an individual, vital mind,
   A purpose and dream that counts.
The world was changing. We could feel it in the air. The world was frozen in time; the great silence before the plunge. I had lived in the same village for as long as I had been on the Earth, the same for my farthest ancestors. It is a land given not to one man, yet now one man tries to take it. This is the story of my struggles, and of the fate that was bestowed upon my people.

Awenasa closed her eyes, closing out the white man before her village and all of the hate and sorrow. She breathed in. It was over, the long fight against the United States to remain here, in her home, was finished. There was no more hope left, Awenasa could hear it from the gasps and sighs around her. They would leave with their cooking pots, blankets and animals to follow the ominous trail before them. The sun was shining, but was it really? With a stern face she turned and went back to her long house. And there, in the shadows of the house and in solitude, she shed tears for her people.

Awenasa woke with a fright to the sound of horses neighing loudly and the loud shouts of men. She lay still curled around the evening fire clutching her little doll. She jumped up and in the silent long house and tip-toed to her father and woke him.

“They have come! What do we do?” she hoarsely whispered in his ear.

Her father sat up, rubbing the sleep from his eyes, a tired look in his worn out face.

“We pack.”

Awenasa looked at him with despair; surely there had to be something that they could do. He could save them, she knew it. She gulped down her words, her hope and her despair and began to pack. Her father, Tooantuh, stood up straight and made his way outside in the early dawn to meet the men. They stood on the north side with twenty mounted horses and rifles at their side. Awenasa peeked through the door to watch what was happening. After a while of talk, Awenasa’s father came back.

“What did they say?” asked Awenasa’s mother.

Tooantuh sighed, “We have to leave within three days or they plan to use force.”

All of Awenasa’s close family in the tent gasped or sighed. Fate had finally reached them.

In a single day everything had been packed and ready to be put on the horses. All of the other family groups had done the same. The day passed in darkness. Each person consumed in his own mind and ideas about the new home, somewhere far away. Many openly wept while the elders spoke with the gods. Awenasa tended to the animals and young children. They too could sense a deep tension in the air.

On the second day, the whole village set out. Awenasa knew this would be the last time she would play in the brook, the last time she would laugh and sing in the fields and the last time she would sleep beneath the same stars. Everything was changing. The pieces were set, and the game had begun. It was the winter of 1838. In the early morning fog, they tracked across the plains surrounding their village. They would soon meet U.S. troops to “guide” them along the trail (or herd them as Tooantuh saw it). With each step Awenasa took, she felt her traditions and culture fall away. She was merely a being in the way of these white men and their industry, no more than the brazen cattle they ate.

The troops did meet up with the group the next day and treated them just as Tooantuh had said. The days went by. Each day brought only more age to their faces and time on their backs. It was hard on the old and young; each step being a brutal slap to the back. Awenasa was small in size but she would take loads from the elders to let them rest. She would feel her knees shake as she walked under the tremendous weight. The cold wind whistled in her ears of illness and plague. The only memory in her eyes being darkness and walking... at night she would dream she was lost in the black and marching, always marching; with the drum beats used at a funeral and a crow’s shrill cry echoing in her mind. It was a funeral for her.
Weeks passed by. The food had dwindled, and the troops would just look onward and not even see the death in Awenasa’s peoples’ eyes. They marched day in and out in almost complete silence. Their once beautiful hazelnut faces became worn and sagging, their lively hearts slowed and tired within their chests. The cold crept over them while the icy breeze battered them relentlessly. Awenasa felt old and weak, not like a 12-year-old girl. She could not remember her home or the stars that she would dance under. Her body ached and throbbed. As much as she tried to sleep at night, she could not. Food felt like ash in her mouth. The journey was taking its toll on her and her people. Already the elders had passed with the cold nights. There were no medications, no life-saving herbs that could cure Awenasa’s disease. The march had brought it, and the cold had kept it there. She feared closing her eyes. The shrill cry of the crow haunted each of her steps.

Death had come for her. On the night of January 25th 1839, she called her family and friends to her. They huddled around her and the cooking fire. They sang songs for her and spoke about the future and the past when they lived peacefully in the shadow of the Appalachian Mountains; about the wonderful times they would have with her once they reached the Indian Territory, though they feared it would not happen. The trail they walked, they trod with sorrow and age. Tears laden upon the Cherokee’s trial were never washed away. They remain there for the world to see, in tacit vow that history would teach its lesson.
How Forward Long

Author: Maria Doerr
Grade: 9
Teacher: Brian Stuhlman
School: Columbia Independent School, Columbia, Missouri

How forward long
May this journey take us,
Its destination yet unknown?
The world still new,
Still awing, still filled with grandeur,
In our wide and ready eyes;
We are ready to become
The leaders and explorers
Of ourselves and the world
To which we were brought.
Our minds bathed in knowledge,
We can step forward in place;
Held up by those whose feet
Have already trodden here,
Whose aged eyes encourage us
To stand tall and astute.
How forward long
May this journey take us,
Its destination yet unknown?
Only the present is comprehended,
Only the prospect is decided
On contemporary actions,
And the past reconciled
By those whose feet
Have already trodden here.
I groped for the snooze button on my alarm clock, beginning my first Friday at Scholar’s Academy. Unfortunately, though, my cell phone rang almost immediately afterwards. I pulled my light blanket over my head and pretended that I was still fast asleep. My cell phone rang again. I twisted in my bed, pulling my pillow over my head. Courtney, my roommate, turned over, muttering incoherently. Ignoring my phone, I faded into a light sleep. I barely got a minute’s more of sleep, however, when a loud, persistent pounding rattled my door.

After listening to the rhythmic noises outside my door for a few moments, vainly hoping that my roommate would answer the door, my sleep-deprived mind finally registered why I had set such an ambitiously early alarm. Some of today’s activities were space-limited, so I needed to beat the crowd in order to sign up. Therefore, I gathered all my self-control and tumbled out of bed. I opened the door to see my friend with her hand raised, about to knock once more.

“Finally!” she exclaimed. “You still want to participate in ‘Archie Bunker’s Neighborhood,’ right? We better hurry before all the spots are filled.”

Too sleep-muddled to speak coherently, I simply grabbed her hand and briskly walked down the dorm hall beneath the thin fluorescent lights towards the lobby of my temporary home, Mark Twain Residence Hall. We pushed through the small crowd that had formed around the front desk. Spotting the sign-up sheet and quickly scanning the paper, I realized there was still room and added both of our names with an inky flourish.

My exhaustion dissipated as the delicious aroma of eggs and bacon wrapped itself around me. Following my nose, I walked towards the cafeteria, where I grabbed a tray with utensils, piled my tray with food and, then, catching the eye of a friend, walked over to a table. I sat and munched on my scrambled eggs slowly, gazing into space as I carefully mulled over the day’s upcoming activities.

After my major and minor classes, I made my way towards Jessie Hall. “Archie Bunker’s Neighborhood” was starting. All who had signed up for the activity formed a line outside of Room 817. Kendall, the activity coordinator, arrived and methodically began to distribute different colored shapes, which dictated the groups. I was a red triangle. I met up with my group, and we sat down to listen to Kendall’s instructions.

Kendall stood at the front of the room and announced, “Here are your instructions.” She explained that each group had forty-five minutes to construct a community. After the time ended, each group would be evaluated on the quality of their community and prizes would be awarded. She designated her helpers to hand out building license request forms, money, construction paper, and other necessary supplies. Each group was assigned a plot of “land.” She then outlined a few more rules, explaining which actions would result in arrest and how to receive licenses to build facilities.

We began. Nathan elected himself mayor of our group while I appointed myself treasurer. My group quickly dissolved into a buzz of suggestions pertaining to the facilities we should build. I scrambled to write down all the opinions.

“We should have a library.”

“A high school, middle school, and elementary school, for sure.”

“A carnival and park are musts!”

We easily received most of the building licenses that we asked for. Every time I glanced up, Nathan was busily strolling back and forth between our community and the line for licenses. I was kept busy directing the group to construct certain buildings and handing out licenses.

In between filling out license request forms, I looked up and noticed that Amanda, a member of our group, was standing outside the boundaries of our community, an act that would lead to arrest. Quickly, I tugged her arm, pulling her back inside the lines of masked tape. It was too late. Kendall, the policewoman, walked towards us. With bated breath, I waited for the inevitable arrest.

“Try not to step outside the boundaries. Ok, guys? Just be more careful next time,” she said.

I was pleasantly surprised but did not question the verdict. Almost immediately afterwards, Kendall
returned. I almost expected a revocation of the warming in favor for an arrest. Instead, she shoved a wad of cash into my hand.

“Let’s call this a loan. Don’t worry about paying me back.”

Smiling gratefully, I accepted the money and thanked her. I quickly gave a chunk of the cash to Nathan to pay for a line of fast food restaurants, which had been deemed more “appropriate” for us than a five-star restaurant. I did not mind either way, so I stayed silent. About five minutes later, Kendall walked over again. Turning my head to follow her movements, I noticed that she was moving the tape that defined the boundaries of our community, expanding our land by cutting into that of another community. I accepted all of these events without question, focusing all of my attention of my job and my community.

The timer rang. We all stepped back in order to allow Kendall to appraise our work. However, instead of looking at the communities, she looked at us and spoke.

“The purpose of this activity was not to create the most prosperous community. It was to raise awareness about discrimination. Each group represented a racial or economist stereotype. Each group was then treated accordingly. For example, the red triangles represented the community most of us live in, the suburban population.”

Shock passed through me, leaving me feeling cold, as the implications of the activity raced through my mind like a current of electricity. My group represented the middle-class, suburban population. As a member of this community, I had been both so focused on acquiring the buildings and facilities I desired and so satisfied with the ease with which we received money and favors that I had completely ignored other communities’ challenges. With this evidence of my own naïveté before me, I was forced to question myself. Before, I was disposed to believe that awareness was almost automatic. I had always trusted in my own perceptiveness and open-mindedness.

Yet, I had failed. I had failed to question the benefits that I received so easily, even when received at the expense of others. I had failed to see the various forms of discrimination occurring around me. I did not notice that while we were only given a warning for certain offenses, others were sent to jail for similar, or inferior, offenses. For instance, in the simulated gay/lesbian community, one by one, all of the individuals except for the mayor were arrested for “loitering” while, in our community, half the occupants stood about aimlessly without even receiving a word of admonishment. Kendall gave us permission to build a nuclear power plant on land taken from the Native American community. In the end, the Native Americans only retained enough land for two people to stand on. I also accepted free money without challenging the reasoning behind it. I had even managed to overlook the blatantly obvious fact that our plot of land was about three or four times the size of the most of the others and that, during the activity, Kendall had continuously increased our land by decreasing that of others.

Looking back on the past forty-five minutes, I realized all of the little moments that I had ignored during the activity that demonstrated the frustration of the disadvantaged communities around me. I remembered the innocents randomly arrested by Kendall. Snatches of discontent, half-joking mumblings about the necessity of civil disobedience came rushing back to me. The image of people in other communities standing uncomfortably close together resurfaced. I had disregarded all of these hints, remaining content as long as my community thrived.

Footsteps and scraping chairs interrupted my reverie. Shaken, I glanced around. The activity had concluded and everyone was leaving. I remained sitting in my chair. My friends tugged my arms. Looking up, I shook my head, trying to clear my mind; effectively pulled out of my trance, I beat back the thoughts spinning in my head in order to talk lightly with my friends about evening plans.

We meandered to the quad in front of Jesse Hall, where some of the guys were playing Frisbee while others lounged around, talking. The stars above winked and the cool night air washed over my face. I inhaled the fresh, crisp air. Removing my shoes, I skipped ahead of my friends in order to claim our usual place on the columns. I climbed up onto the base of the column furthest to my right and lay down, waiting for my friends to catch up. Hearing the gentle rustle of clothing as they clambered up the base of the column to join me, I turned my head and acknowledged their arrival with a nod. All exhausted, we quickly settled into a peaceful quiet.

Looking up at the dark night sky, my primary thought was that I had been blind this afternoon. The fact of the matter was that I represented the suburban population in the activity and was a part of the suburban community in reality. Did my life truly parallel that activity? What else was I blind to in my life? Was I really so sheltered? Why had I never noticed the bubble in which I lived? How could I have missed the discrimination, the obvious favoritism, around me? Even when it was so obvious? I closed my eyes. These questions whirled in my head, spinning my
world around and around until they become a mantra: I didn’t see. I didn’t see. I didn’t see. Despite pride in my awareness, in being unbiased enough to truly perceive the world as it is, I had failed. Somewhere along the line, I had subconsciously chosen to close my eyes to the world. I resolved to never again allow myself to be conditioned into blindness. I opened my eyes.

Sitting up and stretching, I glanced around, noticing out of the corner of my eye a cluster of students and administrators on a corner of the quad. Upon closer inspection, I realized they were spreading information about a referendum that would add gender inclusion and expression to the non-discrimination policy at the university. I vaguely remembered an announcement about the initiative posted in the dorm halls. Leaving my friends on the column, I joined the group of students handing out fliers, finally stepping into a harsher but more aware reality.
Life Story

Author: Ronnia Estes
Grade: 10
Teacher: Kara Smith
School: Fayette High School, Fayette, Missouri

Fatty,
   Worthless,
   Ugly,
   Useless...

These words have been my life story. Sixteen years of names, threats, and bullies.

Sixteen years of pounds, tracks of tears left behind by the words.....

Sixteen years of hopes, and dreams being CRUSHED, shoved, pushed off a cliff...

Struggles, journals, poems.

The diseases. All those pills!

The depression, the suicidal thoughts, wishing for death, wishing to end my FAT, UGLY, PATHETIC. Life.

STUPID, COW, DISGRACE.

My life story.

My poor, fat, ugly, ashamed of being in existence

Life Story.
He woke her up early the first morning he was home on leave. His old Jeep, which hadn’t been driven for nearly a year, rumbled to a stop in the silent parking lot of the ice cream shop. The two of them climbed out and ordered an extra-large chocolate and vanilla swirl waffle cone to share. They sat together and watched the sky turn gold-blue and listened to the bird song. They did not speak for a long time.

