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Missouri Youth Write

*Missouri Youth Write* is sponsored by the Missouri Association of Teachers of English (MATE). Prairie Lands Writing Project at Missouri Western State University joined together with MATE and the Missouri Writing Projects Network in June 2008 to form the Missouri Writing Region, a regional affiliate for the national Scholastic Writing Awards Contest, sponsored by The Alliance for Young Artists & Writers ([http://www.artandwriting.org/](http://www.artandwriting.org/)). The winning students’ writings from the Missouri Writing Region for the 2012 national Scholastic Writing Awards Contest comprise this edition of *Missouri Youth Write*.

Editor: Rebecca Dierking (rebeccadierking@yahoo.com)
Web Editor: Rachel Stancliff (rstancliff@missouriwestern.edu)
Assistant Editor: Eric Williams (ewilliams11@missouriwestern.edu)

This edition is available online at [http://www.missouriwestern.edu/mowriting/youth12.html](http://www.missouriwestern.edu/mowriting/youth12.html). For more information about the Missouri Region for the National Scholastic Contest, see [http://www.missouriwestern.edu/mowriting](http://www.missouriwestern.edu/mowriting).
this is what i meant when i said “goodbye”

i wish you:

1. halcyon days
just barely frosted
by the glacial breath of lurking winter
(i hope you sprawl in the fading emerald grass
until you are ready to get up
and bound across the sidewalk
snapping leaves’ brittle spines underfoot)

2. a girl with eyes
like the december skyline
on a cloudless night
and a laugh
like chimes
frolicking in the wind
(when you ask
“are you okay?”
she will say
“yes,”
trace the ridges of your knuckles,
and smile)

3. impromptu calls (only ever dialed
in the dead space
lodged between midnight and 3 a.m. from a number that almost seems familiar but not quite)
and letters
(coffee rings stamped on the crimped paper)
and cherry-red chalk
scrawled across asphalt driveways in july

and a speckled mirror
in which you frequently glimpse
your own smile
4. a shelf
lined with books and cards
and photos of boys and girls who i will never meet

(there's a picture in a cardboard box
crunched between your high school trophies
and childhood stuffed animals
and we're in it:

my lips divorced in a crescent moon,
your hand seeking
the plateau of my hip
when by accident
your fingers ghosted across my ribcage

i jumped

you warned
“don’t blink”

and the camera clicked)

(please keep the box)

5. a life
nestled in the space
between dream and reality
like warm bed sheets
molded to the angles of your body
in the moments before waking
but you never have to
(i wish you happiness)

**Suicide is always an upper-case event**

My aunt is not a prophet,
the spongy ridges of her spine
poorly suited
to the transmission
of heavenly messages on
otherworldly radio-waves.
Often I forget
that a quarter of a century ago,
she found a glazed glass ball
curving
against the calloused slopes
of her palms,
peering
at the velvety shadows
that twisted like a coarse braided rope.
Her father’s form
lurked within,
cloaked by an ache
that gnawed
on his ribcage
with needle-point teeth
before going after
his 63-year-old heart.

She did not know,
could not have -
but
in the rarely dusted
wrinkles
of her conscience,
a sticky cobweb
spun itself
into the shape
of a noose,
a phantom
of a future
she could not fathom:
her daddy,
slumping on the garage floor,
tangled
in a winding crimson string,
his mangled form
too brutally seized
for an open casket.
Sometimes I wonder how these people’s mirrors don’t break down from overuse. How the hours spent reflecting the same image over and over don’t leave jagged scratches or crack the shallow surface. Don’t the ego-shattering waves of insecurity leave their mark at all? Isn’t it exhausting to reiterate the same hollow message back at its owner morning noon and night?

Ava Parker
Mrs. Harris
English IV – Informative Essay
November 11, 2015

**Two Faced: The Truth Behind Artificial Cosmetic Facial Transplants**

The first twenty-five operations lasted approximately eighteen hours and required an elite and specific team of plastic surgeons, including an ear, nose, and throat specialist; two veteran anesthesiologists; an ophthalmologist; and a small army of surgical nurses. Recovery was extensive and agonizing, and despite the most careful cleaning and medication, rejection and/or infection struck almost a fourth of the time. The first week of healing was said to be a semi-conscious haze of deep ache and stabbing pains, and patients often had to be kept paralyzed to prevent writhing or screaming, which would ruin the results. The swelling went down completely after approximately a month and the bruising followed one to weeks later. Ideally, the patient could eat and speak by this time, but an unfortunate few were not able to chew food for two or three months after the surgery. Specialists often theorize that if an individual had undergone the original version of this procedure (or the “Primitive 25” as the patients are commonly referred to) involuntarily, he or she might not have survived the after process. But the pioneers of this surgery pushed through the pain with tunnel-vision and perseverance, their eyes-of-the-tiger on the finish line. Each one was motivated, driven, and captivated by the same glorious thing – the promise of an all new face.

The idea of artificial cosmetic facial transplants (ACFTs) introduced itself quietly – with whispers between fascinated young women and theoretical analyses in medical circles. Soon the topic was discussed on a morning talk show in which two plastic surgeons examined the ethics of otherwise healthy people being offered the option of personally designing their own faces. Within the week, major news stations were covering suspected cases of transplants and tabloids flashed unsightly faces across their covers, claiming them to be the “before” shots of beautiful celebrities. The first legitimate transplant, however, began on January 3, 2012, and continued well into the following day. The entire event was followed closely by a documentary team that would later run the footage on a widely-watched health channel. The patient was twenty-four year old Angelica Haddon, aspiring model and daughter of Michael Haddon, CFO of New York City’s most successful law firm and multimillionaire. In an excerpt from the
documentary footage, newly exquisite Haddon explained to the world what the surgery meant to her.

“Since I was pretty much born, I’ve had to live knowing that I’m nothing special to look at,” Haddon murmured in shuddering tears as she averted her gaze from the camera. “I mean, my eyes were tiny and beady and completely uninteresting, my nose was huge and hideous, my mouth was thin, not at all plump or luscious, and my cheekbones were so low they might as well have not been there. Don’t even get me started on my complexion.” She paused again, her smooth and artfully chiseled jaw quivering. “Growing up, I always knew that I wasn’t different or special. Kids were so mean. I’ve been called average, ordinary, and even okay. I would walk into a room and no one’s head would turn. Nobody would stare. My parents were so supportive of me and my struggle – they’ve put thousands of dollars into makeup, skin treatments, and my hair, but nothing could hide what I was. And that was a true victim of mediocre genetics. But then I heard about this miraculous surgery that could change my life – no more blending into the background. Gone are my days of being in the fiftieth percentile. Finally, there’s a way for people like me to become strikingly beautiful and I’m so grateful. Yes, the pain was terrible…I mean, God, I’ve never felt anything like that in my life.” Her eyes drained empty and she stopped talking for several seconds, her face unreadable. She snapped her head back sharply and resumed, “But it was one hundred percent worth it. These doctors are doing a wonderful thing.”

Angelica’s surgical team was headed by Dr. Hank Alanbaugh, creator of the synthetic material used in ACFTs and general mad scientist. Alanbaugh, or “Hankenstein” as the media has since dubbed him, personally receives upwards of $400,000 per transplant. It is rumored that he also performs the surgery privately (that is, off the record) for a steeply raised cost. Speculation that parents have hired Alanbaugh to ensure the future good looks of their young children prompted an extensive malpractice investigation by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The query turned up no results, yet government health regulators have been quoted, saying that the case remains open for further inquiry. In addition, in contrast to the excruciating battle fought by the Primitive 25, both the surgery and recovery time have decreased dramatically so that patients are now only in the hospital for two weeks at the most. The procedure itself takes only three hours. Alanbaugh has declined to comment on his seemingly miraculous change in technique, but in the documentary of Haddon’s operation, he eagerly described to the cameras how he stumbled upon the idea of ACFTs.

“When I was just a med student cutting up cadavers, it occurred to me that with all the transplants we doctors perform – hearts, livers, eyes, all those – everything had to be real. Organic. We were miserably behind in the field of synthetic organ engineering. But no longer! While all I have done is create synthetic facial tissue, I still consider it a medical milestone. I mean, I’m creating faces. Functioning, magnificent, faces. But that’s not all that goes into an ACFT. After I remove the inferior, that is, original, face, I do a bit of sculpting and molding, just like an artist would. I’m a regular Michelangelo,” he chuckled lightly. “I give my patients perfect foreheads, high cheekbones, and strong jaws. That way, when I place the superior face, the transformation is complete and dramatic. It’s really quite amazing. Can I produce other synthetic organs? No. That’s simply not possible. In my studies, I have found that artificial facial tissue is just at the far reaches of modern science. It may, conceivably, someday, be possible to modify my tissue to use on other areas of the body, but not anytime soon. Certainly
not in my lifetime. But don’t worry, there are a plethora of homely victims who need me– I don’t have the time to use my work to benefit anyone else!”

Three years later, ACFTs have become increasingly safe, successful, and popular – so much so that most Americans can say they know someone who has had one. These *Humans Version 2.0* are not instantly recognizable – Alanbaugh prides himself on the fact that it is difficult to tell whether his masterpieces are naturally stunning or if their faces have been remodeled via his scalpel. Patients seek out Alanbaugh from all over the world and he typically performs multiple operations in a single day. As the intricate details of the procedure remain known only to Alanbaugh and his surgical team, he is staggeringly and increasingly wealthy.

Nobody is really sure what the rapidly increasing amount of artificial faces means for society– many religious groups are thoroughly opposed to the concept in its entirety, proclaiming it immoral, unnatural, and ungodly, while simultaneously the ACFT seems to be the most popular trend to hit America’s youth. Personally, I’ll keep my face just the way it is– no scalpels necessary.

Ava set the final copy of her essay on Mrs. Harris’ desk, being careful to place the stapled pages face down. Even though her essay was almost exclusively unbiased, with only the slightest touch of personal opinion in the conclusion, she felt self-conscious about the thesis she had chosen. Of the three hundred and fifty students in her high income private school’s senior class, fifteen girls had undergone an ACFT. Once plain and homely, the young women now seemed to shine as they walked down the hall, a triumphant smirk eternally perched on their beautiful mouths. Ava caught a glimpse of her own reflection in the classroom mirror and felt a familiar pang of uncertainty as she took in her muddy brown eyes and skin tone that was just a bit too pink and dotted with pimples.

No, she told herself fiercely, you don’t have to be perfect. Stop worrying about how you look and think about something important. She squared her shoulders and left the classroom with her head held high.

Dr. Hank Alanbaugh, M.D., perched in a panicked half standing, half sitting position over his personalized mahogany desk, rocked from foot to foot nervously as he sifted frantically through mounds of paperwork. A bead of sweat rolled down his wrinkled, pockmarked temple as he pawed at and tossed stacks of forms with increasing intensity. Patient #536, #2078...how did those files end up next to each other? Where in God’s name was #26? At that moment, the intercom beeped and he flew back in his chair, smacking his knees on the underside of his desk.

“Damn it, Erin. You scared me. What is it?”

“Sorry, Doctor, but they need you in the ER right now. It’s a patient of yours. Number...let’s see. Number twenty six. Dr. Alanbaugh, it sounds...it’s not good. You should hurry.”

Sweat now drenched Alanbaugh’s shirt, and his breathing was ragged and irregular. He pounded his fist on the desk once, cursing furiously. He was ruined, over. He had performed so many surgeries...and now his creations would be flooding emergency rooms all over the world, in perfect chronological order. Patient twenty-six, twenty-seven, and then twenty-eight, all the
way to patient 10,022, whose face he had “perfected” just that morning. Alanbaugh sank into his thousand dollar chair, trembling. He couldn’t help it; he began to sob like a child, his face twisting in ugly red knots. Tears splashed onto a pen and paper lying on the desk, waiting to be used. It took him twenty minutes to write the note. As he dropped the shaking pen, his hand slid down and found the hidden drawer nestled under the desk. He popped the compartment, and still convulsing with sobs, pulled out his handgun, bought only days prior and still unused. As he lifted the pistol, unable to look at it, his cries quieted and he took a deep, shuddering breath. A slow smile spread across his wet mouth, and he began to laugh as the gun came towards his temple. Ironic how the last face I will destroy will be my own.

Ava sat in quiet horror as Mrs. Harris handed her the essay she had turned in almost nine months before. So much had happened to her school, to the world, that life, including grading papers, had been put on hold. She winced when she saw the title that claimed to know “The Truth Behind Artificial Cosmetic Facial Transplants.” The lie on the page was so glaringly obvious now; it made her sick to think she had once proclaimed to anyone who would listen that she knew all about the godforsaken surgery. The only mark on the entire composition was a single, sloppy “A.” From her desk, Mrs. Harris made eye contact with her for a split second, just long enough for Ava to know that she shared her bewildered horror. Ava kept her eyes trained on her teacher, avoiding the glare from the empty chair to her left that used to hold Cameron Hillyard, whose funeral had taken place a month ago. Across the room, Emily LaRue’s desk also sat conspicuously vacant. She had died two weeks after Cameron.

To whoever finds this,

You should know that I am sorry. The media spoke the truth the whole time, I really am a monster. A sick, mad, dark monster. But I’m not the only twisted one.

Sometimes I wonder how these people’s mirrors don’t break down from overuse. How the hours spent reflecting the same image over and over don’t leave jagged scratches or crack the shallow surface. Don’t the ego-shattering waves of insecurity leave their mark at all? Isn’t it exhausting to reiterate the same hollow message back at its owner morning, noon, and night?

My patients sickened me. How they spent hours obsessing over every detail of their reflection, and then came to me: have each flaw cut out. They were so vapid, so wildly shallow...for a while; the money was enough to keep me going. The first twenty five surgeries were fine. I gave them the perfect face, I took their money by the ton, and I moved on. I blocked out the images of their exposed skulls, so vulnerable, so ugly. But something changed during surgery twenty-six. That girl’s face lay before me, completely vulnerable. I snapped. “Hankenstein,” they call me. It fits. I performed that operation in a state of mind I can’t describe with words. Leaving the operating room, I didn’t even know what had happened. What I had done differently. My team hadn’t noticed a thing. Or had they? They certainly kept their mouths shut. Then again, don’t bite the hand that feeds you...all I knew was I felt better, and the patient seemed fine. I remember the girl. Her name was Shannon Ayres, and she recovered beautifully. She looked like an angel at the end of it – I remember the look on her perfect face as she thanked me, so grateful. “Maybe I didn’t actually botch the surgery,” I thought. “Maybe it’s just my mind playing tricks on
me.” I performed four thousand nine hundred and six surgeries after that. I went mad each time and had no memory of the operation afterwards. I denied what was happening to me. I convinced myself everything was fine. On second thought, maybe they should call me Dr. Jekyll. Or maybe they should just call me a murderer.

I killed that girl. I killed all of them. I finally brought myself to watch the tape of Shannon Ayres’ operation, and there it was. An unmistakable twitch in my hand, a glimmer of the monster behind my eyes. A single missing stitch. A needle prick in a hot air balloon. To the rest of the world, they look flawless – but I know the truth. They’re rotting under that flawless skin. Their bone, muscles, all of it is necrotic. Shannon died today. I’m sure it was horribly painful but somewhat short – all of that dead tissue flooding her bloodstream. The rest will follow suit. And so will I.

Dr. Hank Alanbaugh, M.D.
Rashid’s mother, Abigail, was fair-skinned and blue-eyed. She had been raised in Northern Wisconsin; her parents were devout Baptists. But she wore the hijab. This was because Rashid’s father, who came to America on a student visa and never left, was an Egyptian Muslim and wouldn’t marry outside his faith. I met Abigail—and, more important, Rashid—when I was six years old, and I kept thinking: She must love him so much. To me, this woman was the epitome of lovely. Yet she draped herself with her differences and wore her beauty like a burden.

The kindergarten class where I first encountered Rashid was the second one I attended in four months—my family was in the process of moving uptown, from our rental condo to a respectable split-level. I use the word _uptown_ very loosely here; Alkali, Ohio, was hardly any kind of town at all. It was a disconcertingly small—and slightly inbred—community of June Cleaver-esque mothers and fathers who worked at the electrical company thirty minutes down the highway. It wasn’t the sort of place one came across latte-skinned boys who brought explosive pills of tart pomegranate seeds to school in an Iron Man lunch box or beautiful women who were losing their fairytale-blonde hair because it never saw the sun. I doubt there was a mosque within one hundred miles of Alkali. The entire family was a curiosity.

Rashid and I sat next to each other in Ms. Ailey’s class; she was one of those alphabetical types who matched names with faces more readily if the faces were placed in a recognizable pattern. Adams next to Anderson, Shalir next to Sheehan, and so forth.

For the first three days in Ms. Ailey’s class, I was communally ignored. The light that dripped in from the windows, sliced to splinters by the yellowed blinds, seemed to pass through me—through the vacant planes of my face; my freckles and my flat nose and my vein-colored eyes. I’ve never been very visible. On the fourth day, though, the dark-eyed boy who would become my best friend tapped me on the shoulder. I turned to look at him.

“You’re sitting where Liam used to sit,” Rashid said. I blinked, startled. “Liam cried all the time and couldn’t write the words on the board. The teacher said Liam was behind and had to go to a different class. But Liam’s mom got mad, and now Liam goes to St. Elizabeth’s. You sit where Liam used to sit, so everyone thinks you can’t write the words on the board, either.”

I sniffed, taken aback. “I can write,” I said simply. To prove it, I wrote my name on the backside my coloring sheet, with a crayon called “cerulean.” _Katherine Sheehan_. Ms. Ailey had been addressing me as _Katie_, which was entirely my mother’s doing. I was named for my paternal grandmother, whom she—my mother—couldn’t stand. I liked the way _Katherine_ rolled over my lips, though, soft and regal, a disc of hard candy melting in my mouth.

Rashid smiled and selected a different crayon—“chartreuse.” He slowly spelled out, _Rashid Shalir_.

Later that day, near the swings, Rashid asked me to marry him. I said no—I was six; boys had cooties. He took this in stride, nodding solemnly, and then asked me to be his best friend.

I said yes.
Having a best friend, when you're small, is uncomplicated. We told ghost stories and swapped lunches (I developed an extensive international palate) and pretended to be spies or superheroes at recess. On one occasion, we stole my mother's kitchen scissors and gave me a choppy, irregular crew cut to match his. We wanted to be alike. It was simple and innocent, unlike my older sisters' turbulent friendships, in which everything was a competition and nobody ever seemed to win.

The year was 2001.

*****

I visited Rashid's house only once. It smelled heavy and dark, like a sandstorm. A special room, facing Mecca, was set aside for salat—one of the pillars of Muslim faith, a five-times-a-day prayer ritual. Mr. Shalir, an awkward sort of man with heavy eyelids and light footsteps, read the newspaper in the living room. A cassette tape played from the stereo in the corner, issuing sounds of pulsing bongo drums and whining flutes. I was endlessly fascinated; behind the Shalirs' front door, there existed an entirely different universe than the one I knew. I felt like I was holding something small and fragile with an unsteady grip, knowing that, sooner or later, I would falter, and whatever it was would shatter at my feet. Often, I had dreams in which I stood inside a room made of windows. People pitched stones at me, and my hands bled unceasingly when I tried to scoop up the flakes of broken glass.

*****

In first grade, three things collapsed in quick succession: my friendship with Rashid, two towers, and the illusion that we as a nation were safe and impenetrable.

It began on the first day of school, the first day I saw Rashid after he'd spent the summer with his grandparents in Wisconsin. With my friend gone, I played with the Triplets—Mary, Sarah, and Erica Widmann—who lived down the block. Their mother had a ludicrous habit of dressing them identically, and it took me forever to learn to tell who was who.

My butchered hair had grown out enough for my mother to tie it back in a sleek yellow ribbon. I stood on the playground, a rose petal pink backpack strung over my shoulders. The first wisps of autumn were beginning to blow through the air, but the sun still baked the metal slides and swings to a dangerous temperature. A group of boys compared their knots of scabs under the fragmented shade of the jungle gym.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Rashid standing on the lip of the playground, beckoning to me. For a reason that wasn't immediately clear to me, I ignored him. Maybe the reasons would never be clear; or, even worse, maybe there weren't any reasons. Barely realizing what I was doing, I let my feet carry me in the direction of the Triplets, and the elaborate double Dutch game they had started on the blacktop. Rashid had been my first and greatest friend, but after having an entire two months to forget his round eyes and tufty black hair, he just seemed so different when I saw him that day. Isolated in his skin and identity. Foreign.

Looking back, I find myself with the belief that appreciation for such inequality is the only thing we learn in our first years of schooling. Not inequality, necessarily, as it relates to race or origin—just the many ways in which people can be above or below their fellows. I had teachers who spent hours lecturing on the importance of coloring inside the lines, teachers who threatened to hold me back a grade because of the odd way I gripped my pencil, teachers who assigned us numbers to stand beside our first names. Little kids are born with a shard of
something primitive and whole and unfettered—an awareness that transcends and disregards the thorny path of supposed to. Elementary school is when we start to believe that there are rules for being human. They slide this belief into our pockets, along with the notion that some people are less than others because of the way they act or think or feel. Although they claim to do the opposite, they— whoever they are; that ambiguous and omnipresent they— make us all into the Triplets: identical and featureless and smooth. Standing there, on the first day of the first grade, my thought process wasn’t quite that sophisticated. But the formative bones of an epiphany were there. Suddenly, I found myself questioning my place in the elaborate hierarchy that is childhood.

We walked away. Maybe we had grown up, grown apart, grown tired of each other. That’s just how it happened—or, at least, it’s what I remember.

*****

I didn’t speak to Rashid for two weeks. Our falling-out wasn’t as dramatic as it would have been if we were older. I played hopscotch with the girls who sat near me in class, and Rashid joined the group of scruffy boys who organized pick-up kickball games in the empty field beside the jungle gym.

Until the second Tuesday of September 2001.

I had been struggling through an addition worksheet when the classroom phone sounded. Miss Mattey, a young, slim woman with colorless eyes and a nervous mouth, answered it, and I watched the blood slither from her face. Alkali Elementary was going into lockdown. Her speech was frenzied, spilling out of her like a handful of pebbles, as she addressed us.

“Boys and girls,” she said, but then her mouth hung open, wordless. I think she may have been just as confused as I was. The principal had been on the phone. There was a national emergency, he said, and Miss Mattey needed to escort her class to the gymnasium where the younger grades were gathering. “Please line up by the door.”

There was some jostling. A girl named Vicky Skaggs shouted that it was her turn to be line-leader, but Miss Mattey didn’t care; she simply shuffled us into some sort of formation and herded us down the hallway. Other teachers were doing the same. No one spoke; words had deserted us somehow. The dirge of our footsteps resounded against the high ceilings and art-bedecked walls. Rashid walked directly in front of me in line. We glanced at each other, a camaraderie of unawareness spanning between our eyes. There was no fear, no panic. Five hundred miles away, in New York City, indescribable pandemonium reigned; screams became a symphony and ashes fell like snowflakes. Alkali, though, remained silent. There was only a shallow kind of curiosity.

On the way to the gym, we passed the sixth grade classrooms. They were watching the unfolding coverage on a small television set someone had brought in from the teachers’ lounge. I caught a glimpse—bloated smoke, rioting car alarms, a speck of a man leaping from the window of a crumpling building. Quickly, I walked on, feeling small and light as a gasp. Rashid’s eyes found mine again.

“Rashid,” I whispered hollowly.

“I know,” he replied. But he didn’t. Neither of us did.

That’s the last thing I remember about him.
I must have seen him sometime after that—in class or around town. Maybe we even spoke to each other or played on the same team for dodge ball. Those aren’t the things I bothered to keep with me. Instead, I have his bottomless eyes, like bitter chocolate and an understanding of separation.

*****

Rashid’s family left Alkali three weeks later. In a clumsy, misguided attempt at patriotism, someone had launched a brick through their front window. Written on its surface, in paint red as blood, was one word—Traitor. A man spat at Abigail as she walked down the street and shouted, “Towelhead!” Mr. Shalir had been a legal American for fifteen years; his wife and son were born here—but no one cared. They needed an effigy; they needed to spoon the blame onto someone.

As for me, I never really comprehended what was happening. The word “terrorist” wasn’t in my vocabulary. I didn’t understand why the yellow ribbons were suddenly around trees instead of in my hair; I didn’t understand why Miss Mattey, whose little sister had been living in New York, trying to make it as a financial executive, had been replaced by a sallow-faced substitute; I didn’t understand what it meant to be at war. The world in which I lived had ducked beneath the cover of a thick screen, and nothing could break through.

*****

We meet millions of people within our lifetimes—we speak to them; we help them along; we change them. We fall in and out of love with them, and we give them little gifts of knowledge and understanding. We experience with each other and laugh and cry with each other. Humans are not meant to be singular; we’re what we are because of the ones we meet—sometimes in spite of them. All those people; all that interaction; all those moments, but most of them don’t matter. Those who aid us most are the ones that we’ll probably never see again.

Sonata in the Key of Bea: A Eulogy

“Or discendiam qua giù nel cieco mondo,”
cominciò il poeta tutto smorto.
“Io sarò primo, e tu sarai secondo.”
--Dante’s Inferno, Canto IV

I.

I would like to begin by asking you not to listen. My shoes pinch my feet as I walk across the stage, toward my sanctuary, and I remember how we always wore boots, because even at school and at Mass, we were just counting the seconds until we could get back into the woods. Back where the ground tried to trick us and it was too dangerous to learn things by doing them, we had to be smarter than ourselves and anticipate our mistakes.

“Venever you’re ready, Mr. Andrasko,” says Professor Mendeloff, a Russian man with shiny lips and hair that defies basic laws of gravity. He assesses me sleepily, sacks of skin dropping all around his eyes. I crack my knuckles, beginning to play.

As soon as my hands touch the keys, I feel l’esprit de l’escalier. French. No English equivalent. The way one feels when a conversation ends but there is still so much left to
say. That’s what it’s like without you, because there are always more unsaid than said things. There are always those botched chords or notes you just skip in your eagerness to reach the crux of the movement.

I hate what you’ve made the music become, especially because I chose it for you. For years, I planned to study superstring theory, but I ditched that dream, just like you ditched me, and took a music scholarship to a school just two hours away from Alkali, because you liked who I was when I played the piano.

You haunt every note, your drunken half-smile lingering in every chord. Before you left, I had such concentration. Now, I ignore legatos and decrescendos, pounding through symphonies in autopilot, too distracted by memories to care when my fingers slip and a wrong note pierces the auditorium. Plural: auditoria.

II.

We met in our freshman year of high school, after my accident. When I returned, the world was brighter than I remembered it—not that I remembered it very well. In the months after the crash, I had to relearn the words for simple things—spoon, bracelet, jealousy. But I still knew who I was. When I woke up, they asked me my name, and I told them without a scrap of hesitation. I didn’t forget Robinson Crusoe or David Letterman or John 3:16.

Your parents sent an arrangement of Gerber daisies, even though they had met my mom and stepfather only twice, at parties where people discussed the political situation in Nepal and ate bite-size shrimp-quiche off crisscrossing trays.

I guess I owe everything good in my life to Ms. Cortez, our biology teacher at Incarnate Heart Day School. She gave you to me and asked me to teach you photosynthesis. Instead of tutoring you in the library, though, I had to tutor you in the detention room, under the pious glare of Sister Mary Augustine. You’d broken, like, eight simultaneous dress code rules or something and then pissed off the nuns by asking if you’d get your name on the wall for such an impressive feat.

You weren’t kidding.

I taught you autotrophs and pigments. You asked me why your hair was red.

“Because,” I began, “our eyes perceive visible light.”

And I talked about the atmosphere and Raleigh scattering and the electromagnetic spectrum until you cut me off. “So, what you’re saying is that I scatter light? I’m just sitting here, scattering all kinds of light?”

Yes.

III.

Alkali, Ohio, is surrounded by woods on three sides and Lake Erie on the fourth. Somewhere in those woods, a few miles from your house, a wide fissure interrupts the ground, where a strong river once surged through the forest. Spanning that fissure—which we nicknamed the Gash after a while—was a long, flat bridge. The bridge. Backbreak Bridge.

About a month after our first tutoring session, you told me to put on some boots and brought me to the bridge to meet your friends. Apparently, abandoned bridges are the place for rebellious rich kids to hang out, drink wine, and discuss literature.
This is exactly what your friends were doing as we approached. A loose semicircle of kids passed around *The Great Gatsby* and a truly sensational merlot. I recognized most of them from school but never would have guessed any of them would be your friends. There was Autumn Schapiro, accompanied as always by her Polaroid camera. Stan Kaikati, who played the clarinet and took AP calculus, even though he was a freshman, like us. Yardley Fisk, a hulking JV linebacker with embarrassed, effeminate hand gestures.

Bethany Garcia. She waved, absolutely trashed.

“This is Daniel,” you said. “He knows something about everything. Daniel, say something about bridges.”

Taken aback, I grappled for a response. “Of all the bridges in Central Park, no two of them are alike.”

The group seemed impressed. I sat down, joining a discussion of whether Gatsby really loved Daisy. The consensus: no, but he thought he did. I played devil’s advocate and defended Gatsby.

“Isn’t believing you love someone the same thing as actually loving them?” I said, taking a swig of the merlot. “You can’t judge someone else’s love by your own standards.”

That won me some approval.

When the sun went down, the group started wandering home, each taking a different well-worn path. You pulled me to the side, leaning in so close I could smell the drunkenness on your breath. “I know this probably goes without saying,” you said, “but don’t go running your mouth about this place. We’re sort of an exclusive group.”

Grinning, I bumped your shoulder with mine as we retraced our steps through the woods. “I’ve never had a secret before,” I whispered.

You looked at me strangely. “Isn’t it wonderful?”

IV.

February, junior year. We were in my stepfather’s car, going sixty-three miles an hour, speeding toward that concrete jungle where dreams are made of. I drove. You smoked. Singing “Start Spreading the News” in a ridiculous Billy Joel impression, I tried to make you laugh. But you just slouched, unresponsive, bent toward your cig as if conserving warmth, the tip of your nose red and cold. There was a white flag waving in your eyes, and I wish I had pulled the car over right there and held you until you held me back. I wish I had asked what was wrong, even if you would have told me you didn’t know.

Instead, I kept up a one-sided conversation, babbling about Monty Python and Marcel Duchamp. The soundtrack to *A Chorus Line* played in surround-sound, and you sang along to only one line: “We did what we had to do.”

“He was an artist,” I said, referring to Duchamp. “He took everyday objects, like urinals and snow shovels, and told people they were art. He called them “ready-mades.” A lot of people thought it was a load of shit. And a lot of other people thought he was trying to see the beauty in unbeautiful things. He wasn’t. He was trying to see the ordinariness in ordinary things.”

For reasons unknown, that roused you. “I like that,” you said. “If you try to make everything beautiful, you forget that some things actually are.”
And then I realized that you were crying. At first, it was just a few tears, lolling down your sharp cheekbones, dripping pathetically onto your shirt. Then you rolled down the window and flicked away your cig, burying your face in your hands. Panicked, I watched your shoulders jerk up and down; I heard the muffled, unabashed sounds of sobbing.

I did pull the car over then, but I didn’t touch you, because I stupidly assumed I would have years to touch you and look at you and maybe, one day, tell you I loved you.

I said your name, cautiously, all illusions about you shattered once and for all. You were not the lovely, bubbly freshman girl who scattered light and fought daily with the nuns. Maybe you had never been her. Maybe she was someone you invented, the way James Gatz invented Jay Gatsby, because your life was not what you wanted it to be and you thought someone else could live it better.

We were all different people in the woods. What really never occurred to me was that you—specifically, personally you—had the capacity to take on a different persona for every occasion. I’d never met someone who could destroy and reinvent herself whenever it struck her fancy. You could be anything you needed. And I thought that was the saddest thing in the world.

“Thank you for letting me wear your coat when it was cold,” you said. “Thank you for helping me pass Biology and teaching me how to play Chopsticks. Thank you for knowing things about twentieth-century dada and the creation of the universe. Thank you for running away with me without really asking any questions.”

Your face was flushed and slack, and I was afraid. A confession: as much as I love you, you scare me to death. You were looking at me, your invincible eyes begging me for something I simultaneously couldn’t name and couldn’t give. I had nothing to give you, really, and we both knew it. No one had anything to give you. No one could ever make you truly happy.

“You’re welcome. But… why…”

You shook your head, fatigued and bottomlessly sad. “We did a terrible thing, Daniel. But I’m still thankful to have you.”

“We ran away. We’re going back. It’s not a terrible thing.”

Your whole body convulsed as you began crying again. “You know what I mean! It was an accident, but we could have done something.” You gave a phlegmy cough and sighed. “Do you ever dream about it? Do you ever watch her sink… into the water… oh God! I didn’t mean…”

We sat in that car, on the shoulder of a highway, reeking of smoke. To calm you down, I told you, no. I never thought about it. I never dreamed of her dark hair spreading like a Chinese fan around her peaceful face as it met the cold water of Lake Erie. I never grew sick thinking of how the bricks we’d tied to her ankles tugged her down. I never wished I had talked to her one last time—asked her what cartoons she watched as a kid; asked how her parents met; asked what her fucking middle name was, because I didn’t even know.

You and I had not killed her. But we could have given her a different ending. You and I. Plural: we.

“We did what we had to do. Right?”

Right?
V.

Exactly two weeks after Bethany died, it snowed eight inches. School wasn’t called, because school is never called in northern Ohio, but we skipped. We bundled ourselves up, coiling multiple scarves around our necks and pulling fur-lined boots—always boots—onto our feet. Then, we walked.

The woods looked different during the day: less secretive, less special. Planks of sunlight broke through the trees and lay tranquilly on the shimmering, untouched ground. You walked carefully, trying not to break through all eight inches of the ashy snow, because you didn’t want to see the mud underneath.

When we came to the clearing with the bridge, I looked over at you. The cold had beaten a raw flush into your cheeks and drawn tears to the corners of your eyes.

At least, that’s what you would have wanted me to think.

“We should go down there,” you said, and, before I had time to warn you about ice and erosion and post-traumatic stress disorder, you clambered into the Gash. Mostly because of the magnetic pull between us, I followed.

Faltering occasionally, we picked our way down the rocky slope. You reached the bottom before I did. Our boots sank into the dregs of not-quite-frozen water lingering among the rocks. Snowy silence cloaked us. We stood on the spot where a girl’s life had ended only fourteen days previously.

I liked the way your hands looked in your mittens. I liked the way your mittened hand fit perfectly in my gloved one. And when you began to cry, and you wiped the tears away with back of your hand, I liked the way the salty wetness of them made the yarn smell like first grade.

“Daniel,” you said, sniffling. “You were dead once, right?”

Blurry memories of the crash swirled in my mind. I nodded. “For one-hundred and twelve seconds.”

A frigid wind ripped through the clearing, rousing the snow on the rocks around us. You said, “How does it feel?”

Biting my chapped bottom lip, I deliberated for a moment. So many people had asked me, but I wanted to make sure I gave you the right answer. “It feels quiet,” I said. “Like this. Like right now. It feels quiet as snow.”

“Was there a bright light?” You weren’t kidding.

“Yeah,” I said, hardly any sound in my voice. “Yeah, there was a bright light. But it wasn’t an actual, literal bright light.” I sighed. “It was the way you looked in that white dress last spring—the way the spotlight rushed over you as you came down the stairs on your father’s arm... but you shone brighter than it. It was the way you waved when they said your name and shouted, ‘Hi, Society!’” You opened your mouth to point out the obvious flaw in this description, but I continued. “And, yeah, I know cotillion was two whole years after I died, but that doesn’t matter, because it was also this: it was my grandfather’s pocket watch. The face was all cracked, and it couldn’t keep time, but he still carried it as, like, a reminder of time. That’s what it was. Do you remember it? Maybe you do. Because I think you were there. I think you have always been with me, through the assemble and disassemble of it all. Through all the blizzards and the bridges and the balls.”

A wistful smile touched your face. “God,” you said, “I wish I was in love with you.”
You looked cold, so I unzipped my coat and draped it around your shoulders.

VI.

Our friend Bethany fell from Backbreak Bridge on Halloween night in our junior year of high school. It was nobody’s fault. We had all been drinking, and we were all freaked out from playing with your Ouija board.

“Did you know,” I said, “that the word ‘Ouija’ is a combination of the French and German words for ‘yes’?”

No one cared. Time fell apart.

She slipped. I watched you watch her. Then, we all scattered.

Her scream stabbed through the air around us, cut short with a gurgle and a hideous crunch. Stumbling as our boots struck rocks and roots, we ran, each in our own direction.

Another scream gutted me—Autumn. She was dressed as a nun, which was supposed to be ironic or something, and she had tripped on the hem of her habit and fallen to the ground. You shouted for us all to stop, and we did. Panting, I dropped to my knees.

I lost track of how long we waited there. After a while, we heard Autumn, praying for Beth in a language we did not know.

“Yit'gadal v'yit'kdash sh'mei raba.”

I could see you through the trees. You stood, your chin cocked, still as porcelain. Your expression was that of a chess player contemplating her next move.

“...Y'hei sh'mei raba m'varakh l'alam ul'al'mei al'maya...”

I whispered your name. “Bea.”

“B'rikh hu.”

Blessed is He.

I remembered the silence and the light of death. I remembered the first breath I took as I was reborn into the world, slow and poignant, like the first note in an empty auditorium. And with perfect clarity, I remembered your hand in mine, both in the snowy clearing and in the quiet place where I spent one-hundred and twelve unbeating heartbeats.

You were there, weren’t you?

VII.

Exactly two weeks after we graduated from high school, you followed Bethany off the bridge. You left me a note, one line long: Something good will come from all of this.

I didn’t cry when they put you in the ground, because crying never came naturally to me. Not even when Beth fell. Not even when you insisted we hide the body, to keep us all out of trouble.

Daniel knows something about everything. No. I don’t. I know nothing about living in a world you decided wasn’t worth the trouble.

But here is what I do know: I know the distance between two points is a line. I know how to play Beethoven and Tchaikovsky and Madonna. I know musicals, the difference between lie and lay, three inappropriate jokes, and how to waltz. I know things about twentieth-century dada and the creation of the universe. I know how to hold my liquor and how to hold you. I know that something good will come from all this, because I have seen that something good comes after this. And I know I love you— I love you in the present tense.
Gasping as if coming up from underwater, I stop playing. Professor Mendeloff jumps a little in his seat in reaction to the sudden silence. Pulse ripping through my veins, I stumble to my feet, knocking over the bench in the process.

"Mr. Andrasko?" Mendeloff calls, clearly shocked. "Are you... finished?"

I turn to face him, nodding. Then, remembering my cotillion training and my basic performance etiquette, I twitch forward in an awkward bow, pry my lips open and say, "Thank you."

**all that remains: a poetry collection**

**La Ciudad**

"No!"
The word; the savage removal of silence,
With ragged edges sketching the contours
of where it previously reclined.
A thump of youth, capped by the foam of rebellion.
Trapped below the crust for all this time,
I am finally resisting—*am I finally resisting?*
Too long, my voice has lain dormant
in my gut, as an unused wad of speech.
But now—am I not so vacant, here in my flesh?
Am I found? Am I coming undone?
The flakes of my porcelain shell
shatter, reveal the colors inside.
The girl I mean to be thrusts herself forward.
Am I yellow? Am I clear? Am I *bursting?*
Am I what I always imagined I would be?

I have dreams like the earth has oceans,
That’s the life I chose.
Build higher walls, if you wish.
But we are leaving the city tonight—
And these are the last words.
Watching Your Hair Grow Back in December

We must wait for the snow to melt. Then, I can go outside and sift through the soggy, mottled remains of the last year. When you shaved your head, I took a picture each day, watching the new coat of black fuzz sprout up and take root. I didn’t ask why you ditched your hair. Maybe it was because someone ditched you, and I really didn’t want to bring that up.

In my yard, I found: skin cell residue, thirty-eight cents, an amethyst pin meant for a wool coat at a funeral, and a nametag: Hello. My name is Ice. I am a bleeding boy. These are the things that remain. These are the dress, white as movie-star teeth, and the sad, smoky smile you gave me for my birthday.

Our neighbors built a fence made of doors, each its own shade of purple or regret. I asked my mother: “Doors let people in.”

I asked you. “Doors keep people out.”
Flotsam

Salt stung the earth, and
nothing grew there again.

Because water wants to go
where there is less of it, and
people, too.

Years dissolved, and now I
sit at the kitchen table, drinking
tea seasoned with tears. It was
an instantaneous defeat. I wonder
if the salt also sopped up the blood,
because blood is mostly water. People, too.

Two birds, one stone. One very
small stone, but still I cannot swallow it.

Jetsam

Your hands take the shape
of my body—one holding my hip,
the other filed under my shirt. The hot breath
we breathe mows down rows of goosebumps. Snow snarls,
beaten down by our boots.

When it is time to leave, you
drizzle a fistful of salt onto the ground,
and our footprints enter the next life.

They can be somebody else’s footprints there.
Hitler and High School Basketball: The Consequences of Indifference
by Jessi Glueck
Blue Valley North High School
Winner of National Gold Medal

"Because you’re Jewish."
That, according to principal Jenny Jones*, was the response of one student from Sunflower Valley High School* when asked why he was wearing Christmas-themed clothing at last month’s basketball game between Sunflower Valley and Mountain Heights*.

"Students were wearing Christmas attire,” Jones said. “That was a given throughout the game. Our students reported to me that two [Sunflower] students [came] by and give the ‘Heil, Hitler’ salute.” This was particularly offensive because Mountain Heights is known for having a large Jewish population.

Disciplinary action was swift: the students involved were removed from the game and had their parents notified, and one of them even called to apologize later.

“I don’t know that some of our kids made the connection [between Christmas sweaters and anti-Semitism]...Theme nights are great, but we’re not going to have theme nights if they poke fun at other schools,” principal Amy Simpson of Sunflower Valley said. “If I had made the connection, I would have said no."

So that’s it. The situation has been taken care of. Yet the question remains: why did it happen in the first place?

We have been taught, at every level of education, about the horrors of the Holocaust. We know the number: 6 million Jewish people murdered solely because they were Jews, and millions more because they were gay or disabled or resisted Hitler’s tyranny. And yet we’re still seeing things like this, ugly flashes of intolerance that, like a slap in the face, sting all the more because you don’t expect them. What makes decent high school kids looking for fun at a basketball game use words and gestures that draw on centuries of hate?

The truth is that this incident probably wasn’t about anti-Semitism. It wasn’t even about ignorance of the Holocaust. It was about something much more prevalent and much more frightening: simple carelessness and apathy.

High school is a tempting time to become apathetic. Our lives are crammed with math tests and soccer conditioning and dates and clubs. Teens grow sleep-deprived and stressed into a kind of emotional numbness. So when we see something like this—where it starts, in the hallways, before it makes it on to the basketball court—we don’t think much of it. We barely notice.

And it’s not just religious bigotry we ignore. Other kinds of prejudice, other kinds of suffering, go unacknowledged because we can’t quite bring ourselves to move past the barrier of our thoughtlessness and indifference. I remember vividly walking into the bathroom one day and hearing a girl sobbing in one of the stalls as if her heart would break. I’ve never heard anyone cry like that. I was sick with worry—but only for a second. I figured she’d be ok. So I said nothing.

Empathy, whether it’s with a group of people being degraded or with another human being who is suffering, takes courage. It takes a certain disregard for societal norms. Incidents like what happened at that basketball game should serve as a reminder to us of how important
Learning to Read

I’m four years old, sitting at my kitchen table with my mom as the fall sunlight streams through our bay windows. It’s warm in the kitchen, and I’m concentrating so hard that little beads of sweat are collecting on my upper lip. My mom’s finger moves along the words in one of those colorful little children’s books for beginning readers. The turquoise sleeve of her bathrobe puddles across the page, and it’s pretty in the sun—but I can’t think about that. You know this word. The sentence pounds inside my head as I struggle with the blankness, the silence on the tip of my tongue where the word should be.

And then suddenly it’s there, the word I couldn’t get, shaped by my utterance into a reality that I can understand. The syllable flutters out of me, and I relax for an instant. My mom plants a kiss on my cheek. “Good! Keep going,” she says. I plunge into my memory in search of the next word.

That morning is one of my earliest memories, but I know there were hundreds of such mornings. There were nights, too: nights when I sat on my mom’s lap and followed along over her shoulder as she read me Harry Potter or The Lord of the Rings. There was much that I didn’t understand, but I sure wasn’t going to admit it to my parents. In time, I grew to understand even Tolkien and then Dickens and Austen and Wilde and Thackeray and Dostoevsky and Frost. By the time I was a junior in high school, I figured there wasn’t much important literature that I couldn’t read.

I was wrong. One day the summer before my junior year I picked up John Milton’s Paradise Lost. It had been gathering dust on a shelf in a friend’s basement, and I thought it looked old and British—just my type. But as I read the first stanza of the epic poem, my mind reeled. Where was the subject? Where was the verb? What on earth were all of these biblical allusions? I struggled on until my temples throbbed and I realized I wasn’t getting anywhere. Then I put the book down, heartily dissatisfied with myself.

A few months later, I was presented with the opportunity to take a graduate-level class on Milton at a local university. I’d finished all the English classes that my high school offered, and the Milton course promised close readings and intense class discussions, which sounded fun. My parents hesitated. “Won’t it be too hard?” they asked. “You have all the time in the world to study Milton. Why not start off with something a little easier?” The five-year-old in me who was undaunted by Tolkien’s long descriptions responded, “No. This is the course I want to take.”
I walked into class on the first day and discovered that I was the only one under the age of twenty in the room. I sat silently in a corner as the senior English majors and graduate students chatted about the comparative advantages of various courses and books. At last the professor brought the class to order.

“You’re all here for Milton, right?” she asked with a grin. There was a collective murmur of assent.

“Brave souls,” she said.

We started off slowly, with Milton’s earliest collection of poems and some uncollected sonnets. The obscurity, diversity and sheer number of his allusions were challenging from the first, but the poems were manageable and relatively short. I became familiar with the 70-page endnotes section at the back of my Milton collection, meticulously looking up at least two arcane references in every line. The language was so exquisite, though, that I didn’t mind. There is a lush, emotive quality to Milton’s sonnets that you don’t have to fully understand in order to feel.

At the same time, we were studying Milton the man: the sometimes boastful and astoundingly erudite, yet insecure and lonely poet struggling with the transition from youth to maturity. We learned of his perfectionism, how he edited his works again and again even after they had already been published. We studied his quirks, his liberalism, and his wives. So by the time the difficult part of the course arrived, I was already in love, too entranced by Milton to ever look back.

The real challenge came when we turned to Milton’s political prose, beginning with excerpts from The Reason of Church Government. I remember hunching up in my desk chair against the early October chill the night that passage was assigned, reading and rereading, marking off clauses and prepositional phrases with a red pen, searching for the verb. It was like another language. I read somewhere that Milton used more 100-word sentences than nearly any author in history. Reading his prose after a night full of calculus was at best painful and at worst put me straight to sleep.

But I kept at it—allusion after allusion, clause after clause, word after painstaking word—because beneath the layers of obfuscating language sparkled the brilliance of Milton’s ideas. The stuffy, ill-lit room where my class was held was elevated to the level of a literary salon as we battled out the great questions of Milton’s work: what should marriage be about? How much censorship of literature can be tolerated? Who should govern the church? How should education be structured? When discussing the last of these, a classmate and I squared off against the other students in a crusade for individualized education that wasn’t necessarily “liberal.” Our debaters’ bloodlust rose; we gave the room full of English majors and our professor a run for their money. I like to think Milton would have approved of our intellectual rigor.

At last the glorious evening came when the assignment was not an essay or a tract, but Paradise Lost: Book I. I opened to the first lines with some trepidation. What if—after all this—I still didn’t understand?

But I did, and it was easy. The words slipped through my mind with the resonant clarity of a familiar song. After my struggles with Milton’s prose, this, his finest poetry, felt effortless and beautiful. In the subsequent short weeks I was introduced to Milton’s God, his Satan, his
Adam, his Eve, his supremely complicated dynamic of free will and faith. It all unfolded before me in a rich tapestry. His words had meaning for me now.

At last we neared the end of the poem, in which Adam and Eve are being comforted by the archangel Michael after the Fall. He shows Adam the whole span of human history: mankind’s perpetual sinfulness and his ultimate redemption by the grace of God. And yet despite God’s goodness, Michael reminds Adam that he as a human being still has a duty to perform. I read these epochal lines aloud to myself, underlining them with the red pen I no longer really needed:

“Add deeds to thy knowledge answerable, add faith,
Add virtue patience, temperance, add love
By name to come called Charity, the soul
Of all the rest: then will thou not be loath
To leave this Paradise, but shall possess
A Paradise within thee, happier far.” (Paradise Lost 12.580-87).

Paradise Lost is known as a tale of creation and the Fall, but to me it is ultimately a story of self-creation: the belief that mankind, even in his fallen state, may take an active part in shaping himself and creating his own inner paradise. Milton’s epic and the experience of taking the class became part of my own self-creation. I have educated and formed myself through Milton’s work. I have trained myself to analyze, understand and take pleasure in Milton’s complex language. I have discovered within myself the critic, the reader, the teacher I someday hope to be. Under Milton’s tutelage, I have again learned to read.

Works Cited
How to Start a World Religion: Ten Easy Steps
by Logan Hollinger
St. Vincent High School
Winner of National Gold Medal

Religion is something the masses need. They need to believe that some higher power, be it Christ, Mohammed, or the Great Flying Spaghetti Monster, is watching over them. It keeps them from going insane and yet somehow inspires them to do it at the same time. By following these ten simple steps, you too can inspire great art, commit great atrocities, and amass vastly disproportionate amounts of the world's wealth for millennia to come!

1. Be Born Dramatically
   The first step is to come in with a bang. A flashy birth makes people believe you'll amount to something, and make them more inclined to believe your real dad is a dragon in the sky. Christ was born of a virgin. Virgins are always nice. No one ever sees that coming. Try to incorporate some meteorological phenomena too. Mohammed was born under a meteor shower. What really tops it off is having some perceived lunatic running around the desert predicting your birth and turns out to be right. It helps if he then dies gruesomely (see Step 7).
   Other elements of a good divine birth include, but are not limited to: choirs of angels, aliens, or cab drivers; talking animals; blue-collar workers dancing frantically; drifters stopping by with gifts; weird-smelling incense; a nicely dramatic “either-or” prophecy; endless amounts of literature, music, and art surrounding the event; and a mass commercialization of the major holiday that the date of your birth will eventually become.

2. Have an Uneventful Early Life
   What was Christ up to at age twelve? Was Buddha mellow and right down the middle even as a teenager? We have no idea!
   You don't want to start off too soon. An ordinary childhood sets the stage for an eventful adulthood. The sensation you're going for is “Whoa! Where the hell did that come from?” The element of surprise is key. You want to keep people guessing. A huge gap in the holy book describing (read: embellishing) your life makes people wonder if you might be mightier than you really let on. Perhaps you spent your childhood strangling squirrels and bringing them back to life. Perhaps you journeyed to the Far East where you learned some crazy martial art that taught you how to rip out somebody's beating heart and show it to him before he dies. Did you marry? Did you have kids? Are their descendants still alive today? Does it really affect your doctrine at all if any of these things are true? Probably not, but that's for your followers to bicker over and eventually write conspiratorial novels about.

3. Be Poor
   Now that you've grown up, you've got to keep it real. A nicely humble, ragged appearance makes people wonder, which, as you've noticed, is integral to any good religion. Shouldn't God send the savior of humanity as a mighty warrior, a rich and victorious king? It would make sense, wouldn't it? But religion isn't about making sense. In fact, it's usually a
better idea if it doesn't. People want a briar patch of contradictions in their faith. Poverty on Earth, wealth in Paradise. That little conundrum makes a hobo going on and on about salvation seem slightly less like a raving lunatic. Not very much, but it does make people more inclined to believe that blessed are they who eat spaghetti, but woe to those who partake of rigatoni!

The words “haggard,” “down,” and “miserable” should come to mind when people look at you. Diseases are good crowd-pleasers (especially when promptly followed by a divine healing) but leprosy, while nicely biblical, is not really worth the commitment. Try not to start any epidemics.

4. Lay Down the Law

Now that you’ve established yourself as savior, now is the time to set a few ground rules. Christ proclaimed Himself the New Law. Mohammed proscribed alcohol, image-making, and just about everything else. You can regulate everything from dietary habits to sexual intercourse to personal hygiene. The more arbitrary and illogical the law, the more likely your followers will obey them to grow closer to you.

Here are a few basic laws to get your started:

• Thou shalt not partake of cheesecake that has passed the hands of Bohemians.
• Thou shalt not breathe the air that has been scented by a generic air freshener.
• When a powder blue Volkswagen Beetle crosses your path, spit out your gum and step on it.

It can actually be a fun game. Use the following Mad Lib to write your Book of Laws:

Thou shalt (or not) (verb) of (noun) that has been (adjective) by (noun).

5. Be Exclusive

Everybody has a tight-knit group of followers to spread his message. First and foremost, you should determine who is not allowed to follow you. For example, Jesus distinguished between disciples and apostles. There was no discernible difference between the two, but the apostles were special just because they were.

Similarly, Christ said that He’d take anybody, even lepers and (ugh) tax collectors, if they gave all of their worldly possessions to the poor to follow Him. This is a trickier proposition than it sounds. I mean, it’s my stuff. If the poor want my stuff, they can pry it from my cold, dead, covetous hands.

Dense, esoteric ritual can also help keep your religion exclusive. Mohammed demanded Muslims pray three times a day on special mats, facing toward Mecca. Who the hell even knows where that is, anyway?

6. Stick It to the Man

All religions in their day challenged the status quo. Governments as a rule don’t like change. This is very good for you. People by their nature are contrarians. They like to go against the grain. Once it’s established that your religion is banned by the powers that be, converts will flock to you like a moth to a flame!