Once, as he bent to lick the ice cream cone, she caught sight of his eyes, which used to look green like summer grass, now seemingly turned gray, still beautiful but very strong and sad. His hands were different, too, rougher and older, and his face was filled with hollows of worry and pain. She saw that he had been broken and remade.

She found herself thinking of the marches at her university, the people carrying signs that said horrible things about the soldiers in Iraq. When she first came to school, it made her furious, but after a while it stopped bothering her. Once she even went to a march, though she would not carry a sign. A cute boy with glasses and cigarette burns on his shirt said casually that he’d heard she had a boyfriend in the army.

She smiled and said, “We’re taking a break.”

“Good,” he replied. “A girl like you deserves better.” He asked her to dinner at the poetic little hole-in-the-wall across town, but she went to a party with her friends instead. All the while she thought not once of the boy out there in the desert, with the guns and the bombs and the loneliness. She had forgotten him.

Her stomach twisted with shame, and she buried her face in her hands. He put his arms around her and let her sob into his chest, telling her he’d missed her and knew things were different now and maybe she had a boyfriend but he’d still missed her; he’d thought of her all the time out there. She could not speak, could only cry, and when they kissed it tasted like tears and chocolate ice cream.

***

Pat always came to the ice cream shop on Tuesdays because that was the day she took Lucy to day care, next door to the ice cream shop. Pat plopped herself down with a double scoop of strawberry and watched the rain begin to fall.

Through the misty grayness she became aware of a young couple sitting under the awning outside. Perhaps they were seventeen years old. The boy was a handsome, strong-looking fellow who seemed almost grown up, and the girl—

Pat leaned forward. She recognized the girl from last week’s newspaper, the prom queen of the local high school. Pat remembered being struck by the girl’s beauty in the grainy black and white photograph; in person the girl was stunning. She had that classic American blue-eyed beauty, complete with freckles and shiny blond hair to her waist, a spot of sunshine on this tired afternoon. Pat touched her own frizzled locks. Not so very long ago, she too had a mane of blond hair, had sat and giggled with boys at ice cream shops, had clipped her prom-queen picture from the paper.

Then Lucy came, and Pat dropped out of school because she had to work, becoming a “single mom”—single mom, isn’t that what they call it when he doesn’t love you back, when he won’t stay? Now she felt old, other prom queens were crowned, life moved on, and Pat was left out of it.

The bells on the shop door tinkled, and Pat looked up to see Lucy, all draggled and chilled with rain. “Mommy!” she cried and climbed onto Pat’s lap. Lucy was five, and Pat was horrified that she’d been allowed to leave day care alone. “I wasn’t by myself,” Lucy said. “The nice lady from the day care saw you in here and walked me over. You were late coming to get me!”

“I’m sorry, Lucy,” Pat said with a trembling voice. “I’m so sorry, sweetheart. I’ll never do it again. I promise.”

“That’s ok,” the girl replied and began braiding a strand of her mother’s hair between her fingers. “You’ve got such pretty hair, Mommy. It’s so soft!” Pat swallowed hard and managed to smile.

“Thank you, sweetie. Would you like some ice cream?”

Lucy bought a small rainbow cone and sat and licked and giggled while the rain came pouring down.

***
They had been coming to the ice cream shop for almost seventy years. He used to take her there on dates when they were in high school and they went late at night the evening before they got married. In the years afterwards they took their children and when their grandchildren came to visit they took them, too.

But today they were alone. She stumbled a little, walking into the shop, and he gave her his arm. She ordered a cake cone of vanilla, and he got one of chocolate; they sat down outside to let the afternoon sunshine warm their old limbs. Listening to the birds chirping and the insects humming, they did not say anything. They did not have to.

She finished her ice cream and closed her eyes, turning her face to the bright sky. “Do you think this is what heaven’s like?” she asked.

“Now why would you ask a question like that?” he grunted, still eating. She shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess coming here reminds me how many years I’ve been around. Makes me think I should start worrying about heaven already.”

He laughed. “That was always you, worrying about everything and nothing.” He pulled his chair up beside her and patted her hand. “I don’t think heaven’s something we need to be worried about, sweetheart.”

“But doesn’t it make you sad? Even a little bit?” she turned to face him. “We won’t have our kids and grandkids in heaven. We might not even have each other in heaven. And I can’t remember the last time I didn’t have you following me around.”

He thought for a moment. “Heaven’s a place created and watched over by God. I guess I don’t believe we’ll be without the ones we love in any place that He made. Anyway, not for long.”

“I guess not. But it worries me, all the same.” He took her hand again. “Don’t you worry. I’ll be right there with you. We’ll give those angels something to talk about!” She giggled.

They were quiet again for a while before she said, “There’s just one more thing that worries me.”

“What’s that?”

“Do you think they have ice cream in heaven?”

He smiled and reached out to hug her. “They have wonderful ice cream in heaven, dear. That I know for sure.”
Gatherings with relatives are an interesting concept. For some, this entails a nice, well planned, “who is bringing a salad” type affair. Others might stray a little. After all, families that chuck Molotov cocktails down abandoned mine shafts together, stay together. This, of course, is the end result of my tale, one full of woe, impatient children, danger, Slurpees, and flashlights. In the immortal words of Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music*, “Let’s start at the very beginning, a very good place to start.”

The pilgrimage back west did not begin any differently. “Children, time to get up!” We protested and snarled as our father continued into a second round of his lame chant. Weighing all options, I decided it was in my best interest to get up. Anything to quiet Dad’s tirade. Standing on two feet, the four of us were herded to the family vehicle. I half-consciously noted that the trunk was packed neater than pieces in a game of Tetris, as I shuffled by.

It had become a habit of mine to sit and watch Dad declare war on all things luggage and storage space the day before embarking. The goal: maximum cargo, minimum space. Year after year he continued to prove his prowess, always managing to cram high and deep, a good sign: successful packing meant happy father. Happy father meant McDonald’s breakfast! Thus began another journey to the great state of Utah, home of half of my family line. Two days and five hundred potty breaks later, our minivan came to a stop in the driveway of our kin. The festivities commenced.

Remember how I broke down family gatherings into the two categories: the salad bringer organizers and the strayers? My family is smack in the middle: straying salad bringer organizers. A great comparison would be to that of a 100 meter dash runner who doesn’t know he is in a marathon. Before he knows it, his legs are out of steam 25.9 miles before the finish. Well, on this particular trip, the fam retained order for the first day or two. Perfect, explosive free days.

The trick to surviving such occasions rests completely in the timing. Once the family train has run out of steam, immediate action must be taken. “Jackson! C’mere” my older cousin beckons me to join him and two of his brothers in the garage. “Dude, you gotta come with us to this cave we found. It’s this abandoned mine shaft in the middle of nowhere.”

I replied with a simple: “Uh, why?”

“I’ll tell you why!” my cousin countered. “We fill up glass jars with gas, light ’em on fire and bon voyage! Watch the fireworks as it explodes below!” Oooh. Danger, gasoline, gaping hole in the earth, almost certain death. Looking him straight in the eye I stated, “I’m in.”

The euphoria surrounding our secret excursion didn’t last long. Of course, nothing was kept secret from the coalition of mothers who soon discovered our devious intentions. “Absolutely not!” “Are you insane?” “Have I taught you nothing, child?” Of course, as civilized people, the two sides reached a compromise. Two hours later, the entire clan was packed into a suburban, minivan, and Honda civic, ready to hit the road. Giving the directions on this little excursion was delegated to the two boys who originally proposed the idea: Michael and Trevor. The first hour or so went smoothly as the caravan proceeded to take the route outlined by the teenagers. Slowly but surely, we drove further and further away from civilization.

“Michael, are you sure you know where you’re taking us?” my uncle asked, beginning to grow impatient. At this point we had been in a packed vehicle for at least two hours. Needless to say, tension was growing high. A pit stop soon became required, and we rejoiced upon spotting a lone 7-11, seemingly the last bastion of civilization in the middle of the surrounding desert. The crew divided and conquered as some ran inside to purchase Slurpees, while others interrogated Michael and Trevor for information. Trevor pleaded with the parents: “Just a little longer, I swear! It’s close!” Grudgingly, they agreed as we had already come so far. So, the horde jumped into their respective modes of transportation, and we were off!

Darkness fell, not part of the plan. Of course, no one expected this to take three hours to find, lest of all our guides, which is a comforting thought. “I swear that bush looks familiar.” Trevor had just previously informed us that the path to the mine was a dirt road that broke off the main highway. News which, given the circumstances and
general lack of illumination, was bad. Fast forward an hour: the path is found! Tired, irksome, and experiencing the negative effects of the sugar high so generously provided by 7-11, the troop hiked a short distance until we saw it. The hole.

It truly was a sight to behold. About forty feet in length and width, the hole was literally a giant chasm in the earth that seemingly went on forever. Covering the entirety of the mouth of the hole was a huge network of criss-crossing steel bars, intended to keep trouble and curious teenagers out. Morale improved significantly at evidence stating that our dear relatives Michael and Trevor indeed possessed some semblance of sanity. “What now?” A young cousin asked, unable to tear her eyes away from the intimidating sight.

“Just watch” Michael replied. He then briskly walked over to a pile of junk and extracted several plywood squares which he used to make a path leading out to the middle of the bar system. The brave journeyed onto the platform, while the children and cowardly stood on solid earth.

The games began on a small scale. To test the depth of the cave, we used pre-gasoline soaked tennis balls, lit them on fire, and released them into the abyss. The light slowly disappeared, and we never heard a sound of impact. Yeah, this was a deep cave. Now for the real show! Making space on one of the platforms, Mike and Trevor proceeded to assemble what is known as a Molotov cocktail. Our mission, should we choose to accept it, was to maniacally chuck homemade bombs down an endless shaft, and watch the explosion below. Every adult expressed doubts and second thoughts at first. Then, the first one was dropped down the chute. BOOM! Jaws dropped as we watched an orange fireball appear out of nowhere, safely below. All apprehension disappeared while children and parents alike hollered for more. It’s amazing what seems logical when one is tired, at wit’s end, and running on a sixteen ounce sugary beverage. Regardless, the group was a happy one at that moment. We all shared the thrill of the explosions, and spent the intermittent moments pathetically imitating each other’s reactions, laughing and teasing. This spectacle continued for a time, before we ran out of ammunition and gaily turned and trekked toward the cars, homeward bound.

One of the most bizarre experiences of my life, I received first hand witness that my family is truly, and irrevocably off of their collective rocker, but not in a bad way. Lesson learned: never underestimate the power of poor planning. Lesson learned: my favorite Slurpee is the blue one. Lesson learned: I now understand why people love the Fourth of July. Fireworks! Explosions in the air! Well, in our own special way, using explosions beneath the ground, my family celebrated our independence from normalcy. The experience was chaotic, frustrating, cramped, and death defying. We would all do it again in a heartbeat.
Machines and Mechanics

Author: Mal Hartigan
Grade: 12
Teacher: Amanda Moyers
School: Central High School, St. Joseph, Missouri

Who, in this shallow world, is going to love you?
(I can’t think of a single one.)
No one. Nobody is going to love you for you but only what they can get out of you. Consider yourself warned. Our human race is a monstrosity. We have taken the concept of something gorgeous and created a machine, incapable of love, programmed only for personal gain, personal interest. We have created something catastrophic, are catastrophic, but fail to acknowledge it.
Some problems go away if you just ignore them, like teenage pregnancy and abuse. If we don’t acknowledge them, then they don’t exist. The beaten child won’t say a word when threatened with the crack of a leather belt.

...Weren’t you an exception to this? You were a beautiful creature, flesh and blood fresh and young, not mechanical or comprised of gears. Since you could think for yourself, I couldn’t have you. My life was moving in chapters—episodes marked by days without you. I would never have you the way that I wanted you. I did, once, but you were always apprehensive. Always in motion. I wondered what lights your body aflame these days...what or who. Not me, not the idea of you and me. I don’t think it ever did, but maybe it lit you with curiosity.
Right.
I got drunk too much, trying to forget you, but even when my brain was fizzled and fucked, I still mumbled about you. It didn’t work...what the fuck would?
Probably nothing.
Maybe if I ignored it, like my smoking habit, my alcohol habit, it would go away. Like terrorists and ex-girlfriends. If you don’t acknowledge them, they don’t exist. Promise.

You know how you shake an etch-a-sketch and the contents vanish? I wanted a brain like that. Shake myself silly and forget that I cared for you like this.

I am panicking like hot soup. Oh no, I can’t do this again. Want to stop shaking, to feel my hands and legs. Want solitude and a vacant bed...but feel you next to me instead with your body heat warming my bones.
I am trying to breathe without panic, but
I want isolation. My hands tremble for it, for you;
my mind, it moves, wants to reconcile, line up in symmetry with planets and stars or maybe you, but I’m a ripe mess, and my mind is too rotten—overripe.
my body is a vegetable—lifeless and shriveled because my mind wanted this.
Feels like I’m being shoved out of my body so panic can take over; funny how even my body tells me I’m not welcome.

I need something to calm me down. My body is drained, but I can never relax.
Never. How can I stay as me even when panic swells my throat shut?...who is me? who are you, would you ever be mine? But what is mine when I don’t even know me?
Body sags under panic’s weight. Get me out out out; please get me out. Your love, please, please, your love.
You slipped into bed
beside me; my body a tomb,
yours conducting the burial,
rhythmic, languid—
eulogy brought my limbs to life
as your
voice
lips
caressed my ears.
Wanted your body pressing me into the dirt rather than the shovel,
your bones wrapped around me rather than a casket,
and I always awoke in this empty bed with my breath hot and
body unclothed, trembling from the winter chill or
desire for you.
My heartbeat punctured this silence, deafening,
and this is how I knew I was alive.
You.

Did you ever wake during the peak of night,
eyes fluttering open with shock,
your breath and body heavy
with the thought of me?
Never. You
woke in terror, mind emblazoned with panic
your heartbeat begging to cease.
I bet you were beautiful
when sleep clouded your eyes,
misted with a mirky film,
lifeless, and I
wanted to pour life into you,
lovingly.