It’s fairly easy to get your religion banned. Simply find something that everybody likes and go in the opposite direction. Examples abound. The Romans banned Christianity because it weakened loyalty to the state. Europeans disliked Islam because it wasn’t Christianity. The Chinese initially proscribed Buddhism because it’s really boring.
7. Martyr Somebody

Religion kills people. That’s proven science. Like in chess, sometimes you have to sacrifice a piece (or a virgin) to move forward (or appease the volcano). After your “lucky follower” has kicked the bucket, show up at his funeral and weep at his greatness, perhaps bestowing some arbitrary honor such as sainthood. To help, I’ve provided a simple form eulogy:

“Alas, poor (martyr’s name), you who are gone will surely be with my (parent deity/monster) in (Heaven/Paradise/Detroit/Chuck E. Cheese). You, (martyr’s name) have earned the greatest of honors, the (arbitrary honor). You will be remembered in the annals of history, and when my Final (Judgment/ Victory/Battle/Pizza party), is over, it is you who will be (blessed/victorious/victorious/served first) alongside me. Still, you should have remembered it was step-kick-step-pivot. It was almost like you were trying to piss off the volcano.”

8. Convert Somebody Cool

Time and time again, religions have scored that one convert that turned things around, except for Islam. They were just really good at marketing. The Christians had the Emperor Constantine, who passed the Edict of Milan, legalizing Christianity in the Roman Empire. Constantine fits a specific profile that every coolest-convert should have:

• In power and seeking further power
• Winning a war
• Susceptible to divine visions
• Influenced early on by a converted relative
• A massive ego
• Huge amounts of cash
• Solid military strength
• A massive ego

Optional qualities include:

• Has written bad science fiction novels
• Has the phone numbers of several famous actors.

9. Die Horribly

Getting yourself killed adds a nicely poignant exclamation point to your life, making people wonder what could have been, had you been able to live a long life. Christ was crucified, Mohammed ate poisoned lamb. No self-respecting messiah ever lets himself die peacefully.

It also raises the question that your doctrine may or may not be incomplete. After all, you can’t possibly cover everything. Allowing your followers to make assumptions about what you might have said about the Polish or bumper stickers means you don’t actually have to take the time to say it.

As for methods, suicide is a no-no. You’ll come off as a kook. Assassination mid-speech is nicely sudden, but there’s much to be said for extended suffering. Be sure, however, that you’re obviously dead. A mere disappearance makes people hope you might come back someday.
10. Watch Your Followers Misconstrue Your Teachings, Preferably to the Point of Bloodshed

Religions have the best sects. Watching your followers quibble over the minutiae of your intricately convoluted doctrine is one of the most satisfying parts of messiah-hood, especially when the part they’re fighting over isn’t particularly important. Excellent points from which your faith can crack and shatter include:

• Whether you were divine, human, or both
• Forgiveness of sins (or lack thereof)
• What flavor of gelato is served in Heaven
• Who jigged the Jell-O

It’s also good to send your religion hurtling into conflict with another. A faith can be unholy just because they decide to spell your name with an “F” as opposed to a “Ph.”

Karl Marx called religion the “opiate of the masses.” And, just like other opiates, we are totally hooked. Humanity cannot live without it. It’s up to you and these ten easy steps to use this crutch to your financial, temporal, and moral advantage.

Happy converting!
“It was real. I feel like I’ve been reborn.”

by Lily Lieberman

Blue Valley North High School

In the Beginning

January of his junior year, JJ Becker walked into a well-known pharmacy and explained to the man at the counter that his dog was sick and in need of needles for insulin shots. At home with his dog, Becker carefully extracted a needle from its case, loaded up the syringe with methylene, shot himself in his favorite vein and waited for the waves to come.

Pushing back with his palms pressed against the edge of the table and his chair precariously perched on its hind legs, Becker sighed and knowingly smiled at his mistake.

“It might be easier for me to just start at the beginning,” Becker said.

“Middle school didn’t go well. I was a good kid, but I was bullied pretty bad. I was different; I wasn’t willing to retaliate so I just laughed it off,” Becker said.

Home schooled in St. Louis, Missouri, until middle school, Becker was hungry for acceptance from his peers. Extremely bright and still coming into his own, Becker’s middle years were plagued with physical and emotional bullying. The scarring he incurred in junior high began to shape his mentality about who he was and where he would fit in at Blue Valley West High School.

“By the time I got to high school I had plenty of friends, but I still didn’t feel like me. I felt like I was wearing a mask, no one knew me,” Becker said.

The emotional stress of bullying during middle school took its toll on Becker in the fall of his freshman year. He sank into a state of depression and by the spring had become suicidal, “wimping out” only moments before ending his life several times.

“I started believing the lies [that I told myself] and even convinced myself I had no future. These lies became the truth,” Becker said.

Throughout his drug use, Becker’s faith taunted him.

“I was going to church every so often, but I wasn’t super religious at this point. I was afraid of hell, though. That was the only thing keeping me from dying,” Becker said.

After experimenting with pills and alcohol over the summer, Becker was sent to a psychiatric hospital in November of his sophomore year. He stayed there for two weeks and was prescribed an anti-depressant, but his mood remained the same and nothing was resolved.

“I expected nothing to be fixed. I was bitter at my parents and myself. I realized then that I had to find my own way out and that I had to try to make myself happy,” Becker said.

Some say happiness can act as a drug, and for Becker, there was more truth to this than for most. He smoked K2 for the first time in January, believing he had found his escape.

“It was like a catharsis. I started smoking periodically, mainly K2, which turned into a weekly thing. By March, I was smoking once a day. I was also researching other drugs, wanting to learn everything about them I could. I got a sort of high from that,” Becker said.

Researching helped Becker realize his gift: he was a chemical genius at making his own drugs. In May, he expanded his repertoire to ecstasy and methylene, a combination of cocaine and ecstasy. The summer before his junior year, he was constantly high, buying Virola Bark online to make DMT, a drug that when inhaled or consumed immerses the consumer in a powerful psychedelic state.
But by the time school started again, Becker had quit his job and was running out of cash to continue to sell. He had a goal: he was saving for a car. His plan was to sell the K2 he had been making. It was cheap and Becker needed the money.

“I was selling at school the K2 that I had made. I was also smoking JWH, the chemical they put on K2. It was the cheapest thing I could make without losing money on the sale,” Becker said.

Becker was caught by his parents a few months into his junior year. He gave them everything – his pipes, his drugs – and told them that he wanted to transfer to Blue Valley Northwest.

“I told [my parents] I needed to get out of West. I couldn’t be around these people and be expected to change. So I started off Northwest clean...started off,” Becker said.

Self-conscious and paranoid, he didn’t talk to anyone for a while. Becker had stopped taking his depression medication because he felt like a zombie.

“It was worse than drugs because I was emotionless, and my depression was worse than ever because I was clean for the most part. I still wanted to do drugs,” Becker said.

Caught in a catch-22, Becker began stealing and drinking cough syrup in December, usually two bottles at a time, for the effects of the codeine.

“I was at the point where I was filling up grocery carts with this stuff and walking out with it,” Becker said.
January of his junior year, Becker’s drug use escalated.

“I would go to Wal-Mart with a BS story about how my dog needed insulin shots,” Becker said. “Shooting up was the ultimate high. It wasn't the same as everything else. It had a darker tone to it. I would shoot up and all of a sudden it would hit me in waves. There were a lot of repercussions, but nothing that would stop me.”

“I would shoot up and run out because of how expensive it was, so I would go through withdrawal. That down was worse than the high. It felt like my body was being ripped apart, and then I would just black out. I wanted to shoot up again so bad. I wasn’t completely addicted to it either. I knew a couple people that had died. We were all friends but didn’t care about each other,” Becker said.

Talking about these friends makes Becker fidget in his seat. He pauses a moment and looks up through his lashes.

“I wish someone would’ve tried to stop me, but I know I wouldn’t have. It had to have come from me,” Becker said.

**The Turnaround**

Becker finally acknowledged the severity of his drug use in March. He had been on a cycle of staying clean for two weeks and then caving and using drugs. These two week crash periods continued until Becker was asked by his Pastor to speak to his youth group about his drug use.

“I knew drugs were ruining my life, but I couldn’t stop. I was kind of going to church, but I rejected the fact that God wanted to help me; I wanted him to change my circumstances. So when my pastor wanted me to talk to my youth group about my experience, I told my story about how God is the only one that helped me out, although I didn’t quite believe it yet,” Becker said.

Senior Steph Hughes walked up and introduced herself to Becker after he spoke to his
youth group that night and invited him to hang out with her friends the next weekend.

“My first impression of JJ was that he was really fun and outgoing. JJ is the kind of guy who never thinks about himself. When JJ told me about his past, my first reaction was shock. He was so outgoing and nice that it seemed crazy that he was fighting those struggles. He's so open and honest about what he's gone through and how he's grown from it, and I'm really glad that he's able to share his story with those around him,” Hughes said.

“I met a lot of Steph’s friends, and they all opened up to me right away. I thought it was going well, but then I began partying again. But I tried to convince myself I was clean. I was living a lie. When I thought about getting clean I couldn’t do it alone,” Becker said.

Becker knew this was a battle he couldn’t fight alone. In June, he was arrested two days in a row for smoking methylene, and two days later, was arrested again with a Minor In Possession.

“I came home from work really drunk and punched a hole in my window. I left the house and was arrested down the street while I was sitting on the sidewalk. When that happened, I knew something had to change. I completely, 100 percent, turned my life over to Christ. It was the biggest effect anything has had on me. [God] changed my mind and transformed everything about me. I was still struggling, but now I had something to lean on,” Becker said.

Becker started praying to God to help him get through his struggle. The temptation was still there, but was never strong enough to start doing drugs again.

“This can be used for good. This pain, everything I went through, was all God’s purpose. It was real. I feel like I’ve been reborn,” Becker said.

Staying clean is one of the hardest things Becker has had to do, but he figures it’s not as difficult as keeping up a loving relationship with God.

“I have to work to build a personal relationship with Him, just like I have to work to stay clean. If I don’t put effort in that week, I don’t feel like I’m at the level I’m meant to be. Drugs never filled up the void I had, God has been the most fulfilling thing to me. Unlike drugs, He’s renewable,” Becker said.

Looking Forward

Becker has found Blue Valley Northwest to be a better environment for him. The lack of hard drugs and the constant support from his friends has allowed him to focus on the things he’s passionate about.

I wrestle, and I also love music, listening as well as making it. I drum, but I also tinker with synthesizers,” Becker said.

Becker recently visited Texas Christian University and Baylor where he’s considering majoring in psychology.

“I'll probably go into counseling for addiction and depression, or maybe even be a pastor,” Becker said. “I'm surprisingly not very good about talking about myself. I like listening.”

The greatest heroes tend to have the darkest pasts, and Becker is no exception. His honesty and extreme openness about his personal history will allow him to counsel and heal those still struggling with what he went through.

Before Becker leaves the interview, he jokes, “Now you’ll have to tell me your life story.”
My First Mushroom Cloud
by Aidan McCarter
Parkway Central High School

Only after our fathers’ unsuspecting snores began to drift unanimously into the boys’ room were my fellow Mohawks and I certain that our nocturnal tomfoolery could commence. Silently, we slid from our makeshift bed sheet hammocks and lighted on the creaky wooden floorboards, no more audible than the autumn leaves flitting across the gravel path just outside our thick cabin walls. We glided across the floor in our socks until we reached the rickety wooden door frame. Once outside, we relaxed. Hot golden embers still glowed dimly in the fire pit, and we lounged back in our folding chairs to warm our feet; the new kings of the campfire, we eagerly began discussion of the night’s activities.

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My friends and I belonged to a group called the Indian Guides, a scout-like organization that incorporated the same wilderness oriented activities without the strict responsibilities expected of Boy Scouts. Instead of troops, the Indian Guides arranged themselves into tribes; the back of my leather vest proudly sported the title of “Mohawks.” Throughout my childhood, the biannual tradition of a father-son weekend stay at Camp Lakewood remained a highly anticipated event.

The campouts were not only important to the kids; our fathers appeared just as happy to be free from the matriarchal tyrannies of the home. The weekend getaway allowed for crude humor, cigar smoking, beer drinking, and a rare environment where a man can pass gas all he wants without ridicule. Consequently, our fathers had little motivation to enforce normal household rules; the kids didn’t have to shower, make their beds, brush their teeth, or sleep…ever. After 8:00 p.m., our dads would begin to get sleepy, and by 9:00 p.m., they would disappear to their beds, leaving us utterly unsupervised.

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The fall air whipped briskly across our noses, nudging us closer to the fire pit. “Quick, hand me that stick!” barked Matthew McFerran, thrusting his arm toward a dark corner of the front porch the weak fire did not illuminate.

“You get it! I’m not leaving this fire. It’s freezing. Plus, there’s prob’ly a ton of spiders and stuff,” whined Danny Appleman.

“Don’t be a loser. Just get me the stick, Danny.”

Danny fetched reluctantly, dragging his feet and making a face of disgust. I watched silently, hypnotized as Matt poked and prodded the fire with the stick. Sparks sprayed upward like hundreds of tiny fireflies as blackened supporting branches crumbled beneath the still glowing main log. In an effort to rekindle the fire, Zachary Tash decided to dump all the dry leaves he could find directly into the fire pit. Soon a shroud of thick smoke enveloped the porch.

“Dang it, Zach! You don’t put dry leaves in a fire, you idiot!” Matt coughed.

“Geez, Matt! How about you keep poking it with that stick? That was working real well. And don’t call me an idiot, you idiot!” said Zach.

“It’s like someone lit a freakin’ smoke bomb out here,” I observed, filtering the air through the collar of my shirt as I inhaled.

“I lit one of those once,” said Danny, eager to be part of the conversation.
“That’s nothing,” countered Matt nonchalantly. “I heard you can make a real bomb if you set an aerosol can on fire.”

Zach said, “I have a can of bug spray.”

Silence descended as the same idea arose in each of them. The corners of their lips curled maniacally, and they exchanged meaningful glances, their faces eerily illuminated from below by the swelling campfire. All three of them shot up and scurried into the bedroom where Zach kept his bug spray. I patiently waited outside, aimlessly tossing pieces of bark at the flame until the crew returned with a short metal can of repellant. It was about the size of a fist and nearly full.

“This’ll be so sick,” murmured Zach in a soft, fierce tone.

“What if we die?” Danny asked as an afterthought.

“How 'bout we watch through the window?” I suggested.

“Yeah. We’ll do that. A’ight, here goes.” Matt dangled the can over the flame for a few seconds before he allowed it to fall from his fingers into the bottom of the fire pit. We all dashed into the cabin without looking back. Once safely behind the thick walls, we peeked warily around the edges of the front windows. We waited, and waited, but nothing exploded. Not even a pop or a sizzle. Eventually, we grew tired of pressing our greasy faces against the cold window and walked away in disappointment.

For fifteen minutes we sat in the cabin lobby, whispering to one another, laughing. Every now and then we would give a quick glance to the window, checking to see if by chance we had missed the pyrotechnics.

Danny needed to relieve himself and stood up to walk to the restroom. I followed his path across the lobby with my eyes. Walking with his shoulders slumped, feet shuffling, and neck cocked slightly forward, giving him an altogether submissive aspect, he passed the front door on his way to the restroom and, in doing so, gave a final glance out the front window to check on the status of the can.

“Aww, I left the chips outside,” he moaned. “Now I have to go back out in the cold.” Still looking out the window he reached for the door handle.

Just as he began to turn it, there was a sharp panging sound, and within a matter of seconds, the entire porch was illuminated by a giant column of fire shooting upward and out of the fire pit. Along with this light show came a low but loud whoosh; the rapid movement of air threw the foldable chairs surrounding the pit outward in all directions. Simultaneously, a small plastic bottle of mustard sitting at the edge of the fire exploded, scattering tiny yellow liquid bullets across the porch. Danny, startled by the explosion, let out a short high-pitched yelp, leapt away from the window, and landed promptly on his rear end. His movement synchronized perfectly with that of the chairs, giving him the appearance of having been thrown backward by the force of the explosion. Our eyes followed the tip of the flame as it billowed outward, stretching still higher and creating a glowing mushroom-shaped cloud. All of this occurred in seconds.

Matt was the first to speak. “That—was—so—awesome.” he stated, separating each word.

I immediately dashed out the front door to survey the damage. The chairs sprawled about farcically. Like the tragic inanimate victims of an air-raid, they lay across the patio splattered with yellow mustard bullets, still gently smoldering. After stomping out all the
remaining embers, I noticed the shrapnel. The porch was a minefield of small, razor sharp pieces of can. Upon closer examination, I saw that the chairs had pieces embedded in their fabric. As the rest of the guides joined me, the door swung behind them, and I noticed shrapnel scattered like buck-shot across the entire frame. It appeared that 90% of the can was now embedded in that feeble barrier. Danny shuddered deeply as he examined it from top to bottom. The same thought crossed all of our minds: What if he had reached for the handle 1 second earlier? That question was as far as our imaginations would permit us; we didn’t want to picture the gruesome possibility.
I arrived at the University of Missouri-Columbia on the bright, warm morning of June twelfth. I remember that I was wearing new clothes and that I was tremendously excited. I remember, also, feeling prepared – an essential feeling for me before I enter into strange territory. I knew I was going to be living in the Mark Twain Residence Hall for three weeks, attending two classes of my choice every day, and seeing speakers and presentations every evening. I knew that I was going to be sharing a bathroom with three other people and that my roommate’s name was Danielle. I knew that I was acquainted with only several other kids at The Academy and that many of my fellow Scholars were self-professed “nerds” and “geeks” with loud views on politics and euthanasia – I was none of those things. But everything was under control. My suitcases were carefully packed; my hair was pulled off my neck so I would not have to deal with it. I was not sweating. I was prepared.

A few hours later, I joined the 325 other Scholars—all incoming juniors like myself—in Jesse Hall for the opening ceremony. The boys wore dress pants and collared shirts; the girls, airy dresses and skirts and light blouses. We marched into the auditorium to a tune reminiscent of Pachelbel’s Canon played by a young bearded man, his tall frame hunched over the piano. Twenty-six flags were draped above the stage, one for each year of The Academy, painting stripes of color over the heads of six chosen speakers facing the house. Sitting in contemplation, I realized the effort I had put in just to be in this chair. I had worked hours on my application essays until they were 500 words of pure perfection and slogged through an IQ test with questions about the Earth’s circumference and Catherine the Great. I had waited months for this moment.

I vowed firmly that nothing would stop me from embracing the Academy in full. I would make friends – good friends. I would do-si-do at the square dance until my heart gave out and I collapsed on the ground. I would go to the nerdiest, geekiest discussions I wanted to, even if they involved chess, calculus, and Shakespeare all rolled into one.

Oh, yes. I was ready.

I watched with delight as a man who introduced himself as Frank Corley stepped to the podium, wearing Chuck Taylors (no socks) with his dress pants and sport coat, and told us all proudly that he was a nerd. Ted Tarkow, one of the directors of The Academy, wore a bright yellow cab driver’s hat on his balding head and assured us that we would all bump and grind and get to know each other soon enough.

The Missouri Scholars Academy had begun.

The next morning, we gathered in front of Mark Twain to meet with the teacher of our major class, one we would be attending six days a week. I was hoping, secretly, to get one of the teachers sporting a large beard and was not disappointed. Adam had shaggy hair and a beard like a swallow’s nest. His face was creased with laugh lines, and his kind, dark eyes crinkled and flashed when he grinned, which was often. He was tall and his skin was tanned.
One morning, Adam drove us to a state park about twenty minutes outside campus. He quickly led us off the main trail and up an incline to a stone platform on a hill. The platform was becoming part of the forest – grass pushed through cracks in the weathered stone, moss spread over the crumbling walls, and trees encroached on its space. We stood still, gathered in a semicircle around Adam, who sat on a ledge of the platform. The air was thick with silence. Minutes passed, and the air pulsed. Suddenly, Adam spoke.

“I met a traveler, from an antique land.”

He leaned forward, head up, hands lively. His eyes were bright, and his voice rang clear and strong through the forest.

“Who said: two vast and trunkless legs of stone stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand, half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown, and wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command…"

He spoke the words delicately, each born of his lips with perfect form. Every syllable was carefully rounded or arched or hardened.

“...Tell that its sculptor well those passions read, which yet survive, stamp’d on these lifeless things…”

The poem began to sculpt an image that was not so different from the crumbling stone and sprawling moss, an image enhanced by the stillness and heartbeat of the air.

“...the hand that marked them and the heart that fed. And on the pedestal these words appear:”

Fairies began to peep out of their houses; jaguars blinked at us lazily from amidst the underbrush. Wood nymphs clambered over the ledge and crouched gracefully at our sides. All types of legendary and fantastic creatures gathered about us. Rama and Sita stood nearby; pirates peered suspiciously through the trees. The forest was under a spell.

“’Look on my works, ye Mighty and despair!’”

The jaguars emitted low growls; the wood nymphs tossed their adorned heads.

“Nothing beside remains. Round the decay of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare, the lone and level sands stretch far away.”

Adam’s voice faded. The nymphs and fairies flitted away; Rama and his bride bounded back into the woods. The birds chirped and the cicadas hummed. We were pulled back into the present, still dizzy with the magic.

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Time passed, the days blending together. The recitation of the poem was not the only brush with magic that I had. We tried to solve the world’s environmental problems in three hours or less in Designing Permanent Culture with Adam, where we learned how to “Think Little” and build straw bale houses, and where the clock hung upside down on the wall. I was off to lunch and class with Frank Corley after that, to discover how math imitates art (or does art imitate math?) and to marvel over the fourth (and fifth and sixth…) dimension and Möbius strips. I became enamored with the concept of infinity and with the architecture of Buckminster Fuller, Thomas Jefferson, and Frank Lloyd Wright. In the afternoons, I had my choice of learning about philosophy, mastering the art of Japanese Taiko drumming, or perhaps getting hypnotized or sitting Zazen. The evenings were for going to dances, listening to speakers, and sprawling on the columns or in the grass to revel in the warm nights. There was an ecstasy in these activities: it was summer, we were free, and we were neck deep in
meaty, abstract topics and world problems to discuss, surrounded by people with which to discuss them. We worked hard and played harder, and the work and play were part of the magic.

I lived for three weeks of my summer in this environment. The magic continued to abound in unexpected places and eventually led me to a new knowledge, one different than knowing my roommate’s name or that I had everything I needed neatly packed in my suitcase. I cannot quite pinpoint the moment I discovered it.

I knew I could do anything.

Somewhere between studying Salvador Dali’s artwork and learning how to Samba, I gained a confidence and security that I had never before possessed. I knew that nothing could stop me from reaching my complete potential, neither others’ opinions nor the limits of my own mind. I was not afraid of standing out; I was not afraid of shine or beauty. I felt a flame kindle inside me, one that danced and glowed. I understood why our greatest fear is being inadequate, and I understood why Solomon asked for Wisdom.

I made another vow to myself at the end of the Academy. The first was accomplished but useless if the second went unfulfilled.

I will keep the flame alive, I said. I will fight, and I will not let it die.
Still burning, flickering, are the words Adam said to me the day before I left.
“You are one of the most inspirational people I have ever met.”
I continue on.
My family was standing around the bed somewhat awkwardly. He was dying, and we all felt a little uncomfortable with the prospect of waiting for him to pass. My mom sat next to Randy and kept reminding him that we loved him and that he would be with “Mom and Dad in heaven.” He lay mute, encircled by his brothers, sisters, and nephews, waiting to move on. It was an immensely curious affair to a ten year-old.

When I think about my schizophrenic uncle, the first thing that comes to mind is his death, not his life, mainly because I don’t know a lot about his life. I knew of and cared for him, but I never really knew him. Despite this distance, however, he was able to teach me—through his death—something I now deem a crucial life lesson.

Due to his illness, Randy was not an especially engaging person. He was unable to follow or incept ideas in a conversation, creating a mildly uncomfortable atmosphere in his vicinity. Adults would talk to him as if he were a toddler: using simplistic, bracingly friendly tones and never branching off into deeper subjects. It always made me uncomfortable to see people talking to my adult uncle in a way more juvenile than they would me. I hold only one memory in which I was able to overcome this awkwardness.

That day, my mom announced that he was going to spend the night. My brothers and I nodded and mumbled, “Okay,” to which she explained that he was a guest and that we needed to be good hosts. When he arrived, she took him to the garage (the place he was allowed to smoke) and then to the kitchen table. Within minutes my brothers (damn them) had taken refuge downstairs. Still innocent and eager to please (and afraid of my parents’ wrath) I stayed and talked with him for over two hours. The content of our conversation was likely simplistic and forced, but that didn’t matter. He was appreciative of the company. Being an artist before he developed schizophrenia, Randy took great delight in my color-changing markers. After forty-five minutes of explanation on how to use them, he still didn’t get it. I smiled and repeated myself for the umpteenth time. This visit, perhaps, gave me a glimpse of what he was like: split-minded confusion paired with a gentle curiosity of everything, a remnant of his earlier self. Getting to know how his later life turned-out gave me a powerful perspective when it came to his death.

One of the most important things Randy showed me is that not everyone is destined to lead a fairy tale life. He was not culpable for contracting schizophrenia; however, that does not change the fact that my actions could yield an unsuccessful life. Witnessing a life that had so much potential turn into a life that was mesmerized by color-changing markers taught me the importance of every decision; we are in control of our destinies, yet we are not entitled to a perfect one. He would not have been content with his life. Will I be?

When we received the call telling that his life was coming to an end, my mom and dad rushed off without us. I had a friend over, so my brothers waited until he was gone before driving up to St. Joseph. Upon arriving, we were hurriedly told that it wouldn’t be much longer. We entered his room respectfully.
As the minutes passed we embarked in gentle conversation: remembering his achievements, giggling uncertainly at the flatulence of the neighbor in the bathroom, and explaining to another, blind uncle what was happening. My mom asked Randy if his feet were warm, noting the mounds of cloth around them, and my cousin gave me a back massage. In other words, we had no idea of what we were supposed to do. As he neared his final moments, the room quieted; everything disappeared, except for his breathing machine and the final ringing prayer we said. Finally, his head dropped, his chest collapsed, and his mouth fell open. Randy was no more.

The physical sense that something had left the room, coupled with the realization that, in a way, something—someone—had left the room, forced me to ponder the idea of death. Certainly, I am no closer to understanding or realizing what truly happens—no one living does—but I have given thought to the strange notion that I will die. I want to make sure I am content with whatever it is I am leaving.

Randy lived a difficult, sad life. He was an artist and had a promising career in architecture when he was overcome by schizophrenia, forcing him to be unable to share any of his brilliant ideas. His habit of chain smoking two packs of cigarettes a day caused his early death, and he was always accompanied by a choir of strange, foreign voices heard only by him. At one point, he spent several days homeless. His brothers and sisters tracked him down, had him diagnosed, and began getting and giving him support. My mom explained that he would be lost without his family: homeless, starving, and scared constantly. This thought chills me, compelling me to make decisions and apply myself in a way that I hope will allow me and others to avoid such a fate. Randy lived a meager existence; however, he did not live a meaningless one. His death served and will continue to serve as a lesson and a reminder that we will all die.

Later that evening and in the days following, my mom would mention that she was proud of me. She explained that most parents would have had their child leave the room as my uncle was dying, but she kept me there because she understood the importance for me to see what death really was. She knew that I would be better prepared for my life after seeing the end of another’s. She nailed it.

Watching death alters one’s perspective on life. My uncle’s death forced me to give death (and life) a bit more thought. I am not impervious to the end we all share. Considering this I am better armed to make the decisions I know are right: the risks that seem less scary when I remember that death could be around the corner. In the end, Apple founder Steve Jobs understood life best when he shared the following words at a Stanford commencement:

“Remembering that I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I've ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Because almost everything—all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure—these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important. Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose. You are already naked.”
Rubato
by Ben Shively
Platte County High School

Rubato - in music, subtle rhythmic manipulation and nuance in performance. For greater musical expression, the performer may stretch certain beats, measures, or phrases and compact others. -Encyclopedia Britannica

The last note. The final, ringing chord that I hoped would never cease to fill the vaulted ceiling to the brim with pure, raw joy. It was ecstasy.

But we’ll come back to that. Let’s back up a bit. We had been preparing for that moment for months – grueling hours upon hours of practicing until our vocal chords, not to mention our director’s ears, bled. Some days we felt like great progress was being made at a very fast pace, but all things being relative, it’s rather difficult to make progress on a song that changes time signature every two or so measures. So, usually, we felt much more like crawling into a corner and hibernating until contest season ended.

Don’t get me wrong; the song was beautiful. One of the most beautiful I’ve ever heard. It’s one of those songs that, even though you may or may not like it, its tune gets trapped in your skull, with no chance of escape for hours at a time. The harmonies were Inception, a dream within a dream (within a dream); notes stacked on top of each other, stacked into a cacophony of sound best described as genius – or madness, depending on your point of view.

We practiced that madness for months; during school, after school, before school, and of course on our own. We had ample time to think about it while it was stuck in our heads. All of that practice was leading up to The Day. D-Day. The Day of all Judgment and Reckoning and Such. And for a while, it seemed as though that day was a speck of light on the horizon – a distant date that was far enough away for almost total comfort. Suddenly, that distant speck turned into a little Chihuahua, biting at our ankles. Then, a crocodile, munching on our kneecaps. Finally, it became a roaring dragon rearing its ugly head that then reached up (well, down) and bit us collectively right on the butt. That monster arrived the day before contest.

I walked into fifth period, glanced at the board, and stopped in my tracks. On it, in large scrawling handwriting, were the words, “Contest is tomorrow! Are you ready?” Under that fateful phrase was an extensive checklist of the things we needed to have, not have, etc. Essentially the important stuff nobody actually ever reads. After the initial shock, the next thought that crossed my mind was, “Dear Lord, that means…I’ll have to get up at 5 a.m. tomorrow!” And then, not surprisingly, I joined into the growing chorus of agonized groans.

At 4:45 a.m. the next morning – Saturday, by the way – my alarm went off. Loudly. Of course, as I always do, I hit the snooze button. Half an hour later, it decided to go off again. Wonderful. Already 15 minutes behind. Needless to say, I rushed through my morning routines so that I could get a decent breakfast before bolting to catch the school bus to contest. However, my “breakfast of champions” became a quick stop at QuikTrip for a couple of donuts and a large cup of coffee. Good enough.

I made it to the school with barely enough time to grab a robe and take a swig off the top of my coffee before flying out the door to climb onto the already full, and therefore stuffy, awaiting bus. I ascended the steps and my senses were assaulted with the smells of freshly
starched suits and dresses, mixed with the sickly sweet odor of an explosion in the fragrance section of the local department store.

After a largely uneventful 20-minute ride, the bus pulled up in front of Park Hill High School, home of the Trojans. The obligatory dirty jokes and giggling rippled through the packed vehicle. We filed off and excitedly attempted to enter the building through the bottlenecked front doors – or were they the back doors? Doesn’t matter. We were herded into the large, open gym and allotted our too-small section of bleachers to sit on. An eternity and a half waiting, Chamber Choir (formerly known as Sound Express) was meticulously led toward the warm-up area, also known as the cafeteria. After a little cram session, attempting to make some last-minute adjustments to our music, we were again moved – this time to our stage, the Library.

We enter the Library, with its vaulted ceiling and large beautiful windows. Bristling with anticipation, we file onto the risers. In front of us, our audience also metaphorically jumped with anticipation. Our hearts, then eyes collectively see the panel of judges, spread out across their three tables, behind our excited crowd. They were already hurriedly speaking into the handheld recorders, looking us up and down, making eye contact with each and every one of us, and judging us before we even start. But any doubts were struck down as soon as we sang our first note. All of our work – blood, sweat, and tears – was, in that moment, paying off tenfold. Every note was heaven, every chord a proclamation of heaven portrayed in that room.

At last, the final chord arrived. All of our practice, purified down into one magnificent moment. In the music, I could (and still can) visualize the word over the last phrase: **tempo rubato**. In Italian, it means literally “to rob time.“ And that, friends and neighbors, is exactly what we did. In that final beautiful moment, I had an epiphany. I realized then that this is where I’m meant to be, and this is what I’m meant to be doing: making music.
An owl sat bespectacled in tawny feathers and wide eyes. Perched in an old sycamore, she watched over the vast field as she had for a hundred years or so. The ground was white, covered in snow and foot prints of those who had wandered lost amongst the hills. In the distance she saw two figures below the abandoned tangerine tree. One, she recognized as the boy who always found his way to this field, but the other was new.

“What are you doing?”
Elliot opened his eyes, and surrounded by falling snowflakes stood a girl. She peered curiously down at him. Lying in the snow underneath a decrepit tangerine tree, he must have seemed very curious indeed. “Dying,” he said without very much thought, as he never did; “dying” was just such an easy answer.

“Well yes, I suppose we all have to die someday.”
“No. I’m dying now.” Usually this was an answer that garnered quizzical, if somewhat pitying, expressions. But this girl, dressed in a summer’s dress and barefoot to match, only crept closer until she dropped down beside him. Curling in on her side, she looked at him through brilliant eyes,

“Really? And what does that feel like?” she asked, a disarming smile set upon her lips; she radiated allure with every condensed breath in the winter’s day. And Elliot, normally a socially-awkward mess, was unalarmed by this stranger; in fact, he was quite charmed by her.

“Did you know this is a magical tree? It’s been here for as long as I can remember, and when I was younger I used to climb to the very top. One day I fell, and I remember crashing to the ground and waking up. My chest had opened, and I’d bled my heart into the very ground. Ever since, I haven’t had a pulse and this tree has. Do you believe me?” It was his turn to peer curiously at her. She stared unblinkingly back, quiet for a moment.

“Yes, I think I can,” she said. Sitting up and crawling closer to the tree, she placed a hand on its trunk and a hesitant palm to Elliot’s chest. Her eyes widened in shock and wonderment. “It’s true!” Elliot couldn’t help but to laugh at her excitement (and couldn’t help but to notice her slight dimples when she smiled).

“Yeah, it is. It used to bear fruit, the tree that is. It used to bloom tangerines, but ever since I fell, it’s only withered. And its pulse, well mine I guess, it’s only grown fainter over the years. Soon it’ll stop all together, and that’ll be the end of me.” The girl had returned to her position at his side, but when he turned to gauge her reaction he found she was staring through the bare branches to the sky.

“You know, tangerines don’t grow in the snow.”
“This isn’t real snow; it’s just how I see the world.” As he spoke the white turned to water, running in streams through the field as flowers emerged through green.
“My name’s Lenya.” She smiled at him as flowers grew intertwined in her hair and surrounded her face in velvet colours. “I’m Elliot.” The growing meadow began to obscure their vision of each other, but through the blades he saw her eyes shining. Laughing, she reached through the grass to touch his face, “You are a strange one, Monsieur Elliot.”

Away in the distance an owl cried, “Who-oo.” The tangerine tree hadn’t borne a leaf nor a fruit in years; at its very peak the owl could make out a single green bud.

“Elliot?” her voice was small, apologetic almost, but filled with pride. She could see his silhouette against the light of the window, his back to her; she saw the slope of his shoulders and the way his hair curled against the collar of his coat. “Elliot. You should’ve known.”

He visibly flinched then – a slight jerk of the head as if he made to turn around, but remained stoically in place. The blues of the walls watched on, Elliot’s childhood room intent on encompassing the two in its memory – exactly as they stood. Stepping toward him she reached out, grasping his shoulder and forcing him to turn to her. He went easily enough, resignation written across his features.

“I made you something.” From her pocket she produced a cassette decorated in swaying swirls and shimmering stars. Taking his hand in her own, she pressed the tape into his palm, curling his fingers around the plastic. Involuntarily he stared. “I wanted to give you this. To remember me by because I fear you’ll forget.” Lenya laughed then, a doleful sound that fell flat in the air, “I…I didn’t mean that, you know. About you forgetting. I know you better than that.” She paused, and the two stared at the other’s feet. “So, um, listen to it, and you’ll know where to find me. If you want to, I mean, I –”

“You don’t have to leave!” Elliot’s outburst was loud, shattering the silence; both boy and girl visibly recoiled. “I’m… I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to yell, I was. I am. I –” Elliot’s tongue tripped over his words. He stared at Lenya’s feet (she was always barefoot it seemed) willing her to remain here. With him. Even as he wished it, she stepped toward him. Elliot felt her fingertips on his cheeks, her palms clasped his chin, and she tilted his face up. Stubbornly, Elliot kept his eyes averted.

“Elliot.” His eyes flickered over her features and then away to stare at the blue of the walls. “Elliot, please, you’ve known all along that I wouldn’t stay. That I can’t. Please, look at me.”

Grudgingly he brought his gaze to meet her own and was sorry for it. He’d made her cry. His silent heart hated him. “Lenya –”

“No,” she pressed her palm to his mouth, barricading the words inside, “you know if I don’t go now, I never will. I was born to run away from everything.” Her voice was sad, but her smile was genuine. As Lenya began to walk away, began to walk from Elliot’s world, the colour left with her. His blue walls faded to grey; his sight became a kaleidoscope of iridescent monochrome. Turning from the sound of her footsteps on the stairs, he faced the window once again to watch Lenya, to see the colours of the outside world before she took them all away. He was never impulsive before he met her, never made a decision without analyzing the possible outcomes over and over again. But having witnessed the world turned to grey, Elliot climbed through his window to stand on the roof where the two of them used to watch the
stars and the occasional falling satellite. Carelessly the boy jumped from the roof, reaching out for the blur of colour in the distance.

_from pixilated grey the world turned to water. Elliot splashed into the waves as the sea level rose, looking about only to see his neighborhood blurred swimmingly._

_It’s just how I see the world._

His neighbors began to float from their homes, their bodies replaced by stiff blinking cursor limbs, their faces perpetual smiling emoticons. As they swirled about, their limbs flashing in and out of view, Elliot opened his mouth to speak. Water rushed down his throat, pulling the words from his thoughts and releasing them in the form of bubbles. He watched in fascination as “Lenya? I’m looking for Lenya,” appeared amongst the sea. Neighbors looked from the words to Elliot, their taunting smiles blinking out to be replaced by frowns.

A great chasm opened in the Earth, and the water began to drain away, taking all of the people with their masks of faces, their haunting discontent; they were caught in a great whirlpool and disappeared into the Earth’s core.

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Elliot had been gathered up by the current and found himself alone in the field where his magical tangerine tree once stood—where he had first met Lenya. It was gone now, so was she. In the deafening silence he listened hard for the cry of the owl that had always watched over this field and was disappointed when the only sound was his ragged breathing. A melody, a chirping bird’s song rushed into his ears. The ground beneath Elliot’s feet crumpled away, and a platform took its place. The grass and the shrubbery of the field, the trees in the distance, all disappeared, and in their places stood row upon millions of rows of plaster animals frozen in posture. Upon their backs sat people, their stick-like limbs and emoticon faces smiling back at him.

The merry-go-round, the world, was spinning.

“Whoo-oo!”

Elliot whipped around, searching for the source of the owl’s cry, the only familiar in this new world. Far off, he could just barely make out Lenya, who sat upon the owl’s back, the only animal without plaster molding. Casting a glance over her shoulder, the carnival lights reflected against her eyes—the world exploded into colour once more.

“Lenya!” Running now and garnering no distance, passing each would-be person upon the backs of molded animals, their hands reached for him. One, a child by the looks of his size, seized his jacket and held on tight.

“Turn around,” the child giggled and was gone, the emoticon smile erased, the screen-face blanked as the child’s body slumped forward, falling to pieces. Turning on his heel Elliot ran. Against the flow and parade of these “people,” these font Frankenstein monsters. Above his head a bird’s song played.

Finally, (fatefully) Lenya.

“You found me.”

“How could I not?” From his pocket he produced the cassette she had bestowed upon him, its recording tape ripped from the spools. Lenya looked to the merry-go-round platform
to see a winding trail of destroyed magnetic tape all leading back to a delicate bow tied around her ankle. She looked to Elliot and smiled.

“Clever boy.”

Fragments of glass began to rain down, the once soothing bird’s song turned to a deafening screech. The plastered animals came to, life skittish, bounding away off the edge of the carousel, the edge of the world, their destined people upon their backs, emoticon faces frozen in delight. The owl, after all of her years of watching, turned to plaster and fell apart.

~*~*~*~*~

Lenya and Elliot. They alone stood upon a now motionless platform littered in glass and broken plaster.

_Ba-Bump_

_Ba-Bump_

“Elliot?”

Puzzled, the two turned their gazes to his chest. Beating from under his clavicles, a rhythm; his body pulsed as a single bud broke through skin only to be followed by a branch. And then more and more as a tree erupted, breaking through his sternum and continuing to grow. Lenya’s hair became entangled within the branches and she was carried into the sky. Unable to support the great weight of the emerging tree Elliot fell to the ground. From up above, Lenya beamed, an amused grin gracing her features, “Tell me, Elliot. What are you doing now?”

He stared at her in disbelief, more appalled by the pulse his body had gained then the massive tree escaping it,

“I think I’m living...”

Lenya plucked a leaf and gently sawed at her hair, cutting through the knots to float back to the ground, landing beside Elliot and curling into his side. As they watched the tree continue to grow, benevolent fruit began to take shape: tangerines.

Softly, in a voice only a whisper, “We can die like this, you know.”

“We could.”

“Imagine, dying at the beginning of the world.” Leaves fell from the tree with each quiver of his heart. Elliot turned to Lenya, “We don’t have to imagine.” She stared for a moment, eyes filled with wonderment once again at this strange boy who brought the world back anew.

“No, I suppose we don’t.”

~*~*~*~*~

Closing their eyes they looked as if they were sleeping. Their clothes turned to feathers, to sand, blowing away in the wind. Lenya’s hair began to grow, entwining around the tree, the branches, their bodies. With a final lurch the tree stopped quivering, and all was still.
The following is an excerpt from my script, "Grievous Times." It is the tale of a family stricken with grief and loss, and forced to deal with sorrow in a way unknown to them. There are five acts -- mirroring the five stages of grief. Within each act are three scenes, with each family member coping with stress, anger, and ultimately trying to find answers that they'd never before asked themselves.

FADE IN TEXT: "ACT 1 - DENIAL" AND SUBTEXT "SCENE 1 - ANDREA"
INT. ANDREA'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - MORNING
Everything is dark. All that can be seen is the blinking red light of a digital clock. The view then goes in to show only the clock, showing that it flashes a repeating 12:00. There's a groan from the bed.

ANDREA: Uhhh... what time is it? (looks at clock) Ah... I've still got time... (a beat) Wait a second-

KITCHEN
A small but tidy kitchen with a large table and chairs shoved in the middle of it. Victor sits at the table eating a bowl of cereal, while Douglass scrambles eggs on the stove. They seem unperturbed by the sounds of chaos and shouting coming from the other room.

ANDREA (O.S.): It looks like the clock reset itself! I'm going to be late again!
DOUGLASS: You still want me to make you breakfast, honey?
ANDREA (O.S.): Didn't you hear me? I'm not going to have time for that!
Andrea enters the kitchen now. Her disarray is evident.

ANDREA: Where's that cell phone? I know I was using it in here last night. Have you seen it, Victor? (Victor shakes his head, but Andrea has already seemed to move on. She glances more than once at her watch.) Oh, I'm going to be late... where's that goddamn cellphone?
DOUGLASS: Language...

ANDREA: Oh, right. Sorry. (to Victor) By the way, sweetie, I'm sorry, but I'm not going to have time to make your lunch today.

VICTOR: Mom, I've been making my own lunch since I was in second grade. And I'm old enough to hear any sorta language in the house. I hear a lot worse at school.

DOUGLASS: You what?!

ANDREA: Aha! (Andrea triumphantly holds up a shining cellphone.) Alright guys, I really do need to go now. (Andrea gives Victor a brief hug, but merely gives Douglass a sort of shoulder-pat. She then rushes out of the kitchen. A few seconds later the sound of the front door slamming can be heard.)

DOUGLASS: You want some eggs?

VICTOR: I've got cereal. (Douglass scoops the eggs onto a plate. He then proceeds to wash dishes.)
DOUGLASS: Have you, um, noticed anything unusual lately? About Andrea?
VICTOR: You mean my mother? Geez, why do call her by her name, anyway?
DOUGLASS: She's been acting very... odd recently. She's been waking up late, always seems tired, in a panic to get somewhere...
VICTOR: She's always been like that.
DOUGLASS: But things are different now. She's always acted so on top of things before, but-
VICTOR: All done. (Victor pushes his bowl forward then pulls on his backpack.) Got to go now, dad, or I'll be screaming about being late just like mom.
DOUGLASS: What? You're leaving already?
VICTOR: Dad, I have school! In case you didn't notice, it's the place I've been going to five days out of every week for the last ten years.
DOUGLASS: Oh... but... (a beat) How 'bout this? You always get good grades and all so missing one day shouldn't hurt. How 'bout you play hooky today and we go out for a little ice cream, just the two of us?
VICTOR: Dad, if you didn't want me to get an education you should've just let me go to a public school. As it is, every day of my education is costing us like a thousand dollars. You wouldn't want me to throw away a thousand dollars, would you?
DOUGLASS: C'mon, son, it'll be fun!
VICTOR: If you're really that lonely why don't you go get a membership at the gym or something? I'm sure there's some social club or other that'd take you in. Maybe you should try making friends your own age for a change.

(Douglass sits there, mute and deflated, as Victor leaves the kitchen with his backpack. A few seconds later the front door closes. Douglass puts down the dishes and sits alone at the table, feebly stabbing at the scrambled eggs.)
Ms. Goody-Two-Shoes
by Ashleigh Bickford
Excelsior Springs Middle School

Sarah Welmes was the neatest, most perfect, goody-two shoes you would ever meet. She had perfectly straight blonde hair and eyes so blue sometimes I swore that fish were swimming around in them. Sarah always sat up straight and was always prepared. The scary thing is that she never messed up. She seemed to be perfect. It was weird, and creepy.

Everybody in the whole 3rd grade hated Sarah Welmes—for many different reasons. Some hated her because they were jealous of her perfect hair and perfect grades. Some hated her because she always made the teachers expect more out of us. Most hated her because she always made everybody else look like they just weren’t good enough. Sarah always came in 1st, always got the top test score, and was always the teacher’s favorite. It was quite annoying, and I was sick of it.

I had the ultimate reason to hate Sarah Welmes. I used to be the most perfect goody-two-shoes in our entire grade. Then in 2nd grade, she moved to our school and stole my whole goody-two-shoes reputation. Everybody stopped paying attention to me. The whole grade now revolved around Sarah Welmes. I had gone my whole 2nd grade year trying to be as perfect as Sarah. I never succeeded. Over the summer, I came up with a master plan to take Sarah down, and now that school had finally started and we were 3rd graders, I was ready to put my master plan into action.

My plan would be difficult to accomplish but not impossible. Sarah Welmes always got 100% on every test she took. Then Ms. Teacher would hold Sarah’s test up, with a big fat A+ on it, and have all the kids in the room clap for Sarah because she had the best test score. Some clapped because they were being polite. Most clapped because, if you didn’t, Ms. Teacher would glare at you with her lips in a straight, tight line and her eyebrows raised almost up to her forehead. It was a strange look, but it got everyone in the room clapping.

My plan was to have Sarah Welmes fail the spelling test that we take every Friday. I couldn’t wait for my perfect spelling test, with a big fat A+ on it, to get raised up. I couldn’t wait for everyone to clap for me instead of for Sarah Welmes. The only problem with my plan is that I didn’t know how to get Sarah to fail her test. Maybe I could give her the wrong spelling list, but she’d for sure notice. Or maybe I could change the answers on her test, but how could I get a hold of it? This was definitely a setback, but I wasn’t going to worry. This was only the 1st part of my plan.

The next day at school, Ms. Teacher rearranged all of our seats. So instead of sitting right in the front, where everyone could see me, Ms. Teacher moved me way in the back. I wasn’t the only person who got moved though. Sarah Welmes also lost her seat at the front of the class and received a seat right at the back of the class, next to me. So now, the #1 most hated person in all of 3rd grade, sat right next to me.

The first thing I noticed when Sarah sat next to me was how organized she was. She placed three freshly sharpened pencils to the right of a clean notebook. She straightened her back and looked to her left, where she saw me, gawking at her. How could anyone stay so organized? She gave me a quick smile and turned her attention back to the front where Ms. Teacher was beginning to talk about linking verbs.
There’s no way I can sit next to this girl much longer, I thought.

Today was Thursday so that meant I only had one more day until our spelling test on Friday, the day I would take Sarah down. When Ms. Teacher moved Sarah’s seat next to mine, I noticed that she almost never stopped reading. When she wasn’t quickly finishing a worksheet, her nose was stuck in a book. It confused me. What kind of 3rd grader actually liked to read?!

This was how weird Sarah Welmes was. Well today, I was passing out some papers for Ms. Teacher when I snuck a peak at the inside of Sarah’s book. I couldn’t believe my eyes. Taped inside Sarah’s book was this week’s spelling list! Sarah always read her book every Friday during the spelling test. I was so angry. Sarah Welmes was a cheater!

It took everything I had not to scream “CHEATER!” in front of everybody. This changed everything. Sarah’s perfect reputation was all a lie. She really wasn’t that smart or perfect or neat. I didn’t know what I was going to do. If I told Ms. Teacher Sarah was cheating on her spelling test every Friday, Sarah would have to re-do every test after school, and Ms. Teacher would not be happy with her. That was a good option, but I had another idea.

Friday morning, everybody studied their spelling lists, hurrying frantically to memorize every word before the tests were handed out. Sarah just read her book.

“Ok. Time’s up,” said Ms. Teacher. “Put your spelling lists away and get ready for the spelling test.”

Sarah just kept reading her book. I smiled.

“Sarah,” I asked innocently, “What book are you reading?”

“Oh…it’s…umm…a book. It’s a good book.” She stumbled over her words.

“Oh good. I love to read. Can I see your book for a second?” I asked.

“No!” she replied a little too urgently.

“Oh. Well, why not?” I asked.

I didn’t wait for her to reply. I snatched the cheater book out of her hands. Sarah looked panicked. I flipped to the page that the spelling list was taped to. Sarah’s eyes were filling with tears, and I was just about to tear the list out of the book when I heard a panicked Ms. Teacher yell.

“Oh whatever are you doing to Sarah’s book?!”

I looked up and everyone was staring at me. This was definitely not part of the plan. I froze in my seat, all eyes were on me. I had to say something, but what?

“Uhh…umm…I’m just…” I stared at the floor trying to come up with something to say.

“Well it looks like you’re destroying Sarah’s book. Why would you ever do such a thing?” Ms. Teacher glared at me.

Suddenly, I was so angry. I wasn’t the one cheating. Why was I the one getting in trouble? It wasn’t supposed to go this way.

“Sarah’s a cheater!” I yelled out in front of the whole class. “She tapes the answers right here inside of her book. She’s a cheater! Cheater! Cheater! Cheater!” I said stamping my foot.

Sarah’s face lost all color. She looked like she would be sick. Ms. Teacher looked at me, then at Sarah, then at me again. She rubbed her forehead.

“Both of you to the principal’s office NOW!” she demanded.

Well I wasn’t going to make Ms. Teacher even madder, so, in unison, Sarah and I stood up and began our journey to the principal’s office. Walking with Sarah was kind of awkward
considering I was the one that had caused everyone in 3rd grade to hate her even more and got her sent to the principal’s office.

“How did you find out?” she sniffled, her eyes glistening with tears.
“I saw the spelling list taped inside your book,” I replied. “Why did you cheat?”
Sarah sniffed and then began crying all over again.
“I didn’t want to cheat. It’s just that I didn’t have any time to study, and I couldn’t fail the test. Everyone would’ve laughed at me. Everyone hates me, and I don’t know why, especially you!”
I raised my eyebrows, surprised that she would point me out.
“Well, only because you’re so perfect! You make everyone look bad!” I said. Surely she knew this.
“Well it’s not like I mean to. What do you want me to do? Fail?”
She was obviously angry, and now that I really thought about it, maybe she had reason.

Finally we reached the dreaded place. As I opened the heavy glass doors everyone in the office looked up.

“Can I help you?” the office lady asked.
I looked at Sarah, hoping she would answer the question. Sarah just looked down at the ground. I was going to have to talk.

“Our teacher sent us to the principal’s office,” I sighed.
The office lady raised her eyebrows like this was the most exciting thing she’d heard all day.

“Oh, ok. Just have a seat, and Mr. Harris will see you in a minute.”
I slumped down in the hard wooden chairs. It was not very comfortable. Actually nothing in the office was comfortable. It felt like a prison.
Eventually the office lady told us we could go see Mr. Harris, the principal. Sarah and I rose from our seats and walked into the dark office. I sat down in one of the two identical chairs in front of Mr. Harris’ desk. Mr. Harris was tall, bald, and big, and everything about him made me want to disappear even more.

“Hello girls,” he boomed. “What’s the problem here?”
I looked at Sarah. Sarah looked at me. Then we both looked at Mr. Harris as he rubbed his forehead in frustration.

“All right girls. Why did you get sent to my office?”
I figured one of us should talk, but Mr. Harris was so scary.
“Well...umm...we got sent to your office because our teacher sent us here,” I mumbled.
Mr. Harris rubbed his forehead again.
“Okay. Do you know why?” he asked.
I shrugged my shoulders and gave Sarah a look that said, “Your turn.”

“Uhh...I...umm...I was cheating on a test,” Sarah mumbled. Her eyes were staring at a random speck on the maroon carpet.
Mr. Harris sighed, looking bored.

“Okay, what about this other young lady?”
He stared down at me through thick, bushy eyebrows.