You said that you quit having dreams, those illustrations that painted your eyelids; lest you close them for too long,
terror would constrict your lungs and you would jolt awake.
I longed for you to dream without tragedy, with your mind compiling
images, actions.
You used to write them down upon waking.
You used to purposefully recall each instance. Now, you didn’t want to sleep at all.

(This was the problem with you. Or was it a problem with me? Alcohol was God. Transubstantiation.
Consustantiation—it was only enough if you felt your stomach burn, churn, skin warm, but you were always like a
furnace, emitting this heat, and so winter was your favorite.
This was winter. We weren’t going to share it together. That is what you wanted.)
Can The Cherry Blossom Grow?

Author: Darrell Hopson
Grade: 8
Teacher: Angela Muse
School: Hazelwood North Middle School, Florissant, Missouri

Can the cherry blossom grow from but a seedling?
Where, encased in its shell,
Its beauty can be found.
Stretching its limbs, now numb from their awakening,
Can it learn to stand erect and proud?
Can it grow its flower to near peerless perfection
Where all may marvel at its elegance?
And with its foliage spanned in all directions,
Can it uphold its unbridled exuberance?

Can the cherry blossom be a more precious sight
Like the pinnacle of a spring-time day dream?
And when its petals decide to venture in flight
Like pink raindrops painting the perfect scene,
Can we predict where the wind shall wisp them away?
And will they be found and revered in all their glory?
Or is it possible that each petal will be led astray,
Its destiny an untold story?

While the future conceals an unknown fate,
And the cherry blossom poses many questions,
I shall bask,
Serene,
Content in mere observation.
And, as I lie,
Gazing upon its marked majesty.
I shall ponder, waiting to know,
“Dearest flower, from humble seed,
Can the cherry blossom grow?”
A Different Kind of Jamaican Melody

Author: Erin Jones
Grade: 12
Teacher: Janet Jelavich
School: Maryville High School, Maryville, Missouri

Fear, excitement, astonishment, and the thought of a plane crashing kept running on permanent rewind through my head. What if the engine explodes and my dream of traveling outside of the United States goes up in smoke? Literally? I grabbed my best friend’s hand as we ventured into the Kansas City International Airport, and she immediately led me to the nearest Starbucks. Soothing words, especially from her, always have this strange ability to calm my nerves. In all honesty, airplanes frighten me, but heights terrify me. Rollercoasters. Sky diving. Bungee jumping. All of it! I would never dare try anything that pretty much welcomes death with huge, open arms. Yet there I was, against my will, standing in the terminal handing over my passport to the bored looking employee. My mom had tried everything to settle the feeling of impending doom in the pit of my stomach: Dramamine, Countryside raspberry lemonade with crushed ice. . . even a blended iced mocha latte from Starbucks! All to no avail. Walking up that long hallway was almost unbearable. The posters of soldiers, advertisements, and pictures of past pilots seemed to be placed on the walls to taunt me, or otherwise remind me that I was most likely going to die that day. I could almost see my own gravestone: February 22, 1992 to June 6, 2009. After that thought I immediately tried thinking of soon being around palm trees, a calm ocean breeze, and drinking a few virgin daiquiris on the balcony of our cruise ship. Unfortunately, while my mind’s eye was looking out onto the horizon, a fiery plane came plummeting across it and into the dark depths of the ocean.

“Okay Erin, this is it! Are you ready? Take off is in just a few seconds!” Chelsea was just a little too excited to die.

I clutched the arm rests and drowned out the noises with my gummy earphones. Even Michael Buble’s “Save the Last Dance” didn’t relax my tense shoulders and throbbing head. Oh, this was not going to be pleasant! I felt the airplane pick up speed, and I dared peek out of our small, oval window.

“Oh my gosh you would not believe the clouds! It is so beautiful! Look, just one peek! It isn’t even scary! Please?” Chelsea’s adventurous spirit had apparently gotten the better of her.

I supposed one peek wouldn’t hurt, and it surprisingly did not. The clouds from that height were gorgeous, as if they were big puffy pieces of coconut flavored cotton candy. I decided I could maybe stay awake through this experience after all! While the flash of Chelsea’s camera kept twinkling, I was thinking to myself that I knew traveling to Jamaica would be quite the adventure, but I had never thought that I could overcome my fear of flying. I decided right at that moment that I would never let any other opportunity pass me by, and if I could strap myself into a flying death trap, I’m sure I could manage jumping out of one.

Sooner than I expected, I woke up to the sound of a rattling cart and an excited Tennessee twang booming over the intercom. Being so groggy, I did not open my eyes; I only listened.

“We’re experiencing a problem with another plane on the runway. Please remain seated for the next thirty minutes, then you may disembark and be on your way!” the perky voice explained.

According to Betty, we were going to disembark on Gate Z, and if we did not get off of the plane soon, we might not make it to our next flight on time. Needless to say, we waited on the plane for the next hour and had to sprint across the whole airport to get on board our flight to Miami, Florida. This could never have been possible had my Nanna not been in a rented wheelchair and had I not been the one energetically pushing her down the hallways at top speed. Chelsea and Betty both were running and screaming for everyone to move. I’m sure we left quite the impression on the customers of the Memphis National Airport. After our jog, we were all ready for a long nap, and the flight to Miami was the perfect opportunity.

Darkness flooded most of the airplane, and the clouds were barely visible underneath the sparkly night sky. Chelsea was asleep on the strange Australian boy next to her, and I was trying my hardest to suppress my obnoxious giggle watching her infringe upon the space of this handsome stranger. Not succeeding very well, I decided to let my eyes drift over the other passengers. There was an older Asian woman with her two children, snuggled up next to her; a Muslim father shushing his young son; a loud, probably tipsy, young couple making obnoxious sucking noises behind me; and then there was my family, completely crazy at times but very close to my heart. Seeing these
variations of cultures, languages, and families made me realize how much more there is to the world outside my small nine-thousand person town. My thoughts were soon interrupted by a deep elbow into my side, and an excruciatingly loud whisper.

“How COULD YOU LET ME SLEEP ON HIM?!” Chelsea exclaimed, her voice escalating with each word.

“Oh stop, you looked so tired! Plus, it was really funny.” She didn’t seem to like my answer at first, but soon started giggling herself.

The Australian boy shook himself awake and turned around and smiled at both of us. Taking a better look at him, he was cuter than we thought. Chelsea and I both became very interested. I don’t quite recall how the conversation began, but we learned that he was in Miami visiting family for the summer. Feeling at ease with this stranger, he made me want to have more encounters with people I would have never met if I had stayed in my small hometown. This immediately sent the message home to me that there was a big, open world out there, and I realized how ready I was to explore it. The conversation died off as he took beautiful pictures of the Miami shoreline below us, and we soon departed the plane, ending up in front of the baggage claim. We would, however, be in that same area for the next two and a half hours because the airport misplaced our luggage.

Another couple, dressed in identical Hawaiian shirts, including leis, and sporting sunglasses at ten o’clock at night, looked bored waiting alongside us; they had been on our same flight. Betty and I struck up a conversation with them, making them acquaintances with whom we would later snorkel in the Grand Cayman Islands. After the baggage claim machine turned on and the different, unique suitcases began circling around us, we quickly realized that our luggage was nowhere to be found. Feeling extremely distraught, and very exhausted, I glanced around the airport with an exasperated sigh. I noticed the Australian stranger from the plane kissing on his somewhat provocative girlfriend (there goes my hope of being the future Mrs. cute-Australian-Boy); the tropical couple laughing as they made their way to a taxi; the perky flight attendant drinking a huge mug of coffee and smiling a little too energetically at all of the passengers; and the young, now drunk, couple practically playing tonsil hockey next to Smoothie Arena. I decided that with my lost luggage, sore legs, and Dramamine induced state, the first day of this vacation had turned out to be one of the most unique experiences in my entire life.
Damn red light. This is the third one I’ve caught this afternoon, and I’m really sick of all these delays. The vibrations from the motor beneath me courses through my body as I stop yet again at this intersection. I can feel the power pulsating through every inch of my car, reaching my hands on the thin leather wheel. It’s so strong that I find myself gripping my fists a little tighter. Power.

Some day it’ll be me calling all the shots. I’ll be the one with all the real control, which means that I’ll finally be able to fire Nick Kitsdale. That’ll be the day. For all the shit he’s put my father through, it’ll be a joy to kick him out on the street. Now, don’t get the wrong idea; I look out for everyone’s best interest in everything that I do, but that may occasionally involve putting myself before all of the unfortunate people that feel they’re above a Kambell. The people that feel they’re above me.

The thought of me ruling the world brought the light to flash green once more. I pushed the accelerator and looked for the marble plaque that would welcome me to West County Public High School. I was almost half an hour early picking her up, but waiting at her house would have driven me nuts, especially today. A sense of urgency has surged through my veins since I woke up this morning. I’ve always believed that everything has a purpose and that there’s more to this car pool today.

A sliding sound coming from the dashboard, taking my eyes off the road. I looked down at the thin blue cell phone that had just landed in my lap. Lily’s phone. I had taken it off her dresser before coming to get her. Vibrating, it alerted me that a new text message awaited her. I picked up the phone and turned it off, throwing it into the glove compartment. She won’t be needing this anyway.

I met Lily through one of my dad’s business luncheons; Mr. Kitsdale brought the whole family to our country club in an attempt to butter up his boss. They played a round of golf, while I tried his daughter on for size. She was pretty, petite for her age but mature in the way that she kept the small talk small. I have enough experience with females to know that pulling her chair out before offering my arm would be enough to get a ride with her around the course.

She was careful about the way she revealed herself. Cautious about every move she made and every word she said. It’s ridiculous that I actually took the time to notice these things about her; no one else ever had. I guess you could say she was special to me; there isn’t one adjective I could find to describe Lily Kitsdale. She’s defiant for one thing. She’s too smart for her own good, and too stupid to see the cruel reality of how the world works.

There is a boy on her mind when I speak to her, as if she’s never fully engaged, and I recently discovered that he isn’t me. He’s a loser; he thinks he owns her. He uses her and treats her like crap most of the time, but she’s too weak to tell him off. No one ever gets in my way, so I don’t really consider this guy a threat, but I’m precise when it comes to getting what I want. Lily happens to be the current object on that list, so there really isn’t much this kid can do to block my path. No, I haven’t personally met him, but I don’t intend to either. I intend to keep her on opposite ends of the Earth from this jackass because he’s no good for her. And I’ve always known what’s best for my girl, as well as her parents, who also agree with me. They’ve told me all the things he amounts to, and it isn’t much. I know that I’m the best thing that ever happened to Lily Rose Kitsdale. I really am.

She was a nice girl up until I told her I didn’t want her hanging around that dirt bag any longer. She disagreed with me, but that was about all she could do at the time: argue. Her parents hated him, her siblings knew when to tattle on her for talking about him, and I practically started living at her house since her father became friends with his new boss. I told her she would regret associating with this boy against my wishes, but she never was one to listen. Stupid girl.

As I arrived at her school, I pulled into the parking lot, driving toward the back where her mother usually picks her up. Her brother was serving a detention or something, so when I volunteered to drive Lily home from school, her mother was delighted that there was finally a decent boy so involved in her rebellious daughter’s life. I was restless sitting there in my BMW watching the sophomores plow out of the side doors of the building. I couldn’t quite remember what she had been wearing that morning, but I was pretty sure it was her fitted gray hoodie over
jeans. She always wore jeans, even when it was hot outside. I spotted a group of girls screaming and laughing over their cell phones and decided that they were much too happy to be the reserved girl I was looking for.

With an oversized black jacket and long dark hair, Lily caught my eye. She’s awfully late this afternoon; she usually got in trouble for making her mother wait until the busses left. I wouldn’t have thought anything odd about the thick bag she wore over her shoulder, or the way her bangs covered the left side of her face; it was the kid she was laughing at that threw me off. He walked right next to her, a little too close for my liking, making faces and gestures that only made her laugh harder. He was a good foot taller than her and had jet black hair that covered most of his forehead. He put his arm around her waist as they walked, and I realized what I was witnessing. This was the wonder boy we argued over all the time. If I had been anywhere near them, I would have shoved him twenty feet away from her with one hand. I leaned forward towards the windshield as he started to brush the hair from her face, then pressed even more intently, turning my knuckles white on the steering wheel, when he reached out to hold her hand. I studied the happy couple until they disappeared behind a red jeep in the upper level of the parking lot. There was no way I was just going to sit there and guess how long they’d be invisible.

In the process of pulling into the line, I cut off an impatient junior who was trying to beat the light. She was going to have to wait because I found Lily leaning on the jeep’s bumper removing the black jacket. I could see her lips moving a mile a minute as he stood in front of her smiling. I didn’t like the way he was looking at her. I didn’t like the way she handed over the black jacket only for him to slide his arms into the warm sleeves that were now laced with her perfume. I didn’t like the way he pulled her into a hug so intimate that she had to stand on her tiptoes to close her arms around his neck. And I certainly didn’t approve of the kiss he bestowed upon her forehead. I was fuming, and the only thing stopping me from killing him was the resistance of the seat belt across my chest. I continued to watch as she grabbed her bag, and he turned his back to leave her. Something I hope he’ll regret someday.

As she started jogging down the slope to the lower lot, I pulled my car forward screaming my brakes between the thick yellow lines painted on the pavement. I opened the door then slammed it behind me without turning the car off. Lily turned towards the slam and dropped her smile once she saw me; nothing could have pissed me off more.

“What the hell are you doing here?” she pulled her backpack up higher, tossing her hair so that it all lay on one shoulder.

“Nice to see you too,” I wasn’t sure if she knew what I had just witnessed, but there was more on my mind than to make her confess. “What took you so long? I’ve been sitting here for fifteen minutes.”

“Where’s my mom? She parks farther back from all the traffic.”

“I thought I’d surprise you today, and parking here allows me a closer view. Aren’t you going to introduce me to your friend?” I nodded in the direction she just came from. “Or should I just kill him now?” I took a step towards her, threatening. I had mastered the art of intimidating Lily from my dad.

“He’s none of your concern, Jack. Now what the hell are you doing here? And why are you spying on me?” It didn’t break, but I could intuit the fear starting to crack in her voice. If her parents found out who had been escorting her today, it was a very likely possibility that she could find herself in private school.

“Oh, I think he’s my biggest concern at the moment Lil, but you and I are going to spend the afternoon together, and it’s not my fault that your hiding spot is so visible.” She didn’t say anything studying me for a moment. She knew better than to glare when I was waving blackmail in her face. “Why don’t you get in the car, you little slut?”

“I’d rather crawl home, asshole.”

I laughed at her. She was so stupid to think she was going to get away with talking to me like that.

“I’m going to forget you said something so disrespectful. Now, get in the car.” I said each word seething through my teeth. It was a fair warning. She planted her feet a little firmer on the blacktop and checked in the direction she came from.

“Think about it, Lil. You go back to him now, and I can make sure that boy won’t even be able to look at you again.”

Lily faced her torso as if she was going back and then restudied my face. She knew I wasn’t the type to bluff; one little chat with her daddy and my word could be done. She shifted forward and shuffled towards the passenger side. Smart girl.
I smiled at her as I put the car into gear, but she turned the radio on to some loud station and crossed her arms over her chest, refusing to look at me. Stupid girl. “You don’t control me, Jack, and it’s rude to spy on people,” she said it without moving her head. “I don’t need a babysitter.”

“It’s also rude to directly disobey me, sweetheart. Sometimes you need to learn your place.” I had calmed down some and was managing to speak in a more composed tone. “So technically, you owe me for this.”

“I don’t owe you anything. You’re lucky I got in the car at all.”

“Am I now? Maybe even luckier than you think.” With that I took a sharp turn left and smirked in her direction. I thought I caught a hint of fear in the corners of her mouth, her eyes flicked right, looking out the window, then closed as she rested her head on the frosted glass. That fear, little as it was, sent a wave of excitement down my spine. I did have the power in this situation, like any other. I get whatever I want, and this time will be no different. She was wrong, I did control her. I set the accelerator back down to the acceptable speed limit and turned into my dad’s neighborhood. My mother left us a few months ago, but my dad was smart enough to get the house from her.

We pulled into the driveway, and I actually turned the car off before opening the door this time. Through the window on the driver’s side, Lily’s fear was unmistakable; she kept her eyes closed, and it looked like her lips were discretely mouthing something. Go ahead, baby girl, pray to God because I’ll be the one in charge the minute you set foot onto my property. She watched me as I opened her door and took the bag that lay under her feet. I looked at her face as she played with her hands in her lap shifting her gaze away from me to watch her fingers intertwine. She was scared. I couldn’t help but smile a little bigger. “Well, aren’t you coming inside?”

“You didn’t say anything about coming here.” Her voice was meek. I liked the sound of that.

“I didn’t say anything about taking you to your house.” I motioned for her to get out, and she just stared at me in disbelief. She knew I was right. I’ve never actually lied to her.

“I want to go home...my sister needs someone to get her off the bus.” The tension in her arms flexed a little as she thought she’d found the perfect scapegoat, but that only made me want to laugh even more.

“Oh, our sisters have a play date for this afternoon.” I had thought of everything. Kaitlyn and Cameron were thrilled when I drove them over to Lily’s and set up the X-Box this morning. “And now so do we.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you.” she was cold, her words cutting ice. She didn’t even have the brain to hold back the anger in her voice as she spoke through her teeth. Stupid girl.

I reached in through the passenger side across her lap and undid her seat belt for her. But the moment I touched her she flinched and pulled back a little deeper into the seat. You little bitch. My smile was gone; she acted as if she was disgusted with me. I’m being a perfect gentleman, and she has the nerve to act like she even deserves to be in the same space as me. As I backed myself out the door, I took hold of her left bicep dragging her out of the car. She struggled, but I was obviously more dominant, being the male and all.

“Let go of me!” her struggle was almost pointless as she yelled at me. I wasn’t about to lose control of the situation.

I took the first step towards her, almost knocking her over. “You shut up! I will not put up with this type of behavior.” I had both fists wrapped around her arms, and it was taking all my strength to keep them from moving to her throat. “You’re being very disrespectful, and I will not tolerate this kind of defiance.”

“Go to hell!” her face was red now, and her eyes were threatening to leak. I jerked her shoulders, forcing her face parallel to mine, turning my voice down to a whisper.

“Now, you listen to me! You are going to shut up, take your bag, and walk into this house like you deserve to be here! You’re going to clean your face off and then apologize to me with so much sincerity that I may even consider forgiving you! You got that, you whore?” I was so mad at her the corners of my eyes started to fill with specks of red.

Then, the bitch spat in my face.

I said nothing. She watched with satisfaction as I slung the back of my fist across my cheek, wiping away the saliva. She dared to act superior to me. I pushed her completely back up against the car. “It’s too late to think you can fight this!” She gritted her teeth, and there was a satisfying clap as I whipped my hand across her face. She held firm against the impact and stared straight into my eyes. But she was crying now, trying to keep her mouth shut, so the tears just leaked silently down her cheeks. I took her by the wrist and snatched her bag off the asphalt. She whimpered like a dog at my grasp, and I led her through the front door, slamming it behind me. The bolts ground as I
turned the lock, and she opened her mouth as if she were going to yell out. It was obvious that she was terrified now, so there was no need to try and hide her fear any longer. She gasped, trying to breathe through her sobs.

“Please.” I almost didn’t hear her whisper. She closed her eyes and stumbled back towards the wall, pressing her hands flush against the crisp paint. Her face was more pale than I’ve ever seen it, and her knees started to buckle as she tried to catch her breath. I stood before her in a firm stance as she looked up at me. She let her knees give and slid down the wall landing on the freshly polished wood floor, wrapping her arms around her legs in front of her.

“You got something to say, baby?” I smirked at her weakness, daring her to continue fighting. She didn’t. I always win.

Stupid girl.
For the Soldiers of our Hearts

Author: Mallorie McLaughlin
Grade: 12
Teacher: Pat Jennings
School: Sacred Heart High School, Sedalia, Missouri

For a war lost
Before it began,
We sent our loved ones
To Iraq and Afghanistan.

We bid them farewell
With hugs and a wave.
We shed tears,
And wished we were as brave.

We pray for peace.
You carry a gun.
But together no matter what
We wish the war was done.

You are sacrificing greatly,
But it’s nothing new.
Forget about China,
We are more in debt to you.

You are our family, friends and neighbors,
A group elite,
And regardless of what happens,
You can’t be beat.

You are the soldiers of our hearts,
For no matter where you roam,
We cannot wait for the day
When once again you’re home.
Angel’s Revenge

Author: Katy Neuman
Grade: 12
Teacher: Lorriane Burns
School: Sherwood High School, Creighton, Missouri

Chapter One

As I walked down the hall I narrowed my eyes to peer into the small door window. A piece of blonde hair wisped by, and that was it. Clenching my teeth I walked to the principal’s office and said hey to the secretary Linda. Groaning inwardly when Linda pointed to Mr. Robinson’s office door, I tried to peer into the doorway. Since it was glass that was smoky or foggy, I saw his silhouette pacing right in front of the door. When I knocked on the door, I put on my face that says, “I hate life, don’t talk to me.”

It took all my control when the door flew open and Mr. Robinson, red faced and breathing hard, growled at me.

“In. Now.”

Putting my head down, I let my bangs fall over my forehead and walked to the chair that pretty much had my butt print in it. Not looking up I heard Mr. Robinson stomp to his own seat and sit heavily. I peered through my bangs at him. Cold metal grey eyes met my bright green ones. Instantly I dropped mine.

“This is the third fight you have been in this year! You get amazing grades, you’re one of the top students and would easily be rewarded for it if you could stop getting in fights all the time. I know your mom is a high ranking official but this is just absurd. Three fights, and this is only the second month of school. I don’t know what I am going to do with you.” By the end of the rant, Mr. Robinson was panting with a mixture of anger and puzzlement.

I jerked my head up and stared directly in his eyes. I knew my eyes were shimmering green in anger. Get into fights? Was he serious? All three of those times I was jumped! Never once have I started a fight in my life, well except with my mom, but we just have some issues.

“I never started any of those fights,” I said in an even tone though it came out slightly deeper than I intended. Clearing my throat I started again, “Sir I-“

“Didn’t start them!? Each boy you fought with was beaten to a bloody pulp. Plus, they all said that you were the one to initiate the fights. Now who should I believe the kid who gets in trouble every year or three boys who have all been beaten up by said kid? Hmm... Hard one.” He finished, practically spitting the words.

“But I-“

The door opened, and in walked Gabriella. Her waist long hair shifting as she walked; light blue eyes blazing with anger glared at Mr. Robinson. I noticed that Mr. Robinson was primping his shirt a little straighter, sitting up taller. Rolling my eyes, I turned around to face her.

“Hey Ma, what are you doing here?”

She ran her hand through my hair and smiled. “I am here to save you of course. I heard you got blamed for the latest fight, which of course is ridiculous. Now, Mr. Robinson I would like you to make this fast because the West End Angel unit is having some problems.” She finished as she sat in the chair next to me....
My fingers touch down upon the strings, gently moving back and forth, creating a glorious sound that caresses my ears like the voice of an angel. I move the horsehair of my bow rhythmically back and forth, bringing out the sound in smooth, rolling waves, first very soft, then slowly getting louder. Finally, I take one last stroke, lifting my bow off the string and letting the note hang in the air until it slowly fades to silence.

I breathe a sigh of bliss. I know I've found my place. Gently, I set down my violin, tenderly laying my bow beside it. I glance to my left and see the music resting on my stand. To some people, it may just be a mess of black ink, to others, a complex organization of musical notes, but I see thoughts, dreams, hopes, sadness, joy, all spread out across the page.

My thoughts are interrupted by a low rumble. I had been so absorbed in my playing I hadn’t noticed how long it had been since I last ate; I’m famished! I stroll into the kitchen and fix myself a quick peanut butter and jelly sandwich. As I sit down at our table and munch my sandwich, my little sister, Elsa, walks in. Only one year younger than I am, Elsa is the sweetest girl you could ever meet. She, too, shares a passion for music. However, she plays the viola. Unlike the violin, it has the lower, more mellow C-string instead of the high, soprano-like E-string.

“Hi, Else. How’s it going?”
“Hi, Lou. I’m all right. I heard you playing a few minutes ago. It sounded great!”

“Thanks. We should practice more duets sometime soon. We’re starting to sound good on some of them.”

Elsa and I play duets often. When we were little, our parents forced us to, but actually, we enjoyed it. Now that we’re older, we still love to play together, though now our pieces are much more complex.

Just then, our mom walks in. I glance up and am immediately worried. She has that “creased eyebrow” look that always means something is wrong.

“Elsa, Louise. I’m glad you’re both here. Dad and I want to talk to you about something. It’s important.”

Mom bites her lip nervously and looks over at my dad, who had just walked in after her with that confident gait he always has, even in the worst of times. Elsa and I quickly exchange a worried glance before focusing our attention on Dad.

He takes a deep breath and starts, “Girls, the two of you are now twelve and thirteen years old, old enough to understand money matters.”

Afraid of what he would say next, we quickly nod.

“What I mean to say is that we have a money issue to deal with. It affects all of us.”

“It’s about the house,” Mom continued, with a bit more confidence than before, “It’s being foreclosed.”

As Mom says those three words, I swear my heart stops beating for a moment. Foreclosed? What are we going to do? Mom and Dad have been working so hard in their jobs for more than a year now, trying to pay off the mortgage. Neither of them have time to get another job, and there is no way they could work any harder. What are we going to do?

I look at my parents. Mom’s eyes are overflowing with tears, and I realize mine are, too. Suddenly, I feel Dad’s comforting arms wrapped tightly around me. I can feel Elsa’s quivering body next to me and Mom’s warm hand on my back. We stand there for awhile, crying. I know our thoughts are the same: What are we going to do?

What are we going to do?

I look at my parents. Mom’s eyes are overflowing with tears, and I realize mine are, too. Suddenly, I feel Dad’s comforting arms wrapped tightly around me. I can feel Elsa’s quivering body next to me and Mom’s warm hand on my back. We stand there for awhile, crying. I know our thoughts are the same: What are we going to do?

What are we going to do?

Soon, we break apart and stand in the kitchen, unsure of what to do next. Dad sighs and looks at the clock, starting when he realizes what time it is. Mom, too, glances at her watch and exclaims, “Noon already! I’ve got to be heading back to work!”

Dad nodded, “Me too. Will you girls be all right on your own?”

“Of course. We’ll be fine, like always,” I say with as much confidence as I can muster. Elsa just nods tearfully.

Mom and Dad give us one last hug before leaving. Before dashing out the door, Dad kisses us both on the head and says, “It will be okay, girls. We will get through this.”

Once we are alone, I glance at a woeful Elsa.
“Come on, Else. You heard Dad. It will all be okay...in time.”
“I know,” she sighs. “I’m going to go up to my room for awhile. I need some time alone.”
“Okay,” I nod knowingly. “I’m going to go practice.”

We part, going in different directions. When I reach my violin, I pick it up tenderly, cradling it to my chest. I feel warm tears spill over my cheeks again and gently fall upon the wood of violin with soft, resonating taps. How could it be that less than half an hour ago everything seemed so perfect?

I nestle the instrument under my chin and lift my bow to the strings, pulling it across and pressing my fingers down; familiar music spills forth. Soon, though, I don’t recognize the melody. It doesn’t sound like anything I have ever heard before. That’s when I realize that I haven’t heard this before. It has never been written down or even played before now. It’s not Mozart or Bach—it’s me. My fingers and heart take over, and music spills forth, releasing all my feelings. I feel my worries come forth, enveloping themselves in the notes. I play and play, feeling better every minute. I play my final note, releasing the sound into the room with a gentle lift of my bow.

I close my eyes, breathe deeply. When I play my violin, I am engulfed in music, and my troubles do not seem so terrible. Carefully bringing my violin off my shoulder, the sound disappears. In the silence, my problems come crashing down upon me again. I look down at my violin and wish with all my might that it could solve all of our problems. If only money could just magically pour forth from my violin and stream through the F-holes! Then we could pay our mortgage, and everything would be fine.