“Well...I tore her book...and yelled during class.”
Mr. Harris still looked bored.
“Is that it?” he asked.
“Uh...yeah,” I replied.
Mr. Harris squinted.
“Is it me, or do you girls not get along very well?” he asked.
Sarah and I shyly nodded our heads.
“That’s what I thought. So is there a reason you two get in each other’s hair? Or do you just naturally hate each other?” asked Mr. Harris bluntly.
Sarah pointed her finger at me. “She started it. She hated me first.”
“No you started it! You drove me crazy, being perfect all the time, and then you cheated.” This time I pointed my finger at her. There was no way she was going to blame this all on me.
Mr. Harris looked at us with sharp eyes.
“I think you both did a lot of wrong today,” he began. “You,” he pointed his thick finger at me, “have a jealousy issue. As for you,” he switched his gaze to Sarah, “you don’t have to be perfect all the time. Cheating on a test was definitely not the way to go.”
Mr. Harris sent us back to our classroom with a note. He said we have to stay after school and make up our tests. He also made Sarah and I apologize to each other, to our class, and to Ms. Teacher. I noticed that it was much easier to say sorry when you didn’t really mean it and a lot tougher when you really did want to apologize and mean it. That’s what made apologizing to our class really easy and apologizing to Sarah really hard.
“I am sorry about hating you and everything. I hope that you can forgive me,” I said to Sarah.
“Oh it’s okay. I’m sorry for being kind of a goody-two-shoes and cheating on a test,” Sarah said.
“It’s okay,” I replied.
“So you don’t hate me anymore?” asked Sarah.
I smiled and pretended I had to think about it real hard before I answered.
“Hmm...Nope I don’t think I hate you anymore.”
Sarah laughed and held out her pinky finger. I linked my pinky finger through hers and gave it a shake. It was a friendship sign. Every 3rd grade girl knew it. It meant that I had made a new best friend.
Whenever I’m angry, I allot time to breathe. Ten easy in and outs, and I’m better than ever, as if with each inhalation my hate meets Jesus. They go on a short walk from my nose to the bottom of my lungs, and He’s got them. They are ready to be sent back into the world like a breath of fresh air. Ten easy in and outs. Ten little miracles.

Oxygen in itself is dangerous enough. It truly is a miracle I can live off an element that is evil. So evil, it attacks fire relentlessly until it burns out. Sometimes it doesn’t even do that. It just makes the flames grow. How can a fragile lung endure so much?

“God works in mysterious ways,” my mom would say.

My father, on the other hand, only cared about the science behind it all. The one time I asked him about the fragility of lungs, he said, “The pulmonary capillaries of neonatal lungs are potentially vulnerable to stress failure because of the complex changes in the pulmonary circulation that occurs after birth.”

It’s a little hard for me to wrap my autistic mind around his words. I find science unexciting and pompous. Sure, I’m fascinated with lungs, but I’d rather associate them with Jesus than a spew of big, nonsensical words. I’m more motivated through the message of love than the message of “you’re just not smart enough.”

When I looked up what my father said, however, the article was talking about rabbits. My mother’s advice, at the time, made much more sense to me. I can accept the unknown to be mysterious. I can’t be sure if rabbit lungs work the same way as mine. Nevertheless, I appreciate their attempts at comforting me.

Once, my mom told me, “What if you woke up only with the things you thanked God for yesterday?” I thank God for Jesus in my lungs every day. The truth is I shudder at the thought of asphyxiating. I’m afraid to die from choking on my own ignorance. I’m afraid to die with no hope resting in the bottom of my lungs.

When I was thirteen I shattered my left cheekbone in a baseball game. The only thing I remember of the occurrence was the hospital, the place my mind doesn’t want to come back to anymore. The white washes out my senses and leaves me with a feeling of pseudo safety, with nothing but a slab of bed underneath and a heartbeat displayed on a black screen. I can’t forget the beeping, the red lines playing like corrupt hymns in my mind. They knock at my eardrums like my head is trying to lock them out.

The beeps terrified me, each beat like a breath I would never get back. I scrutinized the screen like a detective, desperately trying to uncover where they were fleeing to.

“They look like mountains, don’t they?” my mom said.

At the time, I just smiled. I couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“It’s a shame they run out,” she piped, “but you don’t need to worry about that.”

Before that day, I could have counted the number of times I had prayed on zero hands. I wasn’t worried about dying, as I find praying to escape death to be blasphemous. I was worried that all of those mountains would go by without me taking the time to paint them.

So, I prayed. I prayed that my masterpiece would include the greatest mountains in the world on one beautiful landscape. I prayed that when I was down to my last breath, looking at
the world I had created, I wouldn't be afraid to exhale. I prayed that I wouldn't wish for a different painting.

The day I graduated high school, the only thing I could see on my father's face was fear. I graduated in the bottom half of my class, seeking a degree in art. My accomplishments were hardly secure enough for my father. His disappointment ripped a chasm through our relationship. If I could ask him one thing, I'd ask him what he believed in. Although, I'd rather listen to the science clusters spilling from his mouth than find another thing to disagree on.

I'm curious as to where he thinks people go when they die. I can't help but believe he’d avoid the question all together. How can one answer such a speculative question with science? My father automatically shuts me out with his word walls. I only pray that his walls are protecting a loving man. I want to believe that my father is actually very sweet and is only afraid of being hurt by genuine connection. I don't want to believe he is cut off from it.

He was the one that told me connection is the key to survival. When individuals strip away all of the bull and cut down to the basic principles of humanity, they'll find that people need people. My mom believes the same thing, except that the only person a person needs is Jesus. I thank God for Jesus in my lungs every day.

My mom had her favorite verse hanging off the side of the rail of her hospital bed, always in view: “For I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me—Philippians 4:13.” Either she didn’t believe hard enough, or she didn’t quite believe in Jesus the same way I did. Between each of her heartbeats I felt my heart stop. I spent lifetimes waiting for the red mountains to sprout out of the screen—and even longer praying for one last peep of her voice.

I watched the life escape her like a hole in an inflatable tube man. The sweat poured off her forehead in beads of syrup as if her mind was a tree of knowledge. The doctors said the cancer spread like a forest fire.

“What if you woke up only with the things you thanked God for yesterday?” my mom chirped.

My father’s cry broke the lock on my eardrums that were so desperately trying to keep the silence between the beeps out. He looked me in the eyes for what felt longer than my entire graduation ceremony. I've never seen eyes so soft, so vulnerable. I saw straight into his soul, as he was hypothesizing ways to transfer the cancer from my mother to himself. Unfortunately, the scientific method doesn't always work. Sometimes, the problem is out of our hands.

Sometimes, the only thing you can do is breathe. But, I wasn't thinking about breathing. That was too selfish. I was trying to calculate how many prayers it would take before my mother could take breathing for granted. Like father, like son. Unfortunately, I didn’t have enough hands to count on. And it would take more than ten little miracles to calm me down.

“It’s so beautiful,” she whispered, her voice fragile as butterfly wings.

I peered into the glaze over her eyes and watched her painting come to life, balancing on one last, shaking breath. The three of us on a hospital bed that felt more like home than any house I had ever dreamed of living in. My father's hands shaking in my mom’s as if he was afraid of squeezing her final breath out. My mother’s smile wider than I've ever felt, and her heart beating peaks on the screen higher than I've ever seen. And me, thinking, “Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale. Exhale.”

And one final prayer: Let there really be a Heaven.
The flat line pierced like a gunshot. I involuntarily grabbed my chest as if I were putting pressure on an entry wound. My father looked at me with pain in his eyes and hollered, “Nurse!”

I took a moment to breathe it all in. The entire room was sucked up in a deep inhale. The home, the mountain making machine, and the pain all wrapped up in a vortex of air on its way to meet Jesus.

Exhale.
Poetry Collection
by Sarah Bronson
St. Joseph – Central High School

SELAH

Gobble my heart in trusting glass eyes.
Rotten planks with rusted aptitudes. Crash.
Form a pedestal of straining ovations at transparent mistakes.
You embellish each of my squeamish blemishes, smell the glare off my blood sequined lips. Melt like hallucinating steel, a mirage combusts with one step of forced adrenaline onto whipped white wood.
Dilapidated star gazers grind between brave incisors, desperate to shake into bloom. To unite together, reach beyond a mere company. Consume that reality. Ravage our souls with encouraging phonation.
Keep God in the proscenium ‘til life do us part,
sit back, relax, and enjoy my world. As we transcend center stage.

Left Behind

I have never sat on this bench.

So I haven’t see the tattered, plaid blanket shoved off to the side nestled behind my pedicured feet.

If I ever sat on this bench, I wouldn’t notice The man.
The shopping cart.
Or his charcoal grey eyes
behind scruffy ash colored eyebrows.
His gaze wouldn't saunter to the surface
and penetrate my core.

If I ever sat on this bench, I wouldn't listen
to his soil encrusted fingernails pluck out his cheerless tune,
his scruffy white whiskers adding texture
to the sharp, forceful gulps of sound coming from his heart.

If I ever sat on this bench I wouldn't be struck
by his bleached denim coat,
the shadowy hallows lying under his weathered eyes,
how his worn, pale, russet skin sits heavily on his face,
notice that his black tinged hat covers the creases
permanently residing in his forehead
and that, despite this,
His hands are constant,
carrying on
in their only remaining task
of moving music across his insipid pink lips.

I have never sat on this bench.
Obesity as a Matter of Personal Responsibility
by Alissa Buckner
Republic High School

In 2006, the World Health Organization (WHO) projected that approximately 1.6 billion adults were overweight and at least 400 million adults were obese globally. WHO projects that by 2015, 2.3 billion adults will be overweight and 700 million adults will be obese (“Obesity”). With all of the shocking, grave, real statistics involved with obesity Americans are faced with, it seems as if the rising problem of obesity would be doing just the opposite: diminishing. Within all of the current food, diet, and exercise promotion media available, many Americans still find ways to feel uninformed of the true dangers of becoming obese and how to prevent it, calling upon the government to take a more active stance for the welfare of its people (“Update”). However, the government is already providing numerous sources of critical, beneficial information with regards to combating obesity, but to many Americans, this goes under the radar. When it comes down to the matter of personal choice, Americans would rather blame the government than admit they have self-control issues. If the government sustains the current resources regarding prevention, the issue of preventing obesity is a personal responsibility and should be a top priority to be able to live a long and healthful life.

According to the WHO, “overweight” and “obesity” are defined as abnormal or excessive accumulation of fat that may impair health (“Obesity”). Distinguishing between overweight and obesity requires the use of body mass index (BMI), a weight-to-height ratio scale common among all adults, though it is inaccurate in determining muscle mass (“Obesity”). America has only seen increases in issues with the overweight and obese population since 1985, when obesity was finally recognized as a dangerous epidemic (“Key”). Data has been collected, lawsuits have been filed, and laws have been passed, all with reference to or stemming from the case of obesity in Americans, yet this “killer disease” continues to plague increasing numbers of Americans as the years go on (“Key”). Organizations such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Federal Department of Agriculture (FDA; specifically Obesity Working Group), the Center for Science in the Public Interest, and many others have published and made available information to the public in order to attempt to bring the obesity numbers down, yet the public is not getting the message. Despite the increased awareness of obesity, few signs indicate that the dangerous trend will stop any time soon, but something needs to be done. The CDC’s director as of 2007 Dr. Julie Gerberding correctly stated, “Obesity has got to be job No. 1 for us in terms of chronic diseases” (“Update”). This is a difficult problem to deal with, as much of this epidemic does weigh solely on the personal responsibility of the individual American. Though there certainly are critics and ignorants, personal responsibility must be promoted in order to achieve a healthier nation.

One area in which personal responsibility could be greater promoted is food choice while living in a “big food” industry era. Federal studies have concluded that nearly two-thirds of all Americans are currently overweight or obese, giving the United States the honor of holding the highest obesity rate in the world (“Update”). In recent decades, Americans have increased consumption of foods outside the home (in restaurants) and of packaged foods, both often times in greater proportions than necessary. The growth of fast-food has made high-fat,
high-calorie foods ever present in society, and the wide-availability of low-cost, fattening food encourages a culture in which the low-income people are inclined to be heavier than the wealthy ("Update"). US consumers now spend more money on fast-food than on movies, books, magazines, newspapers, and CDs combined ("Fast-Food"). Some victims of weight gain by fast food have attempted to sue the restaurant(s) “responsible” ("Lawsuits"). In 2002, a lawsuit was filed against McDonald’s Corp. and other fast-food chains by citizens claiming the restaurants had contributed to their health problems by serving unhealthy foods. The case has been dismissed, and a bill was passed in 2003 banning obesity-related lawsuits against the food industry ("Key"). Since then, the fast-food industry has been forced by the government to secure their providing of unhealthy food by making nutritional information available to consumers. Under the new healthcare bill signed by President Obama in March 2011, any restaurant with more than twenty locations must prominently display nutrition facts for customers (Murray). This should be a shocking realization for many Americans after years of blissful ignorance that what they were feeding themselves was, in effect, killing them. The idea is to make sure the customers realize the health content of what they are ordering or eating, making it a matter of personal responsibility.

Americans are also lacking in realization of what they are putting in their bodies when eating the abundantly marketed packaged or processed foods, which contribute highly to obesity compared to organic or natural foods. About ninety percent of money Americans spend on food goes to processed items, the convenient, eye-catching packages lining the shelves of the nearest grocery store ("Six"). Processed foods have been changed from their natural state for convenience or “safety” reasons, which means any number of about six-thousand chemicals used to process foods are added ("Six"). This isn’t even including additives the FDA considers Generally Regarded As Safe (GRAS), which are not required for food manufacturers to list ("Six"). Some synthetic chemicals found in processed foods are also known to have carcinogenic properties. Many heavily processed foods are high in sugar, fat, and salt, and lower in fiber and nutrients, making the perfect resource for unhealthy weight-gain and water retention. If the occasional processed food item weren’t bad enough, after eating processed foods regularly, taste buds become used to the strong flavors of the foods, making the adding of salt and sugar to organic foods appealing ("Six"). Americans have the knowledge of what chemicals are feeding into their bodies right at their fingertips yet turn a blind eye to the truth, turning this into a matter of personal responsibility.

Critics of the government’s characterization of unhealthy foods object to the implied definition as toxic substances that will kill you. Food is obviously different from products such as tobacco, the number one cause of death in the US, they say. John Fritchy, a Democratic state representative in Illinois, says, “Cigarettes are one of those products that, when used as directed, will kill you. I don’t believe there is much food out there that, when eaten responsibly, is going to kill you” ("Update"). Once again, the matter of healthy eating in an unhealthy industry is a subject of personal responsibility. Food may not be as generally toxic as cigarettes, but the CDC reported that poor diet and physical inactivity is in position to replace tobacco as the number one cause of death in the near future if the trends don’t change ("Medicine"). In regards to the false healthy appearance of processed foods, the government has also improved nutrition labeling on packaged foods to benefit the customer than what was originally printed for the consumer. In 1990, the government made law The Nutrition Labeling and Education Act.
Some terms of this act include: requirement of food manufacturers to disclose the fat, cholesterol, sodium, sugar, fiber, protein, and carbohydrate content in their products; and setting standards for allowing health claims on foods if the claims are based on sound scientific evidence and are truthful, accurate, and not misleading (“Nutrition”). Given the amount of information the government has provided with regards to warning statistics and educational labeling, Americans have no room to place the blame on the government or anywhere but themselves for the cause of obesity through food.

Another preventive strategy for obesity is engaging in physical activity. The rate of obesity among adults today is twice as high as in the 1960s, among children twice as high as the 1970s. Nutritionists think a great part of this growing problem has to do with changes in the ways Americans work and play today (“Update”). There are fewer intensive labor jobs today that require some amount of physical effort, such as farming, and the increasing independence on technology is allowing Americans to do more while using less physical energy ("Update"). Americans are just looking for ways to do traditional things more easily, including weight-loss. American consumers are spending more than $33 million per year on weight-loss products and services ("Update"), yet one of the most effective weight-loss tools is physical exercising, which can be as easy as going out for a walk or run. This is even achievable for the financially unstable who may be suffering from addiction to the cheap fast-food lifestyle and unable to purchase a gym membership or something of the sort. The government is also active in this area, much to lazy critics' dismay. To encourage Americans to engage in physical activity, The Surgeon General’s Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity was released, which provided suggestions for prevention in home, school, work, and community settings (“Causes”). Maureen Story, director of the Center for Food and Nutrition Policy at Virginia Tech, stated, “The data in our paper indicate that getting off the couch—not watching TV or videos—was far more predictive of whether a child was going to be overweight than any of the other dietary components” ("Update"). A 1999 Journal of an American Medical Association study found that obese men who exercised had only a slightly higher death rate than men of “normal” weight who did not. It is difficult to motivate the personal desire to get up off the couch and be active, but the government is doing enough to protect this excuse as a matter of personal responsibility.

Critics of the movement to promote physical activity claim the threat obesity proposes has been exaggerated. They say weight loss has become an industry and there is little reason to believe being overweight makes people dangerously unhealthy. Critics also point out that while Americans weigh more than they did in the past, they’re also living longer than before. They believe the obsession with weight is merely an extension of society’s preoccupation with physical appearance, which might turn many off to physical activity ("Update").

In response to the critics, the threat of obesity is real, and the consequences disastrous. According to the CDC, being overweight or obese increases the risk of developing such health problems as coronary heart disease, stroke, hypertension, type 2 diabetes, gallbladder disease, osteoarthritis, respiratory problems, and even some forms of cancer ("Update"). The only two areas in the US with obesity rates fewer than twenty percent are Colorado and Washington, D.C. Colorado spent money from a state lottery developing biking and walking trails, and many people began using them, creating “a culture of physical activity.” For Washington, D.C., many residents ride the subway, and studies have shown that those who use public transportation
tend to be thinner because it involves more walking, compared with people who drive (Grady). For the rest of America, the combination of a decrease in physical activity from new technologies and an increase in calorie consumption from more convenient foods make it harder for people to burn off the extra calories they consume, which is detrimental in the battle against obesity ("Update"). The FDA’s Obesity Working Group remarked, “Our report concludes that there is no substitute for the simple formula that ‘calories in must equal calories out’ in order to control weight” ("Medicine"). Without Americans wishing to improve their physical lives and improve the caloric balance, this epidemic will continue to rise in the coming years.

Many Americans feel uninformed about the dangers of weight-gain and obesity and overwhelmed with advertising of dangerous foods. One weight issue linked with advertising is child obesity. The American Academy of Pediatrics reports that one of every five American children is obese, a problem attributed to promotion of poor eating habits by advertising. The ads may cause children to snack more, spurring favor of unhealthy foods over nutritious items. A childhood of unhealthy eating habits could very well lead to a life of obesity (“Youth”). Michael Jacobson, executive director of the Center for Science in the Public Interest, says, “It’s very difficult to eat a healthy diet because there is so much encouragement and opportunity to eat a diet that’s loaded with calories, fat, and sugar” (“Youth”). In fact, the promotion of nutrition has to go against nearly $34 billion in food industry advertising each year ("Update"). Being confronted with so much detrimental media gives Americans crushed and overpowered emotions, which can lead to giving up in the individual quest to find accurate information regarding food health content. The sense of misinformation is what caused many lawsuits against the fast-food industry in the early twenty-first century. The plaintiffs’ complaint that fast-food corporations were giving false impressions about the nutritious content of their food wasn’t far from the truth, though most of the cases were unsuccessful or dismissed (“Lawsuits”). Opponents didn’t have enough argument to get around the fact that no matter how much advertising is shoved down Americans’ throats, customers hold a great deal of personal responsibility in purchasing the unhealthy foods.

Many Americans feel the government has not been adequately involved in the fight against obesity, but more has been, and is being, done by the government than the American public would like to acknowledge. One of the government’s major programs is Steps to a Healthier US, a $44 million project to provide funds to communities involved in urging people to exercise more and eat healthier (“Update”). The Steps program promotes healthier living at various levels in communities, including schools, universities, worksites, and health care organizations ("Steps"). The CDC also launched a physical movement campaign aimed at youth aged nine to thirteen called VERB, encouraging the children to be physically active every day (“Update”). Aiming encouragement at children to be in habit of being physically active is a positive step toward a future generation of healthier adults.

In conclusion, the issue of obesity is too great a danger for the American public to ignore. Dr. Thomas Frieden, director of the CDC, said correctly, “Over the past several decades, obesity has increased faster than anyone would have imagined.” The problems that have led to the continual increase in obesity are overwhelming. Too little exercise. Too much of the wrong kind of food. Uneducated, ignorant Americans. These hurdles in the quest for a healthier nation have consequences in many forms. Other than the fact that 72.5 million Americans, or
26.7 percent of the population, are now obese, our nation is becoming unhealthier in other areas, spurred by the weight-gain (Grady). Dr. Frieden stated that if the obesity numbers keep going up, “more people will get sick and die from the complications of obesity, such as heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and cancer” (Grady). America is also hurting financially from obesity. A 2009 report estimated the medical costs of obesity to be $147 billion each year (Grady). This is a huge increase from $75 billion spent per year as of 2004 (Wahlberg). However great these obstacles, it is possible to approach solutions with simple steps, such as Americans making minor adjustments to their diet and exercise habits to better long-term health and weight issues. With the help the government has provided in the forms of programs and initiatives, it is possible for Americans to turn the ominous trend around. However, Americans cannot be completely reliant on the government to solve the obesity epidemic. The government has given Americans a boost in the right direction, but now the responsibility to fight obesity rests with individual Americans.

References
“From you he only dares to crave,
For his service and his sorrow,
A smile today, a song tomorrow.

~P.B. Shelly
To a Lady, With a Guitar

What child has not had the lines “And so they were married and lived happily ever after” impressed upon its memory through readings and re-readings of cherished fairy-tales? Have we not come to believe that a wedding between the “perfect” couple is a sine qua non for happy, satisfying endings? Especially so when the bride is an angel of ravishing beauty capable of arousing the jealousy of all the nymphs of heaven, and the groom --- well --- suffice it to say that he is Hercules, Alexander the Great, and Robert Pattinson rolled into one. Indeed, the concept of a felicitous union and attainment of nuptial bliss has been so glorified over the ages in all corners of the world that we have come to regard “finding a perfect match” to be of paramount importance in our lives. Few can put it more succinctly than the astute Maugham: “... marriage finishes [a story] very properly ... and the sophisticated are ill-advised to sneer at what is by convention termed a happy ending” (3).

One has only to turn to the actions of over-zealous pundits for proof of the grip of the “perfect marriage = unparalleled bliss” formula on the human psyche. So unfulfilling and unjust did the English audience find the stark ending of Shakespeare’s King Lear that a certain scholar by the name of Nahum Tate was impelled, no doubt by a humane sense of literary philanthropy, to bring forth an altered version of the play. Tate’s adaptation ends in the unqualified triumph of good over evil, and, of course, the marriage of Cordelia to Edgar (in the Bard’s original work, those two characters are unaware of each other’s existence). Tate ensured that his audience would not be disappointed by the heroine’s premature, undeserved death and would take home the satisfaction of knowing that the virtuous duo could persevere unimpeded in their all-consuming passion for each other. And Tate’s revised rendition was an instant hit, supplanting the Shakespearean original as the version produced by major theatre companies until the late 1600s.

Tate’s crowd-pleasing alteration of what is perhaps Shakespeare’s greatest tragedy bears strong testimony to people’s ingrained sense of the inextricability of romantic love and personal happiness. As a child, I, too, thanks to society’s subliminal indoctrination of this notion into my impressionable mind, unquestioningly believed in the necessity of tying the nuptial knot, an essential ingredient in the potpourri of life. It was only natural, that one day I would have to plight my troth to a male and live with him – belong to him – for the rest of my life. Such was my belief until I saw my first Shakespearean play: The Tempest.

I was ten years old at the time – much too young to enjoy the subtle intricacies of the plot and the grandeur of Shakespeare’s lofty language, but not too young to follow the main storyline and delight in the theatrical twists and the dazzling array of characters and scenes. From my father’s (brief) narration of the story as we were driving to the show, I had expected
The opening scene of shipwreck swept my imagination away to an enchanted isle off the coast of Italy, where a father and daughter dwelt, blissfully isolated from the rest of the world. I had been longing to see the spirit Ariel and had my breath taken away when the nimble, unearthly creature made his first appearance. His attire was an ethereal shade of lavender; his voice, sonorous yet mystically soothing. With his first, “All hail, great master!” this celestial being laid hold of my heart – and hasn’t let go since. Here was a spirit, free from all human cares, unblemished by mortal taint, who was one with Nature herself. His delicate, airy nature suggested a sense of the most pristine innocence, combined with an ability to transcend earthly bounds and delve into the realm of the Truth and the Beautiful.

One observation, however, vexed me throughout the duration of the play: Miranda, the young daughter of Prospero, never had any communication with Ariel in the entire play. It seemed that she was oblivious of his existence! In fact, when Ariel made his first appearance on stage, Prospero used his magic to induce his daughter to sleep – as though he wished to prevent her from seeing Ariel. Why did the ingénue of the play never have the opportunity of associating with this heavenly being? My disappointment only grew when Miranda fell in love – “at first sight,” as some might say – with Ferdinand. It seemed so wrong that she should be enraptured by the very first human being she saw (the only one she had known besides her own father) and naively surrender herself to him on a presumably fickle impulse. Surely true love cannot be engendered by a one-time chance encounter?

In the end of the play, Miranda and Ferdinand were married, their parents reconciled, and an atmosphere of triumph and jubilation pervaded the scene. Yet I could not take part in that festive mood. As I watched Ariel, now liberated from servitude to Prospero, dance about merrily and sing of his unbridled future, I could not help but feel that Ariel was the truly victorious character in the play. Miranda, in leaving behind the island of her childhood and, metaphorically, her innocence and venturing into the world of harsh realities, had chosen the less desirable path. She had willingly submitted herself to a man she had known but a few days; she had curtailed her own freedom by accepting the conjugal yoke. Again and again, my thoughts reverted to dear Ariel. He had not received his due recognition by the story’s end; he who had tirelessly striven for the welfare and protection of Prospero and Miranda, he whose sublime love for Miranda – whom he had watched over as a guardian spirit from her babyhood – stood in contrast to Ferdinand’s sensual desire, who cared not for mortal pleasures and delighted only in the song of the birds and the fragrance of fresh blossoms. While this divine spirit’s merits went unsung, many a rosy picture was painted of the unremarkable couple’s future, their union was glorified with song and dance. Try as I might, I failed to convince myself that the plot really ended “happily ever after,” realizing the great disparity between the characters’ deeds and the praises accorded to them.

The unsatisfying ending of The Tempest made me try to articulate my own idea of a logical and wise path in life. For the first time, it struck me that marriage and domestic bliss were perhaps not as attractive and worthy of pursuit as society had made them seem. After all, what can be the use of binding oneself to a fellow human being with a bond of love of such a kind as is “unethical” to feel for another person? In the classic fairy tales, as well as in The
Tempest, the hero and heroine fall in love with each other’s beauty, with the young prince inevitably proclaiming his beloved as the nonpareil of beauty. Surely there are qualities more admirable than physical beauty to be sought in human beings? Surely a woman was not meant to devote herself to only a single man, blinding herself to the beauty of the others, in this vast, beautiful world? Such were the questions that kept rising in my mind. It was as though the once inviolable façade of indoctrinated values in me was beginning to crack— inexorably leading to a total collapse.

My doubts were not groundless, as my readings and experiences in the following years showed. The greatest wave of corroboration came as I sat in a nook at the now-extinct Borders bookstore one day, perusing a copy of Plato’s Symposium. In the dialogue, Socrates was recounting a lesson that he learned from his teacher Diotima about the true nature of love. Interested, I began to read Diotima’s lecture to the young Socrates. The magic began to work: the more I read, the more I loved this wise lady and clung to her every word. Here was a voice, unheeded, alas, by countless people throughout the ages, one that revealed a mind unclouded by tradition and customs, a soul devoted only to the absolute Truth. Everything I had felt but failed to express, Diotima articulated so lucidly yet so cogently. Love, she taught, is a noble sentiment, the manifestation of an ardent longing for eternal possession of the Good and the Beautiful. Ordinary men, she proceeded to say, are content with loving a single person and begetting mortal offspring, and by giving “birth in beauty” they hope to immortalize the good in themselves through generations of posterity. However, the wisest of men—those who are “more creative in their souls than in their bodies”—realize that such physical procreation, although certainly a means to the noblest of ends, is not the best way of striving for union with the Truth and the Beautiful. Exceptional men, rather than being drawn to the physical beauty of another, seek beauty in the souls of fellow men. Such men do not persevere in the love of a single being and instead see and love the beauty in the souls of all like-minded companions they befriend. And such love—most sublime in nature, arising from a shared devotion to the Truth—begets works of virtue that are truly immortal, such as great literature and scientific discoveries. Such “lovers” are “married by a far nearer tie and have a closer friendship than those who beget mortal children, for the children who are their common offspring are fairer and more immortal” (Plato). Diotima’s words had already captivated me with their simple logic and optimism; when she outlined the course a man wishing for this most rewarding experience ought to follow, my heart was all a-flutter. Here were the exact ideas that had occurred to me coming from the lips of a woman who trod this planet more than two thousand years before my time! Diotima encouraged Socrates to devote himself to the beauty of noble minds, and to recognize that the beauty in individual men’s souls is really all part of that enormous sea of Beauty. She urged him to reject narrow, hidebound perspectives—which lead one to be slavishly in love with a single being—and immerse himself in the quest for eternal beauty and truth. Such heavenly devotion has its rewards—ones far outstripping the fruits of earthly passion.

When I finally put Symposium down, I felt as though I had been reborn. A new light flooded my soul, making me realize how misleading the messages transmitted by “happily ever after” endings were. It all made perfect sense now; the kind of love Diotima espoused was by no means easy to attain. Years of devotion, patience, suffering, and abstinence from earthly gratification were required for this fulfillment. Obviously, happily-ever-after tales need to
appeal to the *hoi polloi* who are unable to accept undeserved pain and sorrow as an inevitable part of life and need to see earthly success and instant rewards for good conduct. Cordelia’s death disappointed the common audience, incapable as they were of envisioning that those denied mortal bliss on Earth could go on to the realm of Truth and reap the real rewards of their virtue there. Hence Tate’s reworking of the play, to provide instant gratification to a hidebound audience.

Not long after that day in Borders, I was thrilled to find a striking parallel between Diotima’s ideas and somewhat similar ones in *The Upanishads*, a classic of Indian spirituality: “... Reality is the essence of every created thing, and the same Reality is our real Self, so that each of us is one with the power that created and sustains the universe ...” (Easwaran 22).

I became Diotima’s humble follower, teaching myself how to pursue happiness through my work, and to seek the True and Beautiful in everybody I met. I understood that I must remain a child at heart – unbiased, straightforward, and wary of facades – if I was to expect a soul-enriching life. This meant retaining simplicity and never accepting an idea without ascertaining the validity of its origin. This also meant not chaining myself to a single person for life, but loving every person, who I realized shared my love of the Truth, with grace and dignity.

A fundamental concept in physics – the second law of thermodynamics – states that the universe detests confinement and that all things tend to states of greater freedom, as a gas released from the neck of a balloon shoots out into the world with alacrity or as a vase shatters into a thousand pieces when dropped, pieces which never bother to rearrange themselves of their own accord into their former, rigid structure. The arrow of time increases disorder and brings about mixing and expansion. Nature chafes against bonds of captivity and strives for greater and greater freedom. If such is God’s design, why ought not we to follow it? What indeed prevents us from pouring out our hearts in love to all we are fond of? As to the apparent necessity of tangible rewards on Earth for noble deeds, I hardly think that being nailed to a cross between two thieves to die would qualify as such. Similarly, denunciation as a heretic and the ignominy of public recantation of one’s ideas would scarcely fall into the category of instantaneous accolades for virtue. Yet who can deny that Jesus and Galileo earned immortality through their noble deeds and suffering and truly came into “the everlasting possession of the Good”? Surely, then, winning a princess’ hand in marriage and becoming wealthy and influential among men is not the gateway to immortality and union with the Good.

In *Ariel* of *The Tempest* I saw the embodiment of Diotima’s exalted heavenly passion. Ariel was the apotheosis of the human intellect, embracing freedom and the ultimate reality. No earthly chains could fetter him to mortal ignorance; he was beyond the duality of illusion and apparent reality, beyond the dichotomy of the sexes, and capable of “holding converse with the true beauty simple and divine,” as Diotima put it. The music he produced was untainted by notes of mortal discord – it was primeval music of the spheres, the music that our ears, clogged by ignorance, cannot perceive. *The Tempest’s* ending was indeed as un-Platonic as possible. I can see Ariel, invisible in the background and overhearing the mortals’ conversation, shedding silent tears, and grieving the loss of a potential votary of the Truth. Miranda is lost to him as a companion whom he could have loved and instructed and a being with whose soul he could have mingled his, sharing his love of the Absolute. Already he can foresee the intensity of Miranda and Ferdinand’s now engulfing passion abating and the romance beginning to cloy. He cannot help but pity Miranda – whom he had guarded since her
childhood – and wish she had not been so rash as to surrender herself to Ferdinand. Yet Ariel is not a lover of the flesh like Romeo, ready to destroy his own life at the perceived loss of his beloved. He does not grieve over his unrequited love for Miranda; he prides himself on his capacity for such unselfish passion and, in his state of newly-acquired freedom, lives merrily “under the blossom that hangs on the bough” – loving, and loved by, the One.

I had thought that such thoughts could have occurred to only somebody like me – somebody with seemingly no respect for a great playwright’s dramatic denouement. How wrong I was! In P. B. Shelley’s poem, “To a Lady, With a Guitar” I found explicit echoes of my own thoughts on Ariel and Miranda. Shelley speaks as Ariel, addressing Miranda, who is now in Naples as Ferdinand’s wife. Ariel presents Miranda with a “silent token” – a guitar symbolizing the ethereal music he personifies – and declares that he loves her still and protects her from afar. He is the immortal spirit who guided her vessel safely from the island to “the throne of Naples;” he will continue to devote himself to serving her, although Miranda remembers this not. All that Ariel longs for (reading these sweet simple lines brought tears to my eyes) in return for his constant love is “a smile today, a song tomorrow.” Shelley’s genius marvelously portrayed Ariel’s simple, sublime passion – devoid of any carnal desire – as a stark contrast to Ferdinand’s sexual ardor. I knew, then, that I was not alone.

Such is the story of my enlightenment – my awakening from the depths of commonly held, narrow views to the heights of illumined reality. No more do I waste precious moments telling my littlest friends the deceptive tales of “Cinderella” and “Snow White.” No more do I imagine a future that includes a large, lavish house, a “loving” husband, and offspring of my flesh. I see myself – ten or twenty years from now – in a humble apartment (my desk is littered with uncorrected proofs of my research papers, the immortal progeny of my soul), surrounded by a coterie of colleagues who share my passion for scientific research, in an ever-expanding circle of true love. Always, dear Ariel is watching over me, finding in me the Miranda he lost, and never asking anything of me save “a smile today, a song tomorrow.”

References
A Poem I Wish Someone Else Had Written

As I’m sinking, I begin to feel
the purpose in my gut, the ground beneath
and above me, the gap between where I am and where
I’ll be. Without reason to, I believe that something good
will come from this. Beginnings end, but we are here.

We are clearly unsinkable. And they are the same story: the
one you bequeathed to us and the one
you have let us write for ourselves.

Against the water, I forced my eyes open. Smudged
with algae and waste, I saw nothing. It was then
that I realized I was looking for you, but
you were hiding in the place where the sky
splits open, so virginally and continuously. You told
me things unhappen as much as they happen,
and I used this secret to breathe. It kept me alive.

Blind and scared, I reached out my hand.
Someone took it in theirs, and it
was in this way that I learned beginnings also begin.

Day One

They took me when I was small, to a land
that was neither this one nor that one. With
a knife made of a dead woman’s bone, they
cut me free from the leather cords of my papoose.
The following journey was swift and timeless. I
wound up in a Mongolian yurt, drinking the blood
of my horses for strength in battle.

Shortly after, they traded me for crumbs of magic
in a Byzantine bazaar, three centuries previously.
On a merchant’s ship, I sailed to a new world,
clinging to the ship’s mast for fear
we would fall off the edge of the globe. My face a nauseous
green, I was violently sick for three months. Lost my
soul in a card game. Won it back in a coin toss.

We stayed in the new world for thirty years forward
and twenty years back. I slipped away in the nights,
into the den of a russet-skinned man and his pine-smelling hands.
He made me his wife.
It killed my mother. They burnt her remains, donating the black
smoke of her skin back to the sky. I stood at her pyre, eyes closed,
chanting, half-lucid, belly round and firm as a rock.

Our daughter broke me open. I bit into a strip of tough leather, screamed. Sweat
tumbled down my temples and between my breasts. She came—slick with
blood and filmy with newness— from between my thighs. I drew my last gulp
of air as they pressed her to my chest, saying, Yours yoursyours.

My husband did not watch as they burned me. He stayed inside,
sharpening a knife made from the bone of my limp arm, slicing
and repairing the lines and faults of time.

At a Greek Restaurant for Seder

My parents bicker over the gas it took to
get here, and I fill up on pita before
the multi-pierced waitress even makes a
move to take our order. Her shoes are yellow
like jaundice eyes, and the toes of them
have clearly seen too many dinner shifts. I
want to be her. I want to stick a rod through my
septum, like a Spanish bull, and tattoo a
nice “fuck u” on my knuckles. Kicking
my shins under the table, my little sister
demands a round of tic-tac-toe, which
becomes eighteen rounds. I hate that game,
all the x’s and o’s, all the ties. The only good
part is when you place your letter in such a brilliantly
strategic manner that, no matter your
opponent’s counterstrike, you cannot lose. You’ve
got to give your x options. X has to mark more than one
spot, or you’ll lose the game faster than a block
of cheese goes up in flames—Oupa, accompanied by the
Ooh of the potbellied couple behind us and the
dance of heat against my eyebrows and chapped lips.

When I am a waitress, I’ll wear Docs, decoupage’d with pictures from dirty magazines—the boy-bits and girl-bits inked out in metallic Sharpie. I’ll paint each of my nails a different color and answer with a vague “out” whenever anybody asks me where I’m going. “Out like a light.”
Poetry Collection
by Marisa Cropp
Smithton Middle School

Mirror, Mirror on the Wall

My mind is a time bomb, waiting to explode. I’m not the only one. This world is a stock market, plummeting straight to hell. I don’t know how to save it but neither do you. Maybe if we worked together... “Listen kid, you just don’t get it because you are living in your own mind.”

Once I start to believe that if you disagree with a female politician, you are a dick-headed sexist but the rape victim is just a stupid liar, I’ll know my brain is formed. Then I can remember that the loudest screamer is the most original thinker and that the dumbest person is the best president.

I read your Botoxed face as you decide I’m a selfish hypocrite, wanting what I can’t have. “Respect is earned not given, so give me some respect.” Then you turn your back and roll your eyes because I’m just another stupid kid, another looming lawsuit.

Time is money, and years are wisdom. You spent your wisdom, so now you’re in debt. Tell as many lies as you want, but we are the same; soon I will become another lemming to your sea. I am the voice you silenced years ago, trying to get a job, trying to buy happiness.

We deceive ourselves but not each other. When you say I live in my mind, you mean I live in yours. You can hide, but you can’t run, because life’s a translucent hamster ball plunging into an abyss.
Bastards of Intellect and Media

The music blares
as the children mask their thoughts,
silently waiting for the end of something that never began.
“End”
it’s a powerful word, and they don’t remember what it means,
but it is stuck inside their heads.
They know it is something they want.
Every child is just another television program

The television speaks
as the sensible nod,
living the nightmare that they love
“Life”
it’s a romantic word, and they looked up the definition online,
but they can’t translate it.
They know it is something they have.
Every sensible thought is just another brutally murdered phantom.

The phantom screams
as his scream is lost to the raindrops pounding on the roof,
dropping into a puddle.
“Puddle”
it’s a word they could understand,
simpler in concept than “end.”
They know it is the closest they can ever come.
Every raindrop is just another child who failed.
Caught in the Crosshairs
by Adrian Cuevas
Platte City Middle School

“Hey, dumb wetback!”
“How cold was the river when you crossed it?”
“Dirty Mexican!”

As I got older, the insults became more frequent. In elementary school, no one seemed to mind that my skin was brown. Everyone played with everyone. There were no lines drawn out on the playground, but in middle school everything seemed to change.

No one can stop the racists. Teachers don’t hang out in the bathroom, the locker room, or on the bus where the insults are hurled across the seats like shot puts during track practice. There’s no way to avoid them. They hit me like a brick. Every time. They come at me when I least expect it. Each time a teacher turns his back, I hear them. One would start, and then others would follow. Every hour of every day I hear the whispers—sometimes they’re shouts. Principals and teachers wouldn’t do anything about it anyway. I’ve gone to them, and it seems like I’m the one who ends up in trouble. They say they do “stuff” to the bad guys, but they don’t. They may send the creep to the office, but he comes back meaner than ever. Words are followed by punches where bruises don’t show.

You think it’s easy being Mexican-American in a small mid-western town? Think again. I am a piece of brown bread in the middle of this Wonder Bread town. The only way out of this never-ending pit of slurs was to fight. I had to show them that I wasn’t taking it anymore. I admit it: I started the fight.

I saw them at a lunch table and even though I was nervous, I knew I had to do it. I had to protect my honor—my family’s honor. I got up the courage to speak, but I wasn’t sure anything would come out of my mouth.

“Hey, I’m not taking your crap anymore,” I say a little louder than I wanted. There it was, bigger than life. The tiger had been let out of the cage, and he wasn’t going back. I wanted to use stronger language with these punks, but I wanted to be the bigger man.

They didn’t say anything back. They ignored me.

“I want to fight you…now,” I said in a voice loud enough for them to hear but not loud enough to attract the attention of the lunchroom monitor.

“All right, you’re on, freak,” the leader of the gang said to me in his punk-ass, wise-cracking way.

We walked into the bathroom slowly. The bathroom in our school is known as the official “boxing ring.” It’s where kids decide life’s little problems.

We didn’t want to get the attention of other students or administration. I lead the way. After all, I called this fight. Now the deed was done; it was high noon, and we had no choice but to square off and get this over with.

I suddenly got fighter’s remorse. My legs became shaky, I felt nauseous, and I was...scared. I stood in the restroom and began to walk around in tight circles with both my fists clinched at my chest. Making the first move, I pushed him a little, and then he pushed back harder.
That’s when the beast was unleashed. I pounced on him like a puma, wrapping my arms around his neck and jerking him to the ground. Time and space stopped, but when I knew I had the upper hand, reality hit me.

I actually started feeling sorry for the punk because I was winning. I looked up at his friends, and they looked away, ashamed for my opponent. And then, he said the most degrading thing you can say to a 14-year-old boy.

“Come on, hit me, Momma’s boy.”

Rage overtook me. I started pounding on his face like a hammer gone wild. At first, I didn’t see any marks from my fist, but his lip started to bleed. I stopped, seeing tears have formed in his eyes, one escaping to run down to his bleeding lip.

I stopped.

What was I doing?

I got off of him and walked out of the bathroom. I had mixed feelings: happy that I had won but sorry for the physical pain I caused. I was no better than he was. Tit for tat. Eye for an eye. What kind of justice had just played out?

I saw him as he left the bathroom and knew that I would be getting a call down to the office. Feeling sick in my stomach, I walked back to my lunch table. It seemed just a few seconds went by when I feel a tight grip on my arm.

“My office…now!” my principal growled. He is a giant looking down on a mouse. I walked to his office with my head hung down and my tail between my legs. He took me to an empty conference room and told me to sit down.

“Take this pencil and yellow pad and write everything down as it happened,” my principal said. I felt like I was in an episode of “The Closer” only this time “the criminal” wasn’t entirely guilty and my principal certainly wasn’t a hot blonde chick with a southern accent. Talk about getting screwed a second time.

I finished my “confession,” got up from the table, and knocked on the principal’s door. He put his hand out for the paper. I sat in a chair across from his desk and watched as his eyes ran across the sheet from left to right. Another person was in the room. I didn’t recognize him, but I recognized the holster he had strapped to his waist and what was inside – a 9mm Glock. I started sweating.

“It sounds like you are trying to put this all on the other guy to look innocent,” my principal said.

My jaw hit the floor. I couldn’t believe it. That wasn’t what I wrote. I could feel myself starting to get angry.

“I told you it was my fault,” I said quietly. My head was down when I was talking. I was trying to be respectful.

“I have already called your parents, and I’m going to cut you a break.”

A break? Is he kidding? What kind of a break does a kid like me get? None. He called in reinforcements like I was already in juvie.

“You’re lucky that you’re not in OSS. Also, I called Officer Jones in whenever there is an assault.”

What about the assault on my race? Will he take care of that, too?

The punishment was handed down. Four days of in-school suspension. They went “easy” on me.
The other kid? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. He walked away untarnished and innocent of all charges. I felt alone and angry. There was no justice in this.

I spent the rest of the day in a chair in the office. I spent the next four days staring at a wall in the ISS room. Four long days spent looking at the clock and praying that 2:50 p.m. might come a little sooner one day. I spent hours wondering what my enemy was telling all the other kids at school. I was feeling guilty even though I knew that I had only defended my honor—my family’s honor.

On the fifth day, I was released from school prison. I tried to put on a casual air as I walked to my locker. Unfortunately, the brute’s locker was right next to mine. I focused on my locker combination as his eyes focused on me. I could feel him staring right at me. I got my books, slammed my locker, and went to my first class.

I wish my story had a happy ending, like the fairy tales we read in elementary school. You know the ones I’m talking about, the one where the underdog wins the fight and also wins the popularity contest and sometimes gets the girl. I wish I could write that happy ending for my story. As it is, I’m still the Mexican-American kid who lives my life one day at a time. The racial slurs are fewer, but it’s because I took matters into my own hands. I don’t regret that. I’m OK for now, but I know that there will always be one person who thinks he’s better than me simply because my skin is brown.
Tea In The Garden

The Ladies’ Gardening Association’s semi-annual Tea in the Gardens party had started out just like any other. The ladies, who all lived on the same block in the Green Groves Retirement Village, started in Jan Miller’s garden and worked their way up and back down the block until they ended at Peggy Blue’s house.

The ladies spent twenty-three minutes in each garden. Any longer, and they would get bored. Any shorter, and they would begin to complain about being rushed, as old ladies tend to do. Experience had taught them that twenty-three minutes was the perfect amount of time to adequately admire gardens, get a quick snack, and discuss potting soil, grandchildren, and those crazy liberals ruining the good streets of New York.

They finished at Jan’s house and moved through the rest of the houses and gardens until they finally reached Peggy’s house. The ladies chirped happily to one another, as Peggy’s delicate hand pushed the door open. Peggy never bothered to lock the front door, seeing as no one in the retirement village was willing to devote the energy or time to steal from anyone else. The ladies followed her through the house and out to the garden.

The tea and treats were sitting on the patio table where Peggy had left them. The finger sandwiches, two for each lady, lay on a bed of lettuce, next to the cream puffs. Fresh tea from the garden sat in a small blue dish next to the China tea set Peggy’s family had owned since the 1890’s. Everything was the epitome of perfection, except the figure who had placed herself at the table.

“Hello, ladies,” smiled Janis coyly. She was running a neatly manicured pointer finger around the rim of the teacups Peggy had laid out for the ladies. Now they were a cup short. Peggy couldn’t handle that kind of imperfection.

“What are you doing here?” asked Peggy.

“Well, I noticed you neglected to invite me, so I took the liberty of inviting myself.”

Peggy could feel the rage begin to bubble inside her, growing more and more out of control with every circle Janis’ finger drew around the rim of the teacup.

“You didn’t receive an invitation for a reason,” Peggy commented, teeth gritted.

“Oh, posh,” scoffed Janis, as if she and Peggy were sharing an old joke between friends.

“Damn it, Janis! No one wants you here!” yelled Norma Jean.

“Oh, give me a break,” scoffed Janis.

“A break? I’ll give you a break!” shouted Norma Jean, lunging across the table at Janis. Norma Jean grabbed a handful of cream puffs from their plate on the table and stuffed them in Janis’ face, covering her in a mask of pastry.

One by one, the other ladies joined in the fight, attacking Janis with baked goods and flowers. Peggy stood screaming to the side about how they were ruining her good China, until a finger sandwich hit her in the head. She had been officially pushed over the edge. She slammed a teapot down on Susan’s head and began flailing her arms in a wild attempt to hit another lady gardener.
They ladies were rolling in a heap on the lawn, pulling necklaces and shouting insults, when a timer on the garden wall went off. The ladies halted, stood up, and brushed themselves off.

“Oh Jan! You ruined your best paisley scarf!” exclaimed Peggy, a look of true concern smeared across her face.

“Never mind that. I can get a scarf any time.” Jan reached down and picked up a clip-on pearl earring. “Peggy, if this yours?”

“Yes, thank you much,” said Peggy, accepting the earring and clipping it back into place on her left lobe.

“The tea pot was a nice touch,” commented Susan.

“Thanks, it just came to me!” Peggy beamed, straightening her earring one last time.

“You know girls, when we brought it up at the last meeting, I really didn’t think adding a Fight Club aspect would be a successful idea, but that was a lot of fun!” smiled Janis.

“Whatever keeps us young!” exclaimed Wilma.

The ladies laughed politely and resumed their discussion of potting soil, grand kids, and those darn liberals.

Romance or Something Else
A kiss
is a brisk
moment for a miss
or absolute, total success.
As the door crept open, a beam of light split the night in half. Turning in the opposite direction, I buried my head in my pillow in an attempt to doze off from reality. Mom tiptoed around my new presents that lay scattered on the floor. Finally able to defeat the battle that developed on the carpet, she twisted open the blinds.

A greater force of light attacked the room as I snuggled deeper into my blankets, pleading, “Just give me five more minutes, Mom!”

The bed creaked as she made herself comfortable, arranging herself around the myriads of stuffed animals. The tips of her smooth fingers grazed my face, lightly brushing my bangs out of my blinking eyes. I took refuge under my pillow, pushing out my surroundings.

“Mom, this is the reason for winter break,” I groaned. “I need sleep!”

Granting my wish, my mother rubbed my back and whispered the four words that unleashed the sleeping tiger within me.

“They found a donor.”

My disoriented eyes shot open. My dream faded away to nothing. In the blink of an eye, I dashed after Mom down the spiral staircase, careful not to trip over the family of stuffed snowmen resting at the bottom of the stairs. Desperate for more facts, I stumbled into the kitchen where Mom was already scrubbing down the counter, preparing the house yet again for another round of family visits.

***

When I was seven, my world consisted of designing new hairstyles for my Barbie and watching endless hours of Dragon Tales. My biggest worry should have been finding my lost Polly Pocket accessories when I played house with my sisters. However, when I was seven, my grandpa suffered his first of many lung collapses, creating the dark cloud that surrounded my family for what seemed like a never-ending period of war.

For the next seven years, Papa would battle Rheumatoid Arthritis, which would eventually control both lungs. Before the arthritis, Papa could toss around the football with my uncles or supervise my cousins and I swinging in the hay barn. However, the arthritis took his energy captive, hiding it in a place so obscure, my family could find Waldo before discovering its hiding place.

It seemed like each visit created a new problem that was added to the growing list of complications Papa had to endure. During our visits, the time spent with him would slowly decrease, as if Father Time was stealing away the minutes we had left with Papa. The cheerful atmosphere of the farm disintegrated as a mass of gloom surrounded the house. The hay barn screeched as I swung wildly over the ground. The football lay dull on the ground, lifeless. As the wind howled late at night, the shadows outside brought the Grim Reaper to life, slowly pushing him closer to my family.

I grew used to sneaking around his reclined chair, its occupant spending more time there, sleeping, than anywhere else. I walked on glass around Papa, convinced that the slightest movement would elicit a coughing fit, sending him into the hands of death. At night, I
forced back the tears, trying to convince myself that the doctors would find a solution. However, as soon as I heard him gasping for air in the upstairs room, my wish was eradicated.

Our departure from the farm began to create a black hole in my memory of Papa. The fear of snapping his frail body in two as I went in for a hug frequently entered my mind. My brain told me that each goodbye was forever. A chill ran through my body as we pulled out of the gravel driveway while doubt haunted my thoughts with the question nobody wants to answer.

“What if I never see him again?”

Because of our age, my cousins and I were usually sent outside on the ATV’s or downstairs for a Disney movie when Papa’s health conditions arose in the conversation. Words like “Histoplasmosis” and “Remicade” floated through the air during the early years.

As my knuckles paled from squeezing the rails of a kitchen chair, I leaned in towards my mother, biting my lip. My foot tapped rapidly against the floor while shivers ran through my body. I felt as if I were floating on a cloud as Mom explained that the doctors at Barnes Jewish Hospital found a donor for Papa’s double lung transplant. At first, the news didn’t flow together. The doctors put him on the donor list on Christmas Eve. Now, six days after Christmas, our very own Fairy Godmother granted our wish. The impossible was made possible. Fate gave my family a chance to hold on to my grandpa after fighting for seven years.

Ten months later, I rushed across the church lobby, as fast as I could in my 3-inch heels. The usher thrust a bouquet of white roses into my shaking hands, and I lined up next to the other bridesmaid, as we steadily made our way up the aisle. Trying not to trip, I kept my eyes focused on my uncle, who was waiting patiently for his bride to appear.

Taking my seat in the pew, I spun around, just in time to see Papa escort my grandma down the aisle. A grin spread across every face in my family, as if it were wildfire. Papa marched up the aisle, on his own. Arthritis no longer controlled his ability to complete this simple task. He was no longer dependent on artificially supplied oxygen.

Light filled the church as he glided down the long path, the pianists’ magic fingers flowing over the keys. The statue of Mary beamed down at the man who fought death and won. He snuck a wink in my direction, with a smile wider than the Cheshire cat’s. As he reached the altar, I glanced up at the stained glass image of the angels just as Papa finally reached his destination. The sun gleamed upon our family that day.
My family’s blue-green van reluctantly squeaked to a halt in the parking lot. I cheerfully slammed the door of the van with a metallic crash, swung my backpack up onto one shoulder, and scraped my feet across the pavement a few times. Little chunks of gritty asphalt rolled gratingly underneath my brown crocs, making a satisfying crunchy noise. I reached the door of the church and gave it a yank. It opened reluctantly with a faint squawk.