Suddenly, as though a light bulb clicked on, a thought comes to me! My violin could help us! I could play for money, and not just me, but Elsa, too! We could go to street corners on the local plaza or the city park and play! Dad says it’s called it busking. He always tells us stories of when he was younger and he and his best friend played their guitars in a park and actually made money! If you leave your instrument case open, people walking by can drop money in it.

Exhilarated by my new plan, I sprint upstairs and burst into Elsa’s room, where I find her curled up in bed. I run over to her and breathlessly tell her my plan. Her eyes light up, and I feel a new wave of excitement roll through me.

The two of us run downstairs, where we get our instruments and practice our duets. Our fingers fly as we blend our notes together, creating intricate harmonies and beautiful counter-melodies.

That evening, when Mom and Dad come home, Elsa and I immediately tell them our plan with breathless excitement. They are thrilled! Dad says he is so proud he is about to “bust his buttons.”

The next morning, Elsa and I get dressed and eat our breakfast hurriedly. Because of their work schedules, neither Mom nor Dad is able to drive us to our destination or stay with us while we play. This makes them fairly nervous. However, after a few soothing words, things are settled, and Elsa and I ride our bikes to the town plaza. We set our cases on the street corner outside a popular café which posts “Musicians Welcome Outside” sign on its window. We prop our own, small, handwritten sign against our cases saying “Help our family raise money to pay off our mortgage! Donations appreciated!” We decided that it would be a good idea to let people know where their money would be going.

Now we are ready to play. We lift our instruments to our shoulders, exchange a quick grin, and begin to play. Melodies and rhythms leap from our fingers, mesmerizing passers-by. When we finish our first piece, we look down at our cases and to our delight find a small assortment of bills lying in each! With an ecstatic glance towards each other, we begin again, different notes now enthralling café-goers and shoppers. As we play and play, the money keeps increasing and increasing, and we are having the time of our lives!

Elsa and I go out again the next day and the next and the next. Most of the time we play duets, but occasionally Elsa needs a break, and I play my solos—my on-the-spot, from-the-heart compositions. We play every day for two weeks, counting our money at the end of each day. At the end of the two weeks we add up our earnings to find that we have collected a grand total of...$800.

_Eight-hundred dollars!_

I can hardly believe my eyes. We recount the money three times. I am astonished—this is twice what I expected us to make. None of us can believe it. And then it hits us: if we combine our profit with the money saved from Mom and Dad’s salaries, we can pay off our mortgage.

We can pay off our mortgage—our foreclosure will be cancelled! Our house is ours, thanks to my violin.
Music escapes from the body of my violin, growing and growing as my bow brushes across the strings faster and faster. My fingers press down lightly upon the string, moving with deliberate speed and creating a blissful melody. As I play, I think about my beloved instrument, and I realize how thankful I am for it and for how it has helped me.

Thank you, violin. You helped me. You helped my family. Without you, I would not have been able to raise the money for our mortgage. Without you, I would not have found the music buried deep inside me. Without you, my dear violin, would I be who I am? Without you, I think not.
The hot, Mississippi air circled around the low ceiling and crowded me as I lounged on the small, tan sofa. The intense humidity overwhelmed the sputtering air conditioner in the window. My whole family and I were sitting in the tiny, white house after my grandpa’s memorial service. I was not sure how to feel about my grandpa’s death. Of course I felt the loss of a precious family member, but I could also feel the void of a personal relationship with the deceased. I was only in seventh grade and had only seen him a handful of times. He lived in rural Mississippi, and for several years preceding his death he had developed crippling Alzheimer’s.

The creaking of hinges in need of grease broke the gravity of our solemn silence. My dad stumbled into the quaint living room with two huge armfuls of packing material. His eye caught the befuddled look on my face, and he stated calmly, “See that clock over there?” My eye went directly to the jewel of the room, a tall, polished grandfather clock with bright brass weights and a beautifully gilded face. The rhythmic ticking of the pendulum from behind the delicate glass door was like a pulse forcing me to behold the new entity in the room. “Your grandfather and I built that clock together,” my dad continued. “And now, we are going to take it home.” Dad’s goal was ambitious—to wrap up the clock, put it on the roof of our van, and safely drive it eight hours back to St. Louis. My gut became a knot as I envisioned endless gruesome scenes of splintered wood on the side of I-55. After about forty-five minutes of strategic planning, we hoisted the clock on top of the car.

Finally, our van labored into our driveway. Nervously, we cajoled the clock down from its perch and placed it in our foyer. Dad and I went straight to work. Unwrapping cloths, reattaching pieces, setting the time and winding the weights, and before we knew it, the clock was ticking away. As I gazed at its beauty, the few memories I had of my grandpa became tangible. Every time I heard its melodious tones ringing on the hour, I could see Grandpa’s face. When I would wind the weights, I could feel his soft flannel shirt against my cheek as I embraced him. The quiet ticking of the pendulum mirrored his warm mannerisms.

I thought of the time I visited him at his farm. He let me sit on his lap and drive his tractor. “Let’s go around the yard, Jessica,” he whispered in my ear, so I was the only person who would hear this privileged information. The bright sun shone down on my green throne as I drove around the farm, and I felt Grandpa’s love for me as he placed his hand over mine on the steering wheel. Tick tock, tick tock.

I remembered the time I napped through a dinner at Grandpa’s house. After a rigorous day of chasing the chickens around his farm, my heavy little eyelids could not hold themselves open, even for the prospect of home made chicken and dumplings. I curled up on the sofa and was deserted as my family savored their meal. Several hours later, I woke up to find that my ravenous relatives had wolfed down all of the food. Hungry and frustrated, my four-year-old brain began to form a temper tantrum. As the tears began to well up, Grandpa appeared from the kitchen with an Eskimo pie in his hand. “Don’t tell your mom,” he smiled as he handed me the icy treat. Tick tock, tick tock.

As I returned to the present, standing in my foyer with the clock, my heart was full with a slew of affectionate memories of my grandpa. The connection I craved was staring me in the eye. As long as I had the clock, my grandpa was close to me.
The Hidden Threats of Factory-Produced Meat

Author: Maya Ramachandran
Grade: 11
Teacher: Randy Swift
School: West Junior High School, Columbia, Missouri

Within the confines of a fenced lot, a calf is born. But, moments after birth, he is removed from the protection of his mother and taken to a Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation (otherwise known as a CAFO). The rest of his short, miserable life will be spent in this confinement, packed in so tightly he can’t even turn around. In order to survive these conditions, the calf is heavily medicated with antibiotics via a milk-replacement formula, severely deficient in iron. All by-products of this insufficient diet, toxic or not, will be carelessly dumped in a nearby river or stream, permeating both land and water for miles. Inevitably, the calf is slaughtered, packaged as “gourmet” veal, and eaten by an ignorant public. Supporters of industrialized or factory farming would argue that these practices are perfectly reasonable, but others, myself included, would whole-heartedly disagree. It is in America’s best interest to replace factory farms with sustainable, community farms, making Americans healthier, more cost-efficient, and more eco-friendly.

Unlike factory farms, sustainable farms let their animals graze in open air. This grass diet makes sustainable meat a lot healthier than its competitor. Grass-fed beef has been proven to contain numerous antioxidants, including beta-carotene, vitamin C, and omega-3 fatty acids. 1 Beta-carotene can aid in the development of long-term memory and cognition. 2 Vitamin C, on the other hand, is necessary for healthy bones and healing. 3 And, omega-3 fatty acids, taken in proportion to Omega-6 fatty acids, can prevent heart attacks and an irregular heart beat. 4 Whereas factory-raised cows, fed a corn diet, produce marbling, which results in fattier beef. 5 This fatty beef, coupled with factory farms’ famed cheap prices, is becoming one of the predominant sources of the obesity epidemic. With three out of five Americans overweight, 6 this problem can no longer be ignored.

But, it is this very same ignorance that has kept the meat industry from modification. In the eyes of clientele, the end result—which is cheaper meat, justifies these destructive means. Supporters of factory farming don’t care about all the negative effects of factory-produced meat; once they see the price tag, they automatically reach for the cheaper artificially-produced meat.

But, in terms of cost, they aren’t looking at the bigger picture. According to a study conducted by anthropologist Walter Goldschmidt, “in towns surrounded by family farms, the income circulates among local business establishments, generating jobs and community prosperity.” Goldschmidt analyzed two communities—one surrounded by sustainable farms and another buying from factory farms—before finding that a greater percentage of the income stayed within the community of small sustainable farms. By down-sizing its farms, this community became the more prosperous of the two. Currently, a wealthy community like this one will better withstand the effects of the economic recession than a poorer one.

Not only will the conversion aid in the development of local economies, but grass-fed meat will also save America big bucks. In 1998, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention estimated that the public health system spent four and one-half billion dollars on antibiotic resistance and susceptible infections. 7 These numbers are due, in part, to the unsanitary conditions in which animals are raised, slaughtered, and processed. If we were to convert to sustainable farming, this large burden, funded by taxpayers, will be virtually non-existent—which could mean a decrease in America’s astronomical financial debt.

For what it’s worth, our need for speed and efficiency cause the environment too much harm. Housing an enormous number of animals under one roof creates an insurmountable amount of waste. Originally used as a natural method to fertilize the land in sustainable farms, animal waste has now transformed into an added pollutant. This contaminated waste, which is the by-product of a whole host of toxic chemicals, is stored in deep pits. But, come rainfall, the overflow from these pits runs off into surface waters, killing fish and destroying habitats. And, it is the principal cause of polluted waterways, which currently make up sixty percent of American rivers. 8 This pollution introduces pfiesteria bacteria which can cause problems for all animals, humans as well, including open sores, nausea, memory loss, fatigue and disorientation. 9 Factory farms may be the essence of efficiency, but beneath the surface they are leading contributors to the spread of obesity, America’s ever-growing financial debt, and an increase in pollution. That is why instead of relying
on factory farms, America should convert to more beneficial, sustainable, community farming. Grass-fed meat is a lot more nutritious, because it provides more antioxidants and less fat than its counterpart. Also, it is more cost-efficient, as it eliminates unnecessary costs and because every penny benefits the community. And, with toxic waste removal and added pollution no longer an issue, grass-fed meat also is more environmentally-friendly.

However, the campaign for sustainable meat will not be an easy one to win. Factory farms have an overwhelming monopoly in the meat industry. But, that’s not to say that change isn’t coming. Farmers like Bill Niman are slowly revolutionizing the industry. Unlike the CAFO baby calf, Niman’s animals live the way nature intended—grazing on expansive, open air pastures. And the meat, which is truly gourmet, speaks for itself. But in the end, change ultimately comes down to the consumer. So make the right choice. Together we can make grass-fed widespread and sustainable obtainable.

Works Cited
Ode to Summertime
Joy to the Midwest

A place where the weather just can’t decide.
Once it chose heat.
Hot, hot, heat.

The kind of heat where you don’t want to wear clothes outside but chose to because you can’t afford the fine for public nudity.

We snuck past Mom wearing our skimpiest clothing.

Rumor had it that the corn in Mr. Jenkins’ field had started to pop.

*POP!*
*POP!*
*POP!*

The Earth had become a giant microwave whose timer had broken.

We headed over there. Skeptical.
Bowls in hand.
Ready for miracles.

After filling our bowls with miracle popcorn, we figured it appropriate

I called up Barbara, with her white Chevy van.
You called up everyone who was anyone.

We drove down eleven gravel roads and picked up eight kids, who had also snuck past their moms, wearing next to nothing.

Somehow, we arrived at the movies, still alive.
Excited for the $10 per carload special.

Little did we know, it was a two-for-one-show.

A perfect sunset shown in the western sky, displaying the colors of every Crayola crayon.

To the east, the premiere of Grease.

Even Olivia Newton-John, in her tight leather pants, holding a cigarette in one hand, and John Travolta in the other, could not be as happy as we were sitting on top of Barbra’s van.

A multitude of fireflies flew above our heads, Our country version of New York City lights, Headed to the drive-in.
Que Sera Sera (What Will Be Will Be)

Author: Alyssa Sample  
Grade: 12  
Teacher: Casey Daugherty  
School: Republic Senior High School, Republic, Missouri

I am a senior.
Wow, it still feels weird to write those words. So much has happened in my life since freshman year, though rarely do I step back to think about it. All of the events, the good and the bad, that have been a catalyst for growing up in high school, I never knew how much they affected me until a new English teacher had us free write every day. It was a blessing in disguise. At first, you become annoyed because you ran out of topics in the first three days, but then, when you think you have nothing left to write about, you start putting your soul on the pages. All of your experiences and memories come out but are quickly forgotten. This same teacher had us sift through all of our first semester free writing and create a “Collage Essay.” We sewed snippets of the free writing together into a memoir of sorts. It was an experience in itself and had me relive all these important moments that made me who I am. The result was, at first, a choppy mess, but, like life, the beauty and power of the words are a little deeper than the surface. And so begins the first semester of my senior year...

I’m not gonna lie, I really have no clue what to write about.
And I’m pretty sure I just want to read my book. Is this selfish of me? Ugh. An unexplained melancholy feeling is hanging over my head like an October fog. I don’t know, maybe it’s the weather. Maybe one day everything will go back to being normal, but I’m not sure I remember what that is anymore. I’m always thinking and reading and questioning. It’s my senior year, why not?

I can’t think of what to write.
I just need a BIG caffeine boost. That’ll do the trick. The book I’m reading is very interesting. We once drove two hours out of our way so my sister and I could read it. Me and Jess read all the way home, crying as the characters we’d grown up with since the 3rd grade were dying or moving on with their lives. We’d lost a lot that summer, and that had been the final straw. I was no longer crying over a book character, but what they’d come to represent. Jess is one of my favorite people.
We have so many family stories and inside jokes. It’s a strange friendship, but I’m a strange person, so it all works out in the end. Why? Who knows. It’s strange—nice, but strange.
How often does that happen?

I really don’t even want to write today.
I’d rather be reading, but I guess that’s not going to happen. My new book really makes me think. Even though I don’t like Cinderella in any version I’ve read yet. Seriously, glass slippers? Where is the logic in that?
Basically, she sits around and complains until her Fairy Godmother flies in and fixes everything. If you need a guy to complete your “happily ever after” then you have some pretty low expectations. Life isn’t easy and I don’t think that’s going to change anytime soon.

Que Sera Sera
What will be will be.
...I’m really liking that phrase. At least right now. I doubt I’ll like it much when ‘what will be will be’ refers to something not fun. Though there is nothing that can break me.
There is nothing I can’t live through.
I am strong.
I am unmovable,
Unbreakable,
And unshakable.
I am the willow tree, bending in the storm as opposed to breaking.
I am the calm in the storm.

I can’t write today...
...but I can’t help but question.
Is that right? Does everyone deserve a second chance? What if he is stupid enough to ask for another chance? What if he truly is sorry? Does he even deserve this level of consideration? Is it right for me to do something I don’t want to do, so long as it doesn’t hurt me morally or physically, for someone else? Is it ok to just forgive someone and NOT give them a second chance? Why did he apologize after all this time? Could it be that he truly is sorry? That he truly knows that, towards the end and kind of throughout the whole relationship he was an inexcusable jerk? Is he really sorry? Is it just an old habit? A fear of being manipulated again? A mistrust to the point of insanity? Is that his intention? Is that just what he wants me to think?

Ugh. Maybe Mr. Brashears can give me an equation to explain why he can talk for only 3 minutes or so, but I end up spending a week dissecting every word and intention like one of Mr. Fryert’s bio frogs.
I mean, how often does that happen?
Well, HE can take his memories and counterfeit words. They’re worth nothing to me. He will retreat into the shadows of my mind, trapped in a prison of my thoughts. No one likes double standards.
...Boys are stupid.

I don’t want to write.

My curiosity gets me into more trouble then it’s probably worth, but I hate not knowing. Like I don’t know why I keep having this dream. The same dream or why I practically turn nocturnal during the summer. I’ve always preferred the night. Maybe that’s why Artimus and Athena are my favorite Greek Goddesses. Athena, Goddess of the Moon, and Artimus, Goddess of Wisdom. When there’s a full moon, I have to go outside and soak it up.
I’m most active at night. My brain is more alert, and my body is most awake.
I have choir next hour. It’s my favorite class, but it’s mid-October, and we’re already getting our Christmas songs lined up. I love Christmas, but not in October. But that’s the price you pay for singing which is my favorite thing. The feeling that comes with hitting a third with your voice and someone else’s...it’s amazing. Hit that harmony just right and it feels like you could fly—leap right out of your chair and swing on the notes themselves. I always feel closer to Heaven when I sing a song right or even just sing the right song. Singing makes me feel like God is in the room with me. The only thing I like about winter is that it makes me want to sing. I think my voice sounds better in the winter. Maybe it’s because my voice has a very warm tone, the only warm thing about this time of year. It’s the perfect escape.

I really don’t want to write today.
I want to travel and explore and find, truly find, me. I think the only way to find out who I am is to go out and look. Who knows? Maybe what I’m supposed to do with my life is over in Asia or Europe. I want to see and go and learn. I was to visit the Middle East and see Egypt. I don’t know what I’m looking for, but I think that’s the point. If I don’t know what I’m searching for then I really have to look instead of just skimming and seeing. I have to ask questions. I have to search. To find out who I am, not what I’ve become or what others expect of me. I’m just a work-in-progress vase, only the artist knows what’s really going on.

Yeah, I really don’t even wanna write today.
...box people annoy me! You know who I’m talking about. The people who have to have a stereotype for everything and they HAVE to label you in order for their lives to make sense. And if they can’t fit you in that little box, then you should just go away and leave them alone because you’re just too weird. What a SAD SORRY WAY TO LIVE! I’ve always known that I see the world differently, through rose-colored glasses, I guess. But people try and label me and shove me in this box and it just doesn’t work. You can’t put me there. It’s not my fault that just my presence makes your entire rulebook of the world crumble. It’s not my fault that my very presence challenges the way you believe the world should work. I will not conform to your idea. I will not be anyone but myself. If you can’t accept me for
who I am, then maybe you need to rethink something. Labels are for soup cans, not me. I am an individual, I will not fit in your box of stereotypes, and I never will. There is more than one way to do things. It is not your way or the highway. You are not always right. I am not always wrong. **Yes, I am different than the mold you want everyone to fit to be considered equal to your superiority complex.** That doesn’t work for me. You treat me as inferior because my ideas are different than yours. That is NOT RIGHT, regardless of what you say. I am not misguided. I am not stupid. I am not misled. Yes, I am different, and I THANK GOD I AM NOT YOU! I feel so sorry for you sometimes. How does it feel to see the world through such a tiny hole, instead of the big picture? That won’t work for me.

**BOX PEOPLE**

I am
Different.

Not misled.
Not Misguided.
Not stupid.

Different.

Different than the mold you want everyone to fit to be considered
Equal to your superiority complex.

How does it feel
To see the world through such a tiny hole,
Instead of the big picture?

**You...**
Who have a stereotype for everything.
Who label.
Who shove me in this box.

Challenge,
The way you believe,
Your rulebook of the world.

**Go.**
See the world,
Through rose-colored glasses.

Once again, I’m not sure what to write about.
My writing is often how I think. Very sporadic, spastic, and doesn’t always make sense at first, but often there’s a deeper meaning. There are little nuggets hidden in all the brain blips and random ADD thoughts. Tiny brain nuggets that hint at thoughts and depths beyond the surface of my mind. Like me, my writing appears simple, but in truth, it isn’t. It’s all deeper and more complex than what it appears to be at face value. You have to dig and sift through the word flow to find the diamonds hidden throughout. Subtle little hints about my innermost thoughts and feelings hidden in my soul. **Isn’t that what writing is anyway? An extension of our souls? Seeing that embodiment that exists within us on paper?** In a cosmic sense, it could almost unite us. Our ancestors wrote or drew on cave walls, parts of their soul. Mine is written here, on these pages. In a strange, mystical way, maybe at the point, we’re all connected. Or maybe I’m just being silly and philosophical. Probably the silly option.
The middle of summer in rural Pike County, Illinois, was always sweltering with heat. The people who lived there, in the small one story farm houses, with a few mutt dogs running around their property and the occasional cow shaped mail box, found ways to put up with the hot summers. The farmers continued to tend to their crops with a cold wet towel around their necks, and the children walked around in colorful summer bathing suits playing in sprinklers. The normal heat of summer didn’t seem to bother any of them too much, they had learned how to deal with the heat long before they learned to swim or ride a bike, but there were maybe one or maybe two days in summer where everything just seemed to stop. A true dog day of summer, as the locals called it, a day where the sun knew no bounds, and would burn down upon Pike County like an atomic heat wave.

The solid heat would almost char the streets and sidewalks, making walking barefoot like a death wish. The flowers would sulk close to the ground, and the trees would stand still, stuck in the stagnant molasses air, not even carrying the slightest curl of a cool breeze. On these days, the hardworking farmers retired to their air conditioned houses, and the clerks closed their shops. Even the post office stood empty, not even one mail man daring to set foot anywhere near the town. The streets were void of people; no children made lemonade stands or rode their bikes in their driveways; no cars whirred by; not even a chipmunk darted across the grass. On a dog day of summer, Pike County was a dead city, with all but one exception: the bugs.

Bugs thrived in the intense heat. They swarmed on the surface of boiling lakes and gulped the air violently like trying to swallow hot syrup. They seemed to be hot-wired, drunk almost in a crazed confusion. My father always used to tell me that these were the best days for fishing. On a dog day of summer, my father would sit on the lake in his pale blue motor boat, with his fishing pole thick in the water. He would push a swollen brown pipe between his calloused lips and drag his pale blue boat out to the lake. People said he was crazy, especially my mother. She would go on and on about how he would float to the bottom of that lake one of these days, how he would pass out from heat, and how the boat would flip over and toss him the water. But I respected him for it somehow, respected how he could take the heat, and I would watch him fish out there for hours from inside the safe air conditioned window. When he came back with those fish he would tell me that they would almost jump onto his hook. They all lingered at the top of the water’s glazed surface, where the heat would boil around their scales and where the bugs sat confused and delirious.

I never knew how he stomached the heat, the fish, and the worms all together, because no one else seemed able to. I always used to wonder if Dad would come back melted like candle wax or burnt like a marshmallow held over the fire for too long or just fall into the lake like my mother said he would, but he never did. He always came back, proud as ever, with more fish than you could hope to catch in a week of patiently sitting on the lake. I would eventually get sick of eating the fish for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, but I never mentioned it; dad always seemed so proud.

We all knew that a dog day of summer was approaching in the middle of summer on the year of my 13th birthday. Before the heat wave came, the stray mutts would dig ankle deep holes in the dry dirt under barns or farm houses, and lay in them, preparing their tongues to pant and wet their black noses. Two black spotted mutts had nuzzled up against the white washed paint of our house, their paws restlessly clawing at the dirt and pacing in nervous circles only hours before we all felt the sun’s torture. Mothers and fathers prompted their children inside for an early lunch by the TV and homemade iced lemonade, but our father had a different plan. He had already packed up his boat with fishing rods and worms, already preparing to head out on the lake. It was the day of my 13th birthday, and I remember how much I wanted to go out there with him, how much I wanted to prove that I could take the heat like he did. So, I followed him outside and watched him drag the pale blue boat out of the shed like he always did, to the lake, heaving backwards with his hands on the rusted orange metal of the bow. I watched from behind, and Cole, being only seven at the time, darted out from our back door.

“What are you doing out here?” I spat out quickly, glaring at my younger brother and thinking only that he would ruin my chances of going out on the lake.
“I wana fish, Jimmy, just like you and Dad.”

“Well, you can’t,” I said, snatching his red cap from his head and throwing it towards the house.

“Hey, what’d you do that for,” he yelled back at me, already running to go get his cap. I turned around slowly only to bump into my father.

“Take this,” he shoved the lifejacket into my arms, “and give this to your brother,” he said, handing me another one. I didn’t know what had come over him at that moment, but he was going to let Cole and me in the boat on a dog day of summer, and I wasn’t about to question him. I pulled the green life jacket from around my back, cringing when the dry foam rubbed over my sun burnt shoulders, and slowly buckled it together in the front. Cole raced past me, quickly snatching his life jacket, and was already in the boat, playing with a cracked paddle, by the time I was ready.

I stepped over the boat, right leg in first, then left, already starting to sweat under the bulky life jacket. When both of us were in, Dad unknotted the coarse rope, and pushed the boat into the water, jumping in after it. Neither Cole nor I said a word, worrying we’d somehow ruin the moment, trigger our father’s short temper and make him bring us back inside. Then Dad pulled the dull plastic string to start the motor. We began to push out towards the middle of the lake. I sat backwards with my arms crossed over the boat watching the spinning motor tear the water like a piece of lined paper.

“Once we get out to the center you can see the whole dam lake,” Dad said, pulling a beer out of the cooler and throwing his head back to take a swig. But I wasn’t paying attention; it already felt like the sun had dropped a layer of think burning butter on my back. Cole’s temples started to sweat, and the sun looked like a circle of dark burning sugar, high in the sky. The boat flew out, faster and faster, the motor speeding so fast that I couldn’t even see the blades. My head started to spin, and a wave of nausea washed over my body. I told myself over and over that I was a man, I was 13, and I could stomach the heat, but truthfully I didn’t know if I was going to make it to the center of the lake.

“Do you boys remember how to fish? I think the last time I brought you two out here was almost a year ago, maybe more.” I didn’t respond. I was feeling even dizzier from the heat and spin of the motor.

“I think I remember a little bit!” Cole said.

“And you, Jim, do you remember?” I didn’t even hear my father’s voice over the spinning of my head. “Jim. I’m talking to you, boy. Do you remember?”

“I remember, Dad, I answered, short and quick. In the moment, I didn’t even know what he was asking me to remember.

I hardly noticed when the boat stopped in the middle of the lake, until it began to rock unevenly and turned my stomach inside out. I began to watch the waves, circling around the boat and rocking it back and forth. I had to move my eyes away from the water. I looked up at the sky, but it was so big, the sun burning through my eyes, painful and sickening.

I could see Cole getting uncomfortable from the heat. He began to shift from one position to the other frantically. He was too young for this, and I think he had just given up.

“It’s too hot out here, Dad!! Can’t we go back; it’s just too hot!” Cole complained.

“We haven’t even started fishing, just take off your life jacket for now Cole, you’re a good swimmer, you’ll cool off quickly.” Cole tugged the life jacket off his back happily, as Dad pulled out the white Styrofoam box of worms, his hands digging into the slimy soaked dirt. I felt my stomach churning, the sun pulsating against my skin, the water rocking the boat, up and down, up and down. He pulled out an almost baked worm, and it began to squirm in his hand, writhing its body, spitting hot slime out of its skin.

“Okay, who wants to go first?” Dad asked.

“Me! Me! Me!” Cole shouted putting his hands out in the air, ready to grab the slimy worm like it was just a Popsicle.

“So, you put the hook through the worm’s middle and then double him over to hook ’em again.” Cole grabbed the worm with his eager hand, and Dad helped him hook the worm. His green and red guts came pushing out on the hook, splattering down my father’s hand and dripping on his knee. I clutched my hand over my dry mouth. It felt like my lips were going to split down the middle; I could barely hear my father’s voice. He sounded like he was sitting very far away, and my ears buzzed. The heat was too much, the heat was too much.
“Jim, you all right over there? You look pale,” My father asked.

“Fine, Dad, I’m fine” I said, swallowing the dry spit down the back of my throat. I looked over at Cole’s pole in the water, his red and white bobby dipping in and out of the black water. Dad started to explain something to Cole again; all I heard from the conversation was the word fish. I noticed he was looking back at me every few seconds. He scratched his rough whiskers and shied his mouth to his left side. My cheeks must have looked a sickly greenish color.

“Have some water, Jim. You look hot.” Dad handed me the black water canteen, and I unscrewed the cap frantically, my sweaty palms struggling to hold a tight grasp. I tipped the water into my mouth and felt it burning hot, like blistering dry ice against my tongue. I quickly spat the scorching water off the side of the boat.

“It was hot,” I stuttered, still hanging over the side of the boat.