The dim, warm hallway inside smelled like new paint, overheated vacuum cleaners, and stale popcorn. It was a comforting, sleepy smell. I took a couple skipping steps down the silent, empty hallway as I settled my backpack tightly onto my shoulders and then took the corners fast, first right, then left, then right again and straight ahead. I didn’t feel like being late to Biology, so I jogged quickly straight down the dim hallway to the rec room of the church, where a couple chairs and tables sat in front of an enormous whiteboard.

Stepping through the wide double doors, I virtuously restrained my immediate urge to throw something large and heavy at Luke’s head and stood on my toes, looking for a seat. The second semester of my freshman year, Luke took the same classes I did at the small home school co-op we attended, driving me up the wall in each one. I can’t quite say why we didn’t get along, except that our personalities went together about as well as poison ivy and Boy Scouts on a hiking trip. I dragged my feet to the only empty chair, unfortunately next to him.

For a moment, his loud voice rose above the indistinctly buzzing conversations. Wait a minute. Laughter? This was their response? I couldn’t believe no one told him he was rude or at least changed the subject. I felt physically sick. Then, all of a sudden, I was furious. I couldn’t understand what was going on inside me; I only knew that, at the moment, I wanted to strangle Luke even more than usual. I felt a familiar feeling growing inside me and panicked, begged myself to slow down, stop, get under control, as blood began to pound in my ears.

“What are you talking about? How would you know what it’s like for them? How could you say that? Just shut up! You don’t know what it’s like for them.” I couldn’t control my unreasonable rage. Luke stared at me, speechless for once.

I don’t remember what else I said, but it was probably even more ridiculous. It kept coming, the fury, surging up in me—a fierce heat that I felt in my lungs, in the hard, tightened muscles of my face, in my biting voice.

My voice rose too loud. I tried to rein in my emotion and realized I was almost crying, trembling with anger. Embarrassment suddenly smashed into me, jarring me out of my fury. I
remembered the incoherent words I had just flung at him a few seconds before with shock, ashamed. I mentally listed all the embarrassing possibilities, the countless ways my furious words and aggressive body language could be—surely would be—interpreted by my fellow students. I cringed as remembered the words I had used. They were the worst possible combinations, as usual.

"Oh yes, this is just great," I mused glumly. "They’ll think I’m weird, or lesbian, or totally crazy or something."

I looked around at the circle of uncomfortable people within earshot of me. Surrounding me with my own little circle of silence. Students awkwardly shifted in their seats, looking anywhere but at me; the girls abruptly started shrill, nervous conversations about nothing, and the boys quickly turning to their textbooks. If I hadn’t been completely mortified, it would have been an amusing scene.

Ever since I could remember, my passionate character had completely embarrassed me at times like this. There was the time when, as a skinny little nine-year-old, I got wound up and whacked the boy next door with a big stick nearly as tall as me for teasing the little neighbor kid by running off with his football. Then there was the time during fifth grade in Peru when I always felt an unexplainable obligation to yank the bigger boys away when they teased little Claudio by snatching his backpack and tripping him. And the awful time in eighth grade at summer school dance class when I scolded some girl I didn’t even know for mocking a retarded kid.

I realized I was nervously rubbing the prickly gray fabric covering my chair. The stiff synthetic fibers stung my hands and made them itch, so I pulled them away impatiently and tried to take notes on Biology, resolving to forget this experience and control myself next time.

But my mind kept coming back to the same thoughts. Never had I heard someone use such a mocking, cruel tone of voice to describe another human being. Luke had never known a gay person—never seen them laugh over a joke, struggle with a difficult math problem, tease a friend, experience stage fright. Perhaps that was why he found it so easy to call them stupid or ugly.

* * *

That same semester of my freshman year, I took Drawing 1 at Parkway Central High School. I sat next to Nicki, another freshman. A petite, vivacious girl with red-dyed hair stuck up in an aggressive-looking mohawk, she was funny and friendly. She was also lesbian.

Nicki talked loudly and confidently with her many friends in the class, but I remained withdrawn, silent, and painfully self-conscious, trying to adjust to the rambunctious, gigantic public high school after the relative silence and calm of my tiny home school co-op.

To me, Nicki seemed like all the culture shock and discomfort of my transition condensed into one person. Just thinking about starting a conversation with her, or even saying good morning, made me cringe. I had absolutely no idea how to go about talking to her. Life was so different, she was so different, and I was completely unnerved by unfamiliar things.

My freshman year came to an end, and despite long inward arguments, I still had never made myself say anything more than good morning to the girl I sat next to for over three months. As I left drawing class for the last time, I admit I breathed a small sigh of relief, though simultaneously kicking myself for my cowardice. At least there would be no more
awkwardness or struggles with whether to talk or not. I had a whole summer ahead of me to prepare to start over.

Start over. What wonderful words.

*  *  *

Sighing, I leaned my sleepy face against the cool bus window in a desperate attempt to wake up, my little home-school brain protesting the early hour. I ended up staring groggily at the constant whirl of houses and roads as they came even with the window, froze for a split second, and then charged resolutely on, gone in a moment. Red-tinged trees rushed past, quivering in a chilly fall breeze. Next came a yard full of oaks, with rustling leaves that refused to admit the end of summer, still clinging determinedly. A gusty whoosh of wind and, sighing, the oak trees seemed to dubiously shake their long arms, sending countless laughing leaves tumbling wildly to some other person's far-off yard. It was one of those melancholy days, not quite summer or fall.

Starting over. A clean start.

I heaved my book bag onto my shoulder and charged down the steps and out of the bus, ready to face the world. Confidently, I considered the possibilities for my sophomore year. Yes, my prospects were looking up. No more awkward silences, no more quiet, shy hours in the back of the classroom. The world of public school was going to see the real me at last. I would be outgoing and cheerful, adjusting immediately and seamlessly to the unknown and the different.

Mr. Warren taught sculpture tucked away in the back of the art wing. Over the shiny, irregular floor of Ms. Deffenbaugh’s classroom I strode, past the little art office, around the corner, through the door, and into the huge sculpture classroom.

I had never been there before, so I halted in the doorway and silently surveyed the room. Large windows all along one wall let in rays of peacefully slanting morning sunshine, swirling with a faint golden mist of dust. Several leafy potted plants cut out complicated designs in the shadows on the opposite wall. There were wide yellow newly varnished tables, cross-hatched in random patterns with countless, smoothed-over, sanded-down gouges, and scratched with names from generations of students.

I looked around eagerly for someone I might know. Completely deflated, I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. My self-satisfied attitude sagged into a shapeless lump, like a slowly melting snowman. Nicki was sitting with her back to me, her open backpack flopped against the chair leg, calmly flipping through a magazine lying on one of the tables. I unconsciously slid my feet backwards, and edged my way towards the door, then jerked to a halt and scolded myself inwardly. There was no way I would be such a coward on my first day back to school. The more I looked around, however, the more tempting running away seemed.

Only a couple of other people had arrived to class, and they were busily texting on their cell phones. It would be easy to slip out just as quietly as I had arrived and wait outside until more people came. After that, it was only a simple matter of always keeping the crowd between me and Nicki, always fading into the background when she came close. I knew from experience how easy it would be to ignore and avoid her for the rest of the semester. Or the rest of my high school years, for that matter.

My mind slipped back to that day last year in Biology class. Luke cruelly mocked people like Nicki because he didn’t know them. I shunned her, despite knowing her to be the kind,
cheerful girl she was. At that moment, I couldn’t think of a single thing that made me better than Luke. His actions were judgmental, but at least he was ignorant of the truth. I, on the other hand, knew Nicki, yet I still allowed myself to overlook her wonderful personality, letting just one aspect of her character completely intimidate me. I realized that I hadn’t even noticed the obvious things we had in common, like a love of art, a goofy sense of humor, and longing for good friends.

I sighed. For a moment I gazed indecisively out the door of the classroom at my fellow students walking towards me from the end of the hallway. I turned back, stepped forward firmly, and swung my backpack onto the end of the table. She looked up.

“Hey, Nicki!” I smiled hesitantly.

Nicki grinned back good-naturedly, “I didn’t know you were taking sculpture too! You surprised me!”

I felt cheerful, and absurdly proud of myself. The rest of the class shuffled in and scattered awkwardly among the tables, silent and self-conscious, but Nicki and I were too busy discussing our summer break to notice them.
Kansas
by Jessi Glueck
Blue Valley North High School

As often as I leave and come back again, it never stops being beautiful.
Coming home starts as the plane swings in. The tapestry unfolds itself, field after field, rich as living velvet. I can see the country roads wending brief dusty arteries through the summer green. The grass has this quality of refulgence, which I have never seen anywhere else, so vividly colored it internalizes the sunlight and seems to glow from within.

My own neighborhood displays a gentler and more cultivated kind of beauty. It is a place of sprawling driveways and big houses. Trees at exact intervals throw lacy doilies of shade onto the glittering concrete. A white butterfly chases its shadow over a freshly-mown lawn.

We try to be sophisticated. Every other house has Corinthian columns or a marble statue or an amphora sitting in the front yard. Some have built their fantasies here: a Spanish-style villa, a Cape Cod clapboard, an Old New York red brick with shutters in the windows. There are the sleek modern creations of couples who believe—that Art is going to come to our city and they are going to herald its arrival.

But in running my eyes over the corkscrew contortions of one of these houses (wondering where the front door is), I am invariably distracted by the sky, so blue it makes you wish there were another word for blue, a superlative, something that would capture its essence. We are a prosaic people, but poetry is in that sky.

If our poetry is the iridescent sky, our music is the silence. Cars are few. People speak softly. Upon returning home, I always find myself acutely aware of the small melodies that the urban cacophony covers: the crickets and cicadas, the barking of dogs, the wind in the trees. Something is so liberating about that silence. The noise of cities sits in the back of my consciousness and goads me like a buzzing fly, a doubt that cannot be put to rest. I think it is part of the reason why city people feel always the need to be hurrying somewhere, why they crave distraction and entertainment to drown out the weary clamor of their environment. Here, we know better. Our silence has in it the quiet of the great prairies. It is the song of a place at peace.

As dusk falls in the stillness, I see two moms—neighbors—say hello as they pass each other. One of them is walking a dog; the other, a towheaded toddler. The young creatures play together for a moment, darting in and out of the fading light. The moms chat and, since their companions are getting restless, walk briskly on. I can tell that they’re heading home: toward good food and good company. Each, of course, has her own story; but theirs are predictable and at least a little happy.

Sometimes that predictability can be stifling. I know every crack in the sidewalks of my neighborhood. I can close my eyes and picture my street, my local shopping center, each linoleum tile in the hallways of my high school. I care about other things. I love English literature and watch poetry slams on YouTube. I want to sit in coffeehouses and discuss Shakespeare. I want to have adventures, to talk to someone about books, to experience that epiphany which will inspire my first novel. None of that seems likely to happen here. As peaceful as this place is, it has failed to bring me inner peace.
And so, as soon as I can, I will run away to have my adventures. Maybe they’ll be wonderful or lonely, but I know at the end of them—when the novel is written and the coffeehouses have emptied—this place will welcome me as it always has. Cities are wonderful places to exhaust the restlessness of youth. Afterwards, I know I am going to want to live where I can see the stars.

There is something to be said for settling down, for tempering imagination with reality, beauty with graciousness, excitement with contentment. I have fallen in love with other places, but only this quiet suburb, this backwater of tamed and gentled loveliness, has been my friend.
Dear Grandma,

I think about you all the time, wishing you didn’t have to go. Could I have traded places with you? Is that what you would have wanted? I long for your big hugs, fresh vanilla scent, and inside jokes only we shared. You were a best friend to me in many ways. You promised we would be best friends forever. Does a coma change the meaning of forever? The other day I snuck downstairs like you taught me and saw Momma. She cried and cried missing you. It wasn’t her fault you know. I wish you could tell her that. Maybe that small act would ease her pain. In some ways I think it was Momma that went into a coma that day. She just shut herself off from the world but more importantly the daughter she forgets. Would you have forgotten if you were in her position? I’d like to think no. I’d like to think a lot of things like, why couldn’t you be the one visiting the hospital as opposed to living there...

Write Soon,
Anna Banana

March 24, 2005

Dear Anna,

Do you remember the time we had a snowball fight? It was your first snow day, so we spent an hour making forts. I threw you a snowball, and it hit your face. That was the end of snowball fights. You screamed in my arms and were convinced blindness would win the battle in your eyes. You were wrong. I hope you prove wrong about your momma. Was it her fault? I can’t say it was, but I can’t say it wasn’t. I’ve had so much time to think. When you visit next week, can you tell me your favorite times we shared or the much missed memories? I would give anything to talk to you, but I suppose I must write. It’s the thought that counts.

By the way, I didn’t forget,
Grandma

April 2, 2005

Dear Grandma,

I listened to your wishes. It was hard, but I confessed my favorite times we shared. Do you remember the day you, Mom, and I went to the movies? We picked an awful movie and ended up laughing through the whole thing. The people behind us got up and left. What we learned: take the humor someplace besides the theater. That night I spent at your house. I wanted to play a board game so bad, but it required three people, so what did I ask? I asked you why I didn’t have any siblings. You told me we should go for a drive and confessed my importance to
you and why I didn’t need any siblings. You were the only person to ever say something like that to me.

When I shared these times with your comatose body, Mom was listening. I didn’t know it until I heard her ragged sobs in the hall. I didn’t mean to hurt her feelings, but we all know she didn’t really do a lot involving me. When are you waking up? Besides you knew how to cheer Mom up and give her an apology worth accepting. I can’t do that...

Needing you more than ever,
Anna

April 14, 2005

My dearest, strongest Anna,

I’ll let you in on a secret. I could never give your mother an apology worth accepting. She just chose to open and forgive regardless. Please do something for me, Anna. Give your mother a chance. She has a hard time with you due to the strong resemblance to your dad. She misses him more than you will ever know. I have been comatose for over a month, and if I don’t awaken soon, the good Lord should take me. Being comatose is no way to live. No matter what happens, don’t let your mother live comatose. Just because you can move doesn’t make you’re living. Remember: everybody dies, but not everyone lives.

Loving you now and forever,
Grandma

April 27, 2005

Dear Grandma,

I sent this piece of mail in the priority bundle hoping it would arrive before you left us. It didn’t, but I figure maybe you’re looking down from heaven reading this. When the doctors told us you had stopped breathing Momma locked herself away. She missed the funeral, but don’t be angry with her. She’s traumatized as you would say. The only person she has left is me, and I’m not much of a selection. Wednesday she came out. Her skin was hanging on for dear life as she ate her first meal since your passing. I made her come to a public place, the library, and we had a big long talk. Momma probably won’t forgive herself in my lifetime, but she did concede to get help. You know what Momma did tell me? She said she had been so disconnected because I was just like you. It was hard for her to sit and talk to me knowing I would sound like you. Then she told me a little piece of you was all she needed. She needed me. I really don’t like death, but even in death you made a difference. Momma and I are growing tighter every day. We even went to the movie theater. This time we cried all throughout the movie, so once again the people behind us moved. This caused a laugh. Our laughter might not be as contagious as yours always was, but we are slowly changing our lives for the better. No more living comatose for us. I have finally decided to make this my last letter to you. My therapist
says it’s time to let go. The first step is with the letters. Grandma, just remember, even though I’m letting go, I will always keep a little piece of you for the generations to come.

Loving you now and forever,
Your strong Anna
Waste

by Shawn He

Parkway Central High School

I woke up with a sharp stinging in my neck. Feeling disoriented, I immediately began to survey my surroundings. An old, rickety queen-sized bed holding a stiff mattress that was probably the source of my soreness sat in the middle of an otherwise mostly bare room. My new backpack’s bright blue leather stood out as a foreign object from the overall color palette of the dirty wooden walls and floors. I shook my brother, who was sleeping next to me, and headed downstairs. There, my mother and grandma were steaming mantou for breakfast in the kitchen, which happened to be the only room on the first floor.

While eating, my grandparents listened and laughed while my parents told them the story of how we had gotten stuck in the mud for hours in the taxi the night before. Or so I assumed. Despite going to Chinese classes throughout elementary school, my vocabulary remains severely lacking.

I quietly nibbled on my food, still struggling to acclimate to my grandparents’ house in the southern Chinese rural town where my mom spent her childhood. As an eight year old boy, I was just now aware enough to remember aspects of my home country that I could not during previous visits. I had never noticed that my grandparents had wooden dividers ready in case they ever needed a makeshift front door, or that only a single electric lamp was used to light the entire room, or that we had to relieve ourselves in a pot which my grandparents emptied whenever it got full. The part about the pot concerned me the most. At home, I had always been a stubborn advocate of clean, tidy bathroom environments.

Later that day, while playing with my cousins in a muddy field, I suddenly felt the inevitable urge to have a bowel movement. My mom directed me to a small room outside of the main house, the sight of which gave me a dreadful feeling of apprehension in my stomach. However, the competing sensation in my lower intestinal area could not be ignored, and I trudged towards the shack, hoping that inside those thin wooden walls would be a shiny, first-class toilet.

When I opened the door, the stench of half my extended family’s waste immediately overpowered my delicate nose. The sheer potency of the odor even caused me to visualize a brownish-green gas wafting menacingly towards my nostrils. Horrified, I quickly shut the door.

Now standing uncomfortably in front of the door, I uneasily cracked it open to see if a smaller dose would help me to ease myself into the bathroom. Unfortunately, the stink attacked my sense of smell just as ferociously as before, forcing me back outside. Trying a new method, I held my breath and entered again into the dark room.

When I looked down, I did not see a shiny, first-class toilet. Instead, I gaped in dismay at a crude hole dug into the ground. A single log bridged the pit as my only protection from falling while doing my business. As I struggled to keep myself from opening up my nose to the foul air, I attempted to calculate whether or not I could survive a couple more minutes in the room without dying from odor poisoning. Suddenly, out of the corner of my eye, I saw the slightest movement on the floor, maybe an evil monster, or a scary spider, or most likely just a leaf. Nevertheless, I bolted out and dashed straight to my mother.

“Mom, I can’t go in that bathroom!”
“How come?”
“It’s too gross! I need a better toilet.”
“No, you don’t. When I was your age…”

My mom went on to describe how she used that exact bathroom throughout her childhood and that I should at least be able to use it once. Still believing that I deserved better as a kid of the 21st century, I mainly dismissed her lecturing as unimportant parent-talk. However, my mom directed me back towards the shack, leaving me in the same uncomfortable position as before.

As I walked reluctantly, still positive that I could not bring myself to use the hole, I saw my seven-year old cousin strolling out of the bathroom. He smiled and waved at me, completely unaffected, as if he had not just spent time squatting vulnerably over the most unsanitary place I had ever seen. He then gleefully skipped off to go play, leaving me standing there confounded. It astonished me that someone my age could use that bathroom so nonchalantly. How could something that to me represented the epitome of repulsiveness be so commonplace to my own cousin? Nevertheless, he inspired just a little courage, enough for me to hesitantly enter the bathroom one last time. The rest does not need to be described.

Later, when I reflected upon my experience, I began to realize that throughout this entire ordeal, I had failed to look upon the situation from anywhere other than my narrow, American, upper middle-class point of view. Maybe instead of clinging to the conclusion that my mom and cousin were just crazy, I should have seen that they simply did not share the same uptight standards as me. Our upbringing was different, and that was it. There was nothing wrong with using a hole as a bathroom, or with any of the other cultural differences between us, for that matter.

At home, I had shiny, porcelain toilets with advanced plumbing systems that whisked my waste away to a place where I would never have to see it again. My cousin had a hole. I had paved roads right outside my house, allowing a school bus to promptly arrive at the same time every morning to escort me off to school. My cousin walked every day, often through mud and rain. I had treasure chests piled with endless amounts of toys that made fancy sounds, toys made from hundreds of complicated pieces, toys that used up eight batteries at a time, toys that I only played with once. My cousin had a soccer ball.

And yet, for all the luxury and excess I had in my life, my cousin seemed no less content with himself than I was. While I cringed at the slightest orange stain on a toilet or groaned over having to walk past the three houses to my bus stop on muddy days, my cousin jumped around joyfully outside, dirty and unashamed. As I searched for joy in material goods that I did not yet have, he found it in the simple moments of his everyday life. I realized that I could live much more happily by following my cousin’s example instead of overdramatizing and being overwhelmed by all the inevitable inconveniences bound to happen to me.

Before I left to go back to America, I gave my cousin my pocket Gameboy, the one that made me sit motionless indoors for hours on end and beg my mom constantly for new games to add to my collection. My cousin had no idea how to play the video game, but he had fun pressing the buttons. When he pushed the START button and smiled, I knew I wouldn't miss my toy at all. Simple moments like that just make me happy.
Suppression
by Samantha Huckuntod
St. Joseph – Central High School

Words [are]
Shackles suffocating, digging into fragile skin,
my wrists, and ankles.
Chained to frigid cobblestone walls,
I am
contained by imponderable palisades,
captivated by veiled villifiers.

The sighs in
eyes weigh
down decrepit shoulders;
the effect of surrendering
once fantastic futures to
scrutinizing glares
revealing the jagged shards of volcanic glass
the heart lies with[in].

Shard by single sharp shard
they peel, rip, tear away
the flesh of humanity
and leave behind
abandoned grains of grey, monochromatic dust,
swept away in the next passing breeze.

I awaken yet another day.
Face
harsh, deafening
stonings of mocking laughter and criticisms,
perish in the
searing, cauterizing
flames of solitude

or

Rise
like the proud rooster at glorious dawn:
Embracing its masterful self with each
proud proclaiming
call.
Doubles

We push off
right foot first
and dive
for the lifeline
the savior of carnival folk
and the lifeblood of fishermen
brilliant white interrupted by
lime green
a leftward spin at 130 mph
we ready our weapons
catgut strings tense and alert,
at the line
the DMZ
(trespassers will be shot)
and we jump
soaring for seconds
arms extended, closing to meet this target
the green fatigued trooper
sailing towards our unknown shore
and we put our heads together
(literally)
we fall to the ground,
a mess of toned limbs and tuned instruments
as the crowd breaks into
fractured applause
10-love.

Ode to Kansas

Amber waves of grain
for 13 hours
(more if you stop for gas)
but not like Indiana or its cousin, Illinois,
broken by curves or cities on the skyline
just illuminated mazes
and terraces of corn.

These are farm people
men who are born and die on the land,
their feet not sullied by the burn of asphalt at
high noon,
riding monstrosities of tractors
like broncos,
shaving the land clean and
tilling it
a phoenix in the soil

You have taught me
the agony of a fallow field
the majesty of the constant horizon
the beauty
of desolation.

**The Man in Black**

8.

Oliver stood still.
The ringing in his ears had faded, a dull sound like a muffled church bell. The plain extended for miles around him. The ground was cracked, dried from the cloudless sky drowning the land in sunlight. A lone saguaro stood about 100 feet behind him; wilted, its petals were scattered across the ground. This world, his world, was dead. A wind struck up, brief, filling the void with a slow wave, crashing on him. His face itched, as always in the sun, and his hat was in the daypack, still strapped onto that damned horse. The dust picked up; not quite sand, but it stung as the wind flung it at his legs. He could see the mountains in the distance, their snow-caps mocking him. Maybe 20 miles, or more.

He took a step towards them and toppled to the ground.

6.

Oliver spoke to the man in black.
"Why are you doing this?"
"You know as well as I do," the man said, absently spinning the chamber with his left hand. "We won’t make it another day. Can you think of a better way to settle it?" He spun it again, the quick clicking of the steel twisting against steel, a roulette wheel. "Here, I’ll be the gentleman." He spun the revolver around, his finger in the trigger guard, and gripped it by the barrel. He tossed the gun to Oliver. "Go on. Try it."

Oliver hesitated. He looked into the steel, his face was streaked in dirt, absorbed into his skin, shading it ash-gray. *I look like a dead man*, he thought.
"You not a gambling man, stranger?" The man in black’s voice had gained a vicious tilt.
"Never spun the wheel?"

Oliver leveled the barrel at the man in black, clenched the trigger, and tugged it, waiting for the blast.
They were walking now. The horse was lying a dozen paces back. Oliver had taken one of the canteens, while the man in black had two, slung across each shoulder. They could hear the flies buzzing in the distance, humming like the wind.

“Do you still have the map?”

The man in black patted his left pocket. “Yep.”

“Check it again.”

The man withdrew the tattered piece of cloth and unfolded it, forming a sheet of parchment a foot long in each direction.

“Still west. Into the sun.”

“God damn.”

The man in black glared at Oliver.

“Shouldn’t say that.”

“Don’t think it god damn matters at this point.”

“Have you read the Good Book, stranger?”

Oliver held a hand over his eyes, peering into the west. The sun made the plain shimmer like silk. “Had it read to me. Back home a few times.”

“It’s a sin to use the Lord’s name in vain.”

“Like I said before, I don’t think that much matters.” He took a few more steps into the blaze, his boots caked through with dust. “Doubt the lord has much say in this part of the country.”

The man in black stopped and stared at the sun before breaking into laughter. “That was a good one, stranger,” he said, still chuckling. Then, he smiled. His mouth was white, his teeth mossy but sharp, like a whetstone had been taken to them a few months back. “Whose land does that make this?”

“I couldn’t tell you.”

The man in black reached for the canteen, unscrewed the cap, and tilted it towards his mouth. Oliver watched him. It was like a still life, he decided. Man with water.

“Empty.”

“That was quick.”

“Wasn’t a quarter full.”

The man in black tossed the canteen to the ground. Oliver turned and started walking again. He didn't stop until he heard a hammer being drawn.

“2.”

“So this is the trail.”

Oliver had the map spread across the ground.

“Straight through the Yuma desert. You know the country down there.”

“Course. Sort of.”

“Well, you better,” said the man in black. They mounted up and rode west.

The sun burnt the scrub grass like coals, forcing it to the ground, a layer of moss under the horses’ tread. Oliver could not yet see the desert, but he could see the mountains that towered over it, blue peaks jutting from the edge of the earth like teeth in the mouth of some unknowable creature.
“What exactly are we looking for?”
“Gold. Few years back, 1868 I think. Railroad gold, being shipped to California state government, was waylaid. The gang buried their treasure out here.”
Oliver squinted at the man in black. “How exactly do you know this?”
“I’d rather not say, stranger. We’re partners, not friends.”
“All right.” Oliver stuck a match in the corner of his mouth. Daisy, his horse, whinnied. “I don’t like it, but all right.”

3.
They had been riding for six days, when the man in black’s horse fell. Near a dried stream the horse caught her leg in a crevasse. The man in black worked at it for hours, before taking his gear and loading it onto Daisy. He walked back, and shot the horse in the head. He watched it fall and bleed, slow, and closed its eyes. They left before flies started gathering.
They rode. And they rode. And the end seemed no closer than before. Oliver had ridden in deserts before, never one this size, but deserts the same, and it reminded him of his home, flat and lonesome and somehow dead, in an essential way. He tilted his hat back and spit. The man in black had been quiet since they left the horse.
They rested that night in a dry lake, ground cracked from heat, the skeletons of fish burned fluorescent, mouths gasping for phantom water. They ate jerky in silence around the fire.
It was four days later when Daisy finally toppled to the ground. It had been two days since she was given anything to drink.

5.
“Easy there.” Oliver held his hands up, palms facing west.
“Calm down, stranger,” said the man in black. “I have a proposition.”
“All right.” Oliver slowly lowered his hands. “Maybe you can put that piece away, and we can parley for a bit.”
“No,” the man in black said, shaking his head as if to an inquisitive child as he rolled the chamber open. He took one shell out of his belt, loaded the gun, and flicked the chamber back in, a quick tilt of the wrist, perfected by years of experience. He did the same with his other revolver. “How much water do you think we have, there?”
“Bout a pint.” Oliver spit to his left. It sizzled when it hit the ground. “Maybe more.”
“How long will that last us?”
“A day. No more.”
“I’m proposing a balanced solution. You have no guns, I have two. Therefore, it’s in the interest of fairness...” He began to spin the gun on his left finger, sunlight shining in every direction, reflecting from the polished blue silver. “...that we each have a chance. Wouldn’t you agree?”
“That sounds right, I reckon.”
“And nothing is more fraught with chance than roulette.”
7.

There was no blast—only a click as the hammer struck the base of the chamber, rolling it one slot to the left.

"Now it's my chance," said the man in black. He held his revolver at arm's length, sighting down the barrel like a violinist checking his bow. He drew the trigger quick, no hesitation, just a sudden jerk of his finger signifying nothing but a click. And it was back to Oliver

"Why not just kill me?"
"You know what the Bible says about murder."
"Can't say I do."
"To murder is to consign yourself to hell. Thought that would be obvious." Oliver pulled the trigger. Click.

"Well then, how is this different?"
The man in black pulled the trigger. Click.
"Semantics."
"Pardon?"
"This isn't so much murder as it is self-defense. You have a gun. You're pointing it at me. I'm trying to defend myself as best I can."
"Don't think god will buy that." Click.
"I don't imagine you would know what God does and doesn't think." Click.
Oliver sighed. "Fine. Fine. But let's do it at once. I'm tired. Every time you pull that trigger, my heart jumps out of my throat. If we're going at the same time, I might stand it."
"All right."
They paused and stared at each other, revolvers drawn, sun overhead, sweat pouring down their heads and settling on their necks. Oliver blinked the droplets out of his eyes.
There was a click. Then, there was thunder.

1.

It was night. Oliver was next to the man in black, both in their sleeping packs.
"Stranger."
"My name is Oliver."
"Stranger sounds better. Gives you an air."
"Whatever suits your fancy."
The man in black shifted in his bag. "You know what happens, when you die."
"What."
"You should. Every man who walks this country should."
"Haven't met many talking men round here."
"That's all right." The man in black shifted, turning towards Oliver.
"They say..." The man in black paused and stared at the fire, his eyes lit up in reflection.
"They say you can feel every moment of it, right before you go from this world to the next. You can see everything, and time...well, it's like time stands still for you."
"So?"
"..."
"Good night."
Awakening

I could rise from this wallowing ground,
this patch of worn grass.
I could step into the mystery of the unbeaten path,
bury my nose into the heart of a wildflower,
From the edge of an eroded bank
let the river seep between my toes,
clouds tumbling across a powder blue sky,
and fall into the rhythm of the waves,
the current carrying me to the edge of the world.

Impaired

Flames burn in the reflection of her glassy-eyed stare.
Adrenaline,
deny the inevitable,
hope for the impossible,
contemplate the unspeakable.
Eyes scream behind a three-story window.
Charred remains still whisper, “It’s done.”

Death’s Counting Game

Five minutes until the end of class.
You count them off slowly,
second by passing second,
seeming hour by hour.

Four days until the weekend,
you trudge through the minutes,
looking forward to the future
but scorning the present.

Three weeks until the paper is due,
you schedule every moment,
spending hours beneath the lamplight
but always working toward tomorrow
Two years until graduation,
you mark off the days.
Words float through the air
but never pierce your thoughts.

One second until that aneurysm bursts,
you crash to the floor,
and for just one moment,
you live.
Age: 3

“Mommy! Mommy! Wake up! Eric is hungry and needs to eat,” I said as my mom slept. With my arms flailing over the top of the bed trying to pull the covers from over her head, while not losing balance on my tippie-toes. She continued to ignore my protest, and eventually I gave up. I walked back to through the doorway to the rest of the house and saw my baby brother naked, except for a diaper, sitting on the floor smiling up at me. I smiled back and went to the refrigerator in search of some food.

Age: 4

I woke up to the loud yelling of my mother angrily telling my brother that there was no need for presents and to not expect them. We were bad kids; Santa doesn't bring bad kids presents. It was Christmas morning and in our minds just another day. *Weren't we good this year? Why didn’t Santa notice us? We did everything we were supposed to. Maybe next year?*

Age: 5

“Are they still fighting?” my sister asked me in a whisper from my bedroom door.

“Yeah, I can’t sleep. Is Doyle awake too?” I asked through the darkness.

(A week later)

I was into the bus routine of “first one on, last one off.” It was a nice nap to and from school. I only went to school half the day, so I got home before my sister and brother. Before long though, I was home. I picked my back-pack up from the seat and put it on my shoulders. I went down the steps and saw my mom coming out of the house.

“Get in the car,” she said as she lugged her suitcase from the porch steps.

“Where are we going?” I asked, excited for a trip. She didn’t reply but instead got in the driver’s seat and shut the door. I quickly followed suit before she left me. She began driving; very recklessly and muttering things to herself. I looked over at Eric and smiled at him so he wouldn’t worry. I knew better than to say anything about the driving.

“Life would be so much simpler if you two weren’t here,” she said to the silent car as we slowly sped fast and faster. “A cliff would take care of you. I could say it was all an accident.”

“Mommy no, I don’t want to die yet. We aren’t old enough,” I said not knowing what else I could say to break the horrible look on her face.

A honk came out of nowhere, and I saw my grandma’s car coming toward us on the other side of the street. I breathed a deep sigh of relief.

Age: 7

“Say goodbye to your father; you won’t see him for a long time.” My mom said as burst through the doors. They were back from courthouse, and it looked like things didn’t go well. I got up and looked into my dad's eyes. I could see traces of tears that must have fallen in the car.
ride home. No, not Dad; he can’t cry. He’s too big and strong to cry. I looked over to Megan, my sister, and she saw it too.


“I’m sorry, honey bunch. The court said your mom can take you. I tried, I’m so sorry.”

Age: 8

Beep! Beep! I quickly moved to silence the alarm. I got up and looked into the mirror and saw the big bruise on my arm. It had grown profusely over night and was dark blue and purple. I went to my dresser and got a long sleeved shirt for school. I knew the drill by now: cover the bruises, smile like everyone else, and don’t tell anyone anything.

Age: 8

“That concludes this evening’s news for 10 o’clock. Have a fun snow day for those lucky kids with no school tomorrow!” said the overly cheery and annoying news caster.

“No school? How will we eat? I’m hungry!” My brother Doyle announced to the room.

“Go see if there’s any more Ramen Noodles in the cabinet,” I offered up. He gave me a disgusted look that I could read all too easy. We had eaten Ramen Noodles for every meal since I could remember. School food was a treat that we would have to wait for.

Age: 9

“Can you write me out a statement of what happened this evening Reide?” I was still shaking from what we had done. We were all huddled together at the end of the driveway scared out of our minds. Our mom was on the steps sitting talking to another officer. The only thing separating us was the squad car and a stretch of pavement.

“Yes, I can do it,” I said with a shaky voice not knowing what would happen. I took the clipboard in my hand and remembered everything that had happened up until now, and I wrote:

We were all watching television. We knew she was awake, so we were quiet as usual. Then all of a sudden she came out of the bedroom and sat with us. No one spoke. We didn’t know if she was happy, sad, or mad. Then she burst; she started yelling about the house being messy with dishes and laundry and how lazy we all were. Then she pounced and began hitting my older brother, and we all intervened to release him. We got her off, but she wasn’t done; she reached for the vacuum, picked it up, and started to hit him with it, saying things like if you can’t use it I will. My sister caught the vacuum just before it hit his head with another blow, and I grabbed our mother from behind. We ran as she stumbled from the weight imbalance and raced to the stairs. We locked the door quickly before she could get us again. Doyle grabbed the phone and dialed 911 before we could stop him, but too nervous to speak he hung up. They called back, and we could hear her scrambling for the phone below. Then the “perfect” voice she got when people called, so no one knew what was going on. I picked up the phone and screamed, “Help! She’s trying to kill us!”

Age: 9

We had been staying in a foster home for almost 2 months before she decided to find us. Luckily we all could stay together, but when she came in a brand new green jogging suit to see us, all she wanted was my little brother. She held papers in her hands saying she could take
him home with her. She didn’t once look at the rest of us eyeing her new... everything. *There she goes spending the child support money on herself again.*

**Age: 11**

“Get out and walk home,” she said blunt and hard.

“Mom, it’s got to be at least four miles to the house,” I said in hopes she would let me and my sister ride back with her. We received no answer, so we got out. She sped off, and we began our walk. The crisp November air hit us hard as we walked the hills towards our house, watching the sun sink lower and lower into the horizon, making us shiver and motivating us to walk faster. Then out of nowhere bright lights were in our eyes and we couldn’t see anything. I was stopped in my tracks, but my sister pushed me off the road and into the undergrowth of the field we were walking next to. The car went off the road too, following us fast. This time we ran to the field where we knew our mom couldn’t hit us.

(later that night)

“I’m running away,” my sister said as we snuck into the house.

“I’m coming with you.” I answered, grabbing a small sack and shoving clothes deep into it.

“Bring a coat. It’s gonna be a cold walk.”

**Age: 14**

“Leave now,” I said filled with rage. “This is my house now, you don’t live here. I call the shots.”

“Julie, it’s your time to go,” my grandma said to my mom.

“These are my kids; you can’t keep them from me,” my mom threatened as she left our apartment empty handed.

“You’d better be prepared for court the next time we see you,” my grandma yelled out the door to her before slamming it.

(later that year)

“In the case of Reide Halle LaRosh, guardianship is placed with Gary and Jolene Price until her 18th birthday, May 12, 2013. Visitations by either parent will have to go through the grandparents...” I stopped listening after the judge said this. *I’m free,* I secretly said to myself.

**Age: 16 - October 14, 2011**

Sitting in Challenge Language Arts, bored, I checked my phone and saw a rather long message from my grandma. I opened it to see the full length and began to read: *Just FYI, your mother is in Lee’s Summit Hospital, she attempted to kill herself. Maybe she can finally get the help she needs.* I looked up, took in a deep breath, and smiled at how even though I hadn’t lived with her for five years she could still shake me up inside.

While my teacher wasn’t paying attention, I called my father and told him the news. He said he would be up when I got out of school.

**Age 16: October 15, 2011**
Eric and I had come to the hotel room my dad and sister rented for the weekend. My sister had come from college ready for a weekend getaway. My older brother Doyle decided not to come; he had cut off all ties with my mother. My dad had come to be the one who told my little brother of my mother's decision.

"Dad, can we go swimming?" my little brother, Eric, asked my dad as we all sat around watching T.V.

"I'll take him," I offered. We changed and went down all three flights of stairs, turned left, and walked the hallway to the pool. As soon as we got in the doors and Eric had his shirt off, I pushed him in. He came up spurting and surprised, then gave me that same smile I've always known. I smiled back at him knowing I’d always keep him safe, just as much as when I was the little girl who had to take care of her baby brother, because her mom slept all day.
She should be afraid.
Frightened
of what she is doing to herself.
She sits in the back of class,
hiding under loose clothes,
limp hair
dangling over eyes sunken
into flesh.
Her head hurts,
like there is a person
hacking at the inside of her skull,
with an ice pick.
She thinks about mirrors,
the cold silver light that illuminates
every flaw.
She puts her head down on the desk,
and the teacher knows,
knows
but doesn’t care enough to
ask.
She should be afraid,
but she isn’t,
and she can’t stop
anyway.
So close and so far away
(from everything).
She is too
tall, fat, ugly
to see her brittle fingers,
or broken (hips, ribs, shoulders, elbows)
body.
Maybe there is another girl
inside her,
and perhaps she can find her this way
(if she just waits long enough).
So even though she doesn’t know
she should be
afraid,
she knows she won’t stop.
And no one notices
the girl in the back,
Wasting into a sliver of being.
Shrinking away into
nothing.
She is playing
hide and seek,
but no one's looking for
her.
For now,
she
should be
afraid,
because she is too
(tall, fat, ugly)
well-disguised,
and they won't look for her
until there is
nothing

left

to find.
Remnants

by Anna Levitt

The Pembroke Hill School

1. My dad was admitted to a hospice house two days before my fifteenth birthday. A dark purple mark on the left side of his head served as a lingering reminder of the brain biopsy, and his hair was stringy and unwashed. My sisters and I waited at the end of the bed and gazed at what was left of his eroding body. I remember his eyes the most. I knew the disease that bored holes into his brain made a real goodbye impossible, but his eyes felt like enough. They met mine with a quiet apology and an acceptance of fate that I will never understand. His weak stare reaffirmed what I had learned an hour earlier but suspected for the last three weeks. Then from the throat that once read me bedtime stories and asked for a kiss on the cheek every Shabbat came a feeble, distant sound meaning to say, “I love you.”

2. It was the first anniversary, and my face had that attractive puffy-red combination working for it; all I had to do was get up the nerve. I seamlessly timed bumping into him before class, and I knew that as the upstanding and charismatic senior class president he would insist on consoling me. It was calculated, but his sympathy and toned abs felt worth the moral misdemeanor. The secret high maintenance and attention-starved compartment of my personality craved the pity that I always claimed to despise. The younger, dorkier girl sitting on an abandoned stairwell with the popular jock felt cinematic, but my melodramatic sobs and exaggerated pauses were far from the earnest sensitivity of Molly Ringwald. I had imagined an intimate exchange of anecdotes and emotional scars; instead, I was pimping out my dead father’s memory like a forty-dollar hooker. It was traitorous. I was out of control, so desperate for his solace that I was willing to sacrifice my dignity for his validation.

3. It has always been obvious that I am his favorite. When I was eleven, he called simply to say that I was the star of our holiday card. My older sister and I are both his godchildren, but unlike the boys at school, he thinks I’m the prettier one. He always squeezes the back of my neck and tells me that if he were young enough he would date me. The small bruise and the thought of quasi-incest are nothing compared to the flattery. Whenever I wear glasses, he reminds me how much he likes “my spectacles,” even though I’ve worn them for eight years. I genuinely love him, but he doesn’t cry at my music recitals or read Rudyard Kipling in the middle of an airport like Dad did. He has two sons but no daughters. Will he take me to my Father-Daughter dance?

4. If the DMV is hell, then he is Satan’s minion. Friends’ parents had offered to teach me how to drive; however, in efforts to avoid massive awkwardness, I politely declined and opted for a professional. Our lessons were never excerpts from Chicken Soup for the Teenager Soul, but in the early days he paid little attention to the speedometer when I asked about hunting or his grandchildren. We were four lessons in when the symbiosis began to fade. He became less appreciative of my extensive knowledge of his family tree and more critical of my ability to identify a protective stoplight. Admittedly, I’m not the most defensive driver, but installing a small mirror in order to examine my glances at intersections felt excessive. For each forgotten
shift of my eyes, his face flushed an alarming shade of crimson as the tiny car filled up with his rage. I knew it could never be sentimental like it should have been; I only wanted my leg to stop cramping out of fear.

5. When I was trapped between the twisted ends of grief, he was recommended to help. I thought a psychoanalyst belonged in a Ken Kesey novel, but he calls me “baby” and asks if I remember my dreams. He doesn’t pry or rephrase my questions. He sees the hidden china doll my Dad promised to protect, and guards it in the bubble wrap of his office walls. The best sessions are when I say horrible things and he still hugs me when I leave. It’s painful, but I am trying to show him all of my insides.

Two weeks ago, I visited your new home for the first time. I’m sorry that it felt cliché.

I just wanted to be near your bones.
She licked up and down. Long and heavy swipes of tongue, almost expressive in motion. Camilla swallowed, letting the lumps skate down her esophagus.
She ate the ice cream, and they watched.
Not because of her solidly brown hair, or her solidly brown eyes, her solidly weighty eyelashes, or her solidly upturned lips. They (the park goers) watched because it was the sixth cone. And she was an indiscriminate lover of all flavors.
She began with vanilla, mediocre at best, pure sugar at worst. Then peach, which had the texture of smooth yogurt. Next, pistachio, a strange dark green. For the fourth cone, the white chocolate raspberry with a bitter aftertaste lingering deeply. For the fifth, lemon, which did not wash the absinthian hints away. Now, Camilla worked on a synthetic strawberry, a more ubiquitous blend than actual fruit. To her, all were delicious, melting, enslaving.
She stood up, brushing the scored waffle crumbs off her seersucker dress. They rained down evenly, and Camilla walked 42 steps to the front façade of General Time. BUY 3 HOURS GET 1 FREE, the red banner read.
“Two hours, please,” Camilla said to the clerk, a middle-aged woman.
“If you purchase three hours or more, you receive one complimentary hour.”
“No thank you, I just need two,” Camilla replied.
“That will be $280. ID please.”
Camilla paid. The machine rose up as a tube, tall and dark and grey, perfectly smooth. It narrowed toward the ceiling, like an obelisk, disappearing behind the lighted panels of the roof. At once, it both bore down and lifted. Briefly, Camilla noted its resemblance to a cannon viewed from the wrong perspective—the victim’s perspective. She stepped in.
It was always the same. For one instant, one beat, an interval of time even less than a moment, that surge of peril assailed her—so akin to the palpations felt at the top of the rollercoaster parabola, right before descending, falling, at exponentially increasing speeds.
Then, it was over. She stepped out, into a parallel world created for her. Camilla knew the next steps well because she took them three times a week, if not more. Those 117 steps lead to the gym where she spent one-and-three-quarters of an hour on the treadmill.
Tomorrow, she would choose new flavors of ice cream, three or six or eight cones of ice cream. Tomorrow, she would burn the ice cream calories doing Pilates or yoga or the elliptical.
But the steps would be the same.
***
Noah was a tall, gangly, awkward, young man of twenty-two. When a crisis struck, he did not emerge a hero. Quite the opposite. “Situations” caused Noah to shrink into shadow, falling back on his hamartia and into the inactivity afforded by anonymous crowds. Inversely, Noah adopted an attitude of supreme anxiety in daily life. He incessantly worried about the nervous impression his demeanor left upon others. And even though an orthodontist had removed Noah’s braces at age thirteen, he looked like he still had braces on. Something about the way he moved or smiled suggested that alien metal encasings still wrapped uncomfortably around his teeth—foreign and hard to talk around. To make matters worse, Noah did in fact
talk around a subject, always circling it in increasingly irregular loops, approaching but never reaching the intended value.

Unfortunately, the universe played a depressingly hilarious trick on Noah. Noah was in love. With Guo, the guy who sold Hong Kong-style egg waffles in a street cart.

Thursday, October 1: Noah begins buying every day from Guo. Actually, Noah doesn’t care for egg waffles, but every purchase is a communication—albeit the same communication.

Tuesday, October 27: Noah gathers enough pluck to ask Guo how he’s doing. Guo replies, “Good. You?” But Noah has already left, relieved at his suave posing (no stumbles) of a conversational question.

Monday, November 16: Noah adds a “very much” to the end of his “thank you.”

Friday, January 29: Noah brings Guo a tea. Guo says he only drinks coffee, but that he would like to get coffee with Noah sometime. Guo smiles. Noah is speechless. Noah then runs through lists and groups of words that don’t quite make sense. No...yes...yesterday...key lime pie...appointment...cats everywhere...

Saturday, January 30: Noah and Guo get coffee together. It is successful. Noah manages to eke out straightforward syntax in the second half of the date.

Alas, all those interactions were only rehearsals, moments of practice courtesy of General Time. In real life, Noah has never bought an egg waffle, he’s never met Guo or been on a coffee date with him. All this despite Noah’s knowledge that the Guo of reality would react in the exact same way as the Guo of purchased time—a guarantee of happiness, a possible soul mate!

One year later, Noah still hadn’t approached Guo’s waffle cart. Nothing, not even extra time, was useful in the hands of cowardice.

***

Elsie lay reverse on the sofa so that her bent knees pressed against the backing. After supporting a drooping head for three hours, her elbows were sore. She examined the skin, which, rubbed rosy and raw, looked close to breaking. The flesh along her arms rose in peaks and valleys from the imprint of the faux leather. An entire topographical map, for a land of fictional dwarves, she mused.

A lock clicked.


“Elsie, I’m home,” her mother said. “Oh, you’re studying again. Take a break now and then, honey. You don’t want to strain your eyes.”

“Hi, mom,” Elsie said. “Yes, I’m very busy. I’ll be pulling an all-nighter.”

“You don’t need to,” Elsie’s mother said, handing her an envelope of cash. “Got a raise, so go buy some hours.”

“No, I don’t think I need it. I’ve been working very hard.” The lie came easily, but Elsie felt guilty. Three dear hours emaciated by commercial-filled programming.

“A couple of extra hours might make the difference between an acceptance and rejection from Ivy League.”

“Mom—”
“We’ve already invested thousands in your activities. You’re wasting our money unless you make the final push.”

Elsie grabbed the envelope. Hooking her laptop bag over one shoulder and her viola case over the other, Elsie left for General Time, resolving not to disappoint her mother, to be doubly efficient during the extra five hours. She had to make up for past faults and failures of personality. She absolutely had to. She would write her history essay and complete her anatomy diagram and learn her new viola piece’s rigorous technique and review her Russian flashcards and design the newspaper centerfold and study for the SAT and study for her AP exams and study.

First though, she needed to make her daily Internet rounds: Facebook, Gmail, Twitter, YouTube, Tumblr. Damn, already one hour down. Four hours left meant, yes, she could watch a movie online. A few shows, as well. And then she scratched up an old magazine from a hidden sleeve in her bag, re-reading the torn columns. Shit, only 50 minutes left. At this point, Elsie gave up even pretending that she would accomplish anything. She brainstormed a list of zeugmas, each one less clever than the previous. She spent another twenty minutes moving all of today’s to-dos to tomorrow’s assignment page, planning and rescheduling like a professional bureaucrat. Detached from choices and zealous about pre-arrangements.

Then she went home early. A small flame of shame flitted around her ears, attempting to fan itself into a fire that would burn her into action, but self-justification soon doused the burgeoning regret. Oh well. The money that paid for the five hours was a bonus, so it wasn’t like her family was counting on it anyway. Besides, there was always tomorrow.

***

Delusional. That was how Bruce could describe his therapist, Dr. Therapist Therapist. Dr. Therapist Therapist had somehow convinced herself Bruce had a problem; in even more of a delusion, she thought she knew how to fix that made-up problem. But no one was forcing Bruce to describe Dr. Therapist Therapist in one word. Indeed, no one could force him to do anything—not since that time, that mistake. He would never allow external compulsion or suggestion to result in anything ever again—so that adjective, “delusional,” was useless, since the use of it was unnecessary. He would no longer use it.

Fortunately, Dr. Therapist Therapist’s office was only a minute away from a General Time store. Bruce bought three-and-a-half hours and slipped into the pleats of an alternate dimension. Unplanned, Bruce did what he wanted to do. Simple as that.

It was dark, but not too dark. Like loose saran wrap, the night enfolded the pedestrians, lights, open doors, sidewalks, softly, leaving room to breathe. Bruce walked to a diner and ordered two entrees.

“Here you go, sir, Salisbury steak and penne pasta,” the waitress said.

The steak would be hard to cut. The pasta would be filmy. Bruce did not notice these things. Indeed, he never had the chance, for on the third syllable of “Salisbury,” Bruce noticed something else. Her tic. Her blinking. Her goddamned incessant blinking. Her lower lashes scrunching up to meet her upper lashes—in one purposeful squeeze after another. Her mascara-streaked, drowned blinking.

Who the hell was the hostess? To think that he could put up with this waitress? To slap him with a goddamned disfigured whore?
But Dr. Therapist Therapist had always said, breathe deeply, think, before you act, and think again—not that he cared what Dr. Therapist Therapist said.

The waitress left, so he ate. But not in peace. The family caddy corner. Its children were seemingly well-behaved. They spoke of evolutionary theory and just war. However, they knew nothing. GODDAMNED NOTHING. Arrogant little pricks, thinking they could delve effectively into the adult sphere without getting everything goddamned wrong. AS IF their supposed “theories and government documents” always translated into reality, into truth. The family, and the other families in the diner, something was off.

And then the couples. Again, the couples were seemingly well-behaved. They spoke of hobbies and dreams and experiences. But each couple’s conversation was identical to the next. Goddamned lack of creativity. Goddamned small talk. GODDAMNED OFFICIAL PRETENSES PUT ON FOR SHOW.

Bruce felt that this was not real. Something was not normal. The colors were all too bright or too dull, photo-shopped together with jagged edges and misplaced backgrounds. If he could just remove the mouths of every customer, just perfectly and precisely incise at corners, pull until, like suction cups, the lips would just pop off. He would be happy.

Oh, but they were getting to him. The noises. The repetition. The goddamned PEOPLE.

In a senseless rage, Bruce left the diner, feet rushing forward and backward, lower jaw surging forward in ugly paroxysms. He would go home. Over the canal and past the tracks, he would go home.

He did not attack the man. Rather, the man came between his hands and the wall. Bruce’s face became grossly asymmetrical as he leaned back, aimed, and launched punches and knees. (It was important that the man understood something, experienced something, important that Bruce took away something, some innocence or naïveté or easy, dull trust.) And Bruce squeezed one eye shut, and his lower lips pursed to the right, and the small streams of yellow spittle would come at the man. (It was important that he flooded his disillusion into the man, transferred his war memories on something hard and disbelieving.) The man was heaving; Bruce slashed him across the throat.

He stepped away, then remembered. As he had wanted, he made sharp little incisions at the corners of the man’s mouth and dug his fingers in. But it was not as easy as he had imagined—the lips did not untangle like unraveling buttons—and it was certainly not as clean as he had imagined. So he left, uninterested.

The next morning, he walked to that goddamned woman’s office—Dr. Therapist Therapist’s office, passing the General Time store he had patronized the night before. Bruce saw the man he had killed on purchased time. Although the man’s mouth was shaped oddly (like he had something between his teeth and his lips), his face was unscarred, as if they had never met. Of course, they never really did, at least not in this universe.

***

Executive image consultant, husband, and father, Mr. Norman Cawley, estimated, each case, on average, required 90 minutes to fully assess and yielded $290 in salary. Depending on the fluctuating price of hours at General Time, Mr. Cawley could earn an extra $40-$60 for every “bought” hour spent working. A tidy profit. Well, wasn’t it the damnedest smart thing?
“Six new cases, Mr. Cawley,” Camilla said, handing him binders of manila and plastic and a bouquet of egg waffles. “I also took the liberty of bringing you your favorite, egg waffles with Nutella from Guo.”

Mr. Cawley grunted. This was their tacit understanding—that secretary brought him egg waffles every day in exchange for his oversight of her absence in the afternoons. “Ice cream trip,” his ass. No one—not even Camilla—could stomach ice cream like that, like clockwork.

Mr. Cawley had a very specific timetable. On Mondays and Thursdays, he worked from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. On Tuesdays, he worked from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. On Wednesdays, he worked for 18 hours, plus another 12 purchased hours. On Fridays, he went home to sleep. On Saturdays, he worked for 12 hours, plus another 24 purchased hours. On Sunday, he went home to sleep. He saw very little of anyone.

The only photograph (or any visual element, really) in Mr. Cawley’s office was a family picture. It had been taken four years ago in a botanical garden—when his son still squinted irritably up at the sun with a baring-too-much-teeth-downward-pulled-smile in the presence of a camera—before Mr. Cawley had concocted his genius plan to make more money. The photo reminded him of his efforts’ purpose. Everything was for his family. In a decade, he could relax his work schedule, spend time with his wife, and repair his relationship with his son, which had largely dwindled to passive-aggressive stranger greetings and extravagant gifts. If only they could just understand.

Mr. Norman Cawley opened the first binder. Some Bruce Sherrod had murdered some guy named Noah during a General Time purchase. Even though Noah wasn’t actually dead, Bruce had exhibited violent tendencies. Mr. Cawley would have to be careful in writing his recommendation for General Time’s public relations department. They, to be sure, would want this spun in a positive light since so much controversy surrounded this sort of thing today. He would certainly have to be very careful. Mr. Cawley set his fingers on Home Row. He began typing the report, “In light of recent circumstances...”

***

There were many advantages to being a General Time employee. Good wage. Good benefits. Good observations of all sorts of people. Poor, rich, haughty, embarrassed—they all relied on time in one way or another. But she exploited hidden information only a clerk could access. She could sell her life to the market when an hour’s unit price was at its peak.

It was 6:53 p.m. She stepped into the machine and indicated a minus of seven hours. It was always the same. For one instant, one beat, an interval of time even less than a moment, that surge of compression assailed her—so akin to the palpations felt at the bottom of the rollercoaster parabola, when squeezing momentum, windless breath stopped one abrupt, bare millimeter short of crushing.

Then it was over. She took the cash from the slot, chatted with the next shift’s clerk, and went home. She had cut seven hours from her lifespan, but it was worth it. Her daughter needed the time more. Elsie would use it wisely.
**Person of the Year**  
*by Juwan Mahaney*  
Columbia-Hickman High

*Time Magazine’s* Person of the Year, a very prestigious award given to the most deserving person of the year, but what qualifies a person to be named person of the year? What actions should a person take to achieve such a feat? Someone who brings peace to a nation? Someone who gives the most to charity? Someone who survives the unthinkable and brings hope to a nation? Or someone behind the scenes that makes everything possible? Everyone has something to offer, but what makes one person stand out from all of the others? The person of the year should have the most impact on the nation. The person of the year should be the person who unites the nation and brings everyone together to support one cause. This person must be recognized by everyone, letting his or her story spread like wildfire through society with no end in sight, making headlines for weeks. This person must touch the hearts of everyone and leave a profound effect on people even after his or her reign in the spotlight has ended. No matter if the actions taken by this person were good or bad, if he or she had this kind of effect on the nation then he or she is deserving of the title, person of the year. Therefore, I believe Casey Anthony should be elected *Time Magazine’s* Person of the Year.

In early 2008 Casey Anthony reported her daughter Caylee Anthony missing. Caylee’s skull and partial remains were found in the woods with duct tape around her nose and mouth. Police automatically assumed foul play, and Anthony was taken into custody. After two and a half years of investigating and speculating, the case was ready for trial. The prosecution pushed that Anthony wrapped duct tape around Caylee’s mouth and nose to keep her quiet and suffocated her, then dumped the body in the woods. They also stated her motive was to get rid of the child so she could lead her ‘party girl’ lifestyle. It turns out Caylee had been missing for thirty days before Anthony reported her missing. During those thirty days Anthony went out partying with her friends on a regular basis and got a tattoo that read “the good life” in Italian on her shoulder. A forensic scientist told the jury that the trunk of Anthony’s car had the smell of a decomposing body but no DNA evidence from Caylee was found. The defense came back with allegations saying Anthony was sexually abused by her father when she was young so it could have been him. Every accusation the prosecution made, the defense retaliated with alternative solutions that could happen, but weren’t likely. These solutions still sparked questions in the jurors’ minds which could have easily lit the flame of reasonable doubt. But what ultimately won the case was the lack of forensic evidence. Without forensic or DNA evidence, a guilty verdict was a long shot for the prosecution. They had a strong plausible story, but due to the scarce hard evidence, there were still loose ends that couldn’t be tied up. When the jury reached their verdict, they found Casey Anthony not guilty of murder due to reasonable doubt. They found her guilty though of four counts of providing false information to authorities. Since Anthony had been in jail for nearly two and a half years awaiting trial, the judge acquitted her of all charges and set her free.

This case was aired on every major news station and Casey Anthony’s photo was on the cover of every major magazine. For 6 weeks during the summer the nation was captivated by the trial. Hours of peoples’ lives were spent sitting in front of the television or on the computer trying to learn as much as they could about this case. Anthony brought the country together in
the search, protest, and the mourning of little Caylee. No matter where you went, you saw the face of Anthony or heard someone talking about the case. When the 'Not Guilty' verdict was announced, it caused uproar in the nation. A slew of death threats were slung towards Anthony. She became not only the most hated women in America but the most wanted woman in America as well. As Anthony went immediately into hiding after the trial to escape the danger and ridicule of the nation, news stations and magazine companies scrambled to be the first with a photo or an interview. Reports of Anthony being paid a million dollars for an interview by several news stations arose, and Hustler magazine reportedly offered hundreds of thousands of dollars to be the first to photograph Casey Anthony after the trial. The desire for such a hated woman is incredible.

Though many people disagree that Anthony shouldn’t be person of the year, she deserves the title. Many say there are other deserving people such as Reed Hasting, Angel Merkel, Kate Middleton, Mike Mullen, Barack Obama, Seal Team 6, or Steve Jobs, but I strongly disagree. Yes, these people might have done something to get them recognized, but of those recognized people how many have had such a national effect like Casey Anthony? I recognize the name of some of these people but have no clue as to what they did to become famous or how they affect my life. If Americans were given a list of names and told to say as much as they know about each person, I guarantee that 90% of people will be able to recognize the name Casey Anthony and tell you what she did. She has become a household name that everyone knows. She is even at the top of the list on E!'s Fatal Beauties: 15 Most Notorious Women. True Hollywood Stories, also on E!, has also done an episode dedicated to her life and the trial. She has truly touched the hearts of Americans all over the nation through her infamous crime.

Though Casey Anthony has created her legacy through an unthinkable deed, she has still had the most impact on the nation. She is the person who has united the nation and brought everyone together to support one cause. She has touched the hearts of everyone and left a profound effect on people even after her reign in the spotlight has ended. To this day people are writing about the trial and making speculations. Anthony is a well-recognized individual and will go down in infamy as one of the most notorious women in history. She has made an impact and will keep making an impact until America feels justice has been served, which may never come. Therefore, I believe the clear winner of Time Magazine’s Person of the Year should be Casey Anthony.
Table for One

The round table with two chairsstands in the corner, dressedin red silk.
You sit beside it,
hiding behind your pasta and hair,while the rest of the roomplays a fork and plate gong.
Locusts buzz in your ears,and you have nothing to say,no one to say anything to.

The ice in your cup
has long since melted;
even the table now has rings.
The debt has been paid, and
you keep your eyes low
as they watch you depart.

The busboy wipes away the rings,
pours the drink down the drain, and
puts your napkins in the trash,
removing the only signs that
you had ever been.

The History of Time

Thousands of infinitesimal fragments of Earth;what could have been Stonehenge orthe Hanging Gardens of Babylon
slip through our fingers,
apostates to our history.

So many of these moments
thrown into a bottomless hourglass,a metronome with no tick, the long caseclock with no pendulum.
Slipped from our memories,
malnourished as the Nile, they are the first of many plagues.

Words we will never feel, engraved in the mouth of Penthos. Untie the knot in his tongue; he beseeches for a taste of nepenthe, a gift from Chronos, a drink from the river of Lethe.

History lost in Echo’s cave, memories we will never quite grasp, Broken down fragments of Earth, what we have chosen to forget.
"Cream of the Crop"

You were harvested for this.
You were examined carefully; your firm skin has been smoothed
by dozens of fingers
and cupped
by more than a few hands.
The pulp tangled inside you is not too hard – or gooey –
And so you are plucked as one of the
"Smartest teenagers."
You realize the process you are going through right away because you know physics,
and
"It’s all physics."
You are a projectile rocketing upwards. You lack constant acceleration because it
keeps rising, rising and you know that those idiots are going to need more than an
equation to track you.
But track you they do, and you are no longer
a projectile; you are
the hunted; you are
the v i c t i m, and all
"Victims are shot."
Your head is blown open, and your body is a
" Bloody mess"
surrounded by slippery pieces of
brain
and
ribbons of veins
and
slivers of heart.
Blood is gushing from you; your bloody handprints are swiped on the walls, and your
drops of blood speckle the floor, and your blood makes little red rivers and pools on the
floor – your blood, your blood, not their blood, yours.
But, damn, you better hurry and get your head on straight and tie your veins together
and pump your heart until it beats because this is a war, and not only a war, but a test,
and
"High schoolers embrace tests."
Tree-Song of May

The trees have been silent,
but when I saw your delicate wings – melted sugar or carefully blown glass –
and your sharp red eyes, peering
from above a striated mouth,
I knew they would not be silent much longer.
You
Make the trees hum.
Your parents sang for me when I was a child,
and though they have died, along with
memories, perhaps, old habits, and people,
the leaves will again unfold, and the earth again will breathe
and you
will make the trees sing.
Maria has always seen the angels, but they do not frighten her. They and all their kind—demons, monsters, creatures stepping out of her mother's fairy tales—never hurt her. They only pass by, flickering in the edges of her vision, so faint no one else can see them.

*One day they will come for us,* the voices warn. *We must be ready.*

She made the mistake of telling once. The doctor with the hard eyes, like glass marbles, listed off a whole crowd of nonsense words. The only one she remembers is schizophrenia. A beautiful word, hard and then soft, like biting into an ice cream cone.

The glass eyed man had given her pills, tiny white tears that dissolved to bitter ashes on her tongue. She didn't like them. They made her sleepy, and the angels ran away and hid. She likes them better where she can see them. It's safer—the voices tell her so.

She walks down the city street, watching the angels. They're circling lower than usual, flashing in the sunlight, sending daggers of brightness into her eyes. Forms like men cast in gold, cold eyes like the doctor watching, always watching. More perch on buildings, gaudy gargoyles keeping watch.

Normally she would be inside, doing her best at her job while ignoring what goes on outside. But she has a day off for reasons she can't quite remember.

The tinkle of breaking glass shatters her thoughts like the window three men have pitched a chair through. She watches—not the men carrying television sets to a waiting flatbed truck, but the ground—and smiles. The shards of glass coat the sidewalk, sharp and glistening, reminding her of the day she'd told. She'd taken a knife, the silver metal almost as brilliant as the angels swooping and diving outside, and slid it over her skin like the bow of a violin. Her father had found her then, as she watched blood well up, her skin crying bright red tears.

"Maria, what are you doing?"

"Hiding," she'd whispered, painting red designs along her arm. "Hiding from the angels. They can see me everywhere I go."

He'd started to shout, and she shushed him, not wanting to take her eyes off her blood. She wanted to cover herself, be as red as they were gold, so finally they wouldn't find her remarkable. But he wouldn't quiet, always so excitable. He'd made her take the pills too. She hadn't cried at his funeral.

Danger, her voices murmur. They're restless out in the open. *Ware.*

She steps toward the broken window, feet crunching through glass. Most of the televisions remain. She watches for a few minutes, finally understanding.

Today is the day. The last day.

Maria throws back her head and laughs.

The few people that remain stop and stare, but she doesn't care. She's been right all along. She and the voices. Time has slipped away, and the angels are here to take them all.

She steps out into the middle of the street, craning her neck to look at the darkening sky. A single gold figure passes, veering toward her. She doesn't move as it grows closer and closer, finally hitting the ground with no impact that she can feel.
Here is an angel so close she can touch it. Its wings shudder once or twice, longing to return to the air, as they regard each other. The gray eyes—time itself frozen over—leave her breathless. There's a roaring coming from far away, and the pavement under her feet begins to vibrate. Someone, a man, is shouting at her, but she doesn't listen.

The angel reaches out, and Maria takes its hand, its cold touch turning her fingers blue. She is not afraid.

Poetry Collection

Identity

Maybe I was once different than I am now, other than me, myself, and I.
Not quite comfortable in my own skin, I strive to find myself, the definition of who I truly am.
I lean my cheek against the rough bark of a maple, feeling some kind of kinship in the silent strength of standing firm against wind and rain, drawing my life from the earth as if I were once a tree.
I walk outside and feel the sun kiss my face. Looking up to drink in the light, I feel something stir deep inside of me, a light, a glow rising up to touch the sky as if I too were once a star.

Rumplestiltskin's Logic

If I can spin straw to gold, why would I need or even want the ring from your finger, battered and thin, less than a single strand of straw? Why would I desire
the chain of fine links
around your neck
(such riches for a miller's daughter
but pittance
to such as me!)?
No, I ask for a little
and you give it freely,
and then I ask for more.
You acquiesce,
and little by little
you give away everything you have.
you give away your soul
for straw.
Blue Sea Song

The sails snap and billow on the same wind that
blows my hair into my eyes and steals the apology from my lips.
I wish to be pure and moon-driven
like the tide, who washes its kisses on distant shores
no matter how many times it is pushed away.

Graveyard

I have dreamt of polluted bodies
pushed out of their cocoons
and slumped silent over stillborn tombs.

Dancer

She began to sway.
Lost in the music, she twirled,
trailing ribbons of light in the air after her –
they were filaments of her love,
quiet and iridescent.

What I Know Now

Before

The girl stopped. Dazed, she ran a hand through her ash-blonde extensions and
squinted up at the sun. A loud, frustrated wail erupted from her lips and her pudgy, orange
hands balled into fists. Huffing, the girl shuffled forward and immediately fell face-first into the
sand. Her tanned friends came clucking and flocked around her. This was everyday living on
the Jersey shore.

I shook my head, wiggling my toes into the couch cushions. “I can’t believe these
people are supposed to be in their twenties. Why do we watch this show again?”

My sister – chocolate eyes and smooth brown skin – cocked her head and looked at me
knowingly. “Because we love this show.”


After

I blinked. Everything seemed to move in slow motion. I could hear voices, subdued and
heavy. Somewhere beside me, my mother squeezed my hand. On some impulse that managed
to wade through the thick syrupy matter of my perception, I squeezed back. My vision blurred
again until the tears rolled down my cheeks and I tasted salt in my mouth. Even they seemed sluggish.

There were about twenty of them, dark figures lumped on the sofas in our sitting room and silhouettes crowded against the walls whispering in hushed tones. A moan rose in my mother’s chest and dissolved into sounds I’d never heard her make – raspy, broken whimpers. And they were coming from me too. Between sobs, we gasped for air, suffocating in the density of our own grief.

Time broke in fragments and drifted away. The pain was too big, too much to feel for more than little chunks at a time, so my mind wandered. I was elsewhere, the place where nothing mattered and there were no thoughts. My mind touched awareness without warning and receded just as abruptly. I was trapped in a diving bell at the bottom of the sea – locked inside myself, inaccessible to the world.

I think I lost my mind a little bit. Images shifted, and shapes warped. Nothing was real and nothing made sense. I sagged on the couch, aching and distant. I couldn’t move. The energy it took to speak didn’t seem worth the effort, and there was nothing left to say. My mother’s hand had never seemed so frail and brittle. I sat beside her and held that hand for an eternity. I was numb. Comatose. Elsewhere.

Before
5:32 p.m.
“What are you doing?”
Odi pulled the thermometer away from her mouth and looked at me. “What?”
I tried not to laugh. “That’s the thermometer that goes in your armpit.”
She sighed, pulled up her tank, and tucked the stick into her underarm. Her eyes closed softly as we waited, and I played with the sleeves of her hoodie. Finally, three muffled beeps came from the thermometer. I pulled it out of my sister’s armpit and read the digits on the tiny screen.

“Hmm,” I murmured, touching the back of my hand to her forehead. “Your temperature’s not even that high. It says 99.8 degrees, but you feel hotter.”

“Thanks,” Odi smiled and then shivered. “I feel cold and hot at the same time. And my stomach hurts.”

I was worried. Kids got fevers all the time, but she never did. She was mostly plagued with severe allergies, and they had never before given her fevers.

“Well, Mom took you to the clinic, right? What did the doctor say?”
She shrugged. “I don’t know. Stuff. We got some medicine, too.”

“So do you feel a little better?”

“Yeah…a little bit.”

“Okay. Well, I have to get everything ready for my speech tomorrow,” I said, picking up my bags. “Eat something and then go to sleep.”

After
5:43 a.m.
Eventually, I stood. It wasn’t anything to do with strength or will. One moment I was sitting, and the next, I was on my feet. Two dozen pairs of eyes were on me. Family. Friends.
Strangers. I must’ve looked like a ghost to them. I felt like a ghost – a faint, lingering reminder of the person I used to be. The door, and my cousins filed in, sniffling and shoulders shaking. The one in front – Kelle – met my eyes, and our grief multiplied, bigger than the world and too big for our living room.

Things happened in parts. We, all four of us, held each other tightly, as close as we could without hurting one another. Three men stomped their way around us and up the stairs. I heard the snapping of cameras and shuffling footsteps. My father came down with my brother and little sister Kosi, who had just woken and were rubbing their eyes. He led them into the kitchen. There was whispering, and then Kosi cried out. My dad put his arms around her and led her over to the rest of us. My brother Lotanna followed, tired but otherwise unaffected. He sat on one of the couches and turned on the television. His face was immediately bathed in changing lights, moving colors dancing on contours of his nose, eyes, lips. As I watched him in cold disbelief, his eyes grew blank, and for the rest of that day, I hated him.

Before

I put the blow dryer down and stepped back, fingers spread wide apart. Perfect. My nails were painted a shade of “passionate plum.” I smiled in satisfaction, wondering why people paid for this if they could do it at home.

Nails – check.
Outfit – check.
The only thing that wasn’t ready was the most important: the speech. I exhaled slowly and picked up my cue cards. Turning them over to the blank sides, I ran through my intro as smoothly as possible without looking.

“...and it was the worst dream I’d ever had. After decades of research, scientists still can’t conclusively say why we dream or what dreams mean. But by the time this speech is done, you will know several riveting things about dreams. First, we’re going to talk about the biology of dreaming...”

I stopped.
11:49 p.m.

In the room right next to mine, Lotanna, Kosi, and Odi were asleep. I stared at the mirror and listened hard, not sure what exactly I’d heard.

During

There. The sound came again.

I put down my cue cards and walked into their room. Lotanna sat up, his eyes on Odi in the bed next to his. I slipped in between the two beds and stood at the head of the frame, looking down at her with a frown. As I watched, it happened again.

She moaned. My heart dropped into my stomach. It was long and low and deep. She was moaning, but she was asleep. I’d never seen anything like it before.

“How long has she been doing this?” I asked my brother evenly, my eyes not leaving her.

“She just started.”

“Odi.” I stared at her, just waiting.

She moaned again, louder and more urgently this time. The sound of it alone pulled the air out of my lungs, and I began to panic. I called her name again and threw the thick
comforters off her warm body. She was only in a shirt and a pair of underwear. As I peeled the cover away from her, the moaning grew even louder, and her back arched. Still, her eyes didn’t open. I tried to think straight. Her lips parted as the air blew out. An arm flew up, and I caught it while simultaneously placing my other hand on her forehead. The only thing I could feel was cold sharp fear.

After
My dad opened the door to my room. I peeked out from under the blanket.
“The coroner called. It was viral myocarditis.” He walked out.
After a second of sitting in silence, I got up and switched on my computer.

During
As I began to scream for her, my mother appeared at the top of the stairs with my sleeping baby brother Osina in tow. The panic in my eyes was instantly reflected in hers.
“What?” she asked, looking at me, looking at my hand around Odi’s wrist.
“I don’t know,” I replied, trembling. “Something’s wrong.”
She must’ve put the baby to sleep, because when she returned almost immediately, he was gone. I moved as she slid into the narrow space between the two beds.
Odi moaned.
My mom looked down at her as she twisted on the bed, her legs bare. Mom called her name. She called it once. Twice. Each more frantic than the last, she called her name. Suddenly, Odi stopped – she stopped moving and moaning. My heart stopped. My mom screamed her name once more, but it was so quiet. Then she looked at me and said, “Call 911.”
It happened in parts. I was already moving out of the way as she scooped Odi out of the bed and laid her down on the carpet. I was shaking as I headed for the stairs.
“Genevieve!”
My aunt came running up the stairs. We passed each other as I went down. The phone was in my hand as I dialed. The phone screen blurred as the tears started coming.
“Hello?”
“We need an ambulance!”
“Ma’am, I need you to calm down and tell me what’s happening.” It was a woman’s voice, kind but stern.
“Umm...” I began, trying to gather my thoughts into something coherent. “Um, my little sister was making noises in her room, but she was sleeping, but she was moaning, so I called my mom, and now she’s in there with my aunt.”
“And who are you?”
“Anita Ofokansi?”
“How old are you?”
“Seventeen.”
“And how old is your sister?”
“Eleven,” I said in a small voice, and after that, I just lost it.

After
I was upstairs. I took a deep breath and walked into the room.
My mother, eyes wild and red-rimmed, knelt over my sister. My mother, the respiratory therapist and registered nurse, pumped on Odi’s chest, and my aunt held her limp hand.

“Odi.”

Odi’s eyes snapped open, and she pulled herself up into a sitting position.

“If you understand what I’m saying,” my aunt began calmly, “squeeze my hand, Odi.”

Odi squeezed.

“Can you hear me?” my mother asked.

“Yes, mom,” she said and collapsed again.

“What’s happening?” I screamed.

Odi’s mouth flew open and closed, and in the back of her throat, we could hear her gasping for air. My mother started CPR again. Odi rasped some more and then fell still.

“Odi!”

She began convulsing violently, every muscle in her body tensing with spasms.

“She’s seizing!” my mom cried.

*Before*

“Will you do something for me, please? Just picture your life for me? Thirty years from now, forty years from now? What’s it look like? If it’s with him, go. Go! I lost you once, I think I can do it again. If I thought that’s what you really wanted. But don’t you take the easy way out.”

The two lovers stared into each other’s eyes.

“Damn,” I sighed. “Ryan Gosling is so perfect.”

“Where has this movie been all my life?” Odi asked, mesmerized by the couple on the screen.

“I don’t know,” I laughed. “It was playing on Oxygen, and I had recorded it. ‘I knew you’d like this movie — you love everything with romance in it.’

“That’s because unlike you,” she said pointedly, “I want to get married someday and have sexy babies.”

“Don’t worry, you will,” I assured her with a wry smile. “That is, if you can find a guy who can compete with your huge brain.”

“I am a little bit of a genius,” she shrugged in agreement.

“Alright, smart-ass.”

*After*

My mother was ushered into the living room by her friends, shivering and moaning incoherently. I asked her what was wrong, but she moved right past me. My heart racing, I ran outside. My dad was getting out of a red van. He looked up and met my eyes. I slowed down, then started walking again. He walked towards me slowly, and as I approached him, he said it.

“She didn’t make it.”

A kamikaze of bright lights exploded behind my eyelids; at the same time the world dimmed, and the temperature dropped about twenty degrees.
After

I stood before the casket and looked down. The lights flickered, and I was swept by a wave of vertigo. I didn’t want to leave, but I couldn’t stay. Eventually, someone led me by the arm away from her body. When I sat down again, I looked to my left.

“Mom?”

“Yes?” she replied, her voice trembling.

“What did they do?” I broke down. “It doesn’t look anything like her.”

After

I stood in the doorway for some time. The light from the hallway spilled into the room. I could just see my brother’s form under his covers, fast asleep. Sleep was a distant possibility for me. As quietly as I could manage, I slipped in under the covers on Odi’s side of the bed that she’d shared with our younger sister. I tried to assume her weight, tried to feel her there and understand what had gone so wrong, and everything she’d felt. Kosi stirred beside me and opened her eyes. She blinked and stared. For a moment, I imagined she knew just what I was doing because maybe she had done the same, but as her eyes closed again, I couldn’t tell if she had even seen me at all.

Now

I looked for you in the stars last night.

It’s November. The leaves are changing colors and dropping. I’m standing at the bus stop, and as usual, the bus is still not here. Some things never change, but I think I need that right now. Last night’s rainclouds make the sky a silky grey. My breath leaves me in swirling, white puffs and dissipates into crisp fall air. I shiver and cross my arms over my chest. There’s a Billie Holiday song playing in my head. Her voice and the rich, lilting peel of the saxophone blend in beauty and sorrow so real that I can nearly see Billie herself – far away eyes and wilted magnolia blossoms bathed in the warmth of wonder and wear in a smoky bar in New Orleans. I’ve been listening to a lot of her music lately.

Even now, none of this feels real to me. I don’t know that it ever will. Will it feel real when I have to check the fridge and write the shopping list myself, missing something that you would’ve never forgotten? What about when I have to stop recording all the shows we used to watch together because they’re just not as good anymore? I thought I’d be used to missing you by now, that it would be real to me once I stopped thinking about you and instead starting thinking to you, telling you in my head how things are going down here. Now I can’t stop doing it.

This whole time, I’ve been missing something – something big. Something true and important. It’s keeping me tired and weak, but now I know what it is.

We are moments apart.

And it’s those moments that are important, the ones that happen every day. If I’d known that after that day, you’d be gone – well, I don’t know what I would’ve done. My biggest fear is forgetting your face, your eyes, your laugh. So I try to remember. I remember the way you would press your lips into a thin line, trying not to cry when all you wanted to do was be mad. I remember your loud, loud voice and that laugh. It hurts to remember, but if I don’t, I am scared I’ll forget.
I hope one day, I will be able to look back on our moments together and smile, or even laugh. I hope there won’t always be this lump of yesterday in my throat that won’t let me swallow, but right now, it just hurts. I don’t know where you went. I looked for you in the stars, and you weren’t there. The only things that keep me going are the little things, the things I know I can count on, like November being cold and the bus being late. And this too: There is no way to know what tomorrow will be like, but in this moment, here and now, I think I am okay.
The Third Time

by Savannah Phifer

Mansfield High School

I sit patiently, but my nerves have got the best of me this time. Waiting for our names to be called, I absentmindedly pick little pieces of lint off my suit. I look around, anywhere, to distract me from what is to come, but I do not look across at the only other person in the lobby. She is the same age as me, of slight build, and she told me before we performed our speeches that she has never had any experience doing this before. The silence between my competitor and me is almost deafening as we try to decipher the murmuring of the older women in the room next to us. They are tallying up our scores for the speeches we gave, and we both want to have a head start on what will eventually be announced to our audience and to ourselves.

This is the third time I have performed the "American Legion Constitution Oratory" competition. The last two times, I didn't progress any farther than districts, and this was my third shot at it. To be able to get to districts, you have to win your school and county competition, which has always been an absolute breeze for me, seeing that I am the only competitor in both. Unfortunately, I have never reached any higher than districts, in which I am always shot down. What's even worse is that I don't even know what I did wrong. I never know why I lose.

I was almost jittering in my chair from the excitement. "Third time’s the charm," I have been happily telling myself. This year, I have a fantastic speech that is both politically and emotionally appealing towards our Constitution and government. I knew the topic on which I was to quickly improvise an extemporaneous. I had it all! I knew deep in my soul, that this was going to be the one. This year, I will advance.

In my school’s speech club, we are taught how to act; how to move an audience with nothing more than facial expressions, voice acting, and body language. After I perform at a school tournament, people always come up and ask me how I did and if the judges liked what they saw. Truth is, I never really know. As soon as I begin my speech, my excerpt from a play or monologue, I ignore my audience. I do not see them, they are not there. Yes, I am aware of their existence on a level, but only as if you looking at someone through frosted glass. This is the mental state I have created for myself; the state of existence which I call, the mask.

The mask serves a dual purpose of hiding my true emotions and keeping me from seeing my audience. When I wear my mask, barely anyone can tell. I look my audience in the eye, and I pull them into the story which I unfold, but still, it is not me they are seeing and interacting with. It is the character I am performing. It is the person that I am telling the story about. I myself have no purpose other than to write my name, school code, and title of the piece I will be performing on the dry-erase board, and to thank my judges for their time when my piece is finished. The mask does all the acting. The mask is what my judges see.

The mask has somehow worked its way into my normal life as well. When I am tired and emotionally exhausted, the mask takes over, and I appear to my friends and fellow students around me as perky and happy. When I return home I take off my mask, and I become aware of my bloodshot eyes and tired figure. The more and more I use my mask, the more and more it duplicates and becomes the very emotion that I wish to display. I don’t have
just one but many masks that I use in my daily life. There is a mask that hides my anger, a
mask that hides my joy, whole scores of masks that I use for acting, and an equal number of
masks that hide my ego and self-confidence, showing instead feigned humility and insecurity.

My whole public life now seems to be a part of a play and gives the saying "the whole
world is a stage" a much different perspective. I act my way through unpleasant situations and
moments that are just teeming with stress. I glide over these moments that build life
experience and teach valuable lessons, and nobody knows. They think I have a stiff upper lip
and that I can take whatever the critics throw at me, but in reality I am just sitting behind the
frosted glass of my mask, ignoring them, while my mask shows complete interest in what they
have to say.

There is still one mask that I didn’t have. I never thought I would ever need it, let alone
want it. Instead of having a mask to cover this one solitary feeling, I show myself
completely. Through this hole and emptiness where no mask lies, I expose my inner self and
let the world know my true and completely pure feelings. This crack in my shell is the only way
that the world can see into my soul. Once someone has prodded me in that one sensitive spot,
I fall apart, letting the flood of held-in emotions wash over me, and soon drown my offender in
an ocean of feeling. It was the one place where I had no defense. It was the one spot where I
could happily unravel.

Sitting in that lobby that has grown so familiar over the past three years gave me
hope. I had done more than my best. I had excelled in my performance and had made all my
judges heads bob up and down in agreement, fascinated and intrigued by my skill in delivering
my speech. My parents were smiling, but they couldn’t look at me, for fear that the one
glimpse that they would give would distract me, but I didn’t waver for a second. I was dramatic
and entertaining in my performance and conveyed my view on the Constitution with
indubitable and unbreakable conviction.

I looked at my competitor’s family, her parents watching me with the same rapt
fascination as my judges, and her grandfather, the commander of a nearby American Legion
post, watching with bored eyes, clearly seeing my speech as inferior to his granddaughter’s. I
didn’t care. I cared about the opinion of my judges, who obviously liked my speech and
enjoyed my point of view.

Later, I would ask my parents about my competitor’s speech, and they told me that she
was a worthy opponent but was dull and boring, quietly talking about the right to bear arms
and how guns were a part of the everyday life of an American citizen. My speech was about
how the framers of the Constitution planned on change and how the ordinary citizen plays an
enormous part in our government. I was lively. I was entertaining. I may not have quoted
George Bush or Dick Cheney like my competitor, but hell, it was obvious who had the best and
most well-written speech.

As my competitor and I waited, she started to try and make small talk. I put on my
mask of interest and trustworthy friendship, while inside I just wished she would leave me
alone. We talked for a while about the unusual warm winter and a few uninteresting things.
We found out that we were both juniors, and we discussed the intelligence level of high school
boys with interest. We laughed and joked, and my mask kept up the deception of friendliness.
I was just passing time for myself, and I didn’t care about her in one way or another. She
seemed to think that I did, so we continued our superfluous chatter.
Then, the tally women finally stopped and walked into the room where our audience was seated, the room where we had performed. It took thirty or more minutes to figure it out, and I began to feel my heart sag. One of the tally women brought the host of the competition out and was privately whispering about the score sheets. We couldn’t hear.

A few seconds later, both of us were brought in, and we stood in line in front of the audience. My parents were smiling happily, and the two men from my hometown American Legion post were gleefully excited as well. My previous doubts were washed away, and I squared my shoulders and stood straighter, towering three inches over my competition. I looked like the very personification of confidence, and I was even more proud because I was wearing no mask. The face people saw was my own. My own feelings shined through, and I let my tender emotional body stand in place of a hard and cold mask.

The host of the district competition stalled for time and thanked everyone that helped make this competition possible. Come on, I thought, enough with the ‘message from our sponsors’ and let’s get to the awards. Our host gave us each our $5,000 dollar scholarship to Lindenwood University and our ‘Thanks for Participating’ award. Then, the air grew thick as we waited for the real award to be dealt.

The words that would come next sounded horribly heavy in my ears. My heart slowed from a rapid beat to a mere pulse in my resonating chest. I couldn’t believe what I had just heard, and life went into slow motion. Inside of me, a mask was being made, with a fresh coat of paint and being carved to fit my face completely. Once it was finished I put it on instantly, covering my true feelings, and no one noticed the change from real me to mask.

I accepted the second place award for the third time in a row, smiling as I did so, hiding the one emotion that I thought wasn’t possible to cover: disappointment. The bronze medal in its plastic case mocked me with its horrible appearance, but my face revealed nothing. I smiled and accepted the cursed objects in my hands, showing nothing but gratitude and relief, which I thought would be shown naturally when I won first.

My mother laughed the same laugh as someone told a bad joke. Her eyes were sad for me and angry at whatever injustice did me in. My father let his feelings show, but was polite and applauded what he thought was the wrong winner of the contest. The men from my hometown American Legion post were old enough and had the authority to say, “This is pure bullshit,” as they left, disappointed, from that room for the third time.

My competitor’s family surrounded her, taking pictures of her smiling and holding up the award which I knew was really meant for me, but now, it was no use. My emotional shell was complete. It now had no imperfections and was impenetrable as a fortress. No cracks or holes where you could look into my soul; no more waves of emotion would flow from that empty space. I wore my mask in that crowd, smiling outwardly, but my mind racing, wondering what I did wrong. I had done so well, I hadn’t missed a single beat. What did I do to lose? Then I watched my competitor’s grandfather take a picture with her and her new trophy, I began to wonder. Was he the reason that I had lost? Did he influence the judges in such a way they had to give her the award?

I began thinking of all the reasons that I could have lost: the judges just scored the sheets wrong, I was from a small town far, far away from the American Legions’ district post, I wasn’t the commander’s granddaughter, I was too dramatic, they just didn’t like me. All of these ran through my head, and I felt hot tears begin to well in my eyes, but my mask wouldn’t
allow for such nonsense. I held in my tears, much in the way that I now hold in my emotions, and I just smiled and happily left the room.

People saw a strong woman leave, happy to try again next year, ready to start again and keep on coming back until I won the prize. In reality, that strong woman was nothing more than an illusion, held together by practice and well-rehearsed skill. If they could see past the mask, which I wonder now if any of them did, they would have seen a crying and pathetic young girl, slowly dying, lost of all optimistic thoughts, and ready to give up at any moment. I was even wondering why I should even come back next year, since all I do is lose at this contest.

I lost to “The Granddaughter.” I lost to the proudly declared Republican. I lost to citizen’s gun rights, Dick Cheney, and George Bush. I had lost, despite all my practicing, despite all the researching I did with my parents. I lost despite the fact that I sought help from my school government teacher, practiced it for him, and got some extremely helpful pointers. I lost despite all those nights asking for divine help and praying that this would be the day that I would move on to a higher level of competition.

My parents and I climbed into our car and started our long drive home. Had I won, we would have driven across the street to Outback Steakhouse and devoured coconut shrimp and endless loaves of delicious bread. We would have laughed and joked about my success, saying, “Well, it’s about time,” and letting the wonderful feeling of relief take us in its calming and beautiful arms. Instead, because I lost once more, we just started our way home, stopping only to get drive through McDonald's to fill our stomachs. Instead of delicious coconut shrimp and endless bread, I am eating a five piece chicken strip special out of a clam shell box.

As we continued our way home, my parents voiced their rage and disappointment, and I just sat in the back seat, chewing on my McDonald's chicken strips, full of depression. I had no need to wear my new mask anymore, but now that it was created, I knew it was going to be used again. From disappointing class grades, to experiencing pure remorse, my new mask now has a chance of taking the place of my emotion and hiding the tears that I shed inside.

I used to think that the world still had some glimmer of justice and fairness, but now I know that those too are masks that this world wears. The world I walk in wears as many masks as I do, and we can both see into each other’s deception. My cynical and pessimistic views on life were confirmed that day, and grew considerably stronger, while my optimism and cheerfulness were shattered under the experience. I pick up the pieces and try to put them back together, but nothing I do is any consolation to what I feel. Someday, those happy feelings will return, and I will have little need for my shelter, but for now, I will just put on my masks, and play my part on the large and complicated stage that is The World.
I was your princess. You were my partner in crime. We were our own Romeo and Juliet. Always together, always smiling. We were connected. Where you were, I wasn’t far behind. We leaned on each other for support. The hours we spent in the waiting room could have been exhausting, but they weren’t because we were together. Getting the test results back shattered our dreams of a future together. But I knew if the roles were reversed, you would be my champion.

You didn’t have much time; that we both knew. So we wrote a bucket list. Five things on our list, a wish for a lifetime, a finite future that had to be.

1. 2000 Cars
   It’s not like we needed a reason to be together, but we created “events” where we could slow the passing of time to a crawl. Although time stops for no one, we wanted to make the most of the moments that God gave us. Counting cars was like counting the seconds clicking away on a clock. The oak tree was our haven, time was our enemy, and being together was our goal—our only goal. 2000 cars came and went. Our love remained.

2. Ice Cream
   I remember the look on the employees’ faces when the two of us ran into the store and asked for every flavor and mixture they had. When they agreed, we gave them a tip, and they sang us a song. We danced and laughed and didn’t care what anyone thought. We took turns trying each spoonful and savoring the sweet taste. Thirty-one samples later, we left the ice cream shop still not knowing what kind we liked most. All we knew was how to hold each other close.

3. Stars
   I’ve always been scared of the dark, but that night you were there with me. You were right when you told me not to be afraid and that the moon would light our way. From our spot you could see every star. It was beautiful. I had thought that naming a star after you would make you stay forever, but God’s plan was already set in motion.

4. Concert
   Living on the edge was always your thing, not mine. You brought out my wild side, and I needed that. I needed to cut loose once in a while. Sneaking into that concert was one of the best nights of my life. The way we swayed to the music, the way you kissed me, the way you whispered how much I meant to you, all made me fall deeper in love with you. I almost hated you for making me feel this way.

5. Playground
   We spent so much of our time there when we were younger. It was our special spot, somewhere we could go to play all day. As we got older, we left those playground memories in
our childhood. It surprised me when you suggested this for our list. We had planned to meet each other there at ten. We were going to take a trip to the past, and act as if we had the world at our feet and time on our side.

I waited hours for you to show up that day. It never crossed my mind that you would leave me before our list was complete. I guess I was wrong. You were already gone.
Clean Linens

I love the color white. It's the color of icing, lightning, and sun.  
I bought a candle yesterday, to light the kitchen.  
The candle's smell promises “CLEAN LINEN.”  
And everything is clean here.  
That's why it's perfect.

My floor is clean.  
All the dust and sand blown in has been put out.  
The wind of Spring promised aid to my cleaning, and it did.  
Brushing its steady hand with mine, across the floor, gathering the dust, we cleaned the floor.  
My floor is clean.  
All the windows are open.  
The dust is visible, the cracks in the wood doors and windowpanes are dry and in need of water,  
as I do, when I pour the ice cold shower from the whitest wash bucket I own,  
as I have done, every morning since my mother taught me.  
There is no chance of rain now, unless the roaming winds bring in a storm for tonight.  
I pray that they will.

My children are clean.  
They run outside, about my “ghostie” nightdress and white sheets and white pillowcases that dance wildly and haunt the dreaded clothesline.  
The children are kicking up dust like the horses our neighbors have.  
forty miles away.  
Their clothes are new: their Easter Sunday bests.  
The little fawn is Emma, a tulip in her sweet dress. Dust on the matching petal shoes.  
Dustin and Edward—both clad in little boy blue—face skyward and fly above us all, fighter jets today, space ships tomorrow.  
They come inside; I tell them to take their shoes off.  
Emma points at a rainbow, a glimmer from one of the daffodil vase's turning angles.  
I smile, tell them to run upstairs, each with their tiny tokens from children's church.  
Dustin, chocolate rabbit all rubbed on his lips,  
Whistles a song from church he doesn't remember.  
The children head up the scratched wood stairs, skipping upwards toward a cloud to rest on.

The rain, however, is just waking up.  
The children begin to dance on the creaking stairs, stomping feet as thunder booms.
Emma squeals, Edward shouts, and they all scamper from the banister to the windows to watch.

Father is coming home tonight; he will see how clean our house is. I hear the children’s distant footsteps, close the screen door, smooth back my drying hair, and swish it back to cover the ribs of my thin wooden chair.

I look up as lightning illuminates the now flooded drive and see Father’s truck, headlights happy to see home. Home with its white-washed shutters and painted front steps and porch flashing in the storm. Home he has returned, to Edward, to Dustin, to Emma, and me. I’m rushing to light the finishing touch, and the smell of clean linens folds into the air, as if I’m straightening out one of my clean pillowcases. I hear his muddy boots come up the front steps, not bothering with the “Wipe your Paws.” I laugh at him through the mud and the screen, when I suddenly remembered: I left the washing out.

The Invitation

The family crawls its silver Chevy up past the front gates, smelling its nose upwards towards the thirsty gravel drive. The dog rises from its timid search, stops; the car doors open as they scramble to their feet and attempt brave navigation of the path to the vast swelling garden with those nighttime dazzling fires are all about. Tails tucked, the parents offer their best festivity, a creative cake of red, white, and blue, for the buffet. Soft cake falls in shame on the procession of gifts, each with flags of false celebration atop a flimsy gesture. Snapping toothpick sounds reach their ears, prick up and sigh. An old-eyed child reaches the table and watches as the collie mouths over a mess of icing and plastic dishware, crushed and patriotic. She remembers how someone told her how tall she was getting, that she looks like a young lady, young enough for the market. She smiles, just like Mama said.
Sardines & Rhamdomancy

The muse tossed up a coughing and spluttering something at my bare feet before she promptly breathed “Fetch.”
She expected me to recycle my thoughts?
Tossing her golden head towards more sun and bells, she laughed,
lips stained with pomegranate, eyes lit with greenfire,
breezily, “Intellectual property means nothing to a sage!”
I shooed her away like dusty smoldering clouds in some romantic sunset’s wind,
I bent down and pawed at the ground for my own magic staff.
I followed the largest birds to the pond. I began to wade my feet around in its magic spill.
I strode over to the jade trees, pillars of nephrite singing in its vault.
Her crystalline voice would echo like the eerie ring of water on a goblet:
"You may not think beyond those trees. . ."
So I disobeyed, entered, and left the struggling something on the page to die.
Lyndsey Gravette bounced her leg impatiently, checking her watch. 3:42. *I’ll barely make it.* She signaled her driver to accelerate. The limo skimmed over the wet pavement, parting the thick mist that often accompanied a DC morning. *That’s Foggy Bottom for you.* Lyndsey settled into her plush leather seat. She loved her limo; it had a feel of impenetrable solitude that only served to aid in her instinctual feeling of invincibility. Whatever happened there was the sole business her and her associates. Lyndsey Gravette was a powerful woman, and she maintained a veil of ambiguity towards the other powerful people with whom she had no business.

The vehicle parked noiselessly alongside the curb at 3:51. *Nine minutes to get prepared.* Lyndsey closed her eyes, seizing her last moment of peace before the 3 hour book-signing that would ensue. She heard the driver’s door close, muffled by the divider. Chilled air rushed in as the door opened. She brushed by him, as cold as the swirling fog.

She cast her gaze to the sign crowning the bookstore. *Alton’s* had always treated her regally, so she’d agreed to do a book-signing at their flagship store. Her assistant smiled at her timidly at the door. Lyndsey scoffed, gliding past her subordinate. Jay Tourville was the simpering sycophant she’d had to hire when her last assistant, Darrel Lustig, had been hit by a car. Darrel had been one damn good employee. She knew she’d owned Darrel, but she’d also respected him. He was the only employee she’d called by their first name. Tourville would never measure up.

She stepped into the elevator, Tourville barely squeezing through the doors. Checking her reflection in the bronze interior, she primped her immaculate blonde curls, smoothing off the water that’d condensed on her hair while traversing the mist. She let Tourville choose the floor, and when the elevator stopped, she stepped onto the fourth floor, walking briskly towards her table with only minutes to spare. The mechanical ding of the elevator had attracted the attention of *Alton’s* employees, serving as a low-key fanfare for her arrival.

As Gravette sat, sipping the latte she’d been handed, Jay scrambled to get things ready. He opened a package of 15 pens, and laid them in front his boss. *Or rather mistress.* She would probably use every pen during the signing. Lyndsey Gravette had acquired quite a fan base over the years, to Jay’s disbelief. He straightened the numerous book piles on the table. *Manthe* was her newest novel. It involved a detective’s attempt to solve the disappearance of a couple who’d vanished after their marriage, when crossing a town bearing the title’s name. The book had given Jay the creeps. It was eventually discovered that Manthe’s inhabitants were all cult members deeply involved in human sacrifice. People entered Manthe, but nobody ever came out.

Jay flinched checking the fastenings on the banner hanging from the table. A large printout of Gravette smiled up at him. The delicate features and softly rounded face were harshly misleading. Jay’d had no idea of the vicious monster Gravette was when he’d applied for the job. He’d thought Gravette was a nice middle-aged woman, like everyone else. The plump, blonde writer may have resembled Miss Piggy, but his job was no kids’ show. Jay didn’t
like Gravette any more as a person than a writer. His dream was to ascend to an editor’s position, and he was scaling the ladder one excruciating step at a time.

“You’re stunning today, Ms. Gravette,” he said as she finished her latte and uncapped a pen. She didn’t even look at him.

“Lose the ponytail, Tourville,” was her only response. His hand rose involuntarily, touching the hair he’d spent ages tying impeccably at the nape of his neck. He’d thought he looked sophisticated. Apparently not. Sighing, Jay melted into the background as a mass of devotees hurried towards them.

Lyndsey smiled tightly at the first aficionado to reach her. That same, strained smile greeted every person for the next nearly three hours; as it did all people Lyndsey felt were beneath her. The falseness was the mask through which she interacted, and like a mask, it could limit the wearer’s capabilities to interface with others. While the fakery was restrictive and made Lyndsey incapable of sincerity, it served its purpose. The false smile morphed Lyndsey from an uninterested woman, into one that appeared to care.

Lyndsey’s fake smile flickered into a flirtatious one at the approach of a good-looking worshipper. She regarded him appraisingly.

“That’s a bad idea,” a voice said, appearing suddenly. “Romeo’s married.” Lyndsey spun, searching wildly for the source. Nothing.

“Happily,” the voice added, as if marriage alone wouldn’t have discouraged pursuit. She saw only Alton’s employees and Tourville napping. Nobody was speaking to her. Heart pounding, she faced the man, who had now reached her table, fearing total loss of her sanity.

Greeting him unsteadily, she noticed a wedding-band on his left ring-finger. I couldn’t have known he was married. I hoped he was single. He left, bearing the shakiest signature of Lyndsey’s career. She glanced at her watch. Fifteen minutes.

“You’ve never enjoyed book-signings,” the voice said. Lyndsey jumped. Lyndsey abandoned all thoughts of waiting 15 min, and fled, making Tourville deal with the people still in line.

Reaching the bathroom, she rushed to the sink. Wide eyes stared back at her from the mirror, and she clawed through her purse for Aspirin.

“That’s not a very healthy coping mechanism; and it won’t make me disappear.” Halfway through the sentence, a man appeared in the mirror’s reflection. Starting, she knocked the Aspirin into the sink, where the pills scattered.


“I’d say, ‘In the flesh,’ but that’d be misleading,” he said, passing through the wall behind him and back again. “I’m a ghost now.”

“Y-you’re not r-real,” she said, pointing a shaking finger at him, “I’m j-just imagining y-you.”

“Lyndsey, I’m hurt. If you don’t believe me,” he produced a cell phone from his pocket, “call me. Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten my number.”

She hadn’t. Quivering, she dialed.

“Put it on speaker.” She obeyed. The sounds of her phone dialing echoed around the bathroom.
Darrel’s phone started ringing. He raised his eyebrows in an I-told-you-so manner. He sent her call to voicemail, and his voice emanated from her phone, still.

“You’ve reached Duh-rell Lustig. Don’t worry if you were trying to reach Dair-uhl; we’re the same person.” Lyndsey recognized it. Darrel used to have problems involving his name.

“Okay, it’s you. What do you want?”

“You’re the reason I died; I was getting your coffee when I got hit.” His eyes glazed as if re-living his final moments. His jaw clenched. “I’ve returned as a specter with the hopes of preventing any further tragedy.”

“What’re you going to do to me?”

“It’s my hope that you’ll make the transformation on your own. I’m just here to guide your way. Speaking of which, we should leave before somebody comes.” Darrel glanced at the door. “C’mon.”

Optionless, Lyndsey followed Darrel. They walked in silence, ending up in front of the elevator.

“Where’re we going?” she asked.

“You’ll see.” He produced a room key-like card from his chest pocket, sliding it into a slot on the elevator panel. He pressed the down-arrow, and the doors slid open on the elevator’s arrival. The elevator looked identical outside, but when she entered, she noticed the significant change.

All the floor-number-buttons had been replaced with rectangular worded-buttons. When she peered closer, she gasped. They were all titles from her books: Blackmark, Turned to Gold, The Hazel Tree.

Darrel pressed a button. The elevator started to descend with a jolt. Lyndsey saw the Marelberg button was lit-up. Jacob Marelberg died in a small-town murder, and the novel revolved around his mysterious death.

Seeing her confusion, Darrel spoke, “We’re traveling into your books.”

“What?”

“The idea is that by travelling into your stories, you can learn to change. You’ve decimated too many lives already to be allowed to continue.” Lyndsey’s head spun. Decimated too many lives?

“You’re the only person I know who’s died!” she exclaimed, “My grandparents are still alive!”

Before he could answer, the elevator halted. The doors slid open but not to anything she’d expected. They weren’t in Alton’s. Not even close. The elevator opened onto a gas-station parking lot. Her jaw dropped when she saw the station’s sign.

“Recognize it?” Darrel asked. She knew this place clearly, from the desolate cornfield to the dust-caked stop-sign. She’d written the living tableau unfolding in front of her.

Lyndsey looked around the SaleQuic parking lot. A plain sedan pulled in, driven by an equally plain man. A vagrant reclined against the wall, and another car sat at the farthest pump. Something integral was missing. As if summoned, the all-important convertible rolled up. An airheaded and bellicose girl drove, her vapid friends piled in back.

Though she’d written it, some aspects of the scene Lyndsey didn’t recognize. She was sure she didn’t know the derelict car-dealership across the street, or the black woman walking by. She was unsurprised; however, when loud music suddenly blasted. That she’d written.
The convertible’s radio was so loud that the bass could be felt as tangible pressure waves. The girls in the back shrieked excitably. Lyndsey jumped at a car door slamming. A girl rocketed from the car at the far pump. She winced when the door slammed but faced the convertible wide-eyed.

The driver too noticed the teenager. She exited her car, eyes flashing dangerously.

“You got a problem with us?” she yelled. The girl cowered, looking around frantically.

“Hey, I’m talking to you. I said you-got-a-prob-l-em?” she snarled. The girl still didn’t answer.

“What’s with this chick?” one of the blonde’s friends muttered disgustedly.

“I dunno,” the blonde girl answered. Then louder, “Leave us alone, bitch! We don’t need freaks like you staring at us!” At the continued assault, the girl began crying. Lyndsey turned away, shifting focus to a man who’d been quietly observing, the plain man who’d just finished filling his equally plain sedan. The protagonist of the story, Martin Carter was a police-detective put on the case. This scene was the introduction of the blonde driver, Kleo Tivoli. Due to her carelessness and tendency to text and drive, Kleo came to be suspected for the hit-and-run of Marelberg, whose death had been ruled vehicular-homicide. She’d used the confrontation to reveal Kleo’s personality to Carter.

“Pretty nasty stuff,” Darrel drawled.

“It was supposed to be,” she responded, “That’s Kleo for you.” Kleo was proven innocent when Marelberg’s affronted wife confessed.

“You’re missing things; we need to develop your perception,” said Darrel. “Not everything’s what it appears. Let’s watch again.” Darrel snapped, and everything blurred, her surroundings shifting. Kleo’s car disappeared and she was standing by the car at the far pump. The black woman who’d walked by her earlier was behind the wheel, the teenager assaulted by Kleo, next to her. Their identical bone-structure revealed their close relation. The surprising part was that they were signing.

“Is one deaf?” Lyndsey questioned.

“No more; today, the daughter joined the hearing. She can’t talk yet, so they’re still signing.” He saw her confusion. “Look,” he gestured towards the girl’s ear, “She got cochlear implants 6 weeks ago. They were programed today; she’s now hearing noises for the first time.” Lyndsey saw a new-looking scar behind the girl’s ear, surrounded by a patch of fuzz starting to grow back. “Here, I’ll translate…’I’m going to grab you a drink; does Sprite sound good?’…’Yeah, can I have chips too?’…’They’re loud to eat. It might give you a headache.’” The girl acquiesced, and the mother left the car, striding past where Lyndsey’d recently been standing.