“I got something! I got something!” Cole’s voice shrieked over the lake. He yanked up too quickly, revealing a dripping black fish with sharp yellow tainted fangs. The fish began to thrash violently in the air, wrapping abruptly around Cole’s body like a tether ball swinging around its pole. His barbed fins like silver daggers cut into Cole’s skin, bleeding and dripping steaming green water like warm tea and flesh into the boat. Blood everywhere, black fish gills, drying and flapping, the burning heat, the sky, the water, the fish, everything spinning and roaring like an industrial fan. I couldn’t hold it back any longer, I doubled over the boat and vomited into the hot water, heaving and coughing, but at that point no one noticed. Cole was struggling to untangle the fish, only pulling the thin transparent wire tighter around his skin, and in a panic he suddenly stood in the boat, flapping his arms hysterically in the air.

“Get it off! Get it off!” He shrieked wildly, and then the boat flipped over in the water, just like mom always said it would, splashing a searing black wave into the air. My skin was suddenly warm and burning. I gagged in my mouth, and everything was black and dark. My mind didn’t even process that I was under water until the life jacket floated me up to the surface, my mind spurting thoughts in a crazed confusion. I saw my dad’s head pop up about a foot away from me.

“Where’s Cole? Where’s Cole?” He said, splashing his arms in the hot water. He dove under, and back up again for a very long time. Each time he surfaced, his eyes quivered over the lake, his black eyebrows straining in the heat. I just floated there, letting the life jacket hold me up, and stared blankly at the water. It was as if someone else spoke the words when the thought flashed through my mind, “He wasn’t wearing his life jacket, and the clear fishing wire around his body must have felt like an iron anvil tied to his back.” Sometimes, when I look back on that dog day of summer, I wonder if it was my fault. I wonder if I could have done anything to keep Cole off that boat, and other times I just wish it could have been me instead of him.
The Long and Winding Road

Author: Tim Shedor
Grade: 12
Teacher: Dow Tate
School: Shawnee Mission East High School, Shawnee Mission, Kansas

“I’ll take you to get a car.”
Those magic seven words from Mom signaled the end of my minivan days and the start of a new, high-flying era of after-ten curfew and unlimited QuickTrip runs.

But like all things that come from the golden land of Detroit, there was fine print under this new lease on life. You have to pay for it.

I cashed grandpa’s birthday checks. I redeemed every I.O.U. since 2nd grade. I broke my Bugs Bunny souvenir bank. I felt like I had just betrayed my childhood innocence, but this was a moment I’d been waiting for since birth.

As soon as we told him I was buying my first car, his face brightened, saying he had just the thing.

Right then and there I knew it was the one. As soon as he said “Corolla” I nearly swooned out of the plush seat. It was infamous for great gas mileage, was known for reliable mechanics, and even had side air bags.

Overcome by this newfound desire for Japanese manufacturing, I demanded we see it immediately. He showed us a 2000 that had been traded just last night! It hadn’t been detailed yet and was covered in dirt, leaves and Lord knows what. It didn’t matter. One spin around the lot, and I knew it had to be mine.

But Mom warned against falling for the first car, so we ventured to other lots. At Dealership number two, which had advertised a $4,000 Corolla in Thursday’s classifieds, we had called a salesman in advance, but the rest of the office didn’t know that when we walked in.

Spring-loaded, a salesman pounced into commission-earning action as soon as he caught our scent. He held open four doors at once; pulled up the most comfortable chair he could find, and would have baked cookies if he knew we were coming. He was devastated when we told him someone was already waiting on us.

Fifteen minutes later, an eternity in the used car business, our man showed up. He didn’t look me in the eye and had the type of handshake that said you’re-wasting-my-time-because-I-don’t-get-any-commission-on-a-$4,000-used-car.

Nonetheless, he drove us three lots over to the used car junk yard and showed us a 1999 Dodge Neon that had just been traded in just last night! At an overpriced $6,000, it came complete with stick shift, roll-down windows, and an interior design that deserved to be the pilot of “Extreme Car Makeover.”

Then we found the Corolla, a dirty ’92 jalopy that looked like it had just come out of a “Die Hard” film. The tag valued it at $4,500, but I didn’t think it could make the trip out of the lot.

We skidooshed off the lot and went to Shawnee, Merriam, and Missouri lots in pursuit of “other cars.” But the others couldn’t compare. Escort, Taurus, Camry, nothing was like my first and only love.

Every dealer laughed us off when we asked for a car under $5,000, but I didn’t care what they thought. Nobody else mattered; it was just me and my Corolla against the world.

We even visited a fly-by-night salesman, decked in a blinding lime green shirt and novelty sun hat. He showed us a car that had been traded last night! It was a ‘92 Honda Accord that looked like a D’Lorean on a diet. It very well could have been the Corolla’s ugly cousin, yet I was almost convinced because it came with the salesman’s word and a free coke!

I admit, I did cheat on my Corolla. I spent an evening with a 2001 purple Malibu with full ashtrays and a sub woofer, a car that had been traded just last night! But after finding oil in the brake pads, the family mechanic said forget about it.

Just when I thought I could come home with flowers and chocolate to make things right, tell my baby I loved her and would never leave her again, dealership number one called. The Corolla was spewing black smoke, and they wouldn’t sell it to anybody. It was off the market. I almost wept.

I was heartbroken. I felt alone in this dark and sketchy world of excessive hair gel and “Great deals!” In dire desperation I looked through millions of Craigslist ads and tore up every classified since April 5, 2008.

Nothing. It looked as though I would be bumming rides from friends and taking the bus to school for the rest
of my life. I would live in the basement eating Hot Pocket lunches and Ramen dinners. I would never get a job or ever aspire to something more than a car-less bum.

Yet, there was hope. Dealership number one called once more. A car had been traded in just last night!

It was a 1996 Oldsmobile Ciera. The periwinkle blue four-door looked, sounded, and smelled like a car my grandma would drive before me, but that didn’t matter. It was $4,000, and earned our mechanic’s approval. I knew the Corolla would have wanted it this way. It was better for both of us.
Author: Megan Sullivan  
Grade: 12  
Teacher: Mary Wavering  
School: Macon R-1 High School, Macon, Missouri

I am from rope swings,  
From Louisville Slugger and maple trees.

I am from the heat put off by the wood stove,  
(Large, warm, and inviting, yet painful to the touch).

I am from Grandma’s rose bush,  
The Weeping Willow's reflection in the pond.

I am from fondue and short legs,  
From Tony Eugene and Melba Ruth and Howard Duane.

I am from sleeping late on Saturdays and watching Saturday Night Live episodes.  
From “Nobody is better than you” and “You are no better than anybody else.”

I am from drawing pictures in the bulletin during the church service.

I’m from Guilford,  
Baked Mac and Cheese and Mississippi Mud cake.  
From the helmet that saved my great grandpa’s life in World War I,  
The monkey that terrorized my Grandpa Head while he bailed hay,  
And the salon chair in Elaine’s house.

I am from the trunk under the ping pong table and from the slides piled in the closet,  
Collecting dust, faces becoming creased and blurred, but forever containing memories.
The Beautiful Walk

I walk footstep by footstep in the dark, silent night.
In my heart there is light.
Toe to heel on the gravel ground,
I hear the waves crashing around
In the distance.

I quicken my pace
To reach my happiness.
The hard gravel ground turns to soft sand.
My shoes slip from my feet.
My run turns to a slow and steady dance.

I greet my old friend with a smile and a sigh.
It’s like I’ve been here before.
I return to the water,
My beginning and my end.
What remains of my stay
A sandy footprint friend.
The summer sun lowered beneath the treetops, its last few rays of light struggling to play with the colors of Jasmine’s carmine strands. Her blue eyes glistened, and Andrew sat mesmerized by her radiance, her glow. While the young couple hid among the grasses, the wind sounded its melody. The meadow which detained them was enclosed by looming oaks. Jasmine let her happiness splotch into a blush as they sat in comfort. Andrew’s Irish features gazed dreamily into the skies as he rocked Jasmine. Turning, she looked up at him with a smile. He bowed his crimson head and kissed her pink nose.

Andrew smiled down at his mate, cuddling her closer. Jasmine’s sapphire eyes wandered away from his and trailed each lonesome firefly that loomed just above the grass. “Fairies.” The word was but a whisper on Andrew’s lips. Her eyes once more met his, making his breath catch.

“Hmm?” she asked quietly, loving the way he slid adventure into everything. It had made life so much more fun. In a deep majestic voice he replied, “Those ‘fireflies’ are not really fireflies but fairies, and they dance around these meadows just before the sun goes behind those trees.” Andrew pointed to the tree line and grinned.

Jasmine’s eyes widened and her face lit up as if his story provoked the child inside. She rose up to stare into the gloomy night at those last blinking fairies. Eyelids slowly covered her sleepy eyes as she fell into a dream of fairies.

Andrew lifted Jasmine into his arms, holding her safe and warm. The walk back to the truck was brimming with the noises of life in the woods. Soft raindrops started to fall upon the leaves, making soft pitter patter rhythms. He held the warmth of Jasmine closer and picked up his pace. Once he got to the old pick-up he owned, Andrew set her down gently and hurried around to the driver’s side. Her soft breathing made him look over. The sigh he was about to take froze inside his throat, for she was so beautiful. Even when sleeping, with her fiery red hair thrown this way and that, she was an angel. His face reddened as he realized he was staring. Quickly he started up the truck and drove his girl home to her waiting momma.

After Andrew dropped Jasmine off, he headed back to his small shack on the outskirts of town. It wasn’t much, but it was what he could afford. He slowly sat down on his overstuffed chair in the corner of his living room and touched the small box he had hidden in the pocket of his wranglers. A smile crept over the stubble he had forgotten to shave as he pulled the box out and opened it. Nestled into velvet sat a small band of gold. Engraved on the inside was written, My Precious Fairy. Andrew stared until his eyelids began to droop. Slowly he began to fall into a sleep, gripping the ring tight in his hand.

Fog surrounded the room as Andrew slumbered. The temperature rose with each passing second while flames ate at the door. Slowly, he opened his sleepy lids, only to quickly shut them for the irritated fire was screaming. Scrambling off the chair, Andrew stared in terror as sulfur slammed into his body. He snatched up the ring that now rested beside him and ran toward the front door, only to stumble on a wire lying wickedly in the floor. Flames hungrily licked at his legs, cracking the skin and leaving nasty gashes. Pain engulfed Andrew, but when he tried to move, his limbs felt like jelly.

Slowly, a blackness rolled around him and death seeped through the wood floors. Only Jasmine’s sweet face floated in his mind now and the ring he had so wanted to place on her finger lay snuggled in his palm.

Andrew watched Jasmine weep on the front step of the funeral home. Tears rolled down her scarlet cheeks while tears fell down his own. Sob after sob rolled out of her lips, each a blow to his heart. Andrew wished he could go to her, to tell her it would be alright, but in all honesty he knew it wouldn’t be.

No, he could never hold her again, for she would think she was looking at a ghost. His soul ripped at the seams, slowly, each gash killing him. Begging for death to reach him, if only to have this hurt go away, but then again he had done this to himself. He was the one to fake his death after the fire. How could he let her see him? She would turn and run from him. Sitting out of sight, in the woods across the street, Andrew let the salty tears run along the
gashes burned into his face. The tears slipped into each nasty slash. He didn’t care, for that pain was nothing like the
hurt he was feeling inside. She wept and he died a little more. The feelings he once knew were nowhere to be found
while emptiness stole its place. Slowly, he fell to the ground.

Two years later

As silently as night, Andrew moved over cobble stones that covered the sidewalks of the small town. Vines as
old as time climbed the walls of an aged brick pub. Andrew gazed down from the building’s roof, letting his long
overcoat whip around in the wind like a snake ready to strike.

Jasmine and a man strolled out the doors, laughing and holding each other, quietly enjoying the comfort
each gave. The man stole a kiss like a thief. Andrew scowled down at him, hating how the man could hold the woman
he loved, and Andrew could do nothing. Andrew knelt low and watched as the man in Jasmine’s arms placed a small
box into her hands.

Jasmine looked up at the second man she had ever loved and then down at the soft scarlet box. Her heart
skipped a little. “I know I’m not Andrew,” he stopped and looked away from her, “but I love you more than any man
could.” He knelt down on one knee and took the box, then her hand. “Marry me?” The words were spoken so softly
she barely heard them. Something kept her from saying anything. Instead, Jasmine looked to the pub’s roof. Nothing
was there, of course, but sometimes she felt Andrew with her, watching over her. She looked back down at her new-
found love asking for her hand, and she nodded. His expression was pure shock and joy all at once. Jasmine laughed
aloud as he exploded up and grabbed her in his arms.

Andrew fell to his knees from the force of sheer black pain. Before he knew what was happening or how he
had done it, he was deep in the woods that covered the back of the pub. Big tears rolled down like waterfalls across
his spoiled face. The wind whipped at him, pulling and pushing at his black cloak. He had always known this would
happen, that she would find someone to hang onto. It hurt so much, like someone had punched his already broken
heart.

Andrew stumbled to the ground, the rocks ripping at his hands and knees. A groan tore from his lungs as he
slammed his bloody fists against a tree. He examined the gashes in his slacks. A low predatorily growl rumbled his
chest. More animal than man, Andrew leaped to his feet, stalking the trees....
A Voice against Religious Persecution

Author: Thao Thai
Grade: 12
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Religious persecution is a serious, worldwide issue which does not raise much international concern. Many miserable people in Afghanistan, Sudan, Tibet and many other countries are tormented under the government’s abuse of human rights, especially freedom of religion. These people are blockaded in the violation bubble, struggling everyday to live with one hope — that there shall be a voluntary international cooperation that would hear their cries and help them reestablish their innate rights. As a world leader, the United States has a moral responsibility to advocate and monitor international religious freedom, to ensure people the right of freedom of conscious as dictated in The International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, “It shall be the policy of the United States to condemn violations of religious freedom, and to promote, and to assist other governments in the promotion of, the fundamental right to freedom of religious” — that will strengthen the possibility for world peace including the United States.