No sooner had she reached SaleQuic, than the harsh beat erupted. The recently-hearing-girl jumped, frightened, springing out of the car, presumably to find her mother, but froze under the glare of a girl. She trembled as Kleo attacked her; sobbing at the continued belligerence.

“Her first memories of hearing are of that girl berating her. Heartbreaking.” Lyndsey agreed. A lump swelled in her throat. The poor girl had no idea what was going on, but she was alone and terrified.

“Her name’s Diana Victor.”

“No,” Lyndsey breathed, shocked.
“The daughter of Police-Chief, Brooks Victor. Wasn’t he a suspect because he was, ‘acting funny’? I think that’d be the stress of having a hearing-impaired child. But your readers never knew, did they? They went along with Carter when he publically accused Victor. That cost him his job, and despite his innocence, he never regained public trust. Imagine trying to pay for cochlear implant surgery when nobody will employ you. All because of the stress caused when Kleo traumatized his daughter. And that all comes back to you.”

“They aren’t real!” Darrel gave her a you-do-realize-you’re-talking-to-a-ghost-right kind of look.

“You don’t exist here do you?” Seeing her face, “No one can see you, can they? Hear you? You’re no more ‘real’ in this reality, than this man,” he indicated the vagrant, “is in yours. You’re still both human. You both breathe. You both dream. You can both feel pain.” His eyes bored into her. “Lyndsey, in this reality, you’re causing people unnecessary suffering.”

Lyndsey’s eyes burned trying to holding back tears. She wasn’t compassionate, but she would never intentionally hurt someone, and she hated any possibility that she had. No. She couldn’t have. These people were only random names she’d given personalities.

“I want to leave. Now.”

“Alright,” Darrel answered. He led her back to the side of the parking-lot where a port-o-potty, after Darrel inserted his card, morphed into elevator. Pressing the down arrow, they were admitted. As they began moving, Darrel spoke, “The elevator chose an intense scene, I wonder what’s next.”

“It’s alive?”

“More or less. It picks what it thinks will affect you the most.” Searching for its brain, Lyndsey accidentally glimpsed her reflection. She was markedly more disheveled than she last remembered.

She stared resolutely at the floor until the elevator stopped.

The doors opened, and she noticed that the Comedy of Murders button was lit. It wasn’t a favorite. It involved the mafia, a subject that bored her. When she stepped out of the elevator, she saw she’d traveled in distance and time. She was in a 1920’s pool-hall, standing in the most secluded corner across a table from the bootlegger, Eduardo Johk. The pronunciation of his last name as “joke” had born the title, Comedy of Murders, a novel about the homicidal attempts of his family to find the person ruining their business through the bind of blackmail.

In this scene, Eduardo followed a tip to find the man who’d first leaked his secret. A diminutive, complaisant man passed her, approaching the table.

“Sit,” growled Johk. The man instantly dropped to his stool. “You have the name?”

“Yes, Mr. Johk, sir, I do,” he answered. His groveling reminded her of Tourville.

“Christopher Frolock.”

“That was important. When you wrote that, you intended to write Frohock. Unfortunately, you got Frolock; but you didn’t care to fix it. The Johks are a vindictive family. The blackmail ruined their business, and they’d be damned if they didn’t make the family of the one responsible suffer as well. I’ll show you what I mean.”

The world spun and refocused on a picnic.

It was awful.

The golden day seemed to mock the 20 people laying dead on the grass. Only a little boy, still breathing laboriously, remained, fighting the clutches of death.
“Can we do something?” she cried, tears rolling down her face.

“No. We don’t exist here,” Darrel answered, “Two days after the pool-hall meeting, the Frolocks were poisoned.” The boy’s terror-filled eyes stared through her, burning in agony. He coughed weakly, and the light left his eyes as the poison stole his life. As he exhaled his last breath, Lyndsey’s protective mask shattered into a thousand heart-slicing pieces.

She broke down sobbing as the scene played over and over in her mind, her heart breaking further each time.

Rage boiled in Lyndsey’s gut when Darrel told her about Christopher Frohock, a man with no family, the world would have been better without him as he went on to murder 7 more people after the Forlocks’ mistaken deaths. It was him alone that should have died. Not all of those people. She never should have had to watch that boy die right in front of her while she was powerless to help.

Darrel led her, crying, back to the elevator, though she was unaware of her surroundings. She did notice though that this time he pushed the up arrow. She wondered if it meant she got to go home. She hoped so.

Darrel began to speak, “I think tonight’s the first time you’ve understood your responsibility as a writer. Other dimensions exist, and authors unwittingly pick up certain impressions from these different realities. They write about what they perceive and create a story around it. These are the people capable of arranging meaningless collections of words into impacting ideas, and breathing life into concepts until they’re practically tangible. As you’ve seen, they also have some influence on these realities as well. The greats have even created entire realities of their own.

“But Lyndsey, you’ve shut down your perceptions, and that coupled with your lack of caring, is what always inhibited your human relationships. It also makes you a disastrous writer for the people you write about. You only get partial impressions, and when making up plots around them, you’re bound to make mistakes. I think you can see that all now and hope that some of what you learned carries over into your life, because your writing’s not the only place you have problems. Promise me you’ll find people to be close to, alright? I care about you, Lyndsey.”

At the moment, as she stared at her reflection in the elevator wall, she couldn’t even imagine loving herself again. The truth was, when she had her despising thought of Frohock, she had also felt hatred stir towards herself. She had never been open-minded, so set in her ways as the right ways. And now that’s cost me, and others too. She felt completely dead inside except for an aching pain where her heart used to be.

She sat on the elevator floor with Darrel next to her. “There’s one more thing we need to talk about,” he said. “In the book you’re writing now, Falcon, you’re going to have the antagonist rob a convenience store and kill a lot of people in the crossfire. One man there, Carl Diaz, just proposed to his girlfriend. She hasn’t told him yet, but she’d pregnant. Lyndsey, don’t make that woman raise her child without her husband. I really think you’ve changed. Please, prove me right.”

She sat straighter and looked Darrel dead in the eye.

“This man is not dying. When I get back,” she swallowed tears, “I’m going to make some changes in my life, and he’s going to be one of the first ones.” Darrel beamed at her.
Looking at herself in the bronze, she could see that something in her reflection had changed, lighter somehow, as if her internal barriers had crumbled. Her heart plummeted though, at a thought.

“When I leave this elevator...does that mean I’ll never see you again?” She’d just undergone the toughest ordeal of her life. She abhorred the thought of him forever leaving her.

“You’ve got an open mind now,” he answered. “You’d be surprised where it can take you.” He paused. “Swing by my dimension sometime, alright?” She stepped forward and hugged him tightly. The elevator dinged, the doors sliding open. Darrel returned the hug, equally forceful. “Good-bye, Lyndsey,” he whispered. They separated, and Lyndsey saw her condo outside the elevator. Walking towards her door, she turned back.

“Whenever you’re in the neighborhood...” She smiled sadly at him, tears welling in her eyes. He nodded in understanding, a sad smile on his face, and the elevator doors slid closed.

Jay sighed, waiting at the office for his Gravette’s arrival, anticipating another day of slave-work. He was filing manuscripts when she entered.

“Still have the ponytail, I see.” she said.

He flushed. “Yes ma’am, but I have a haircut this afternoon.”

“Keep it,” she said, shuffling papers. “It looks good, Jay.” He reeled, astounded she’d called him Jay for the first time and had complimented him. Wait, was she smiling?

“You should probably wear a coat. It’s cold outside.” She said handing him his jacket.

“Where are we going?” he asked, bewildered.

“You’re going to help me figure out how I can donate some of our proceeds to the American Society of the Hearing Impaired.” Lyndsey smiled, thinking of her experiences last night. Somehow, she thought Darrel would approve.
The Light Switch

Now the boys are curled in the sheets, tackling each other, pulling white blankets off, pushing them on the wooden floor. One turns on and off the light switch, leaning out of bed, pulling at his mouth with excitement. They are ticklish, are still wearing their soccer jerseys and underwear, have taken off their pants. Their feet are bare soldiers; their hands, steal canopies. They have been wet all day from water buckets and neighborhood pools after soccer. They know not the meaning of the day quite yet. The TV is on, speaking in Spanish and flashing in the room’s one corner. It is 12:11. Late. They are too young to stay up, but I let them, because their eyes are my demigods and their teeth have yet to fall from their soft gums. One still sucks his thumb but only in his sleep. The other is asking for his first motor bike. I let them pull off covers, lay their pillows half off the bed.
I let them pull at each other’s hair because this is the only time for that. Soon their words, sentences will be grammatically correct, coherent. They will not say things that do not make since, that do not need to. There will be no joy in turning off and on the light switch.

**Growing Young**

Stand here in this expanse of muddy grass which still smells like broken avocadoes and dusted peanut shells to me. Tilt upwards like when I was a child, spinning, spinning, spinning like an off-course freight train dusted lightly with the snowy ash of yesterday’s coal.

My lips remember what it was like to suckle the air, to drink the sky’s dizzying sweetness, to lose myself to the universe so easily.

My six year old self would now be swaying unevenly, trying to steady herself by digging her bare toes into the sappy, russet mud. She would now feel gravity tugging at the ends of her pants like the wet mouth of a young dog.
She would now fall, 
willingly, 
crumple like lined paper, 
laugh.
I woke up expecting to see my ceiling of my room, but what I saw made my skin crawl. I was in some kind of hospital or lab. I saw a flash of movement to my left and snapped my head to see who or what was making the movement. To my surprise nothing was there. Unable to find the source of the movement, I turned my head the other way only to find a pair of deep chocolate brown eyes staring at me. I jumped off the bed sending tubes, wires, and other medical supplies scattering.

“Holy crap,” I said gasping for air, “don’t do that.”
“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” the man said chuckling. “I must admit I really did mean to scare you, but only to make sure you were wide awake.”
I looked around, a little fearful. “Where am I?"
“Well isn't it obvious?”
I shook my head. “I'm completely new to this place.”
The man looked at me sternly. “First of all, I can press a button and put poison in your bloodstream which will instantly kill you. Okay?” I nodded.
“As for where you are: you’re in Washington, D.C., and the date is February 5th, 2277.
My head was swimming with thoughts and ideas “But…but how?”
“Simply put,” the man said, “you were just a test subject to see if humans man survive going through time. Nothing more.”
I rolled my eyes. “So what do I do now Mr....Mr....uh.”
“My name is Dr. Sean, not ‘Mr. Sean.’ Dr. Sean.” I sighed loudly.
“Fine. What do I do now, Dr. Sean?”
A beep sounded overhead, and an intercom came on with a female that asked prettily, “Dr. Sean?”
“Yes.”
“President Jem would like to see test subject 072 in his office right away.”
“Okay, I'll send him right up.” After she hung up, he looked at me. “Well, there’s your answer. President’s office is on the top floor, use the elevator.” He jabbed his thumb behind him pointing at a small double door. I walked away from the room as fast as I could and rode the elevator to the 87th floor.
The office's lobby was huge with the presidential seal on every wall, desk, floor, and ceiling. Sitting at the front desk was a lady who was tall, lean, and blonde with crystal blue eyes; she must’ve been the one talking on the intercom. I approached her and said, “Well, from the looks of this lobby I’d say the President really loves his job.”
She stared at me for a moment before realization dawned in her eyes “Oh, you mean the presidential seals everywhere. Yeah he really does and has for the past 12 years.”
That took me by surprise. “I thought you were only allowed to serve for eight years?”
She gave me a look that said she thought I was stupid, but then she took it back and said, “Oh, I’m sorry. I forgot you’re from a different era.”
“Ms. Tuck, where is Test Subject 072?” said a voice from the intercom.
"He’s on his way in," she replied. She gave me gesture that told me to get into the President’s office now. Not wanting to make a hot “single” lady on my bad side, I did as I was told and gave her what I thought was a suave “007” wink before I went in.

Now for some reason the Oval Office was the exact same way I’ve seen it in pictures. Sitting in a chair behind the desk was a tall lean man with a jet black neatly trimmed beard, mustache, and clean cut hair.

“Ah, so you made it without any deformations.” That got me mad.

“Well, Mr. President, I’ve checked everything except in my pants, so let’s have little look shall we?”

“That won’t be necessary, 072.” His face filled with horror. “I’m sorry about your inconvenience, but we had to test to see if it was possible. Now if you’d be so kind as to go back down to the 2nd floor, Dr. Sean will tell you how you get back.” Okay, that was weird.

“Excuse me, but you made me come all the way up here, talk to you for like a minute and send me right back down?”

“Yes, that is correct.” That didn’t go well with me.

“Listen here, you little bas…”

“Ah, ah, ah,” he said, wiggling his finger at me. “Just so you know, I have lasers in here that can kill you. Trust me: it’ll hurt. Go.”

The elevator came to a stop on the second floor. As I stepped out, I saw Dr. Sean waiting for me. “In order for you to go home, you must go around Washington DC, finding certain people so you can acquire the parts to build a time machine. Here is your list.”

I looked at him, taken aback. “Okay… and how do I find them and why?”

He blankly stared at me for a moment before answering, “In order to find them, you go around cities and ask the locals. As for why, so you can go home and to see if the time travel affected your brain.” I sighed loudly.

“You know, I really don’t care if it affected my brain.”

“It doesn’t matter if you don’t care, it matters that someone could care; plus, we need to see if it does affect a brain. Now go, but first take this data glove. If you have any questions, just ask, and it will answer. Its name is R.A.D., which stands for Robotic Answering Device.”

Let's see. It says here, once I get the piece I need, I have to bring the person back to the lab. Let’s see. The first person on the list is Kyle Will, and he has the Quantum Stabilizer. “What in the world is a Quantum Stabilizer?” I whispered to myself when RAD came to life and in a robotic voice said: “A Quantum Stabilizer is the device used in a time machine to make sure it does not fall apart during time travel.”

“Uh…thank you…RAD.” I said in an awkward voice. “Uh RAD, can you also find people?”

“Yes, sir, say the name, and I’ll find all people with that name in the region.”

I smiled. Looks like Dr. Sean was on my side all along, or he’s a complete idiot. “RAD find Kyle Will and his location.”

“Kyle Will lives in Cavern City.”

“RAD, from now on display a map for my home screen.”

“Yes, sir.”

Cavern City was weird. I mean, it’s in the ground...literally. Whoever founded it must’ve liked rocks, or that was what was in his head. I walked through the door where a man
in a security uniform waited. “Excuse me, do you know where I can find Kyle Will?” He stared at me for a moment before answering.

“He’s in the bar down the hall and to your right.”

I headed the way he said. The bar was pretty much empty, but there was a red-headed guy with pale skin and freckles behind the counter who I assumed was Kyle Will. I approached him. “Are you Kyle Will?”

He glanced at me. “What’s it to you?”

I looked around, leaned in, and said, “I need the Quantum Stabilizer.”

He looked around and leaned in and asked, “Who told you about that?”

I laughed. “Dr. Sean and President Jem. Now come on I’m supposed to take you with me.”

He groaned. “Ugh, you’re a test subject; let’s go. Don’t want to get the President mad.”

“Let’s see. RAD find Keavan Sly and map him.”

“Keavan Sly lives in Meg Town which is one mile south of your current position.”

Kyle dropped his things. “What! That’s a nuclear manufacturing city; it’s the reason Cavern City is underground.” It explained a lot.

“Either way,” I said, “We’ve got to go to get a Fission Battery because it makes the time machine go back in time.”

Kyle groaned, “Okay fine I’ll come, but just so I don’t get in trouble.”

For a place that develops nukes, the place was a dump. Standing next to the entrance was an Asian guy with a strong build and blackish brown hair. “Do you know where to find Keavan Sly?”

The guy suddenly looked hurt, “Isn’t it obvious that you’re looking at him?”

My face slid into astonishment. “How do you have a Fission Battery in the first place?”

He gave me a “well duh” a look.

“I own NMC, the Nuclear Manufacturing Company.”

“Um but you’re wearing pretty much dishrags.” His face took on the hurt look again.

“That’s what everybody wears here. How did you know I have a Fission Battery?”

Kyle answered that one, “President Jem and Dr. Sean.” Realization lit his face.

“So am I supposed to come with you?”

I sighed, “Yeah, pretty much.”

“All right then, let’s go.”

“Okay RAD find Allen Bru.”

“Allen Bru lives at URS or the Universal Radio Station which is 100 miles east of your current position.”

I thought for a second “RAD play the URS.” Someone started talking through a speaker.

“Hello everybody, my name is Allen Bru, and you’re listening to URS. This just in: word has that the government has brought someone in from the past to see if time travel works. I know, messed up, right, but if you see him give me some info.”

Now just to let you know Keavan Sly is the most annoying person on the planet. If you don’t believe me, he talked the whole 30 minutes, and after we parked, he took his first breath since he got into the car.

First we strolled into the building and asked to see Allen; the guard said no. Keavan gave him $50.00, and I screamed at him, “What do you mean you won’t give me the PSDT?”
Allen had a strong build like Keavan, but he had blonde hair and blue eyes. Allen looked at me sternly.

“You heard me; my answer is no.”
I groaned, “Um, key word: ‘why’?”
Allen rolled his eyes, “It was a gift from my dad; it’s the only thing left that I have that’s his.”
I made a pleading gesture with my hands. “I’m stuck in a time that’s 265 years ahead of where I’m from.” The room went silent before Alec spoke.
“Fine but only if you take me with you, deal?”
I nodded, “Deal.”
I waited a moment, “By the way what does PSDT stand for anyway”
He gave me a “you’re stupid” look and said, “It means Personnel Safety Device Time. It makes sure the people in the time machine are safe.”
I ran into the room with my group yelling, “Dr. Sean, I’ve got them! I’ve got them!”

What I came upon was Dr. Sean on the floor and President Jem above him.
“You bloody traitor.” He turned and looked at me “Rick Wall, just the person I wanted to see. Hand over the time machine parts, and I’ll be on my way.” I looked at him confused.
“Wait, why do you need the parts?” he shook his head.
“Well, Rick, I plan on taking those parts, going back to your past, and ruling over your time. Since I’ll die at the date I was supposed to, at this time the only way to die there is to kill me which won’t happen. Hand it over or Ms. Tuck or Dr. Sean dies.” My face turned red with fury.

“Put them down…” I leaped into the air “Now!” I tackled him, but it wasn’t enough because apparently President Jem has some ninja skills. He threw me to the floor, the time machines parts scattering across it he grabbed them put them in the time machine and vanished.

“Mission failed,” TV’s speakers intoned.
“Ha, ha,” Alex laughed “Told you you’d fail the last mission…loser.” I glared at him.
“Shut up you were distracting me.” He laughed at me again.
“Nuh-uh,”
“Uh-huh, you were screaming in my ear, ‘Don’t mess up! Don’t mess up!’ So shut up and give me my five, Alex.” Since we made this a contest, we wanted a judge which was our dads.

“Alex,” he said, “Give Conner the money.” I looked back at him.
“Wha-at.” He dug into his pocket.
“Yeah, yeah. Fine, here you go.” I held up Abe Lincoln.
“Yes, finally I won a bet.”
The Rumored Record Cabinet

We yearn for the inversion,
of clairvoyance: show me the past.
Steal me away from a generation without giants,
full of cop-siren lullabies and cigarette sand boxes.
Steal me to a land of luxury and taboo,
where art has a taste, something like champagne
and romance has a voice, something like song.
I long to embrace the bronze bust deity,
long hidden by the decades,
long lost by youth,
intangible.

Forgotten,
by a society long ahead,
quick to smile, yet distant to embrace
the romantic incandescence dripping from the hip,
it crashes like matrimony to the fleece
of the rug of the room of late December.
Catatonic words of an age now frozen in time,
preserved just beyond reach
in the Rumored Record Cabinet:
a vault of prestige and passion.
My fingers shudder
at the notion of theft
of history itself.

But the remnant beckons yet,
shimmering between the Osmonds and Beck,
one square-foot of vintage glory,
age, like a diamond roster,
vinyl scales like the rings of a broken hollow and,
scratched into the phonograph,
a rickety old voice untapped,
a deposit of sophistication on the brink of eruption.
My finger is poised, my ambition fiery
my execution flawless.
I free class itself
from the war camp of age.
Summoned, it roars unturned, 
bouncing up the bolts and rivets, twirling 
through brassy coils and smoky dust, 
twirling out to strut Chicago Streets 
—young again—
every shade of blue and brandy 
and fiber-glass film on his breath. 
Blue eyed boot heel kicks the street, 
splashin’ some jazz on a drunken fedora, 
curdled by the shrills of a frightful sax. 
Such freedom—to live, drink, and smoke 
at a China party by the docks, 
where foreign lamps light the swing dance 
and every snap sounds off like a bang.

Though the scene winds down, 
an awkward dream of child-like notions, 
time is but a playground of fantastic love. 
I trace the rhythmic rings that carry with them 
the late December's song, like moon's rings around her Earth, 
and I hear the nightly sound of a cosmic needle 
playing away the day, 
the year, 
the decade. 
I count by every dream, 
preserved just beyond reach 
in the Rumored Record Cabinet.

Prayer

Railroad Tie falls loose, 
loses everything, alone 
yet perseveres. 
Blood rust in his eyes, 
stone quarry dweller, 
“Forget me in the rain!” 
he spits. 
Grows up a lonely stargazer 
the earth-warm soul about him. 
“T’ll last.” 
Somewhere a family of deer 
find alien turf
baseball fields
and the comfort of trespassing
in a realm that's always yours.
It's free illumination;
humming street lamps every night,
burn entitlement checks into the ground.
I think the world is mine.
The moths
dance in the light,
wholeheartedly believing
they've finally caught the moon.
And if the glory's short-lived,
they'll dance again tomorrow
and know perpetual bliss,
burning to death in a fool's nirvana.
I turn the lights out when I sleep to pray
I'm not a mistaken moth.
Maybe I'm the ballpark deer, maybe,
in the history of misconception.
But dear god don't let me be
a stargazing railroad tie,
blind with independence,
to the train wreck left behind.
A lot of people say that I am very lucky to be alive, that not many people have made it through what I have experienced. Well, that’s what they say, but what about me? Did I ever say I wanted to live? Did I ever ask to see the same man in my nightmares every night? No, I never asked for any of that, and do you want to know why? Life would be easier with me dead.

All I know is that what I went through is every girl’s worst nightmare. He picked me; out of the thousands of girls who go to the same beach, who live in the same town, and who go to the same places, he picked me. But why? I’m not a girl who would stop boys in their tracks, but I’m not repulsive either. I’m just plain average. There’s nothing spectacular about how I look. After asking this question again and again, I’ve come up with one answer. Confidence. I had confidence, and he wanted control. He wanted to make me suffer just like he had suffered during his adolescence. He got what he wanted.

It was one of those days you see on television when an ad for an allergy medication comes on— blue-skies, the kind of day where you can’t stay inside because the beach is your backyard, a day full of laughter, happiness, and peace. When night finally came, the air was clear and nothing came between me and the ocean breeze. At least, that’s what I thought at the time.

My house was not more than a half mile down the street from the beach, but between the two it was deserted. I had never noticed how lonely that walk was until that night. No one heard my screams for help. Nobody came to rescue me. I was all alone.

If I wanted to make my curfew of ten-thirty, I knew I’d have to hustle from the beach to my house. As I was walking down the hill, I noticed that there was a big, white van sitting at the bottom of the hill. I thought it was strange that the two back doors were open, but I didn’t really give it a second thought. Someone must have had car trouble. I didn’t want to get too close, though. I was alone, and I needed to get home.

About a half block after I passed the van, I heard a door shut. I didn’t look back, but I thought I heard slow footsteps behind me. I picked up my pace. I heard someone running, and my body reacted in some primitive manner because I began to run, too. I wasn’t fast enough. I felt a sharp pinprick in the back of my neck and saw nothing else except blackness.

“Dani? Are you awake?”
A strange smell assaulted me, and I tried to physically shake it off. What was that? Alcohol? Cleaner? I fell back into the comfortable blackness.

“Dani. Try to wake up, sweetheart.”
Ahh, my mother’s voice. Something familiar. I tried to smile, but I felt numb. It all came flooding back, complete with a wave of uncontrollable nausea. I leaned over the bed, but my head hit a metal bar. I released the contents of my stomach in my bed and began to cry. It was only then that I opened my eyes.

The memories, the nightmares, the terrifying images all flash back into my head. It wasn’t a dream. It was all real. As I thought more about what had happened to me, another wave of nausea came over me, but this time my mom was there to help me.
“Oh Dani, I am so sorry…”

I opened my eyes for the first time to see that my mother was crying. I wasn’t at home. I was in a bed in a room that I did not recognize. I was too exhausted to ask questions and just fell back against the pillow.

However, when I closed my eyes again, I could see him. I could see him laughing like he was the king of the world. It was sickening. He forced me to do unspeakable acts. That was horrifying. The worst part was the satisfaction that he was getting out of the whole thing.

He knew my name, my secrets, and my life. He took control of me like I was a two year old kid who was lost, crying for my mom. The pain I felt was like none I had never felt before. Brutal, raw, gut-wrenching pain that took my breath away. I couldn’t cry. I couldn’t scream. I knew at that moment that my life would be forever changed. My innocence was lost to a man who took it from me greedily and then tossed me aside like a piece of trash.

To him, my name was Leah. He woke me with his sinister laugh, calling for me, “Leah! Wake up, Leah!” As soon as I started shaking, he came over to me, released the duct tape and said, “See Leah, that wasn’t so bad! Now, get ready for something better.” I had no response. My body froze when I realized. He stood up over me with a grin on his face and reached to unbuckle his belt. I quickly let out a scream as I closed my eyes, realizing that it was too late and braced myself for the pain.

** ** **

I stayed for a week in the hospital, staring straight ahead at the wall in front of my bed. I memorized every scrape and crack on the wall. I don’t remember eating or who came to see me. I just remember laying there quietly sobbing when no one was there.

My mom tried to be cheery. I don’t even want to talk about my dad. I’ll forever be haunted by the look in his eyes. When I went back to school, I got the nastiest looks from the people I thought I knew best. My teachers tried to give extra help to improve my grades, but I didn’t allow them to get any better. I then realized how no one, not my teachers, not my old friends, not even my own mom and dad, would listen to me. They never listened to me, and they thought that I could go back to having a normal life. But they are all wrong. I can’t.

Before everything happened, I was strong, confident. I was someone who wasn’t afraid to speak her mind. I was the type of person that never let anything affect me. Now I live my life hidden in the shadows of others. I hide my face everywhere I go so people don’t know that I was “that girl.” I am now considered dead inside. The only way that I will be able to get over the shame is to pull the trigger on the gun that rests against my lips.

So, the last thing I want to say is this: My name is Dani, not Leah. I want to make a promise to whoever is responsible for changing me, you will eventually regret every second that you hurt me. Now I will be known as “the dead girl.”
Earth

painted green and blue
with the hands of a child,
certain that’s what it looks like
from an outsider’s view.

but what she doesn’t know
is that the green and blues
are nothing
without so many other pigments.
so many, impossible
to include them all on that
thin, white sheet of paper.

impossible
to add the easeful, vibrant hues
of the sun as it sets
while adding the vivid,
blaze color of the sun
at dawn.

impossible
to create the complicated shadows
and creases
of an unfaithful blanket
when one awakes
next to the one they love.

impossible
to compose the darkness
and dust
that builds up in caskets
after all those years
of emptiness
and neglect.

instead of attempting the impossible--
we reach not for the stars
but for green and blue to design
a world of simplicity and order
that we’d like to believe
exists.

Age of Imagination

There’s a commodity of concepts one might find appeasing about an aquarium.
As a child, to see these, you press your rounded face against the cool glass
Terrorizing the fish for all eternity
But also craving for them to follow you
And your chubby fingers as they glide across the transparent barrier;
To absorb the vibrant colors:
The “green” plants that you see become chartreuse and malachite,
The “blue” rocks are cerulean and sapphire,
Even the fish materialize into radiating rainbows;
Your mind diverges as you absorb this spectacle.
You begin to long to thrive like those creatures,
Imagining fins for yourself,
Jetting through the water,
Dodging the seaweed,
Pin wheeling through countless and countless waves,
but never washing up on the shore.

As one ages
and becomes “wise,”
you may watch the glass from afar,
tapping your black shoes
against the tile,
thinking only how tax dollars
could have been spent, perhaps,
more efficiently.
The Deer
by Emily Stobbe
Kirkwood Senior High School

Allie was only eleven and already she had seen a ghost.
Not a real ghost, but more of a whisper or spirit: her mother on a broken barstool in the kitchen with a mug of Simpatico beer, her moonshine hair spilling down her back, her blue eyes cold with black goldfish pupils swimming, her ribs concave, the space below them a bowl where Allie used to lay her head. Her bones pushed through her skin to display the exaggerated slope of her shoulders and the slices of her ribs, an instrument that would wash or sing if rubbed violently enough. Her hands were pale and luminous moonflowers opening drunkenly to the night. They wrapped around the Simpatico, cradling the mug to her chest, then lips.

Allie had two brothers, Richie and Howie. They were both younger with flops of caramel hair and freckles smattered in star clusters on their slim arms and torsos and across their pointy noses. They had also seen their ghostly mother. The barstool was the only thing that belonged to her in the house, that and her wedding ring of dull gold with a diamond so small it could have been a diamond shaving. It became too big for her slender finger years ago, and she wore it on a trembling chain around her neck, the cold band against her small breast.

Richie's eyes glowed hungrily. He knelt beside the old cherry wood teacart, his hair like straw as it flaked down against his cheeks, his small hands clutching the reddish wood and his toy truck. On top of the teacart sat a plastic salmon-colored telephone, an empty pie tin, and a glass pitcher with a skin of dust. There was also a portrait of their father's old brick house, his mother planted in front like a hardy geranium, fisted, her hair wild as hot steel, her eyes flashing in the sun. “What are you doing?” Richie whispered.

“Watching our mother,” Allie said softly. She felt a wolfish need to protect him and reached out, pulling him into her chest. Their mother dropped further forward on the stool, her back crumpling. Simpatico tumbled in beads of sweet poison from her mouth.

Richie was nine and leaned his dusty hair against his sister's chest, listening to the squiggling noises from her stomach. Sunshine winked off the hot pane above the sink, whipped across the faucet, knifed through and splashed against the fridge. Their father had shot a deer the week before as if anticipating his departure and half its carcass, bloody and wild, slumped behind the door, blocking the fruit pops and ice chunks, its flanks veiled in ice crystals.

“It’s a good day today,” Richie murmured.

“Why?” Allie asked, loudly. They both blinked and stared hard at their mother, but she only gripped the mug of Simpatico tighter, her lips trembling. She seemed as delicate as the silk strings of a spider web. She couldn’t be saved and the night before had even yelled that she goddamned didn't want to be, smashing her fist into the jewelry box so baubles sprayed like blood.

“Why is today a good day?” Richie repeated to himself. He sat up taller and knitted his pale fingers into mesh. “I don’t know. Maybe our father will come home.” They stared at the empty driveway, which sprawled as long and gravelly as a smoker’s rasp. A heavy silence descended. Howie, at six, wore cotton socks stained yellow and appeared from the doorway of their bedroom, his eyes puffed and white and shocked. He perhaps missed their father most,
sucking his fist, standing out front and searching the ends of the property just as their father often did with the cross-hairs of his rifle, steadying before pulling the trigger. Their father had been gone before but not this long, and normally when he was, he sent paper bags of food for delivery from the grocery store or a taxi to take them to school. Was he in Selma? Stotts? Corte Madera? What was keeping him: something uncontrollable or his own unwillingness to return? Did it matter?

Howie slid up beside Allie, and the three of them peered at their mother, curious and startled yet somehow not surprised. She did seem beautiful, perched on her stool like a bird of paradise within its metal cage.

Their mother hadn’t fed them all day, and Howie’s stomach erupted into a rumble. Allie gulped a breath and stood slowly, creeping into the kitchen. She was driven by the hunger in her brothers’ eyes, the twisting-knife sensation of her own emptiness, and the electrifying feeling in the soles of her feet as she stepped into the forbidden battle grounds of her mother’s sadness. If their mother noticed Allie, she did not show it.

Allie found sausages at the back of an otherwise empty fridge drawer and sniffed them; their smell was strange, but she dumped the links into a pan anyway, their oils hissing and popping. Richie and Howie gawped from the doorway, charmed by the smell of cooking food. They’d managed to reach a few popsicles so far that day, key lime, strawberry, and apple, and ate them under the mossy back porch in secret, the bright melty drops landing among the rotting leaves. But it was nearing eight o’clock. Allie rolled the sausages with her fingertips and wondered at her new red welts.

Her mother wasn’t always so depressed. Sometimes she was brighter, but like a dying light bulb, she winked on and off. On her better days, she combed her hair, cooked them breakfast, and laughed a little, even if the laughter was brittle and fell in shards of broken glass on the room. But their father had been gone for five days, and ever since he left – after a flurry of punches and threats – she’d flickered and burned out. The food dwindled. The milk spoiled. The house grew chilly.

“Can she hear us?” Howie whispered, sneaking up behind Allie. He frowned at his mother and gripped the sink.

“I don’t know,” Allie said. “Mother–mother–” she shrugged and took the sausages out of the pan, still sizzling in their own fat, and patted them down with a paper towel. There were thirteen in all. She gave five to each brother and three to herself. They squatted on the floor and devoured the meat like animals, their chins and cheeks and fingers coated in a slick layer of grease. Richie grinned around the meat.

Suddenly their mother stirred, as if shaken from deep prayer. “Guys?” she said, almost a squeak. “You didn’t–”

“We thought you weren’t hungry,” Richie said quickly. “There are ice pops in the freezer.”

Their mother’s lips shook. She poured herself Jack Daniels mixed with a Bailey and slipped into the bedroom, her back arched like a cat.

That night, despite the sausages, Allie was still hungry. She dug her fist into her chest to act as food while she dreamt of it: an entire feasting table with a red silk runner and white candles, a massive dish of chicken with golden crackling skin, potatoes steaming in rich gravy, and biscuits so soft they melted.
On the sixth day, hunger chewed at Howie. He dug in the closet and found a fishing pole made from flimsy bamboo with a line tangled in several spots. There was an icy creek unspooling in the backyard with occasional catfish or salmon, surrounded by firs and oaks and elms that rose up into the smeary blue sky.

He raced out into the backyard with the pole carving a line through the dirt. Allie was stretched out in a panel of sun, sucking a rectangle of mint gum to make it last. Earlier that day she'd snatched her father's gun, clean and polished, from its glass case after busting through the paneling with her fragile shoulder. She could hardly aim it, but if worse came to worst, she could probably kill a rabbit or squirrel. Now she hefted it anxiously, touching the rim of the hole as if touching the teeth of something venomous.

“Allie!” he shouted eagerly.

“What, Howard?” she snapped. He blushed and stared at his feet; she only called him Howard when her temper was short.

“I found a fishing pole. We don’t have no food left, and I thought we could go fishing, maybe catch something to eat tonight. Something for her.” He pointed to the house, to their mother. They’d left her that morning with coffee and a ratty bathrobe, her hair in tumbleweed tangles. Allie had knelt behind her with a wet comb and tried desperately to tease it free, but nothing worked; her mother began to wince and cry, and Allie left her quickly.

“Okay,” Allie said. “Put on your rubber boots and get Richie from the cellar. I think he’s in there again. I’ll be right back.” She stood and wobbled into the house, her legs shaking from suddenly being used, and found her mother on the couch in the living room cradling a rum-and-Coke, her lips quivering. Her face was crusty with a mixture of tears, sweat, and snot. Allie fought the urge to recoil.

“Hi,” Allie said.

Her mother gazed at her through thin, sparse eyelashes. “Where is your father?” she murmured. “I saw him last night.”

“You did?” Allie said, heart leaping. She stepped closer and accidentally swallowed the gum.

“Yes, he was perched outside on one of those pine tree branches. Then he sprouted wings, black feathery raven ones, and flapped up into the sky and stirred up the cornfields and broke the stalks. I called and called for him.” She shook her head sadly.

“Are you sure it wasn’t a dream?” Allie said carefully.

Her mother took a suck on the rum-and-Coke. “It was not a dream, Allison. I shouted for him this morning. All his things are gone – what do you think that means?”

“He left us a week ago,” Allie said. “Mother?”

Her mother frowned.

“Maybe you can drive me to the store today, and I can buy some food. Some ground beef, some vegetables. I can make us a stew tomorrow. How does that sound?”

“It sounds lovely,” her mother said dreamily.

“So can you drive me?” Allie asked, her hopes rising into her thin throat. She spotted her brothers through the window, spraying dew with their rubber boots and giggling, swinging the pole about in a game of swords.

“Drive you...?”
“Mother, I need you to drive me,” Allie said. She got on her knees and felt a punch of uselessness, a clawing hopelessness at her stomach. She clasped her hands and squeezed her eyes and pleaded. “We need food; we need food! Please!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Where am I? Who...?” her mother said frantically. She drained the alcohol and whimpered, a shadowy groove forming between her two icy eyes. She was an apparition, a ghost on the couch, or a baby, wrapped in a yarn blanket and shivering. Allie swallowed and swiveled sharply to the kitchen.

Within the cabinet there were many glass bottles and tin cans. She shoved them aside. Jack Daniels, cheap beer, spirits, rums, gins, Bud Light, holiday schnapps merrily decorated with jingle bells. Sunlight nicked off the bottles. She stroked the neck of one and then looked back out the window, at the driveway spread like a rattlesnake sunning itself, and squinted for the car, for the smudged-tear shape of her father. No luck.

She poured each bottle down the drain of the sink; each disappeared in gushes of amber.

At the stream, Howie and Allie dug like animals for worms, raking aside the rich mud with able fingers and removing the wetly squirming things. The worms felt warm and moist, similar to cat mews.

Richie then impaled the chocolate worms on a rusty hook and lowered them into the stream, drowning them among racing twigs, chips of ice, and snail-peppered algae. He smiled gleefully and swung his legs. “She’ll be so happy when we catch a salmon or catfish,” he said.

“We won’t catch no salmon or catfish,” Howie said happily. “We’ll catch a hundred!”

Allie gazed at her brothers, red-faced, their freckles reminding her of city dots on a map. They were beautiful with an unquenchable thirst, though not their mother’s type; it was a thirst to please her, to bring back the smile that had so long ago bobbed away, disappearing downstream with her sanity and their father’s fidelity. Allie cursed under her breath and found another worm, yanking it out with such force that it ripped in half.

“I had a remembery,” Howie said, his fingers puckered with cold. He watched the gentle wipe of smoke rising from houses nearby above the shimmering pine needles. Smoke represented warmth and safety and nourishment. Allie cursed again. She felt increasingly bitter each day, less and less childlike, a girl draped with responsibility as a house is laden with snow before the roof sags and collapses.

“What?” Richie asked. He jerked on the line; a fish had stolen the bait. Allie passed him the half worm and he swiftly stabbed it and dropped the line back into the water. “Oh I wish...I was a catfish...” he sang to himself.

“I remembered about one time our mother drove me into town and bought me a huge strip of saltwater taffy and let me eat it all underneath this big tree, and she kissed my head and smelled clean...” Howie smiled and dug deeper, his nails stained with strips of deep brown from the mud. “I was so little then.”

Richie nodded. “One time she took me outside and showed me a constellation. You know I have the Big Dipper on my arm?” He pointed to the shape below his shoulder.

It made sense to Allie that her brothers would be mirrors of the universe, as if God had stitched the ebony night into two beautiful children, leaving the stars blinking from their skin.
She loved them fiercely and painfully; a new, fresh, and bewildering hate for her mother stemmed from this love. She glared through the trees to her house and ground her teeth.

“What about you?” Richie asked. The stream sucked below them, shushing past moss and twigs and tender water weeds, and the trees chided from above, the branches brushing against each other.

“Me?” Allie asked. “I don’t have any good memories.”

Richie frowned through his cinnamon hair. “Yes, you do,” he said softly, so poignantly that Allie buckled and began to cry, gazing up through her tears at the branches and sky, at the charcoaled smoke, breathing raggedly, hugging her knees.

A memory lodged in her throat and choked her until she had to spit it out. “Mother took me swimming once, at a pool with concrete sides. I bashed my head against a wall after I went off the diving board, and she jumped in and saved me, even with my blood coming out like scribbles. She saved me there, and both of us were streaming water—” Allie swallowed and cried again, her body racked. Her mother started drinking shortly after that day, first watery beer, then stronger and stronger until it seemed she urinated Jack Daniels, she sweat bourbon, she cried Budweiser. She screamed in the night about people no one knew: a blond baby called Tootsie, a past lover with a body as smooth as a pear, a novel character. She stopped brushing her hair. She tuck her laughter away like a bird’s egg in the nest of her tangled mind. Their father retreated, a nervous animal with wild red eyes, and the fights erupted, loud and white-hot-blinding, splitting the house with their light. Just the week before her father had come home sleepy and doe-eyed after a night with a mistress, and their mother had screamed, sobbing, hurling a shoe at his head. He packed a corduroy suitcase and left suddenly in the night, no dry kisses, no rustling goodbyes, just the dry slam of a door, the rustle and crunch of tires on gravel. Allie watched him go through a parted curtain. She heard her mother weeping from the barstool, just a ghost of her former self.

Allie stood and wiped her nose quickly, smearing her tears off of her chapped cheeks. She put her hand on Richie’s neck and rubbed. She did not know it then, but in the coming days food would arrive in sheepish paper bags, tomatoes and hunks of ground meat and cups of fruit drowning in syrup and a cake that was shake-and-bake. A letter, a snatch of a phone message left on the machine, money for the heating bill in a purple envelope—no father, but salvation all the same.

But for that moment, in the woods by the stream, Allie felt darkness clutching at her, and a flutter of need, of being pressed upon, and a new fiery-fierce determination lit beneath her and fueled her. She gazed down at her brothers and swallowed and spoke.

“Let’s go home. There are no fish. We’ll be okay. I’ll feed you with something. I will cook that damn deer.”

Her eyes held a flash of light that told her brothers she meant what she told them, and they scrambled to their feet, baffled yet trusting, and through the thick forest followed her home.
Homeschooling: An Alternative for Americans
by John Terschluse
Chaminade College Prep School

The Scripps-Howard News Service’s National Spelling Bee features the very best young minds from across America. Every year, the nation marvels at the participants’ intellect, dedication, and willpower to learn spelling rules, master linguistic patterns, and develop a strict discipline. In 2000, three kids, George Abraham Thampy, Sean Conley, and Alison Miller finished first, second, and third, respectively. They all share many similarities, including their ages and dedication. These three prodigies stand out among the other contestants, though, not because of how they acted at the competition or how they utilized different strategies to spell daunting words. In fact, the three resembled any normal teenager. However, unlike their counterparts, Thampy, Conley, and Miller did not learn in a traditional school. That is, they are homeschooled by their parents, every month, week, and day of the year, distant from the auspices of public or private schools and outside influences. Surprisingly, despite a much larger turnout for their traditionally educated peers, homeschooled students accounted for nearly twelve percent of the finalists. Indeed, homeschooled students are a formidable force that continues to challenge misconceptions, even if they are at a numerical disadvantage at competitions and on the national level.

But Thampy, Conley, and Miller are not alone. The National Merit Scholarship Corporation announced the multitude of 2011 National Merit Scholarship winners, who, to win, had to score highly on standardized tests. In the city of St. Louis, Missouri, the list featured two homeschooled students, Connor Perkins and Mark Baehr, out of the twenty-four local winners. Their achievements prove that homeschooling can give children opportunities for success outside of the home, just as traditionally educated students can earn success outside of the school. As a larger group, homeschooling enjoys over one and a half million adherents from all across the nation, stretching from Hawaii to the northern limits of Maine. The movement grows by an average of ten to fifteen percent each year, a frightening fact for public and private schools alike (Lines 1). While there may be more National Merit Scholarship winners or Scripps National Spelling Bee winners educated in traditional schools, the success of the homeschooled individuals emphasizes that homeschooling has become an effective alternative to traditional schools for an increasingly large number of students in the United States, a number that continues to grow.

Indeed, as the homeschooling movement flourishes, the question arises as to their motives for leaving traditional schools and taking the responsibility of education away from teachers. Such a large number of homeschoolers today indicates the willingness of many to abandon traditional schools for their private homes. As homeschooling is no easy feat, adopting the responsibility of education can be an extremely stressful and tiring endeavor, especially for mothers. Imagine a stay-at-home mother who has a workload independent of her children’s education but decides to assume a whole new duty, to solely educate her children without those educated to do so at traditional schools. Even as homeschooling may seem unnecessarily daunting, the factors that cause over one and a half million families to educate their own children exist and are as prevalent as ever.
While there are not many comprehensive surveys of why homeschooling families leave the public school system, there is a general consensus among them that traditional schools are failing for a number of reasons. A survey conducted by a reputable educational magazine, *Education*, found that most Americans give their schools “C” ratings, on a scale of “A” being the absolute best and “F” being the absolute worst (Howell, West, and Peterson 1). While “C” is not a failing rating, mediocrity is not acceptable. Homeschooling is not a foreign entity to Americans. In fact, during colonial times, most wealthy families educated their children through private tutors. Homeschooling was a necessity then, but today most families choose to leave the formal school environment in favor of a more controlled atmosphere at home. For instance, according to a 2000 study of homeschooling families, forty-two percent decided to leave public schools due to “dissatisfaction with the public school environment--especially safety, drugs, and adverse peer pressure” (Lines 1). Bruce Mitchell and Robert Salsbury, experts on education, add, “Consequently, more and more parents are turning to either private schools or home schooling as an alternative to public schools, which are often perceived as ‘dangerous’” (105). If families leave public schools due to the pressures of drugs, safety, and peer pressure, then homeschooling beckons as an alternative. Considering the horrible shootings at Columbine High School and several other schools, homeschooling seems to be a protective covering that parents can use to shield their children from corrupting influences. They could directly control their child’s habits and lifestyle, particularly by preventing the usage of drugs and other intoxicants. The student also does not need to worry about peer pressure, because the only peers involved in his education are potentially his siblings, who are much more likely to playfully quarrel than to pressure one another.

On the contrary, many criticize homeschooling as an institution which prevents children from being fully active in society. Critics explain that homeschooling prevents the socialization of its students and prevents full participation as citizens, even stating its students are undemocratic. This criticism rests on the stereotype that homeschoolers have isolationist and antisocial tendencies. Many people incorrectly state that homeschoolers educate their children outside of formal education due to religious reasons, as if they were fundamentalist cults. However, only twenty-seven percent of families homeschool because of religious reasons, trailing behind other reasons such as social pressures and the public school environment. Stereotypes still linger from the mid to late twentieth century when a few cultish and isolationist families gave homeschooling a bad name. However, as a recent article from *The Washington Times* reports, “In all areas in life, from gaining employment, to being satisfied with their home-schooling, to participating in community activities, to voting, home-schoolers were more active and involved than their public school counterparts” (“Socialization” 1). Many homeschoolers even form groups with other homeschooling families, often planning field trips, lectures, and even parties with public school students, in turn challenging this antisocial stereotype.

Some critics also say that homeschoolers are undemocratic. Not only do homeschoolers vote, but they also sponsor a legal defense fund called the Home School Legal Defense Association. If one considers democracy to be indicative of freedom and liberty, then homeschooling fits those characteristics, as it seeks to individually educate the student on the family level, contrary to what homeschooling families see as the suffocating atmosphere of formal schooling. In essence, the claims that homeschooling creates social miscreants and
recluses is false, even considering that many social miscreants and recluses come from private and public schools alike.

In keeping with those criticisms of seclusion and isolation, many say homeschooling undermines the traditional schooling system and society at large. Chris Lubinski, a critic of homeschooling, explains, “I agree that, in addition to its private benefits, education is a public good, and thus the public has an interest in how it is provided” (Lubinski 207). Many experts see this issue, the regulation of schooling, as the heart of the matter. Should families be able to teach their children anything, or for that matter, implement a curriculum of their choosing and not face accountability on the governmental level? Considering that many homeschooling families actually left public schools because of a failing system constantly under the watch of regulatory committees, government interference would be the last thing they would want. While families can home school and teach their children any philosophy, most critics fail to realize that most families in the traditional schooling system can already mold their child’s ideas anyway. The call for more regulation often rests on the stereotype that homeschooling forces religious and antisocial ideas down the throats of its students. The call for more regulation focuses on the people involved in homeschooling, applying stereotypes to them before actually analyzing the success of their educational methods.

However, some regulation may be needed, as Robin West warns against the harms of unregulated homeschooling, “If you want to teach them from nothing but the Bible, you can. If they want to skateboard all day, and you choose to let them, you can.” (Robin West 7). Many states already regulate homeschooling to some degree, whether this is textbook selection or standardized testing “check-ups.” A respectful compromise now exists. At one end of the spectrum lies homeschooling, with parents completely affecting the development of their children, and at the other end lies traditional schooling, with government, whether local or on the federal level, regulating the content of curricula through textbooks. The regulation of homeschooling synthesizes both perspectives, allowing parents to be the teachers but also allowing the local government to ensure children are meeting the same standards as their traditionally educated peers. If a family chooses to home school, it will encounter a respectful amount of regulation that balances education as both a private good and a public good.

Furthermore, many families started homeschooling their children in order to leave what they saw as an insufficient, inadequate, or detrimental curriculum for their children. According to a recent poll of homeschooling families, sixteen percent left public schools owing to their “dissatisfaction with public school instruction” (Lines 1). Homeschooling parents may have been upset with a series of poor individual teachers or even the overall curriculum. As evidenced by the recent debates over teacher pay and teachers unions, much attention has been taken away from students. Consider the recent struggles at the Texas Board of Education over textbook content. The people attending the meetings petitioned the board to fit into the textbooks hundreds of different references to cultural events that really are not applicable to textbook history. The schools, in this case, were more concerned about political correctness than the pure educational content of their curricula. Homeschooling parents do not have to deal with issues like these, as they have considerable freedom in choosing their own curricula. Many companies, most notably Homeschooling Books, offer families myriad choices in their textbook choices, ranging from accelerated courses to lessons centered on the Bible.
Homeschoolers have the final say in what their child learns and how they learn it. It is this flexibility that draws so many people to homeschooling.

As such, homeschooling families have an incredible degree of flexibility and independence. Families can have a regimented schedule, with set times and places for the home to become a school. Nonetheless, if events come up, or emergencies arise, families can fit education into the schedule at their preference, not according to some formal school schedules with strict start and stop times. The flexibility of home schooling works well with gifted students, whose parents often take them out of schools that do not offer gifted programs. Homeschoolers often criticize traditional schools for applying a “one size fits all” approach to students that does not acknowledge individual skills and needs. An article from the Roeper Review, a publication centered on modern education, states, “In a global world, one-size-fits-all schools fail to provide differentiated experiences for students with diverse needs and abilities” (“Innovative” 1). While some public schools feature reputable special education programs, homeschooling offers the highest possibility of individual attention, as parents can be flexible in their approach to their children.

In traditional schools, where conformity governs schedules, classes, and curricula, the individual will becomes consumed by the will of the community. That is, what the school sees as best for the student body becomes policy. But many students can be negatively impacted by policies aimed at the average student. The multitude of gifted students suffers the most from those policies. Based on the principles of homeschooling, parents can adjust the curriculum to meet the individual student’s needs without having to accommodate the needs of a large class. If the student needs harder work, the parent can give them harder work. Likewise, if the student needs easier work and more instruction, the parent can adjust for that need.

While homeschooling appears to be a panacea, it is not a suitable option for many Americans. Just as families can choose to homeschool, families who do not homeschool do so for good reasons. The major roadblock to homeschooling is its economic demands. As such, when a family decides to homeschool their children, one parent must choose not to work or work much less time and, therefore, give up potential income. Today, especially in such an economic downturn, many Americans cannot choose to give up that income, so homeschooling becomes an unrealistic proposition. In addition, the costs to homeschool can be intimidating. Homeschooling families must still pay property taxes towards their area public schools. But homeschoolers must also pay for their own materials, including textbooks and supplies that traditional schools would provide. In essence, homeschooling families face a financial liability that many Americans simply cannot justify.

Moreover, while homeschooling has its benefits and liabilities, the outcome of its students deserves acknowledgment and analysis. If one considers standardized test scores as indicators of academic success, then homeschooling is a credible institution. Homeschoolers have gained the reputation as high achievers on the SAT and ACT standardized tests. For example, in an article from a news analysis journal titled Insight on the News, Andrea Billups explains, “Homeschooled students have scored higher than their traditionally educated peers on the American College Test, or ACT, one of the nation’s two major college entrance exams, for the third consecutive year. While the average ACT assessment score (on a scale from 1 to 36) was 21 nationally, home-educated students averaged 22.8” (Billups 1). The increasing
success of homeschooled students on these standardized tests brings some credibility to the
homeschooling movement, challenging criticisms of incompetence and ineffectiveness.
Likewise, homeschooling has produced many famous individuals, including Venus and Serena
Williams, Abraham Lincoln, and Albert Einstein. Eighteen of fifty delegates to the
Constitutional Convention of 1787 were homeschooled. Modern homeschooled students
include Colonel Harland Sanders and Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor.
Homeschooling as an institution can benefit humanity, producing individuals who can
participate fully in society with confidence and even represent America on the world stage. The
issue for discussion here is not what type of schooling is better than the other, but that
homeschooling can produce similar results even with different educational methods.

In addition, Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of the most respected American authors and
renowned education expert, extolled the virtues of a teacher who respects the individual pupil
in his essay, On Education. According to Emerson, these teachers must also accommodate the
student and refrain from interfering with nature's laws, which manifest in the soul. Now,
extending the meaning to modern day, Emerson's philosophy would nod to homeschooling, as
individual parents can foster a personalized education for the individual student. Commenting
on traditional schools, Emerson states, “You have to work for large classes instead of
individuals; you must lower your flag and reef your sails to wait for the dull sailors; you grow
departmental, routinary, military, almost with your discipline and college police” (Emerson
105). Indeed, at traditional schools teachers must attend to different students, some gifted and
some less academically developed than others. Homeschooling allows parents to slow down
on tougher topics and increase the difficulty on easier subjects. In turn, parents can create a
highly personalized lesson plan for their children, just as Emerson emphasizes the individual
pupil.

The values of independence, liberty, and freedom define homeschooling as an
institution of choice and personalized education based on whatever the family thinks is best for
their particular situation. This freedom extends to flexibility for families so that they can juggle
between the home as a family-unit and as a school. While there are not as defined boundaries
between home and school, homeschooling prepares students for life beyond the home. As
Michelle Wichers, reviewing a peer's work in the journal, Education, explains, “His research has
challenged the author to reconsider beliefs that homeschooled students were disadvantaged,
and inadequately educated to compete and achieve academically as compared to traditional
schooled students” (Wichers 1). Homeschooled students continue to defy the stereotypes, as
many accept the same diploma as their traditionally educated peers at college graduation. The
qualities Emerson mentions give homeschooling the power to be an effective alternative for
many American families.

In conclusion, homeschooling has become a potent alternative to traditional schools for
an increasingly large number of students in the United States. Its flexibility allows families to
build a customized curriculum and hone in on specific subject areas. Even though many critics
condemn the supposed antisocial tendencies of homeschooling, its students actually
participate in many social and community events. Homeschooling families feel very strongly
about this issue, so much so that most belong to the Home School Legal Defense Association,
an organization that aims to protect the rights of parents to choose their method of education.
The organization assisted in the pivotal Supreme Court case, Wisconsin v. Yoder, which
protected the rights of Amish parents to keep their children out of public schools and to educate by their own means. The case set the precedent for the future of homeschooling, not just as an alternative, but as an integral American institution protected under the Constitution. In later cases, homeschooling’s values of freedom and independence gained a victory when the Supreme Court ruled that states could not stipulate how families met educational standards. With over one and a half million followers, homeschooling stands as a growing institution in America. But homeschooling is more than just an institution; it is a link between parent and child. Good hearted parents will instill in their children moral values that may not be found in traditional schools. As Mahatma Gandhi once said, "There is no school equal to a decent home and no teacher equal to a virtuous parent."

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Technology in the Classroom: What Schools Should Consider

Today's revolutionary movements not only begin on the streets of countries like Egypt and Libya, but also in everyday classrooms, where schools promote new technology over the age-old institution of pen and paper. Children grow up with technology; they learn about the internet, television, and cell phones alongside the alphabet and nursery rhymes. Schools and society at large regard technology to be a natural supplement to a student's education. In turn, the face of education continues to change; the effects of the quantity and the quality of
information deserve analysis. Technology, primarily the computer and the internet, facilitates the broadcasting of information in never before seen quantities, but the quality of this information, nonetheless, poses questions about technology’s effect on education. Schools need to consider important factors before using technology in curriculum and instruction. Kevin Delaney calls the new class of innovative educators “pioneering teachers” (Delaney), but David Rotstein acknowledges they are “taking risks” (Rotstein). Technology has benefits, but it also presents hazards to a student’s education. Granted, the internet opens up a student’s horizons, but if schools do not equip their students to evaluate the information acquired from the internet, then that information is ineffective. Moreover, technology aims to encourage a student’s creativity, but technology also poses threats to that same creativity. More troubling, however, is the fact that technology can be abused by both teachers and students.

To begin, the internet offers a wide array of resources to students, but if schools do not prepare their students to analyze information from the internet, then that information is ineffective. The problem, at the center, does not revolve around the amount or availability of information, as 1.9 billion people use the internet daily, but rather what students do with the information. David Gelernter, a writer for Time magazine, equates the unpreparedness of students to handle the internet with swimming, “It's as if the Administration were announcing that every child have the fanciest scuba gear on the market – but these kids don’t know how to swim,” and when they don’t know how to swim, or handle the internet’s information, he adds, “they’ll drown” (Gelernter). For instance, consider the website Wikipedia, one of the most popular online encyclopedias to date. The website contains over one million articles, but a disturbing fact remains: the articles are written and edited by the public, at any time and from anywhere. Schools need to consider that the internet, despite its wide availability of information, contains information of questionable quality.

Students, without a school’s instruction, from my experience, will blindly accept Wikipedia’s information without evaluating sources and its crucial footnotes. In turn, students write essays and create presentations with incorrect or faulty information. Had these students been taught to evaluate what information is admissible or unreliable, the daunting problem of websites like Wikipedia would be curbed. To achieve these ends, many schools, such as Chaminade in St. Louis, Missouri, instruct students to make annotated bibliographies, documents that summarize pages and evaluate sources. Students, with these worksheets, can then analyze websites and improve upon their research, rather than accepting what the internet offers as proven dogma. Schools need not be discouraged to offer internet access; offering students more resources is a school’s duty. However, despite the internet’s benefits, schools need to consider educational programs that teach students how to use the internet’s information, or else, as Gelernter says, “they’ll drown.”

Furthermore, technology aims to promote a student’s creativity, but schools must evaluate whether technology actually supports or diminishes creativity. School art and communications programs involve technologies, such as cameras, laptops, sophisticated software, and internet resources. An art student can take pictures of an outdoor scene and then create a visually stimulating collage on paper. A computer science student can wirelessly connect his laptop via Bluetooth technology so he can show his class a new computer model. Even elementary classrooms have SmartBoards which students can draw on and use for artistic ends. Computers increase the quantity of creative opportunities and at the same time
allow students to enhance the quality of the creative process. However, schools must also consider technology’s detriments to creativity.

Some technology-reluctant adults say typing on a computer instead of writing on paper encourages students to be automatons, merely typing away until length or word count requirements have been met, hence suffocating the creative process. Steven Johnson, a prominent New York author, explains that typing instead of writing would seem to transform his writing “circuits” into machines. But, rather, he says, “When I was young that circuit was completed by tools of ink and paper; today it belongs to the zeroes and ones. The basic shape of the circuit is unchanged” (Johnson). Indeed, schools need not be afraid to offer technology in response to fears of suffocating creativity. In fact, technology presents new outlets for creativity. Computer programs like Photoshop allow student artists to create appealing virtual images, and some argue these images are more appealing than images created on paper. In essence, while technology has few detriments to a student’s creativity, schools should still consider technology’s effects on the creative process when forming curricula.

Lastly, despite technology’s benefits to education, there remains the opportunity for students and teachers to abuse technology’s resources. Technology opens up an entire world of information to students, but this world is riddled with dangers. For instance, Kevin Delaney, a journalist for the Wall Street Journal, says, “…educators are beginning to interact with students, parents, and each other in ways they never have before” (Delaney). At Chaminade, in St. Louis, teachers often illustrate this interaction by engaging in class activities on laptops. However, while the activity has a beneficial purpose, students often play games or do not pay attention when they should be participating in class. Teachers, unfortunately, do not always have the resources to notice a student’s in-class delinquency. If they are to implement technology effectively, schools need to consider instituting policies or programs that discourage or even inhibit technology’s distractions.

In addition, more serious problems accompany technology, and schools must consider them. Recent news reports detail the “sexting” craze in which students send each other inappropriate images via text messaging. In some cases, though rare, teachers even acquired student cell phone numbers and participated in this “sexting.” Some students, when given internet access, use the internet for immoral purposes. Schools must also consider the threat of cheating. For instance, with the internet’s wide collection of essays, students can easily fall into the trap that is plagiarism. Websites, such as Turnitin.com which scans all submitted documents for copied work, combat cheating and plagiarism. With the great availability of information comes the opportunity to distort that information’s quality. Essentially, while technology expands a classroom’s resources, schools need to consider that abuses of technology, such as inappropriateness and cheating, can occur.

In conclusion, before implementing technology in the classroom, schools need to consider the possible effects it may have on students, including effects such as cheating and other abuses. Technology, while aiming to support creativity, may stifle creativity, even though this is a rather weak argument. Moreover, if schools do not prepare students to evaluate the internet’s information, then that information is ineffective. While technology’s effects on education have been discussed, the question arises of how technology affects the personality of a student. In a cartoon from a Mexican newspaper, Angel Boligan shows that technology estranges and isolates students, plunging them into a state of darkness, or
ignorance (Boligan). Now, education aims to bring students out of ignorance to a state of enlightenment. This is an interesting paradox. While schools implement technology with hopes to benefit education, technology can actually have the opposite effects. So, technology can have negative or positive effects on a person’s intellect. Technology’s benefits or detriments will all depend on its implementation, whether or not schools will be enlightened institutions that advance education with technology or superficial institutions that irresponsibly treat education and technology as equals.

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Writing Portfolio

Heart of Darkness: More than a Journey into the Jungle

Heart of Darkness, by Joseph Conrad, details the retelling of a journey, a quest of sorts into the deep, mysterious jungles of Africa. Throughout the novel, Marlow, a contemplative and insightful character, retells the story of his time as a sea captain employed by a trading company. Traversing the strange landscapes of jungles, rivers, and native villages, Marlow becomes perplexed at the darkness, chaos, and absurdity of the occurrences around him. He learns of Kurtz, the all-important ivory trader, who inspires mystery and rumor among the story’s characters. Through Marlow’s retelling of his journeys, the word “darkness” assumes a significant meaning, the word comes to represent the profound and unfathomable nature of humankind, its antisocial impulses, evidenced by the horrid atrocities provoked by economic imperialism, and its ultimate connection to malice and iniquity. As such, the issues discussed by Conrad in his novella can be analyzed through the teachings of two major philosophers, Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx.

Freud’s teachings centered on the theories of psychoanalysis, that the human conscience could be analyzed and divided into several parts, including the ego and the unconscious, in which the ego suppresses certain antisocial behaviors into the chaotic unconscious. Freudian theories place great emphasis on past experience, as the ego suppresses behaviors that during one’s childhood were scolded. Marx, on the other hand,
discusses the relationship between the subject and object of experience, humans and the world around them. To Marx, outside factors, especially economic factors, shaped the human conscience, according to “dialectical materialism” in which the battles between opposites, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, emphasize the constant change of matter. In relation to *Heart of Darkness*, Karl Marx’s philosophy of dialectical materialism applies to the imperialistic actions of the European colonizers, whereas Sigmund Freud’s ideas about the human consciousness pertain to both Marlow’s dreamlike retelling of his journeys and the absurdity of human action.

To begin, Sigmund Freud’s philosophy concerning the human conscious corresponds to the absurd, chaotic jungle and human behavior described in *Heart of Darkness*. As Freud emphasizes the meaning of dreams and past experience’s effects on the conscious, Marlow recalls his journeys and experiences in vivid detail, almost as if they were a dream. One of these experiences involves a map, which serves as a premonition for the reader. Explaining with distinct imagery, Marlow states, “True, by this time it was not a blank space any more. It had got filled since my boyhood with rivers and lakes and names. It had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery...It had become a place of darkness” (Conrad 10). This retelling of events corresponds with Freud’s theories on repressed childhood memories that form a person’s behavior, or in this case, haunt Marlow. This memory, that resides in Marlow’s subconscious, discusses darkness, which serves to symbolize the deep and profound mystery found in that same subconscious. Likewise, the unconscious serves to symbolize absurdity and irrationality, as it is where the animal impulses of humans reside. Marlow acknowledges this irrationality throughout his journeys, particularly with the jungle and the natives. While on a French gunboat, Marlow describes the jungle and the ship’s cannon firing into the jungle, stating, “In the empty immensity of earth, sky, and water, there she was, incomprehensible, firing into a continent” (22). This occurrence, together with the dark, animal characteristics of the natives, embodies darkness, the antisocial, absurd, and irrational behaviors of humans. It is no mistake the reader feels a sense of confusion and suspicion; in fact, the ego tells humans to be suspicious of those behaviors, which can be found in the unconscious. In essence, Sigmund Freud’s theories concerning psychoanalysis and repressed memories pertain directly to the theme of darkness in Conrad’s novella.

Furthermore, Karl Marx’s principle of dialectic materialism, particularly its attention to economic factors as a catalyst for human behavior, applies to the plot in *Heart of Darkness*. The end result of this dialectical materialism, according to Marx, will inevitably lead to socialism. Now, this struggle oscillates between the opposites, the bourgeoisie and the working class, otherwise known as the proletariat. Marx states economic factors shape human behavior, just as “The hand-mill gives a society with the feudal lord...” The novella often mentions Kurtz, a mysterious character who many, including Marlow, have a difficult time understanding. Kurtz works in the ivory section of the jungle, procuring the precious material for economic profit. Ivory, however, consumes the thoughts and behavior of those around Marlow, as Marlow explains, “The word ‘ivory’ rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed. You would think they were praying to it” (39). All in all, the Europeans exploit the African continent for economic profit. Humans are so motivated by the unconscious impulses for economic profit that they will disguise their efforts with a humanitarian veneer, a Freudian suppression of the unconscious by the ego. Moreover, Marx’s philosophy stresses the struggle between the poor, or the
proletariat, and the rich, or the bourgeoisie, a process otherwise known as dialectic materialism. Marx and his followers detested imperialism for both its economic exploitation and enslavement of native populations. They view imperialism as an extension of the upper class, another battle driven by economic motives. As *Heart of Darkness* discusses the darkening effects of imperialism, Marx’s ideas would support its negative look at the European colonizers. In essence, Marx’s ideas concerning dialectic materialism and economic effects on human behavior correspond to themes found in *Heart of Darkness*.

In conclusion, Sigmund Freud’s ideas about the unconscious and the ego, and Karl Marx’s dialectic materialism and discussions about economic impetuses all find meaning in Joseph Conrad’s novella, *Heart of Darkness*. The irrationality and absurdity of the occurrences in the novella reflect the suppression of the unconscious by the ego. Through the lens of Conrad’s storytelling, one can see the correlations between Freud’s analysis of childhood memories and Marlow’s retelling of his journeys into the African wilderness. In addition, Marx’s description of the battle between the working classes and the capitalists correlates to the economic nature of the novella, including the antipathy for Europe’s tentacles reaching into Africa. There is no surprise that the ideas of some of the greatest philosophers in Western thought and the plot of one of the greatest novels in Western literature can find similarities. Critics have rightly called Conrad’s novel one of the greatest in history, as it offers an analysis in narrative form of human nature. Interestingly, the Marxist analysis of the novel reappears with its take on ideology, a seemingly unavoidable element of human nature. As Marx explains, ideologies reinforce human action. Kurtz, the most mysterious of characters in the novel, is described as an “emissary of pity and science and progress” (41), even though Kurtz succumbs to the human impulses of economic profit and exploitation. In essence, while humans tend to write off their ideologies as noble and righteous, their real nature resides in an evil, wicked “heart of darkness.”

Works Cited

“You don’t have enough money to buy all of these clothes,” my mom said.
“But Mo-om! I only need 12 more dollars. Can’t I just pay you back later?” I pleaded.
“No way. You said that the last time we went shopping and you still haven’t paid me back,” Mom sighed. “Just take something back. We need to go back home so I can make dinner.”

I frowned and cried out, “Hold on! Just give me a few more minutes.” Jamie, a few racks away, nodded while browsing through the endless sea of shirts, skirts, and accessories.

“Fine,” Mom said. “I’ll go find some clothes for your brother.”

My mom, Jamie, and I were out on our annual back-to-school shopping trip. We were at Once Upon a Child, a small store with good quality but cheap clothes, as well as toys and shoes. It had a dark purple carpet and music that was barely audible was playing in the background. I came with only 60 dollars, but I kept finding the cutest clothes I’d ever seen. I needed them. I really needed them.

Jamie peered at my pile of clothes, forehead wrinkling in thought. Suddenly, her eyes brightened. “I’ll take that for you!” She pulled a light blue polo shirt from the stack and inspected it. “It’s so cute.”

“You can have it if you really want it,” I replied, smiling. After all, I needed to get some jeans. At my house, I only had two pairs left that still fit me. And in my mind, a girl without jeans is like a city without people. Crazy, right?

Picking up my huge tangle of sleeves, hangers, and shirt cuffs, I wandered off to the size 12 jeans. I dropped the clothes and immediately began browsing. The thing is, at Once Upon a Child, there are never any pairs of skinny jeans. But they sure do have everything else: straight, bell bottom, boot cut, you name it. Sighing, I surveyed my options. Guess I’ll have to wait until next year, I thought. Suddenly, a pair of dark blue jeans caught my attention. I stopped sifting through the items and fumbled around until I located the bright white tag. “Please be cheap, please be cheap,” I whispered to myself.

The tag, with a bland typewriter font, cried out, “Ab. Jeans, only $12.00!” It was like the jeans were beckoning to me, drawing me in with the idea of having my first pair of Abercrombie jeans. My heart flipped with joy. Now I really needed those 12 dollars.

“Jamie, come look at these jeans,” I whispered loudly.

“K,” she answered. She had a few items in her arms as well.
Her eyes dropped to the jeans, and she raised her eyebrows. “I love them!” she screeched into my ear like a banshee. “How much do they cost?”

“Only twelve dollars. And they’re Abercrombie,” I explained smugly.

“Really? But you don’t have enough money. Too bad, they’re adorable.”

“I’ll find a way to get the money. You’ll see,” I replied.

“Good luck with that,” Jamie said. “I’m going to keep looking.” She turned briskly and headed to the back of the store.
I plopped down onto the rough carpet floor, examining the jeans. They were dark and perfectly worn in, the bottoms poofing out perfectly, but not like I had stuffed two balloons down my pants. That would be weird.

A flash of green caught my eye, and I peered into the light pink floral pocket. “Wonder what that is,” I said to myself. Turning the pocket inside out, I flapped it around with my fingers. A few folded green bills fell out and onto the purple carpet. Is that… Money? Frantically, I unfolded the bills, and true enough, three faces of presidents stared out at me with melancholy faces. I counted them out loud. “Five dollars, five dollars, 10 dollars, and five more one dollar bills! Oh my gosh! “Jamie, I found some money in the jeans.” I picked the cash up and waved it around so she could see.

Jamie ran over, eyes full of excitement. She snatched the money out of my hands. “We should tell your mom,” she said.

“K, let’s go.” I ran over to the boys’ section, Jamie following closely behind me.

Mom was busy looking through army and camouflage pants, eyebrows furrowed in concentration. I snuck up behind her, eyes full of anticipation. Tapping her back lightly, I cried out, “Mom, guess what?”

Her focus broken, she turned around and asked, “What?”

“We found some money in these jeans I was looking at. Jamie, show her.” Jamie came forward and handed Mom the money. As she counted it out, her eyebrows raised higher and higher as she counted more money.

“Where did you get this?” she asked.

“I already told you. In the pockets of some jeans.”

“You should tell the workers before getting too excited.”

“They would have found the cash if they were paying attention,” I retorted.

Mom heaved a sigh. “Ok, you can keep the money. But how about you and Jamie splitting the money 50-50 and me keeping the change?” She suggested, grinning.

“But I found the money! Jamie was busy looking at shirts. Why should she get the money?”

“Well, if Jamie found 25 dollars and kept it for herself, wouldn’t you want to have a share?”

I nodded after a while, agreeing halfheartedly. “Ok. We can divide the money. I’ll still have enough to buy the jeans.”

“Great!” Mom handed each of us 12 bills and secured her own in her bulging black purse.

“So, can I buy the jeans? I have the money now. Jamie took one of my shirts for herself, and I can get rid of another. The jeans are sooo cute!”

“Let me see them.”

I led her to the jeans, still strewn on the floor, abandoned after I had dropped them to show Mom the money. They kind of perked up when I retrieved them and showed Mom the price tag. I stabbed it with my index finger for emphasis.

“See, Mom? Only 12 dollars. And they’re Abercrombie.”

“Those are pretty nice. But if it’s too good to be true, it’s probably not.” Still, she inspected the jeans, checking every side for holes, stains, etc. “Hm, nothing’s wrong.” She muttered and paused in thought. “Ok, you can get them. Now take something back, and we’ll go home.”
I took out a garish tank top with hearts smothered over it. It looked like the top was being suffocated. I didn’t even know how it had gotten into my pile when I had spent such a long time narrowing everything down. Even Sherlock Holmes wouldn’t have been able to solve that mystery.

I set it back on the hanger and put it back up where it was supposed to be. Well, I was pretty sure that was where the shirt should have been. Who cared? I had the jeans, and that was all that mattered.

I held up my precious dollar bills and kissed them. “Thank you money,” I whispered. “Thank you.”
Paper Fan

Their skin stretched uncomfortably over their fragile bones, leaving leathery tan hide with wrinkles set so deep their sweat pooled there. In their whicker rocking chairs, my grandparents dozed off into the heat of the summer. Dark skin reminded me of my mother, even though my skin was also that deep bronzy color. Like every other summer of my life, I had been dropped carelessly at my grandparents’ door step. Once school was over and my Mom’s work laid her off for the hot months, we would pack up our things and flee the scorching Arizona sun. Of course I was always left here, in the middle of nowhere, while my mom went with whoever her significant other might be at the time to a casino to spend away her hard work. I always imagined her wearing her bright orange cocktail dress and her stilettos, leaning over a velvety poker table and sipping on an exotic drink. Of course, I never asked about her adventures that usually left us without rent money for the first month of fall. It was better I didn’t know.

I stood in the doorway of the sunroom, fanning myself with a cheap paper fan. Being the only source of air on the entire ranch, it left my hand feeling numb due to the continuous motion. Beads of sweat raced down the back of my loose shirt and matted my dark black hair under my collar. Out the window I could see dust whipping the sides of the barns and the horse that stalked under the shade of the one lonely tree.

The reservation never changed. My grandparents had lived here their entire lives and resented my mother for leaving at eighteen, who went and got herself pregnant. Not that I should complain. I was born with all of the features of my mother’s heritage, but my father was definitely not Native American. The black hair, the dark skin, the brown eyes, it was all there just like my grandparents, cousins, and the entire reservation population. While you couldn’t tell I was only half Cherokee, I was still treated like a half Cherokee in my grandparents’ house. When the cousins came over, I was always last for everything. My grandmother never spoke to me. My grandfather used me as a farmhand, and I was never allowed into town. They were ashamed of me and never gave me a chance. I had dealt with it every summer for years. The sad part was I didn’t seem to mind it much anymore; dealing with prejudice was almost as familiar as tying my shoes.

I stepped outside, hoping that the wind that had been shaking the trees would cool me. My flip-flops smacked across the hot dirt, sending it up into the air and blinding me. I sauntered through the blistering sun, to the shade tree, where the horse was resting. It was a rare occasion to find her lying down, but I didn’t blame her; it was nearly one-hundred degrees outside. “Hey,” I whispered to her, reaching under the fence to pet her velvety nose. She was an old horse, much like everything on the ranch. Her thin brown hair was coated with foamy sweat and drool pooled out of her mouth, soaking up into the dry earth. She whinnied softly, as if begging me to turn down the heat. “I know,” I consoled her “I’m stuck here too.” Her dark eyes moved across my face, as if to try and understand my language. I walked over to her stale water basin, which looked fusty with mosquito larva and mud. “Yuck.” I frowned. With all of my
might, I pulled the basin across the dirt, feeling the uneven metal edges cutting into my skin. I tipped the bin over and watched as the dirt sucked up the water like a vacuum. After filling the basin, halfway, I pulled it all the way back to fence, where the horse waited appreciatively. I watched her drink slowly, lapping the water as the sun beat on her bare back. I paused for a moment to rub my sore hands, which were callused and cut from work on the ranch.

As the horse raised her head, I could hear the soft rumbling of an automobile down the road. With much hope bubbling in my stomach, I waved to the driver of the green pick-up truck. I hoped it was someone who would offer to take me into town or maybe the air-conditioning repairman. Whoever it was, I was going to greet the person with the best hospitality I could muster, for I would have someone new to pass the time with. I stood on my tip-toes. Maybe I would even have a chance to escape the dusty doldrums of the desolate ranch. The green truck passed the ranch, sending dirt into the sky.

A Ticket to Solitude

Airports made me miserable. It wasn’t because I was terrified of planes, or terrorists, I wasn’t even afraid of the bacterial infections that my mother had been murmuring about in her sleep for the last three days. I was miserable because of the last time I was in an airport.

I’d tripped and had fallen in a crowd of people. While everyone saw me, they just walked around me, like I was just a lonely piece of trash misplaced in a clean world. Airports were full of people with their own agendas, which is what made it so lonely for me. From my seat next to my mother on a bench, I could see a family with Disney t-shirts walking out of the building with suitcases. I could see a man in a military uniform, scanning the crowds, with a green duffel slung over his shoulder. A woman in black pumps talked on an expensive cell phone, with her designer suitcase perched by her cocked hip. It was depressing. I had no set agenda. I wasn’t the one who was getting on a plane, nor was I the one who was waiting on a plane to bring someone home. I was just sitting in the airport.

My mother sat with her hands folded neatly in her lap, her legs cross at the ankles, and her soft brown hair rolled up in her tight French twist. She was a germaphobe, though she denied it with every fiber of her being. Her psychiatrist had said this would be good for her, so I’d packed her in the car and taken her here.

“Can we leave now?” she asked politely. She wouldn’t look at me. She was determined to prove to me that she wasn’t crazy. I wanted to believe her.

“No Mom, just a few more minutes.” I looked at my watch. We’d been sitting for only ten minutes. It was fascinating to me how my mother had even made it this long. Her foot started trembling; it always started like that. She uncrossed her legs and pressed her shaking foot to the floor.

She turned to me, there was a tear hanging on the inside of her eye, “Please?” I took a deep breath. Part of me wanted to see my mom break down and go stark mad in the middle of the airport, but then again I was the only one in the airport that would peel her up off the pavement. I knew that from personal experience.

“Okay Mom.” I replied, discharging her from the torment I’d brought upon her. She stood up quickly, dusted off her skirt and made a brisk pace to the front door, leaving me to pick up her purse, which she’d left on the bench.
The ride home was silent, except for the sound of the baby wipes she’d snatched from the glove compartment, which she used liberally on her hands and face. Her pearl shaded make-up came off and her mascara smeared as she washed her face vigorously.

“I don’t like airports,” she whispered softly.

I took a deep breath, “Me either.” Her reason for not liking airports may have not been reasonable, but then again neither was mine. Maybe I was crazy too.

I let her open up her can of Progresso and heat it in the bleach white microwave in a glass bowl she’d scrubbed herself. Then she swept the living room six times before she watched her favorite movie, *Father of the Bride*, on our plastic covered couch. I sat next to her, wrapped in my scratchy horse blanket, while she watched the screen with a warm smile. I was tired of the movie, but when she watched the movie it reminded me of the way things were before the days of chemical cleaner and germ-X. I had one year before I would leave for college, and I knew that my mother couldn’t function on her own anymore. She couldn’t go to the gas station, the grocery store, or even the park. The only places that were “safe” to her were the vitamin store across town, the psychiatrist’s office in the bottom floor of the hospital in the middle of the city, and the little white church at the end of the street. I worried for her.

“Hey, Mom,” I whispered.

“Hmm?” she asked, sipping on the chai tea I’d brought her.

“I’m going to the grocery store, want anything?”

“Maybe some canned soup.” We had eight cans already, but I couldn’t tell which was which because she’d peeled the labels and washed the outside of the cans. “Okay Mom.” I nodded. I stood up and walked toward the door, with my car keys in hand.

“Don’t forget to take a shower when you get home.”

“Yeah,” I nodded.

I sat in the airport, alone this time. I thought about buying a ticket and flying out to see my dad. I thought about just leaving my mother at home. She would be fine for a while. I was tired of the same things over and over again. I wanted to go on vacations to the beach. I wanted to go to school without worrying if my mother had realized that I hadn’t taken my “germ-free” lunch she’d packed me and ate the corndog at school instead. With saddening thoughts suddenly rushing into my head, I started crying. Everyone passed me as I wept. No one gave me a second look. Once again there was no one to scrape me up off of the floor of the airport.
I wore this same damn dress to the funeral last week, but what did you expect me to do? It is not like I can show up to a funeral wearing a sequin dress and pumps. I probably should not be so sarcastic. Oh, it is a coping-mechanism? Right. Okay. Well, I do not even know how to cope, or grieve, or mourn, or lament, or any other verb that I am actually supposed to be doing right now. By the way, who even decided there is supposed to be a “mechanism” to live with the fact that a person is dead anyways? At the end of last week, his father’s father took his life with a bullet, and at the beginning of this week, his mother’s father passed away due to medical reasons. The casket was open this time around; I caught a glimpse of the man.

A mother in The Book of Eulogies tries to tell me, “Inevitably, wounds turn into scars, life into memory, or the memory of a memory. This is called healing.”

Healing? No. My hidden wound was always ripped open. They could not find her body. My grandmother was mercilessly taken away by wintry floodwaters and was never found. It is terrible that the only piece of information I know of my grandmother is how she died. Her death became my mother’s memory, and I have received a vague version of the memory of her memory from my father. I will never, never ask my mother about this woman; I am too afraid to break my mother’s heart even more than it is already. How am I expected to show sorrow for the death of a woman I do not even know? How am I expected to heal a scar from a wound that has not even been given the chance to close up?

I long to hear my grandmother echo the words of Barbara Boggs Sigmund: “I was real once.”

She held the hand of my mother, touched the same kitchen countertop in my grandfather’s home, and looked at the same baby pictures of my mother and uncle. A fraction of her genetics is in me. She was real. I am not completely certain about the spirit, but I know flesh is only real for so. She did not just vanish into thin air. She lived; she died. I need proof that she was real. I need to see a picture of the casket and the funeral service and the dozens of overdone flower bouquets. I need to see a picture of the body. The body. What is this feeling? Envy? How embarrassing! I am jealous of my friend because he can look at the bodies of his grandparents and know for a fact that they are dead. I only know from word of mouth; “She couldn’t fight the current,” my father tells me. I am expected to believe this statement. My friend has the chance to visit graves and know for a fact that those two men had oxygen pumping through their bodies at one point. I want to know where the remains of my grandmother’s body are. I know she is dead, but I just want to see it for my own eyes.

I am begging you, grandmother, I want to hear you say it: “I was very real.”

Not a single word was spoken as we drove away from a funeral home for the second time this week. The moon looked like a pure, white drop of paint that fell onto a cloudless, navy blue canvas. A Marcus Foster song was crackling through the speakers of his old Buick: “Fourteen times I call your name; fourteen times I get the same — a silent chill, an empty room, and four dogs barking at the moon.” I rested my palm on the top of his hand and laced my fingers with his. This is what it feels like to be alive, to be real, while experiencing the shock of
another’s death. There is a discomforting connection between the living and the dead. We are all very real once — only once.
August 15, 2011

Dear Charlie,

Hi. I’m writing this letter to you because I need a friend, because I trust you. That’s a good one. I trust the fictional main character of a “poignant reflection on life, love, and friendship.” Long spiel short, the story of your freshman year of high school changed my life, so I’m going to write to you. Apparently I’ve lost my sense of reality along with my happiness. And if I’m going to do this part of the way, I might as well go all out. So here goes.

You might be wondering why I’ve resorted to writing meaningless words in scratched cursive in the middle of the night. Well, the truth is, I have no other choice. I’ll get into that later. I’m sorry about all of this. I’m sorry for pouring out my woes to you. Don’t worry, though, I’ll share my happy moments too. If there are any. But for now, thank you for listening. You don’t know what it means to me.

So this is my life. At the moment I’m putting one foot in front of the other. Things have been difficult, but it could always be much worse. Sitting alone in the dark at one in the morning, feeling as if no one cares and wanting to die is nothing compared to being a young girl in a third world country who’s starving to death and has to walk fifteen miles in the blazing hot sun to provide her family with fresh water. If depression has taught me one thing, it’s that perspective is necessary to understand things. Even when you don’t really want to understand them.

Sometimes I wonder what has made me this way. They tell me I was born fifty-five. I don’t know if I believe it, but often I feel like I was. My father says from the time he first looked into my eyes, he knew I was a wise soul. In short, my father is the corniest person I have ever known.

Right now, I’m extremely nervous. Tomorrow will be my first day of high school. I don’t really want to go, especially with the way I’ve been feeling for the past three months. I don’t know what’s wrong with me or how I truly feel. All I know is that it’s not normal, and that I want it to go away. I hate all of the clichés about the “teenage years” being difficult and full of angst and how I’m supposed to “figure out who I am” during them. I really hope they’re not right.

Love always,

Afton
August 22, 2011

Dear Charlie,

I do not like high school. First of all, it’s private, Catholic, and all-girls. Most of them look and act pretty much the same. No one is all too friendly. I still have friends from middle school, but they don’t exactly feel like my close friends anymore. It’s more like they’re nice because they have to be. I can tell they don’t really want to talk to me. Sometimes it makes me feel like shit, but I try to ignore it. If they don’t want to be my friend, well, there’s nothing I can do. It’s hard, but I’m trying to move on.

I made a new friend on Friday. Her name is Ness, and we met in our PE class. I told her I liked her eyeliner, so apparently we’re friends now. I’ve noticed that I don’t have problems making or keeping friends, I have problems with trusting people and putting too much into friendships. Maybe I’ll get it right this time.

Love always,
Afton

August 26, 2011

Dear Charlie,

It’s 6a.m., and I’m up, thinking. I don’t want to have surgery. The doctors told me I need to have muscle taken out of my arm so they can figure out what this mystery disease is. I’ve been having symptoms of for the past seven months. I used to be a big swimmer, you know. Eighteen hours a week. I loved it. I loved it so much. And then, I just couldn’t do it anymore. I get exhausted when I do any kind of exercise now. I tried to swim all summer, to practice like I used to. I couldn’t, and now I’m not swimming at all while they try to figure things out, which is why I’m going for the muscle biopsy on Monday. I do not think I will be mentally ready for this in three days. I’m scared about it, and I don’t know why.

I feel strange things now. Just last week, I was walking from one class to another, and I wanted to curl into a ball and die. I felt so alone. I know I’m pretty much on my own, but it has never hit me that hard before. And it hurt. One foot in front of the other, though. Smile through everything. It always works.

I can’t worry my parents with it, either. A storm hit our house last night, and the power’s out. A tree went through our roof, and the yard is an unbelievable mess. We’re staying at my grandparents’ house for now, until everything is cleaned up. I just want to be at home. Enough complaining.

Love always,
Afton
September 6, 2011

Dear Charlie,

I just did something I never thought I would do: I took a knife, ran it up and down the inside of my left arm, and cut into my forearm hard, deep, and fast. It was a short, dull little knife that I used, and it hurt a lot. No. I take that back. It took away the pain.

Everything started after the surgery last week. It’s too much to explain, but my father yelled at me like he never had before. I wanted to die. And I don’t mean that figuratively. I mean it literally, like I wanted my life to end. This was my first experience with the feeling. It was strange. And it wasn’t all my father’s fault, me feeling this way. It was that, plus the drugs they had me on after the surgery, my feelings of loss on so many different levels, and my pain about so many different things I couldn’t begin to ponder. I couldn’t sleep after our fight that night. So I got online to talk to my friend Bethany, the one who’s off at college that’s like an older sister to me. She talked me out of attempting to kill myself that night. I still think I owe her my life.

It all got worse when I went back to school the next day. I had too many things to do, too much work to make up, too many expectations riding on my shoulders. But it wasn’t until today that I heard it.

“Dyke.”

I’ve been called every name in the book, but this was a new one. It hurt like hell. It hurt because it was a gay slur, and I’m just a little fucking gay. It’s taken me so long to even write those words out. Three people in the entire world know, and I’m terrified about my secret getting out. The girls don’t know that, though. They just know the mean way to say. The verbal slap didn’t hurt as much as the fact that I thought this all was over. I thought that once I left middle school, I could leave behind the fat jokes, the judging looks, the ridiculing laughs. Guess not.

One of the mothers of the few horrible people I went to middle school with brought me home today. She has no idea what her daughter has done to me or what she’s driven me to. Poor, poor mother. I was home alone, and I hated myself. I loathed the person I saw in the mirror more than I have ever hated anyone in my entire life. After I got home, I locked myself in the bathroom and talked to myself.

“You know, they only do this to you because there’s something wrong with you.”

“They’re right. Look, you’re fat. Look at the way your stomach rolls. You can pinch it in.”


“What’s wrong with you?”

The last one I whispered to myself after I went into the kitchen and unwove my own flesh three times. After I was done, I wiped up the blood and rolled down my sleeve. Today was definitely a strange day. A strange day that hurt like shit.

Love always,
Afton

September 23, 2011
Dear Charlie,

It’s the middle of the night. I have now cut up and down my arms and my legs eleven times. I found a new knife to do it with, too. This one’s long and sharp. It makes the cuts bleed for a lot longer, and it slices far deeper than the other little joke did. I keep it hidden. What I have to do to myself is embarrassing. What’s even worse, though, is that I know it’s unhealthy and only hurting me, yet I’m still doing it. It scares me sometimes.

It’s either this or drown, though. This is how I deal with school. A day hasn’t passed so far where I’ve been left alone. That’s all I want, but somehow I’ve become a target again, just like it’s been for the past nine years. They all used to hate me because I was fat, I guess. Now I’m not as fat anymore, but they still hate me, and I don’t know why. I don’t care what they think of me, but what they say and do to me still hurts. It never stops hurting, even after all these years.

What hurts just as bad as what the girls say to me, though, is the fact that my friends see all of this, but they choose to look the other way. They see what those girls do to me. No one stands up for me, not even the other people who get picked on, not even the ones that I stand up for. I can somehow stand up for everyone else, but never for myself.

After a while I just learn to take it.

Love always,
Afton

September 28, 2011

Dear Charlie,

I want to die. I don’t think I can do this anymore. Everything’s gotten out of hand. They hate me. They told me to go to hell, to go die in a hole. I want to. I’m ready. Yesterday I gave directions to one of my best friends. I didn’t tell her anything, I just left her a note. “If anything happens to me...” I don’t want to be here anymore.

Zoya doesn’t even care. Neither does Madison, my other best friend, or even Nessie, whom I was counting on. I told all of them separately about what I do to myself. I was screaming for help, and they couldn’t even hear me.

Madison told me that I’m stupid, that I have no reason. Ness told me that she couldn’t handle it and didn’t want to hear it. And Zoya said that what I do to myself “isn’t that bad” and that she doesn’t know why they consider cutting a disease.

I’m fucking done. I’m going to go slit my wrists and watch myself bleed to death. I’m sorry.

Love always,
Afton

October 7, 2011
Dear Charlie,

I’m still here. After I finished the last letter to you, I called Bethany. I thought a lot about how my death would impact too many people for me to go through with it and how I could never be so selfish as to cause my family all that pain. I am a lot of things, but selfish isn’t one of them.

I cut that night, though. Really badly. I cut my hips now, where no one can see. I’ve lost track of how many times. With every pull of the blade, I’m reminded of how much I hate myself. I can still hear the voices in my head, repeating back to me what I hear every day. After a while, they all run together.

_Bitchfatloserdykelesbobitchfatdykefatfatfatuglybitchdykelesbo._

Where no one can see, I carve everything I’ve been suppressing for the past nine years into myself. I hate what I’ve become but not as much as I hate who I know I am inside.

Love always,

Afton

October 11, 2011

Dear Charlie,

I’ve stopped eating. Now that I think about it, I haven’t really eaten three meals in one day since August. I just don’t like it. I wake up in the morning and drink my coffee. I drink water at school, and I eat half of what my mother serves for dinner so she doesn’t get suspicious. That’s it. I’m probably getting around 700 calories a day.

I hate food. I hate life, too. Everyone is so goddamn mean. I would never hurt anyone else intentionally, so I don’t know why all those girls feel the need to do it to me. Obviously I’ve done something wrong. I just wish I knew what it was so I could try to fix it.

You know what I also hate? I hate wasted skin space, when a cut doesn’t bleed or hurt enough and I wasted the skin with a cut that didn’t do everything it was supposed to. I just cut myself three times deeper to make up for it.

I’ve started writing again. I never told you this, but I’m a poet and a songwriter. I hear music and words in my head, so I’ve started writing my poetry and songs again. It’s definitely different than it used to be, but then again, I’m different than I used to be.

I’m sorry these letters are so short, and I’m really sorry I jump around so much. It’s hard to put all my thoughts into order sometimes.

Love always,

Afton

October 20, 2011
Dear Charlie,

My parents found out about what I’ve been doing to myself. I go to see a therapist now. I hate to admit it, but I love therapy. I’ve started living session to session. It’s the only thing keeping me here.

My cutting, self-injuring, whatever you want to call it, has just gotten worse. The things people say to me have gotten ten times worse too, which makes me loath myself more. I’m mad at myself for being so stupid and fat and ugly and for being a lesbian, too. Maybe if I weren’t gay, they wouldn’t hate me like they do. I don’t know. I wish my friends would stand by me. Their abandonment hurts so fucking bad, especially considering I’m always there for them when they need it. I have no shoulder to cry on.

Ugh. Anyway, I’ve started an art class. It’s the second thing I look forward to all week. Honestly, art, music, and writing are what I live for nowadays. Do you think that’s strange?

I just realized that I wake up every morning disappointed that I haven’t died in my sleep. I’m so done. If someone asked me to describe death in one word, it would probably be freedom. I want to die.

Love always,
Afton

November 2, 2011

Dear Charlie,

I’ve cut myself open every single day for the past week. And not just shallow superficial cuts, either. Deep ones where the blood takes forever to clot. Yesterday, the blood ran all the way down my leg, and I nearly passed out. I don’t just do it at home anymore, either; I hurt myself at school too because otherwise I can’t get through the day. I don’t eat, and my hands are always shaking.

I am sick, Charlie. So sick in fact that I’m on my way to the hospital right now. I went in for my session today, and the therapist told my mother that she needed to bring me in. I’m not sure what will happen, but I hope things will get better. I need this. I need help, and I need people that will help me to regain my faith in the human race, and maybe in life itself. Maybe going to the hospital will finally provide me with what I need.

I have to go. I’m scared, but I hope I can beat this. I hope I can walk away from the blades. I hope I’m strong enough. They tell me I am. Maybe this time I actually should believe what they tell me.

Love always,
Afton
Poetry Collection

Autotroph

I.

I am the lord
of broken things,
of birds that fly
but do not sing,
of bitterness, lingering,
of all the sorrows life can bring.

I am the master
of endless nights,
of windows and wishes
and too-cold knives,
of something like hope
and nothing like peace,
of all our lost extremities.

I am the queen
of wasted dreams,
of phones that ring
and empty streets
of ginger hair
and drawn-out waits,
of broken hearts
and stifled screams.

and since
I am the god
of shattered lives,
I breathe a lie;
I kiss a dream
and lose my sanity
far, far in between.

II.

I live on broken wings
and enigmatic sighs
lost pomegranates and
something like tears.
odd dives into third-person
have never been
my virtue.

they tell me I'm a
fucked-up child, and
quite frankly
I agree. for peppermint,
never wintergreen,
seems to satisfy the
pit others enjoy
digging within my heart.

instead I choke
on earrings and thumbtacks
and travel the world in
my sleep. because eyeliner
that runs in constellations
has never stood
as universally as it does
this morning,

gathering in the postulates
of my hazels.
ugh, they whisper to me.
you weirdo.

Pigeon Dreams

last night I dreamt
and you were the number nine
[nine] cracks through a broken spine
I dreamt of tender fish
I pulled their scales
off one by one
so I could hear each of them scream

but I was never one for lying

last night I didn’t dream of succulence
I dreamt of wishes
and you were the number two
[two] birds of paradise
on a beach of blood
I was running
I was flying
I was choking
I watched the dirt collect under my fingernails.

but I was never one for lying

last night I didn’t dream of worth
I dreamt of becoming lost
and you were the number six
[six] kisses- no, bullets- through my forehead
through my heart

last night I didn’t dream
of fish or birds or numbers

I dreamt of blossoms and asphalt
and something iridescent.

last night I didn’t dream at all.

well, I was never one for lying.
Expend People Like Paychecks

You had me at
"I didn't know you had brown eyes,"
the day I wiped my security locks of hair
from my face
to get a better look at you.

Look in my eyes like mirrors.
The reflection of my sentiment
made you Narcissist.
And the osmosis of our gaze
blessed you beautiful.
You are welcome.

I gave all.
Eyes and ears
and mouth and rainbows.
Until you left me Mr. Potato.

My barren anatomy makes for a
raw piggy bank of déjà vu.
Your silver dollars clunk through my Hollow.
Never rust.
You wonder why I
never let go.
Bankruptcy has me petrified.

Putting park walks into penny stocks
waiting to cash in on
two kisses during Christmas time.

Hoping you invest as much in me.

Wedding Day Waltz

Hands touch. A new
organ born in the
pits
of my chest.
Hemorrhages harmonize, new
tissues compose as
blood streams through
auditorium doors: threshold.
And the house is sold out.

Spirit looks
forward
as the arms of the conductor raise.

We begin. Strings pull
bows forth and back
Grave
but saccharine.
Downbeats dance, forever
pulses pump passion as
warmth drips back to
my hands: Your hands.
And the audience is submerged.

Now bells
ring
as wide as my smile.

And the congregation drowns in love.
It took eighty-seven dollars to get across Baghdad. John forked over his fair and mumbled a nondescript gratitude as the taxi driver deposited his duffel onto the sidewalk. People somberly bustled about the BIAP airport, and John imagined casual laughter, carefree smiles, a couple holding hands. He shook his head to gain back his resolve. His assignment was finished. He weaved through the crowds as he slowly progressed through the terminal and soon found himself falling into the brisk. His eyes scanned the span of people: a business man, a wary family, a cluster of elderly women. He determined the best course of action, then set off. John arrived at Gate M towards the end of its agonizing process of herding people onto the plane. He tried to clear his mind of tension. Close your eyes, deep breaths. Nice and steady. Focus. Be aware of your surroundings. Find your last shot. An elderly lady, with a fragile hijab over her greying hair, stood with tears caught in her eyes as she looked out a smudged window towards the aircraft; a few kids were consumed in a jacks game; a little girl clung to a stoic man’s pant leg; a janitor popped a pill. His lens shuttered as it captured this ordinary day. The flight attendant yelled the last call for New York City. John secured the cap back on his camera. This had been a long year. The weary Times reporter was finally heading home to share his story.


Floor 52, home to management and the boss’s office. John’s stomach dropped. This was it. He was getting fired. He straightened his stack of food reviews and party covers and slid them into his folder. He knew this was coming; he’d seen it for weeks. His four years at the New York Times had been a blessing. He’d reported major happenings all over the city. Even won an award for his article covering a bank heist his first year on the job. He’d been undercover, punched, shot at, caught in a flaming building, sent out for all the big hits, until last month. He was unstoppable; he was always vying to get the best shot and write the top story. But the boss, Mr. Harvey Paterson, quit assigning him projects. He had been allotted intern-level stories: an eight year old’s extravagant birthday celebration, an opening of a sub-par restaurant two blocks down from Broadway, an interview with the common taxi man. They were tired of him. There comes a point in every man’s career when he just loses his edge. Maybe this was his time.

John’s nails skimmed the brass knob of the office. An explosion rang in his ears and gunshots pounded against his temple. The clammy sweat on his palm forced his grasp to strengthen against the corrosive metal. Screams echoed, and footsteps pounded his rib cage. The faint crash vibrated as the door clicked shut. The wood moaned with protest as the door scraped into its frame. The crystals dangling from the chandelier swayed as the pressure danced, rippling past him. His eyes adjusted to the dimly lit room. Its regal flowers were stripped of their colorful demeanor. He’d never been all the way up here. The room felt almost homey, as if he’d stepped from the industrial wonder of New York into a blubbery family room out west. Mahogany bookcases lined the walls, cluttered with knickknacks and plaques. “Best This” and “Top That,” Pulitzer prizes crammed behind photos of vacations. John scanned the rest of the room when his eyes caught the piercing stare of his fate. His heart froze.

"Have a seat, John..."
John squished down the narrow aisle, trying not to swing his duffle into unsuspecting people. He found his empty seat, 28A, next to a young lady. She was squinting at an upside-down Webster's Dictionary and didn't notice as John stored his luggage above. He plopped down beside her, and she glanced up uneasily. He spared a smile, and she quickly returned to her book, her eyes scrolling as if searching for her place. John got out his most recent journal. His fingers brushed against the rough cardboard edges as he pulled his pen from his shirt pocket. One story. Just one story was all he would get. The pen is mightier than the sword, but it's a hell of a lot harder to sharpen. He chuckled at Mr. Paterson's advice and settled his soaring thoughts. John's lungs filled with anticipation.

12 hours and 17 minutes until arriving at the New York airport.

The swirling sand caught John in the face as he exited Mess Hall. He hastily stepped aside as soldiers filed in past him. Glancing down at his wrist, his feet carried him towards the only phone for twenty miles. It was 16:26. Across the ocean Mr. Paterson should be just arriving at the office, 7:30AM. His weekly check-in was due. He arrived at General Harris's tent and flashed his press card. The chunky phone was a load in his hand as he dialed. He caught the answering machine's tone,

"Hello, Mr. Paterson. It's day forty-seven of assignment Article Iraq Military Training Base. The camp has been doing normal drills as of late. They have been scouting the area on training missions, but no teams have returned so far. This is great stuff so far, boss. Are you sure you need me to stay for the entire year?"

That fateful day when he'd been called up to Floor 52, Mr. Paterson had been so proud to announce that he, John Nichols, had the privilege to write the hands-on experience about the life of a soldier in training. The new base in Iraq had opened because they could practice flying military jets. Of course, he had to say yes. They had been letting him rest up without his knowledge for this very reason. John recalled how cheery Mr. Patterson had seemed when he announced that John was to leave the next weekend. It would be a year-long assignment. Of course he was scared, but this was the opportunity of a lifetime. However, so far nothing had happened. He wasn't involved in any of the flight missions. He couldn't see what their developing weapons were. He was stuck on KP duty and was living on an uncomfortable cot.

"I mean, I could come home early. I think I've got a good story already!"

John was lying. He had a mediocre opening paragraph and a few lines jotted down. He couldn't take it anymore.

"Well, I'll call you up sometime soon. I don't think there's anything else to see here, boss..."

John heard a commotion outside.

"I guess I'll..."

The dial tone screamed in John's ear. He reached to return the phone to its stand. The click of the receiver was the first shot of the turmoil. General Harris exploded into the marquee, seizing John by the collar. He was yanked into the court. An ammunition stock detonated around the corner. A bulletproof vest was shoved into his grasp. His arms shook as he scurried to pull it on. His shirt began to stick to his neck, and his pulse deafened him. John felt as if his movements were stuck in molasses while the world around him erupted into a wild burst of motion. A tank stampeded through his sleeping quarters, demolishing all his belongings. People were running all around him. He took a step before a hand smashed his face to the earth. Dust shoved between his front teeth, causing him to choke. The soil trembled, and screams knocked John in the chest with
the explosion. He strained to distinguish his rescuer in the swirl of sand. He found himself in the clutches of a man with a sallow cloth draped around his head. The skin around his eyes looked like bottomless crimson wells, as if the sun had scraped against his face. He bellowed an undistinguishable cheer and held John up by his neck. John struggled to free himself. He heard machine guns crack. He heard bullets whistle. He heard shrieks of pain. He heard pitiful crying. Upon wrenching his eyes open, he realized it was himself. His body quivered. A prick in his thigh registered in his mind. A balmy warmth seeped into his body, and he quietly slipped into deceptive safety.

The wheels of the drink cart squeaked as it stopped next to him. He ordered a Coke and a bag of miniature pretzels. He arranged his tray table to accommodate both his journal and his beginning flight snack. The flight attendant rolled her eyes as the young lady set down her book and motioned she didn't want anything. She fidgeted in her seat and glanced at her watch, out the window, then back at her watch.

“First time flying? You know it’s statistically the safest way to travel. It'll be over it a jiff.” John reassured with a smile. “My name is John Nichols. It’s nice to meet you.” He offered his hand.

She slouched away and in a timid voice replied, “My name is Ramiah. I am going to America to help my sick mother. She needs me very much.”

Ramiah retrieved her book and began to read. John looked at her. Wavy chocolate hair draped around her face. Her eyes were a deep green and twinkled with secrets. John picked up his pen and began to write.

7 hours and 46 minutes until arriving at the New York Airport.

John's head swirled as his eyes began to open. His eyelashes were coated in crust and his temple throbbed. He tried to wipe the grime from his face, but his arms were weighted down. Chains wrapped around his wrists and ankles. Panic began to set in. He forced his eyes to adjust to the dark and found himself in a musky room with a dirt floor. Two other people were across the room watching him. He tried to concentrate. There was a young girl with ebony hair and dark eyes. Her tiny hands grasped the vague wisps of a ragdoll. She was curled up next to a solemn man with a tangled beard the color of slate. His face was thin, and his muscles appeared frail, but his eyes had the sheen of authority.

“Where are we? What’s happening?” John barely croaked out the words.

The man tightened his grasp around the girl as she stared at John. His mouth opened to reply when a metal door, that John hadn’t noticed, swung open. A brawny, mid-aged man stepped in with a scowl on his face. He marched over to John and recited in practiced English, “You are now property of the Iranian government. You are to stay here until we deem otherwise. Do not try to escape. Do not try to call for help. Do not speak unless told to. Disobedience will result in discipline. Do you understand, American?”

John’s stomach dropped and horror rose in his throat, he felt his head shake in a nod. The soldier stepped forward, unshackled his chains, and walked out, closing the door behind him. The lock snapped into place.

John’s heart began to fall. His lungs couldn’t get enough air, and he broke out in a cold sweat. He was never going to see his family again. He was never going to hear his name called for a Pulitzer Prize. He was never going to return home. He was going to die.
John’s hand cramped as he started on the fifth page of his article. He was so close to finished. His blue pen fell to the floor and rolled under the seat in front of him. He fluidly cleared his tray table of his trash from the cardboard quality airline dinner, swooped it up and locked it, ducked down, and retrieved his prize. This pen was sticking with him. He clicked the gold top, sheathing his weapon. Ramiah closed her book and stored it in her olive, drawstring bag. She took a few shaky breaths and leaned her head back on a pillow. She unconsciously popped her fingers while she seemed to whisper a nervous prayer.

3 hours and 7 minutes until arriving at the New York Airport.