If a six-month-old baby is burned in a fire, and a person has the opportunity to save it without undue risk to his life, he would no doubt save it. However, if he decided not to because the baby had nothing to do with him, he could be excused for his attitude, but his excuse would not be reasonable in this case. It is fully understandable why most Americans think the United States had no right to interfere in foreign affairs, but we cannot turn our back on those who need help. What affects other countries will eventually affect the United States as well. The Holocaust was a situation showing what happens when people stand by. It lead to the persecution and murder of Jews and other groups by the Nazi regime and its collaborators. These people screamed for help, yet the world responded with a deafening silence. Although the United States finally stepped in, approximately six millions people suffered and died. Even though we cannot do anything to change the past, we can look at it as an experience not to repeat the same mistake.

The Holocaust was the issue of yesterday; we need to face religious persecution today. In January of 2004, Article 2 of The Afghan Constitution authorized that Islam is the “religion of that state,” but it allows other religious worshippers to exercise and to practice their belief under limited circumstance of the law. On the other hand, Article 3 declared that “no law could be contrary to the belief and provisions of the sacred religion of Islam.” These statements seem to be contradicting; in other words, Islamic law dictates how religious freedom works. Also, Article 7 proclaims that The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other foreign conventions will accept the case in which the country is a party (Marshall 58). Abdul Rahman, who lived during the Taliban era, was captured and imprisoned for a month; he was almost sentenced to death for converting to Christianity (59).

In addition, China, now taking advantage of its power, is abusing minorities such as Tibetan Buddhists and Uighur Muslims not only because of their faith but also their background as a morality group with diverse cultures and languages. The People’s Republican of China’s Constitution states that the government would maintain the freedom of religion; however, the conservation of practice of faith would be restricted to certain circumstances. Believers such as Tibetans who revere the Dalai Lama cannot freely exercise their worship because the government considers those activities as examples of political protest. On March 10, 2008, "patriotic education" attacked the TAR and other Tibetan regions; monks and nuns were compelled to sign a statement directly criticizing the Dalai Lama (“China”). Those persecutions violate the Article 18 of The Universal Declaration of Human Right, which states:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. This right includes freedom to change his belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance. (Glendon)

Many people are fighting for the freedom of religion, not only for themselves but also for future generations, while we are freely practicing and exercising our beliefs here in the United States. We all have the commonality “that all human beings naturally share common humanity, moral worth, inherent dignity and goodness, and compassionate minds that cannot bear to see others suffer.” The governments have a duty to cultivate these natural rights of their citizens through compassion and ethical behavior. In case the governments deteriorate and leaders refuse to do so, then a voluntary cooperation of dominant nations should advance to work with these governments to affirm and protect human rights (Lauren 10). As a powerful nation, the United States has a responsibility to advocate for those
persecuted individuals in foreign countries on the account of their religious beliefs; “thus increase the degree to which individuals personally choose, shape, and own their core ideas, concepts, worldviews, habits, virtues, social engagement, and behavior” (Marshall 58).

The communities are calling our name for help. If the United States, their only hope, refuses in silence and ignores the issue, then who will step in? “Many of our Nation’s founders fled religious persecution abroad, cherishing in their hearts and minds the ideal of religious freedom” (“One”). We, as the next generation, must continue to commemorate this tradition by ensuring religious freedom and opening our hands to those going through religious oppression. It does not mean that the United States should send the troops to those countries and force the leaders to follow our command because then it would cause controversy. Instead as a model, we should unite with other countries to ensure that all people may exercise the rights of which they are entitled.

Religious freedom is essential to provide a sense of security. With the establishment and enforcement of laws, people would feel safe knowing that their rights would be assured and respected by the law. The United States has built a legacy of religious freedom from its birth to this day. As leader of the future, this duty now rests in the hands of the next generation. We must continue to honor this heritage and be responsible U.S citizens by keeping informed, by voicing our opinions, and by offering assistance whenever possible to support religious freedom.

Works Cited

Watch Out!
- Bang!
Books spill to the floor,
The oppressors snigger,
Leaning over their quarry,
A girl...
She gets down on her,
Hands and knees,
Picking up the books.
Where you going Scarecrow?
They taunt.
They tease.
Pointing at her glasses,
Her faded red dress and rusty sneakers,
A wooly scarf slung around her neck,
Dressed like a scarecrow.
The unruly black hair,
That sticks to her face,
Her crooked nose,
Scarecrow! They say,
Why don’t you
Take off that
Halloween’s gone and past,
You
Could
Never
Be anything
But
Ugly.
Her hands shake.
She looks up and smiles,
Exposing a mouthful of jack-O-lantern teeth,
And says,
Boys
I may not be
Pretty,
But I sure can be
Beautiful.

In the hall she walks,
Close to the wall.
They like to shove her,
When she goes by.
   In the lunch line,
Girls whisper loudly,
   Look at her clothes...
   Her hair!
Why can’t she get braces...
   - Or something?
During class she sits,
   In the corner.
Ten points extra credit,
   Go to the show!
The crowd rustles as
Parents and siblings crowd into the bleachers.
The Boys joke
About a fat old broad,
   Asleep already-
   Snoring.
Lights dim.
Curtains open.
A girl walks out.
Scarecrow?
And then she begins to sing,
And
The
Sound
From
Her
Mouth
Was
Beautiful.
The Creek

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We were going painfully slow as we walked beside our favorite creek, barely able to see hints of reflected
light off the peaceful flowing water. We jumped the broken barbed wire fence, hopped the two gulleys, and crossed
under the sideways-growing tree.

“Almost there guys,” I announced to my half-witted friends.

Soon enough we reached the fallen log, trudging through the remaining vibrant herbs and grasses in our
drenched shoes. Jacob and Jordan were a bit nervous to cross the creek on the fallen log, which surprised me. I as-
sured them we had crossed the thin, rotting log a trillion times. I hopped the cliff onto the log and sarcastically pre-
tended to be careful, by holding my arms out and slowly putting each foot in front of the last. I lost my humorous
mood after I noticed there was no reaction.

From the middle of the log I nagged, “Come on, g…” SLIP!!!
What happened, I thought, as I faded in and out of consciousness? My eyes eased open, and the bright sum-
mer day came back to me. I felt dizzy, woozy, and my head was throbbing. My feet had been unbearably uncomfort-
able with mud, rocks, and pebbles wedged into the soaked, ten-pound pair of Adidas Sambas. I had been going too
fast. Ouch. Aw man, my head. As I examined myself for further injury, I found leaves, rocks, and mud, tangled in my
now, literally, dirty blond hair. My hair was like the forest floor in a jungle with endless waste thrust upon it. I was
trying to retrace my steps and find the cause for my awful accident.

What did I do wrong? I had made it through the new death trap, the creek, a billion times before. I soon real-
ized I fell because of my soaked, slimy sneakers, a small misstep due to my laziness. MOAN! My head killed. The sun
in the center of the deep blue sky was playing hide-and–go-seek with me through the rugged tree tops.

Then I remembered Jacob and Jordan who had neglected to ask a simple, “Are you okay?” or to help their
battered, baffled buddy. What great people to bring with me on this unexpectedly dangerous trip. I started feeling a
little better even though my head still had the sensation of exploding into three million pieces.

Then Jacob spoke up, “Do we keep going?” he stupidly stated.

If I would have felt a little better, he would have had a big red spot on his face shaped like my hand. They sat
there just like puppies that slightly tilt their heads when they are confused. I made an attempt to stand up. To my
surprise I didn’t fall down in the creek again.

I stuttered, “Give me a minute, and then I’ve got to go back.”

I told them to follow the creek back, and I would take the cliff over the deep part of the water that had previ-
ously forced us to take the trail. They started heading back, and I turned, head throbbing, and started back towards
home. I came upon the deep spot, crawled under the cave ledge, and shakily grasped the roots that were running
down the cliff. I tried not to fall. My head was a fireworks on the fourth of July with the fuse getting shorter and
shorter. The climb soon came to a conclusion, and I met up with my friends. Our way back was even slower than the
way there.

I reached home and yelled up the stairs, “Mom, I fell.”

She raced down the stairs to help. I was fine except for a major headache and a horrible time cleaning my
hair.

So, I learned a few things. One, don’t walk down thin logs, high off the ground with soaked shoes. You will
fall, and it will hurt. Second, when you go on trips, even with a slight risk of danger, bring friends who will help, be-
cause my friends did nothing.
My heart pounded in my chest, my lungs aching from lack of oxygen. *How long was I underwater? Long enough to evade his watching eyes,* I prayed. *Surely he'd left by now.* I slipped and stumbled along the mossy green and gray pebbles in the flooded creek and crawled hands and knees through the weeds and poison ivy, making way too much noise for an easy escape. I paused for a second, squeezing my eyes tightly shut and shuddering to make my breath resume its normal pace. I lay sprawled on the grass, as still as my keyed up muscles would allow. A maple leaf fluttered down to my cheek; my eyes flew open, and he was upon me.

"Come on, Rachel, you're so incredibly slow, girl!" I shouted to her, giggling at how easily I surged up the hill. My sister never runs on command. The adrenaline pulsing through my body kept my feet dancing through the tall grass and trees, but Rachel, almost three years older than me, couldn't understand where my flightiness came from. I pondered at her lethargy while I waited for her to reach me at the top of the hill. She sauntered up the hill and delicately sat on the picnic table I was flitting around. I smiled as she brought her familiar smell with her: strawberry perfume.

"Leah, you know I didn't get much sleep last night," she complained.
"Ah yes, but you had all afternoon to catch up. Mom is probably the best dean we've ever had; she knows we need breaks from the kids. You had yours today and could've slept all afternoon," I gently reminded her.

Darkness had already settled over Camp MoCoMi more swiftly than I had imagined, and the unusually cool breeze had me shivering down to my toes. The spectacular view on top of the hill held my gaze as the fading sunbeams glowered gently on the western horizon. The maple trees rustled ostentatiously, begging me to climb them to the very tops of their branches, but Rachel controlled her inner child while I cannot. I remained on the ground with her, content for the time-being. She rose gracefully from the table and linked arms with me.

"Shall we?" I asked.
"We shall," she replied, just as I knew she would. I can almost always finish her sentences, but I usually give her the glory.

We stepped onto the gravel driveway that would eventually take us back to the chapel and the campfire site. My sister obviously had something on her mind, but I didn't inquire, as I was lost in my own thoughts. We walked along in companionable silence, recalling many memories that this church camp brought back: the chapel, the dorms, the rec room, the campfire, the sand volleyball court, the waterslides. We'd both been coming here every year since 1st grade, and I came even before that, when I was too little to go as a camper and our mother, now the dean of the 3rd and 4th grade week, would bring me along when she came as a counselor at Rachel's 1st and 2nd grade week. I loved this place, as did Rachel; Camp MoCoMi was our stronghold, our safe haven, where nothing could ever go wrong. *And yet,* I wondered.

At that moment Rachel spoke, bringing me out of my subconscious. "Hey, do you know who's going to-night?"

"What, out to the campfire?"
"Duh! Where else?"

"I'm not sure. Jordan should be there, and Cortney, Hannah, and Robbie. I think David and Nathan mentioned that they'd show up later, after the boys fell asleep in their dorm."

I glanced back at the distance we'd covered and then looked up to find that we'd made it back to the chapel. We stepped off of the rocky road and made our way along the route we always took to get to the campfire site, which was so near to the rest of the camp that people standing outside the chapel could practically hear you clear your throat by the campfire. The inescapable treeline all but sucked you in, and the sky was reduced to the size of a large cubicle. Seeing the moon was quite rare in itself, practically a phenomenon, at the campfire. The only part I liked about it was the journey there; a bridge had to be crossed over a creek, and the winding path gave me a sense of purpose and direction.
The usually quiet creek was bubbly with laughter today; heavy rains caused it to slightly flood and the water splashed happily around the many twists and turns of its course. We stepped onto the bridge and simultaneously looked over the railing.

"It's strange to hear the creek at night when we're unable to see it, don't you think?" Rachel idly mentioned.
"Yeah, I thought so too. I wonder how deep it is since it's all flooded out," I thought aloud.
"Robbie checked it out earlier and said it went up over his waist," she said.
My jaw dropped in shock. "The creek is never up past our ankles!"
She laughed and beckoned me forward. "Come on, I'll bet they ate all the marshmallows already. They probably think we got lost." She playfully tugged on the sleeve of my black jacket.
"Go on without me. Catching up won't be too hard," I teased.
She jokingly stuck out her tongue. "Well, if you say so. See you in a minute." She continued up the gravel path, glanced once behind me with eyes full of concern, then disappeared around the corner; once I found myself alone, the claustrophobia of the woods and infinite darkness weighed down on me. She couldn't have been more than fifteen feet away from me and already I couldn't see her. Thank God for the torches to light the way!

We should've brought flashlights, I scolded myself furiously.

Matthew and I were sitting cross-legged on the floor in the upstairs room of the chapel. He was like my big brother, very protective and playfully affectionate. We played cards and talked animatedly. He had the radio turned down low to a music station, but then the Emergency Alert buzzer started going off. He looked at it quizzically and leaned over to turn the volume up. I paused in the middle of our intense game of War and looked up to see why his confused face quickly turned to concern.

"What's going on?" I asked.
"Shh, listen," he said grimly.
I inclined my head to the radio: "--for Cole, Boone, Morgan, and Miller Counties. Again, this warning is for Cole, Boone, Morgan, and Miller counties. Corbin Poe, alias 'Boo', has escaped from the Algoa Correctional Center in Jefferson City. Poe, age 53, is 6'4" and has shaggy brown hair and facial hair, black eyes, and a hunch in his back. He escaped two days ago and has been sighted along local roads south of the city, wearing a red plaid shirt and blue jeans with excessive holes in them. Poe was arrested on charges of rape and first degree murder. He is known to be armed and dangerous. Poe was last seen by locals in the Eugene area and was carrying what appeared to be a dual blade axe. We remind our listeners that Poe is armed and dangerous. If you have any tips, call Crimestoppers or your local police. Again, Corbin Poe, age 53--" The man's grim voice switched off. My gaze flew to Matthew's eyes; his were tense with worry. He rose from the floor and muttered, "I'll go and tell your mom. She needs to know about this."

He disappeared from the room, and I was left to myself to brood over this newfound information. Matthew never came back to finish our card game. Matthew never came back at all....