John didn’t know how much time had passed since he’d been captured. His stomach had grown accustomed to being hollow, and his hair settled on his shoulders. He had learned that the old man’s name was Azzam and the young girl was his sister’s daughter, Aadab. Beyond that, language constricted communication. His eyes still clashed with the old man’s bravery. Fear settled into his bones each time the gruff soldier threw bread into the cell. As he watched the pair across the room he saw Azzam grow weaker. Every bit of his share went to Aadab. She somehow maintained her roundish cheeks. How long had they been here? What was going to happen to him?

The little girl whispered in the man’s ear, and John crossed his arms across his chest. The man nodded, and she stood. John expected crying. He expected begging. But she began to do a dance. It was minor at first. Her small feet shuffled in a vague pattern. She glanced at the Aazam, and he nodded in encouragement. She then began to hop and slide making her hair spin. She swung her arms and twisted her head. She kicked her feet then began to spin in circles. Suddenly she slipped, and John caught her. She stared into his face. There was hope in her eyes. It glistened for a moment. John felt the corners of his lips twitch.

The metal door swung open, and John shielded Aadab from whatever was to come. Last time Azzam spoke out, and John would never speak of what he saw. "Discipline" was not to be taken lightly.

Instead of the usual guard, a young man stepped in. His face seemed to be stern, but there was an alarmed curiosity in his eyes. He placed the food down in the room before backing up. He gazed at them as if he was looking at a grave. His eyes were tinted with pity. John racked his brain. There was a phrase he was supposed to say if he ever saw someone potentially kind. The boy began to shut the door. General Harris’s welcoming words erupted from his mouth, “Salam Alaikum! Salam Alaikum.”

Peace be with you.

The door stopped. The young man gapped at John. He glanced at Azzam and Aadab. Slowly the door clicked shut.

An explosion reverberated on the other side. Hopping to their feet, they waited. They heard footsteps thumping quickly by, and agitated shouts pierced through the thick door. The young man returned and thickly cried, “Alaikum Salam.”

And with you.

John handed Aadab over to Azzam, and their eyes shared a respecting farewell. They ran for it, weaving down halls past frantic soldiers. They heard fighting and finally found their way outside. The sun blinded them. American troops were streaming into an entrance down the hill from them. Fighter jets and helicopters kept bringing more armed forces.
John placed the last punctuation at the end of his article. Receiving the Pulitzer Prize flashed behind his eyes, and he suppressed a smile. “John Nichols for his Best of 2001 New York Times front page article, ‘How I Escaped Bagdad.’” The crowd went wild.

Ramiah squeezed past John and excused herself to the restroom, taking her bag. She began to head towards the pilot’s cabin.

11 minutes and 38 seconds until arriving at the New York Air Port.

John whipped around. They had been followed. A nervous soldier wearing American camouflage feverishly lit the fuse of an old fashioned grenade and tossed the green orb towards them. He ran, closing the door to the base shut tight behind him. It rolled to Aadab’s feet. John, without thinking, sprinted towards her, shoved her aside, and tackled the bomb.

A flight attendant gently tried to tell Ramiah she was going the wrong direction, but she pushed towards the front. She opened her green bag and pulled out her book. She began to rip the pages back revealing an electrical contraption with a countdown on the front. 10 seconds.

7 minutes and 22 seconds until arriving at the New York Airport.

John braced for the explosion, but nothing came. He began to get up and he saw blue ink covering his shirt and steam rising into the air. The ink had smothered the fuse.

The flight attendant fainted. Babies began to cry. Men began to scream.

John felt the world in slow motion as the timer ticked down to zero. He saw the lady’s hands clasp together in a prayer as she looked joyfully to the sky. He felt like he was flying as the metal of the plane easily peeled back. His hands clutched his notebook, and he felt the warmth of his words. He saw the Twin Towers congratulate him on coming home before his eyes gently closed.

The next hours blurred in John’s brain. He remembered troops grabbing him. He felt General Harris placing a blanket over his thin shoulders. Water and food were forced down his dry throat. He recalled begging to see Aadab and Azzam. Words penetrated his ears, “You’re going home, son.”

He remembered peace.
And we fell. Three words that seems to give so much and yet so little. Who are you anyway? Are you some nosy nobody that happened to fall upon these written pages? I'm not writing this for your enjoyment or even to teach you a lesson. These lines are simply for me to remember what I might forget, because I'd hate to forget her.

The girl was Amber Fall. Maybe I should've known then. From the day I met her, I couldn't seem to stay away from her. I took simple pleasure in her saying my name. “Billy King,” she would say. Every time she said it, I had shivers down my spine. Looking back on it now, I never seemed to understand why she even gave me the time of day. I told myself then that maybe it was because of how handsome or smooth I was, but even then it didn't seem enough for her to even look at me.

The day I first saw her was an ordinary day. It was dawn, and the cool breeze seemed so soothing. The sun hadn't come into view yet. I was sitting on a branch of an oak tree, eyes closed. Then a breeze came that was warm enough to grab my attention. I opened my eyes, and for the first time I saw her. She seemed to bring the sun with her as she walked closer. The very earth seemed to change around her. From that day on, she had both my balance and my heart, though I didn't know it.

I didn't see her for a while after that day except in my dreams. Work seemed unimportant, and food lost its flavor. I went on for days feeling numb to the touch. People ask me “Hey, Billy. Why so down?” I'd simply reply with a shrug and go on with my day as usual. Yet fate or maybe even God smiled on me one day. My ma sent me out for some air. She said “I can't stand you looking like that, sugar. Why don't you go on out for a while?” I simply nodded. I decided to go by the creek. I'd been by the oak tree too many times without seeing her, so I gave up.

And I saw her with her feet in the river and hair in the wind. I couldn't stop staring. This one girl had given me joy and misery before even meeting me, and I couldn't stop staring because I was scared she might disappear. As if she felt my eyes, she turned and looked at me. Eyes like amber, skin like brown sugar, and hair like coal, she didn't look away. She kept my eyes in almost a challenge. Then she smiled. My feet moved forward as if they had minds of their own.

The times after that seemed to go the same way, but I didn't mind. We'd either talk or just enjoy each other's company. "Billy King," she would say with a smile that outshone the sun. Every so often, I would tell her to meet me by the oak tree before dawn to watch the sunrise. Under that tree, we said “I love you.”

We were too tired to climb it this day and decided to lie in the morning dew. I lay on my back as she lay on my chest with our fingers intertwined. She looked at me, and I looked at her as she said those three little words. Without a blink I repeated the phrase. She smiled, and I could have sworn she blushed. “Don't say it if you don't mean it, Billy King,” she said.

“Love, I mean what I say.” With that, she lay back down on my chest, right after that the sun rose. That was the last dawn we spent together. It's the last of my memories that seemed to be perfectly simple.
I was supposed to meet her at the creek at midday, but she never came. Then I heard the news. I had gone into town and was once again numb to the touch. I heard news that some folks were killed and robbed. “Thankfully,” they said, “the daughter was fine.” Something in me knew it was her, so I ran. It must have clicked where to find her. It was as clear as day. I didn’t stop until I reached the cliff.

She’d told me a story about a man and wife who lived nearby. They were so much in love. One day war came. Her love and her brothers all left to fight. As time passed, the letters of their deaths came. One day her husband’s letter came. They said she became depressed. She couldn’t take the grief anymore, so they say she jumped off the cliff. She’d said, “I’d probably do the same if all my family were to leave me like that. The pain would be too great.”

I just held her and kissed.

By the time I got to the cliff, the sun was setting. The sky and everything around it was swallowed in the colors of red and gold. There she was. Her arms were outstretched, her hair blowing toward me. As she usually did, she turned to me and smiled. This time, though, the smile didn’t meet her eyes, for they gave a different emotion. It was the first time I saw her cry. I could see it in her eyes that she was weak from confusion, weak from heartbreak, and weak from loneliness. I stood in front of her with my hands in my pockets looking into those amber eyes I adored.

“I missed you,” I said. She said nothing. “I heard what happened,” I said. She still said nothing. “You could live with me, Amber. We could be happy. I know it’s not the life you deserve, but it’s a life with me. I love you. You know that don’t you?” Her tears seemed to multiply.

She finally said, “I have to go, love.”

“But why? Don’t you love me?”

“You know I love you, but I cannot stay.” So I held her. She gave me a kiss sweeter than any honey and more powerful than heaven and earth. She was my poison, and she knew that. To this day, I regret it because I let her out my arms long enough for her to break free. The moment I let her go. The day she fell. The day I followed her.

The day she seemed to both fall and fly off that cliff. I watched her fall with a smile on her face and her arms outstretched with a look as if begging me to follow. So I went in after her. I fell with her. But I didn’t die.

I fell, but she flew.
What Blissful Ignorance?

Eyes sealed, tongue outstretched,
You lap up whatever morsel is given.

You stammer out hisses,
Boo with the crowd, even though you cannot see over
the shoulders.

Parading around in a silk gown, that contours obediently to your
re lent less frame, but you have never seen the meager face of your seamstress.

You gallant knights are hesitant to save the princess, even though the
dragon is long gone.

Plum is the color of your bone-chilled fingers, yet
matches are in hand.

You smirk at the soup of stones in the beggars crusted hands. Tonight your
belly is grumbling.

You are urged on by the crowd for battle, though you have
no horse.

“Huzzah!” your mouth spews out.

Dreams Only Dreamt

Jump under the covers, eagerly
Snapping my lids together
Awaiting the dream I’ve had time and time.
The fence posts of wood appear,
Though they are splintered and weathered.
The sheep in fumbling rows,
Ribs protruding,
Roughly sheared and scabbed.
“Jump!” your voice murmurs. You begin your count:
One...
One...
One...
Their fragile heads ram into the taunting boards.
Bruised,
Bloodied, and
Battered
By your burdensome desires, that of which are tantalizingly distant.
Once baby soft billows took to bounding over the crude boards so effortlessly;
Now impossible.
My Eternal Walk

whispers as I pass
easily disturbed stares
silent laughing, shaking shoulders
silent lips
directed at me
I walk on

flopping weakly
gills straining limply
no water to be found
dying in the gutter
one lonely star
the blurred sky
polluted air
covering natures beauty
I walk on

a cardboard box
a scruffy face
ragged clothes
thin chest heaving
bones poking out
weakly shaking
an empty tin can
with nothing to give
no time to stop
I walk on

charred remains
crumbling to dust
once a home
not even a house
no life
one more family
gone forever
I walk on

scrambling for a bite
an argument breaks out
forced to fight
amongst themselves
no faith
in these starving people
I walk on

this dead city
so many
hungry bellies
parched throats
sad dusty
scuffling in dirt
foraging for food
no relief
I walk on

fallen trees
should be fallen leaves
though autumn is here
no one can tell
all resources
destroyed
no nature
no beauty
in this desolate place
I walk on

no crushed dreams
no dreams to be had
all is bleak
no laughter
or playful spirits
or happy faces
in the city of gloom
with a wishful heart
I walk on

the sun sets
and rises
and sets again
I walk on

still I walk on
walking, walking
on and on
towards my doom
no
this is my doom
forever condemned
to this horrendous fate
I walk on

The Life of a Black-Throated Sparrow

An egg abandoned in the desert,
A crack, blossoms like a flower in spring.
A beak peeks out of a perfect hole.
The beginning of the black-throated sparrow.

Hopping, hopping in the shrubs
Peck, peck at bugs
Beetles for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Make friends with Mr. Saguaro,
Hop on top.
A ruffle of feathers, preparing to dive,
Plop in the sand.

A second try, a tentative hop,
He flies, the black-throated sparrow.
Swoop, swirl, dive,
The wind whistles through his feathers.

A twitch at the tip, a perfect circle
Landing on his new friend the saguaro
His only friend in the lonely desert.

Flying in the desert, feast on bugs,
With only a saguaro for company,
Rest in the rare shade.
A happy black-throated sparrow,
Settle down for the night.

A fresh start, a new day
Say farewell to the cactus
And set off on his own.
A black-throated sparrow all alone.

A hot summer’s day
No bugs to be found
Too hot to fly
Shuffle on the ground

So quickly he tires,
The black-throated sparrow
And puffs on the ground
Dust billowing around him,
drifts to sleep.

Later, cooled off,
The black-throated sparrow
Trudges back home to his saguaro.

A big, strong, grown up
black-throated sparrow
leaves his saguaro
for good.

A journey to new,
Exciting places
Places he’s never been before,
The black-throated sparrow

Flying easily,
Turn with a twitch of the wings
It all comes naturally
To the black-throated sparrow

Puff himself up
Believe, thinking to himself,
He’s the strongest bird,
The only bird,
Ruler of them all,
Soar through the air,
Swoop upon bugs,
His unsuspecting victims,
Lowly servants,
Tasty meal,
Partners in crime.
He is king.

A loud crack
A dot of blood
A falling bird
A rising sun
An instrument of death
An impending doom
A cloud of dust
A bright flash

A dead black-throated sparrow
I stand before the mirror and fearfully lift my shirt. I turn, the light sculpts my stomach. I bend over, watching the fat fold. Rolling. *I’m disgusting.* In this ritual I dissect myself. Never pleased. Only finding flaws. *I’m disgusting.* My hipbones jut out, accentuated by my protruding ribs. It’s like a fight to burst through my skin. But all I see is fat. I stand with my feet squarely on the ground, hips width apart. Arching my back I analyze my stomach, running my fingertips over, around and over. My mind refuses to see the emancipation, just the lack of self-worth.

No lunch for me today. 
Not yesterday. Not today.

I creep across my room, the wooden floor squeaks, alerting my mother of my presence. I attempt to stealthily sneak into my parents’ room. With quiet speed I remove their body scale from beneath the mound of soiled clothes. Closing my eyes, I step onto the slick white surface. The cold shocks my toes. I forget to breathe. 
The red numbers scream at me. 
One hundred and three! 
One hundred and three! 
I’m ecstatic, I didn’t gain weight. Anger flashes. 
One hundred and three pounds, what a fat-ass. 
I need to lose weight, one hundred pounds by Friday? 
No. 
Ninety-five pounds by Monday, then I’ll be satisfied.

This was just the beginning of my day.
* * * *
No matter the environment, school or work, the thoughts assault me. Any second I may be set off; unknowingly every individual acts as my trigger.

*You make me look fat. Why are you so fucking perfect?* 
No matter what she does, or he, it’s always one step above me. 
* * * * 
This self-hatred pounds me raw, leaving me naked and vulnerable. 
I rush for the kitchen, hunting for a source of comfort. In a daze, I tug the fridge door open. The cold, white incandescent light showers on my body. It illuminates my desires. Crouching down,
eye level with my companions, I consume yesterday’s leftovers. My fingers are cold, dripping with marinara sauce; my tongue bites of garlic and cilantro. This fire dances across my tongue, my subconscious decides to squelch the burn. Knowing the only option, peanut butter. It never fails me.

Within fifteen minutes I've eaten a day’s worth of food. Maybe even two. A buzzing alerts my senses, drawing me to life. Awakening I recall the cookies I had eagerly baked only a short time ago. The torn plastic dough packaging lies on the floor. Now I remember. I remember tearing through the plastic, digging for a buried treasure. The chocolate remains are caked under my nails, just a reminder.

The crisp burned molasses assaults my nose, causing my mouth to salivate. *I must eat the entire tray.* Within five minutes I've finished the challenge, my tongue burns from the crisp heat. Panic assails, while a vile substance creeps up my throat. My moment of comfort has morphed into disgust. Scrambling, I make my way to the bathroom. Collapsing on the floor, onto my tired worn knees. Like clockwork, I stoop down above the porcelain stool and jam my finger down my throat.

But I can’t rid myself of the hate.

Resting, I lean my weary body against the wall, staring at the evidence. With hands reeking of puke, the red skin seems angry. It only taunts, *I can’t achieve.*

My active mind jumps onto plans for reversal. *I just won’t eat tomorrow.*

*But the hunger? How will I conquer it?*

My reliable antidote, peach flavored green tea. Guzzled by the liter, and soon the gallon. Cinnamon gum will simulate the exercise of eating. A packet will be finished in one day.

My moment of gratification forces feelings of self-worth into the form of food or the lack of thereof.

My mind bounces from the two extremes; either I eat almost nothing or too much. Daily I face the challenge of living normally, living without the thought of food; and daily I fail. In the beginning it was just a way to gain control, power over my wasted life. It awoke the monster within me, feeding it with venom, self-hatred and demons fueled by my father. A father who refused to see the truth of his actions; it burdens me. This monster grew eager, hungry and greedy. It conquered my sensibility, making me its slave.

Glancing at the gold paper on the counter, I remember why I did this today.

Maybe if I lose weight, just five pounds, I’ll be better than you.

*Then I’ll be worthy.* Maybe my flaws will disintegrate.
Eyelashes Feathered with Snowflakes

*by Hanna Fiedler*

St. Joseph – Central High School

Living in the 'Golden State' was an experience like no other, especially on Edwards Air Force Base in the Mojave Desert, one-and-a-half hours from nothing but four hours from everything. In the summer, merely a two hour drive took me to the heart of Los Angeles or even farther (that is, if you could beat the traffic). Beaches, world-class museums, amusement parks, and paparazzi galore! During the winter, ski resorts in the Sierra Nevadas up north can beat the boredom any day.

The weather is pretty much the same year round in the Mojave, with a huge range in temperature: up to 115°F Fahrenheit in the summer and down to 30°F in the winter. Sometimes a 40 degree change in one day! The summers were so hot that the sidewalks could burn the skin off your foot. (I'm not joking; it actually happened to me one time.) To beat the heat in the summer, I'd swim. And when we returned to school in the fall, nobody compared tans since everyone was practically the same dark shade.

However, winter was always windy and sunny. No rain, no snow. Heck, no precipitation at all. If you were a native Southern Californian, any precipitation would be like a foreign object to you, except for seeing it in the movies. Like previous Christmases before, we knew that we wouldn't have a white Christmas. So no one was expecting the surprise we would be in for on Christmas Eve.

My sister and I were bundled up in our winter attire. Mom was wrapping scarves around our necks and doing the typical stuff a mom would do before letting her kids outside in cold weather. Finally we escaped her attention and waddled outside. The cold sliced through my jacket with no mercy.

“Aughh!” I cried.

“Hanna, be quiet,” my sister rudely ordered me. Though she is younger than me, she thinks she can boss me around.

I don’t even know why we wanted to go outside so badly. But when I look back on that day, I think it’s something kids have; like some sort of sixth sense that indicates when it’s going to snow.

We didn’t do much for the first half hour. Some grey clouds crept on the horizon, but we didn’t think much of it. We walked up and down our street and all around our neighborhood. Our little dog followed us, never straying from our side, unless it was to scare away some potentially evil tumbleweed catching a ride on the breeze. He had to inspect something if it moved.

We lived in what seemed like a desolate wasteland. Edwards Air Force was tearing down all the old housing and replacing it with modern neighborhoods. Our home had been built in the '50s, and we were the last family to occupy the home before the big destruction. As families moved out, nobody moved in behind them. We lived in an empty neighborhood in a desert. Trees were dead, and the grass was brown and crunchy. Nobody else was outside. We thoroughly inspected all the houses, deciding which ones were empty and which ones were not.

Finally, we sat down on the sidewalk together with our pink noses telling us that it was too cold to be outside. I sighed, witnessing my breath mist out of my mouth, so I laughed.
saw it wisp out again, and I laughed even harder. I looked at my sister and started breathing heavily to show her my amazing trick. She gave me a look and shook her head. She always thought I wasn’t right in my head.

I don’t think we made the connection until it (literally) hit my face.

I felt a cold sting on my cheek, but it vanished as quickly as it had come. I pressed my mitten-clad hand to my face, looking up and realizing the sun wasn’t shining as brightly as it usually did on a cold desert day. The sky was coated with a layer of ominous clouds. With my eyes squinted, I thought I saw something move. I looked harder and felt more stings on my face.

“It’s snow, you dumb-butt!” my sister called out in sheer joy.

I think my heart skipped a beat, did a back flip, jumped out of my chest, and finally settled back where it was supposed to be. I felt genuine laughter bubble from deep inside.

Snow surrounded us. It was like the desert kept all the snow it had saved up for the past years and released it in frenzied anger. With every fiber of my body, I took a mental snapshot. My dog frisking in the snow. The snow hitting my face. The taste like tasting water but more special for its rarity. I scooped up some snow that had accumulated on the ground and shaped it into a tiny ball. I threw it, and it hit my sister’s back. She would’ve been irked in normal circumstances, but she instead threw one back. It hit my stomach with a wetness that slid off, hitting the ground with a light thud.

We ran around and tried everything we could think off. Snow angels, snow forts, snow men. We maybe got three inches of snow, but it made me to be appreciative of the little things life gives me. My sister and I used up all the snow that had so gracefully floated through the air, finally returning home exhausted, our eyelashes feathered with snowflakes.

Now that I live in Missouri, there is definitely an excess amount of snow. But I’m still glad to be able to go outside in the Christmas season and sled down a hill caked with powdery whiteness. And I’m thankful for that one Christmas Eve that brought snow to the desert.
The room was cold and dark. So dark I could barely see my feet below me. I crept in, the door slamm  ing behind me, making me flinch. I felt eyes creeping down my neck. I turned around afraid to see a face staring down at me with abrasive eyes, but I found nothing, just darkness. Shaking, I walked down the hallway, my boots clicking against the tile. I glanced all around me and discovered thousands of file cabinets lining the walls. I reached the row of cabinets that had a bright red “R” on them. Slipping my hands onto the handle and gently pull  ing, the drawer slid open revealing hundreds of yellow folders. I took a deep breath and began looking through the folders, finger  ing through half until I found the one with the red tab of “Robinson,” just as it had appeared on my computer. I exhaled and opened the folder. I pulled out all the papers and removed the one from the top, a missing person’s report a brunette baby with blue eyes stared up at me. I placed it on the floor beside me and pulled a thick cream colored paper off the top. I felt a tear run down my cheek. The birth certificate stated, “Lucy Anne Robinson, born January 4th, 1998, Daughter of Marcie and Steve Robinson.”

Again I had a sensation of being watched, but before I could turn around, a big muscular hand covered my mouth, and the paper was ripped from my hands. I felt the excruciating pain of a knife piercing my throat. I looked up to see my kidnappers staring at me; they walked away and left me lying on the floor slipping into unconsciousness.

It started like any other day. My alarm told me it was 7 o’clock. I threw my self out of bed, yanked on a t-shirt and jeans, and ran down stairs. “Good morning sweetie,” my mom greeted me as I walked in the kitchen. I smiled and kissed her on the cheek, then took a seat by my dad. My dad was in his usual seat reading the paper and drinking his coffee. “Good luck today,” he said smiling. “What is today again?”

“Today,” I said, snatching the paper out of his hands, “is the best day of my life!” He stared at me with a puzzled look. “Today I am auditioning for the school musical!” I spun around the kitchen on my tippy toes, almost knocking a hot skillet containing scrambled eggs out of my mom’s hands and onto the hardwood floor. My parents were boring old accountants. My mom was a tall but thin woman who in my opinion wore too much makeup and had long blond hair and green eyes; my father was a short bald man with huge muscles. Somehow they got me, a really talented teenager who had already been accepted into New York City School for the Performing Arts. I smiled, said bye, and threw my backpack over my shoulder, sprinting out the front door.

I reached the end of my driveway just in time; the bus had just turned the corner. Its doors flung open, revealing our curly red-headed bus driver who always wore too much red lipstick. I climbed up the stairs and walked to the back of the bus. “Hey Lucy,” my best friend Sam said as I plopped down in the seat next to her. Later we arrived at school, the bus driver, like always, slammed on her brakes, causing me to do a face plant into the back of the seat in front of me. I slowly climbed off the bus, still shaken from hitting the seat.

“Are you okay, Lucy?” Sam said with concern in her voice.
“Ya,” I replied laughing. She said “okay” and walked into school. I stood on the sidewalk afraid to go in, the sun gleaming on my face. I took a deep breath and walked in through the bright red double doors feeling the sudden urge to run away.

My day was slow, slower than usual or at least it seemed so. In each class I sat at my desk, face burning, legs shaking, and feeling light-headed. I successfully made it through all eight classes without passing out. When the final bell rang, I stood, my legs wobbling. I could feel my face getting red as I walked out of the classroom, through the hallway on the verge of crying. I dodged the paper airplanes and spit balls, trying not to burst into tears. When I reached the auditorium goose bumps covered my body. I stopped in front of the doors, took a deep breath, and burst through the entrance as if showing no fear. I felt at least 50 people staring at me as I took a seat in the front row. The director listed of names to audition. I listened to tons of people audition, making me even more nervous. Finally the director looked at her list and said, “Lucy Jones.” My heart began to beat so loud I could hear it hitting my rib cage.

I moved slowly to the edge of the stage, walking up the stairs and standing in the center of the stage. The piano began to play, and I was so nervous I forgot the lyrics to the song. When I finally remembered the words, they came out flat, and my voice began to squeak. After the song was over and I thought I had tortured my peers enough, I hurried off the stage, down the steps, and nearly threw myself in my seat. I listened to the director say, “Now if you get a part in the play we will send a cast list to your email.” After she was done speaking, I ran out of the auditorium and out the front door, looking around until I found my dad’s car. I ran across the street, flung the car door open, and jumped in the front seat. My father looked at me as if he was waiting for me to fill him in on what happened. When I told him I didn't want to talk about it, he paused for a second, said “okay,” and drove away, not saying another word.

When I got home I ran up to my room; tears forming in my eyes. I fell onto my bed and buried my head in a pillow until I cried myself to sleep. An hour later I woke up and noticed the sun setting. I opened my laptop and signed onto my email to find Sam on chat. I told her all about the play auditions, and we were still talking when a public service announcement caught my eye. On the left side of my screen was the word missing in bright bold letters, but there was something peculiar and familiar about that picture below it. I clicked on it to get more information. The baby had the same birthday and had gone missing from her California home 12 years ago. I hopped off my bed nearly falling down. I yanked the bottom drawer of my desk open and pulled out a large photo album. I flipped through the first couple of pages and pulled out a small photo of a tiny brown-haired, blue-eyed baby. I held it up to the photo of the missing child on the report, sitting there for a few minutes not sure how to react. The pictures were a perfect match.
Jason settled back on his disheveled bed and gazed at his laptop. His roommate sat rigidly upright at his desk, drilling information out of a textbook. Every so often he stopped and made a note without taking his eyes off the page. Jason watched him for a moment and then snapped his laptop shut.

“Sam,” he said wearily, “I am out of ideas.”

Sam did not look up. Jason rolled off his bed and strolled over to his roommate’s desk. “I don’t think I’m cut out to be an English major,” Jason remarked, peering over Sam’s shoulder. “Maybe you can teach me some calculus or whatever it is you engineering people are working on.”

As Sam bent closer to the textbook, a ray of late September sun stretched over his desk. Jason caught a glimpse of his roommate’s shadow-rimmed eyes and thin, pockmarked cheeks. He tapped Sam tentatively on the shoulder. “You could take a break, you know,” he said. “You’ve been studying for hours.”

Sam glanced up. “No,” he replied shortly. “I haven’t done enough.”

“You have, though,” said Jason. “Why not relax for half an hour? Take a nap or get coffee with me. Half an hour won’t make much difference. You’ll probably focus better.”

Sam did not respond, and Jason almost doubted whether he’d heard. He sighed. “Guess I’ll be getting coffee by myself.”

***

“Honestly,” said Jason’s friend Stephen as they left their afternoon history seminar together, “I don’t see why you mind so much. The kid stays out of your way. He isn’t doing anything gross or bizarre. What more do you want?”

“Yeah, I’d trade roommates with you if I could,” said another boy in an undertone. “Mine’s a germ freak. Yells at me about leaving clothes on the floor and won’t even let me sit at his desk. It’s like living with my mother.”

“I don’t even know why it bothers me,” Jason said. “I just can’t stand the idea of sharing a room with someone and pretending he doesn’t exist.”

Stephen shrugged. “Whatever. It’ll work itself out. Come get dinner with us. We’re going into town afterwards.”

Jason thanked him, but declined. “I’ll meet up with you guys on your way to town. I’m not hungry.”

“Yeah, sure,” said Stephen. He paused. “Maybe you should ask your roommate to help you with math, or something. Genius guys like to show off sometimes. It might soften him up.”

“I’ll try that,” Jason said. “See ya, Stephen.”
Jason turned off the path that led to the dorms and strolled across the brick courtyard. It was still baking hot, but a cool breeze had sprung up off the river and was ruffling the enormous flowering bushes that grew up one side of a nearby block of classrooms. Jason found a favorite ledge to lean against and gazed down the steep hill on which the courtyard stood. A white staircase meandered down it to an ancient shady cemetery. Beyond stood the old campus buildings, which looked in their delicate scrolling stonework, like cloud castles or creations of lace.

He mused on a discussion about setting he’d had in his literature class that morning. How important, he thought, was place—where stories and memories happened—the ground you walked upon, the air you breathed. Places made you part of themselves. Surveying the campus, he felt it was wonderful to be part of this.

Yet in the midst of his admiration, Jason found himself feeling a little homesick for the plain Midwestern house where he’d grown up. He knew just how it looked on these Indian summer days: the roses in late-blooming glory under the kitchen window, the shadows of the dilapidated play set stretching themselves out over the imperfectly-mown grass (his father having grown too lazy to do it properly), the sky an all-embracing blue. The view was of a quiet street bounded by equally ordinary houses and some big trees. For eighteen years, that had been enough.

Jason left the courtyard and walked back to his dorm. He found Sam seated at his desk as usual, but he was not working. Jason thought it was the first time he’d ever seen his roommate without a textbook. He was gazing instead at what looked like a photograph.

“Hey,” said Jason softly. “What’s that?”

Sam did not answer. Jason looked curiously at him.

“Are you OK?” he asked.

“Fine,” Sam snapped. “I’m fine.” He rose violently and stalked out of the room.

Jason moved to his roommate’s desk, hesitated, and peered at what Sam had left lying there. A letter, written in delicate Chinese characters on pink stationery, accompanied a photograph, turned face down. Unable to resist, Jason turned it over. It was a picture of a house.

*****

The next day the cafeteria was bustling. Jason filled his tray and was about to sit down with Stephen and the others when he caught sight of Sam, huddled over a textbook at a table by himself. Jason had seen him sitting alone like this a thousand times before, but today he paused, remembering the letter and the house.

“I’m going to go sit with my roommate,” he told his friends. “You guys can join us.”

They all looked at their feet. “Um…that’s okay,” said Stephen awkwardly. Jason flushed.

“What are we, a bunch of cliquey twelve-year-old girls?” he demanded.

“Maybe,” Stephen laughed.

Jason swallowed his indignation. “Fair enough,” he replied coolly and left them.

He put his tray down next to Sam’s and sat. “What’re you working on?” he inquired.

Sam showed him the front of his biomedical engineering textbook and went back to reading. Jason clenched his fists in his lap.
Then he remembered Stephen’s suggestion from the previous afternoon and dug the
textbook from his only math class out from the bottom of his bag. He’d vaguely intended to
leave it until just before the semester exam, but there was no harm in getting started a little
early. He opened to a random set of problems and turned to his roommate.
“Sam, do you think you could help me with something?”
Sam said nothing, but he did glance up from his textbook. Jason stabbed at the open
book with his pencil. “I’m having a lot of trouble with this one.”
“You haven’t even tried it,” said Sam, but his eyes were now fixed on Jason’s math
textbook, and Jason could tell he was doing the problem in his head.
“I don’t know how to start it,” said Jason, which was perfectly true. “Want to show me?”
Sam snatched Jason’s piece of notebook paper and his calculator and moved them to
his side of the table. He wrote two lines of indecipherable symbols, and in ten seconds he was
done. He handed the paper back and resumed his studying, a flicker of satisfaction passing
over his impassive face.
Jason knew it was a lost cause, but he had to ask anyway. He cleared his throat. “Do you
—
—
do you think you could explain to me how you got that?”
Sam stared at him, genuinely bewildered. “You have the right answer,” he said. “What
more can you want?”
Jason shrugged. He picked up his tray and left the cafeteria without another word.

Two weeks passed. It was fall. Classes and football games and parties picked up. Jason
had less time to pester his roommate or to stand in melancholy meditation in the brick
courtyard.

With Sam, things continued as usual—the brutal studying, the silence, the few hours of
hard, focused sleep. Jason observed that he looked almost ill with exhaustion, and sometimes
he worried. But he was busy, and beyond giving Sam the satisfaction of doing math problems
for him, he felt there wasn’t much he could do.

On a Friday in October, Jason dragged himself back to his dorm after one of the most
frenetic weeks he ever remembered. He’d gotten a B on an English paper for the first time in
his life, aced a history test for which he had crammed between the hours of four and eleven in
the morning, and attended the football game and a formal dance. It was with an effort that he
climbed the stairs to his room and stumbled in to collapse on his bed.

He awoke half an hour later to discover that Sam was sitting at his desk, holding a piece
of pink stationery up to the light with trembling fingers.

Jason started up. “Sam,” he said, “What’s wrong? Has something happened?”
Sam swallowed and shook his head. This time Jason wouldn’t let it go at that. He
walked over and put a hand awkwardly on Sam’s shoulder.

“Come on,” he said. “It’s OK. You can tell me.”
Sam shook his head, blinking hard.

“I’ll do whatever I can,” Jason said. “Even if it’s just, you know, listening.”
After a moment, Sam looked up at him. His gaze was cold.
“Don’t get it, do you?” he asked. “We are nothing alike. We don’t care about the
same things. We don’t think the same way. We don’t speak the same language. I’m here to
succeed, not to make friends with people like you.”
Jason stepped back. “People like me? What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

Sam slammed his desk drawer. “You Americans have no heritage, no tradition, no culture. You have no sense of duty, no identity; you accomplish nothing. But in your arrogance you think you understand everything!”

“Yeah?” Jason snapped furiously. “You don’t know anything about me or where I come from! Talk about arrogance. What is this great cultural heritage of yours? Is it that your parents beat you if you don’t get straight A’s? Is that your identity?”

Sam stood abruptly, upsetting his chair. They regarded each other fiercely for a tense instant. Jason felt a violent urge to push Sam against the wall. Then his vision cleared, and he saw a bitter, homesick, unhappy boy, so exhausted from his own relentless self-punishment that he could scarcely stand. He remembered the photograph of the house.

“Look,” he said, “I didn’t mean any of that. I’m sorry.”

Sam shrugged. He picked up his chair and sat down again at his desk, staring straight ahead.

***

The courtyard was different this time of year. The flowering bushes had faded. The grass of the cemetery was gold and scattered with red and yellow leaves. Jason stood near the old ledge the morning after his confrontation with Sam. He closed his eyes and laid his cheek against the cool stone wall. He did not want to think about anything.

He became aware, presently, of Sam standing next to him.

They stood listening to the wind in the dry bushes. Sam spread his hands out on the ledge, examining his own pale ink-stained fingers. Jason noted, abstractedly, that doing math problems and scribbling poetry stained your fingers in exactly the same places.

Sam, for once, broke the silence. “I need to go to the grocery store,” he said. Jason looked at him quizzically, but Sam would not meet his eyes.

“Want me to come with you?” Jason asked gently. Sam nodded.

“Okay,” Jason said.

They walked through the empty campus—no one was awake this early on a Saturday morning—and entered the store. Sam led him to the cosmetics aisle and stopped before a display of nail polish.

“I have a cousin,” Sam said, looking at the floor. “She lives in China. We—we grew up together. Same house.” His voice was a whisper. Jason nodded, beginning to understand. Sam picked up a bottle of blue nail polish and rolled it between his fingers.

“She’s a sister to me, and she’s getting married. And I can’t be there—but—well, what color do you think she’d like?” He glanced up desperately for an instant and then turned away. “It’s probably a stupid idea—but they don’t have nail polish where she lives.”

They stood in silence for a long moment.

“Try pink,” said Jason finally.

“Pink? You think she’d like that?” Sam ran his eyes eagerly over the row of pinks, and then his face fell. “But which? There are so many.”

“This one,” said Jason, who had two sisters. “Just trust me.” The boys looked at the bottle of nail polish and laughed together—for the first time.
Two short years ago, my mother formed her colony. Like a mirage in the middle of the desert, a solitary female floated through the grass with a trove of drones behind her. Aldus told me it was a beautiful sight. I was born two years after the beehive was created and fed on nutritious royal jelly until the inspection came from the queen. She walked up and down the cells with a kind of bored disinterest, until she spotted me. Aldus told me that she stopped in her tracks and gently extended her feelers to examine my body. I can vaguely remember her touch, like a flowered breeze through my golden hair. She told me that I was “marked” with an extra yellow dot fixed in front of my compound eyes. Unlike the rest of the colony, I remember growing up, vividly, and I hated it.

As a young pupa, I remember my primary care-taker Nessa. She was a lively and fixated worker bee, who looked down on me with envy and disdain. Nessa, as the biggest worker bee of the time, had been pulled before her maiden voyage into the world to return to the menial task of caring for young: Specifically, for me. Only the biggest, strongest, or most important bees were allowed to have names; I was called Primrose after the queen Rosaline. Nessa was a steadfast caretaker who looked after me through the long autumn in the prairie. Unlike so many of my brethren, I had been growing at an agonizingly slow pace in which I finally pupated (grew into adult form) at the ending of the fall. By this time, my mother was slowing down her rapid reproduction that kept the colony alive and focusing on winter preparation. Once I emerged from my silky white cocoon, I was ushered into society life and training with the queen.

When I first set my adult eyes on my mother, I remember the awe I felt in her presence. Even though she was two, old by bee standards, she was a true monarch. I met up with her on her daily break, and she performed a special wag dance that told me to watch and learn. I followed her throughout her day, which consisted of laying eggs in cells to create a new generation of drones while also monitoring the honey storage and frantically dancing at the “scouting” bees to hurry up and make more honey. A sense in me said we had about two full days until winter began. After inventory, she ushered me into a private chamber while she created new worker bees to make up for the ones lost in the battle with the hornets a week ago. I remember buzzing around the room in awe, then gazing out the door into the rich, lacquered golden brown hallways that could only be found in the center of the hive. It was magnificent and too much for me to handle. I had just emerged from my childhood a few hours ago and had seen what my entire life was going to be like. Rosaline had placed her trust in me, even if I was too young to deserve it.

That night I met Aldus, the eldest drone who had been officially "retired" by Rosaline. Miraculously, she had not expelled him with the other useless drones at the end of autumn but had kept him for some pleasure of her own. The moment I saw Aldus, withered and tinged with silver, I knew I would appreciate him more than Nessa. That night, he brought me some special royal jelly for consumption and acted out his many memories. He told me many happy and devastating things, like how many worker bees freeze to death in the winter huddle and how the drones had to be sent to die before winter or else the whole hive starves. He let me taste
the miracle of honey and bid me to do what was best for the hive when Rosaline became unproductive in the near future. Most of all, he told me not to fall in love like Rosaline had with him, and he showed me the devastating saga.

That night, my first night as an adult, I was told that Queens did not sleep, they prepared for tomorrow, and I was sent off to explore what would become my palace. Flying through the long halls and over the clusters of eggs, larva, and honey, reality dawned. I would serve the colony, the bees, and protect and renew this hard-built structure. My compound eyes gazed down on the yellow, sticky honey that provided sugar sustenance for the bees and over the sleeping drones that would soon be sent out to die. Strangely, a kind of compassion washed over me, and I felt the urge to go on my maiden voyage to give these helpless things a purpose for dying. I walked through the brown tunnels that led to the outside, guarded by fearless worker bees who gently stopped me and sent me on my way back to the nest. Among them was Nessa, who stared at me blankly. By the time I made it back to my hall and a sleeping Aldus, I had made up my mind. It was time for Primrose to become Queen.

The day went by quickly and smoothly; the nursery tasks were simple and easy. Before I could react, it was evening, and I was toting behind Rosaline to the departing ceremony. As I passed the length of endless drones, hovering in silence, I searched their faces for any sort of fear or resentment. I found none. Instead, some looked happy; most were tranquil. I was shocked into silence. Rosaline led me to the mouth of the cave where she explained to the drones that she and the New Queen wished them a happy and safe trip to the Netherlands (the bee's term for the winter land) and that this year some must leave since the New Queen needed a fresh group of males to build the colony. After she was done dancing all eyes turned to me. I did a simple dance that meant: Good travels. With that the swarm was off, hundreds of potential mates flying into the Netherlands to die. Most I could see were very old and were honored to do a favor for the New Queen. I drooped and slowly hovered next to Rosaline as our hive was all but abandoned.

The day after the departing, the cold hit, and we formed the winter cluster that helped us survive. I slowly lost track of time. I was in the middle of the huddle, and the Queen and I shared stories as the long winter brewed on. She told me of her sense that she would become unproductive after this winter and how I would have to take charge to keep the colony running. I passed the time in silence. Life in the winter cluster was sweet and warm. The worker bees did all the work, producing heat and transferring food to us in the middle, while the few drones that were left huddled with us in silent melancholy. Time passed in waves. First went the extreme cold wave, where the cluster was forced to pack even tighter as worker bees and drones died of the cold. Then the gradual warming and cooling commenced; thawing and refreezing turn a bee’s joints to molten honey. All the while I stayed content in the middle, listening to Aldus and Rosaline and watching their affection with envy. Would I ever have someone like that? Someone I held special and who thought of me as more than just a Queen? As I turned the thought over, I realized that I would always and forever be alone, amidst a cloud of kindred. Nobody could, or ever would, understand me.

Spring arrived one sunny day when Rosaline dispersed the huddle claiming she was overheated. I flew out in gratitude, free to roam as I pleased—or so I thought. Rosaline let me explore and stretch my wings for about an hour but soon called me back. I remember floating there, confused and resigned, as I stared over the multitude of my subjects as the old Queen
bowed at me and told me my maiden voyage was to begin tomorrow. The rest of the day was spent in kind of a shock. I went around with the Queen to observe all her menial tasks and realized, with a shock of alarm, that she was not laying eggs nearly fast enough to keep up the colony. I left Rosaline that evening, weaseled some honey out of the worker bees, and hovered at the entrance of the hive, realizing that tomorrow would be my first and only time as I searched for the one that was different, that would call to me. They all looked the same. Sure, some were bigger and smaller, brighter and duller, louder and quieter, but none made an attempt to talk to me. I guess it must be better to die for a dream than a truth. Before I could even focus my giant eyes on the task at hand, the sun was casting warm pink glaze into the hive, and I fell into a blissful unconsciousness on the hive’s doorstep. I vaguely recall being rudely dragged by a swarm of drones into my private chamber, but truly I was too overwhelmed to care. I was about to become queen.

I awoke before sunrise in a cold sweat from a terrible nightmare. I dreamed that on my maiden voyage, the entire hive went out to watch me and a terrible storm hit and everyone died but me. I was all alone and spent the rest of my life just sitting on a branch, paralyzed. It took me a moment to become aware of my surroundings again. When I finally came to, my mother seemed to hover before me, gazing at me cruelly, but when I reached to touch her furrowed brow, she vanished and was replaced by a trembling Nessa. She danced the follow dance, and I flew with clarity to the Queen’s chambers, struck dumb by my visions. On the ground were two old bees, intertwined in what looked like sleep, inconspicuously dead.

I roused the hive precisely at sunrise, announcing myself as new queen and telling the drones to prepare themselves. Just as the sun was casting its sunny glaze on sparkling dew, I set off to explore the meadow, followed close behind by my mates. The meadow was dazzling, its beauty rang true in every sweet blade of grass and every rugged rock. Viewing the hive from the outside, it was a strange conical shape that seemed to glisten with life and honey. The hive seemed to sit on a bleached white birch, the only tree in a stretch of tall grass and flowers. What amazed me the most were the giant slabs of rock reaching far into the sky. Up until this point, my entire life was constituted by the hive. Now, we were just one small thing in a small world. I flew over all this surprisingly fast, and the drones were having trouble keeping up. Freedom and flowers tasted like heaven. I had almost forgotten that I was on my maiden voyage until I was confronted by a drone. We both stopped abruptly and stared at each other. He pointed back in the direction of the forest, and I pointed at the birch. When he realized where I was from, a kind of malice overtook his frame and he shook with anger. I danced out my name and motioned to him. Cold intelligence swept his features, and he told me in our way that he was called Quill and that he did not appreciate communicating with bees from the rebel hive. I laughed and calmly told him that I was its new queen. Still he resisted. No awe, reverence, or longing overtook his features with the sight of a fertile and available female. Surprisingly, this Quill just shook his head and continued on his task. I went to fly after him when the swarm finally caught up to me. I don’t remember much in those few minutes but a tingly sense of pleasure and pain; when I finally returned to the hive, it was, and I felt glazed from the weather and my ordeal. As I was flying back to the hive, leaving my dead bees littered on the ground, Quill found me and expressed his interest in touring the hive. Some part of me was attached to him, and I accepted, through the week bones in my knees. When I arrived back at the hive, the worker bee guards started to attack Quill until I explained...
that he was a guest from queen Rosaline’s past. Timidly, they consented, and I let him fly his own way as I started my duties as queen. When the long day was finally over, I returned to my chamber only to find Quill waiting.

Looking at his long, dark, rugged feature, I started to fall in love. Something I had never done before but what Rosaline must have felt toward Aldus. I don’t know when it overtook me, but before long I was staring at Quill’s bedazzled, moon-speckled hide with more than just sleepy condensation. It had to be him. With that deep thought, a sleepy wave overtook me, and I prepared for a well-deserved slumber.

I was woken roughly by a buzzing Quill. He wanted to see where the honey and young where kept. Sourly, I shook my head (I had never been a morning worker) and gestured him to sit down. Judging from the dark, rich indigos and silence cascading from the hive, I still had about an hour before my first day on the job began. True queens never sleep. Before I decided to fully fall in love with this Quill and give him my imprudent trust, I wanted to know more about him. In a heated exchange of dance moves and comments, Quill and I had a long conversation about life in our twin colonies; the boring, the exciting, the usual.

I left my throne room in a heated daze, exploding with indignation, joy, and wonder. Already I could feel his effect on my mental state as I prepared for my duties with excitement and a hint of over-eagerness. I wanted to see my bee again. After only about ten minutes of work, it happened: screaming. A sound unlike any I had ever heard before that made its crescendo in waves as my sleeping hive was awoken from a fuzzy slumber. The sound oozed pain as I belatedly turned from my dining area to the fragile nursery area only to be overwhelmed with the scent and sight of death. Shock rattled my brain as my very own Quill emerged from the haze of blood…with what could only be called a smile.

Fury sizzled up my narrow capillaries as I realized my mistake. Quill was advancing towards me rapidly with what only could be called a bloodthirsty expression as I did what any young female would do. I kissed him as I prepared for the tentacle, the knife to be stabbed into my unprotected abdomen. I had already committed the worst and only mistake of my measly existence, and Primrose was not to be taken down without a bang. The seconds oozed together as I absorbed his closeness in my white-hot heat and waited for the death blow that never came. Confused, I backed out only to find that my “advisor” was stone-cold and yet again the steady Nessa had come to my aid. Only this time she didn't bring her bland eyes but her own, equally hot fury.

She grabbed me roughly by the tentacle and led my out of the hive as I bumped along drunkenly. When did we acquire so many bees? Finally I reached a narrow opening in the back where a group of survivors waited blindly, seemingly as drunk as me. Nessa, always the one to get things in motion, hurried us out of the hatch as new bees came every closer with their unfamiliar drone to our refuge area. My dream to be freed from my bland hive life seemed to come true as I was confronted with the bitter, cold Netherland air that chilled me to my soul.

Covered with sparkling dew, rainbow drops sputtered off of me in morning light as I took in my day-long reign. I had successfully fallen in love, killed thousands of innocent bees, and had done something to be remembered, told about in summers ahead, by children of grandchildren of my generation. I would be remembered as the one who successfully changed history, for the better or worse, who can know? Looking back on my overthrown hive I felt not bitterness, disappointment, or fury, but the hopeless feeling of independence that stated how I
was not my mother, not a normal queen. I was different: a girl who fell in love with a boy. I made my mark.

With that thought, I fell from the sky.
Poetry Collection
by Sophie Hamm
St. Joseph – Central High School

Waking Up on the Wrong Side of the Bed

Because lately I’ve been tired
and completely uninspired;
  and it’s hard to sing a song,
    when the notes don’t make sense-
      like you can’t make a sound
    because your vocal chords are too tense.
      You can’t reach that high C.
  and it’s hard to dance the pain away,
    when I miss all of the steps-
      like I’ve fallen down five flights
    but have no battle wounds
      to show for it.
    Sometimes you feel the pain but receive no gain.

  and it’s hard to write a poem,
    when I feel no emotion-
      like the metaphors go unspoken:
    a bomb with no explosion.
      The stanzas remain empty.
  and it’s hard to smile,
    when tears are in my eyes-
      like the fire is full of beauty
    until smoke smothers it with stinging lies.
      The pros don’t always weigh out the cons.

  and sometimes it’s just simpler
  to take the easy way out,
    and sleep all morning
  instead of taking the risk.
  and waking up on the
    wrong side of the bed.

Lost Boys

Second star to the right,
Straight on ‘til morning.
I do believe in fairies,
but so many lost boys are ignoring
the freedom we felt while flying
has been stolen by Captain Hook—
the innocence of children
dies
because we have no kiss
to protect us.
The Stair Rail
by Tara Hansen
Platte City Middle School

Just close your eyes and imagine the familiar stairs. The ones where we laughed and cried. Where I picked you up in my arms, holding you as close as possible after we broke the rail playing cats and dogs. We sat down on the steps eating our Kit-Kat bones, knowing it wouldn’t always be like this. The stairs where whip cream stained the carpet from our Christmas traditions and all Caroline would say was “you make a mess you clean it up.” The last thought was when you open your eyes it will all be gone and the pitter-patter of little feet will be present. Then everything was gone and the opening of eyes displayed the chaos that lay ahead.

The flames licked my clothing while I bribed them by rushing towards the fire blocking the door. I flung my body from the plane searching desperately for the pilot. Nowhere in sight. Fleeing for the safety of the rocks, my feet leaped into action pushing off the ground into the air. Hitting the ground from the gas tanks’ explosion, my head made connection with the rocks. I am surrounded by darkness and lost thoughts.

“What?” Caroline sobbed out.

“I'm sorry Mrs. Natlynn. This must be hard, but we have a counselor on hand for your family,” the officer tried to comfort.

“A counselor, he’s dead, and this man is offering to bring a nutcase into this already broken household! Absolutely not, Mom!” Shyla yelled, storming to her room.

“I’m sorry, but that service will not be needed,” Caroline choked out.

“Kit-Kat, we need to talk,” Caroline called as soon as the officer left.

“Don’t ever call me Kit-Kat again! Only one person calls me that, and he's dead!”

My body came too, but something was missing. The first thing I remember was jumping and the last was landing. Everything else was an unreachable mist, and once I cleared the fog, I'd have it. Little did I know the fog wasn’t clearing and possibly never would.

“Norah, baby, can you come talk to Mommy?” Caroline asked.

“What, Mommy?”

“Baby, Daddy isn’t coming home.”

“Why not Mommy?”

“Norah, Daddy's airplane wrecked, and they don’t know where the accident happened. All they know is the pilot paged he was having problems and was going to the nearest airport when he disappeared from the radar, and they can’t find him anywhere near the site of the last radar signal.”

“What does that mean, Mommy?” Norah asked, puzzled.

“They told me your daddy passed away,” Caroline whispered.

Replaying the scene over and over, I remembered. The bi-plane was riding so smoothly when everything started to shift down. I looked into the cockpit at the pilot and saw he was passed out. Bracing for impact I waited, but nothing happened. Then the plane hit the rough landscape and everything burst into flames. Covered in blood, I jumped and landed. That is the only thing my brain knows aside from the fact my name is Devin Natlynn.

Lying in the rocks my brain registered the vibrations before I could see anything. My body ached all over, but I knew here in the open I would end up dead. So against my best judgment, I
stood up and braced for the pain that would come. The pain consumed me whole, and the only thing that pushed me forward was an idea that threaded into my brain. What if I’m not the only Natlynn, and there are people I care about? Making it back to them, if there was a them, wasn’t an option; it was a mission. In the time to come I would have to live off the land, find cures for my hopefully non-infected wounds, fight the wilderness, and try to return to civilization, Mission Impossible.

When your dad dies, you go numb but not like Pink Floyd comfortably numb, just numb. People told me I would experience the stages of grief, and I said I wasn’t and wouldn’t. I lied. I went into shock and was just numb. My friends told me, “Shyla, we are here if you want to talk.” What do you tell someone that doesn’t understand? My siblings were too young to get it. My mother was a mess. I was alone, and my friends didn’t understand. They tried but couldn’t. All I got from being with my friends was anger. They had two parents, and I had one. So I did the only thing I could: I pushed everyone away and went into isolation. Then I got mad, rage-filled even. My mom wasn’t doing anything right. I was a jerk to my dad while he was alive, and now he was dead. My second chances were gone. Little did I know, my mom was experiencing the same thing, but she had a man at work named Shaw to talk to; I didn’t have my man to consult. My man’s body was lifeless somewhere no one could find.

Isolation... one little word that doesn’t mean much unless you’re isolated. I was completely alone. The voices in my head made me insane, I thought. The ideas were worst. The silence was my nemesis. Nothing was right, and the imaginary family I had created was the only thing that kept me alive. I imagined I had four kids, three boys, one girl, and an irreplaceable wife.

Was I lucky or unlucky? All the time my mind was in a constant state of indecisiveness. Was I lucky in the sense I had survived this far? Was I unlucky because I was helpless and a tiny make believe thought was all that pushed me onward? But I wasn’t crazy; I remembered my name, Devin.

My legs continue to push on, but I constantly fell from the pain. The cuts were deep, and the debris from the plane only gave me an empty water bottle and the guns I had packed for the ultimate Alaskan elk hunting trip. The gun powder had been burnt and caused many explosions, but as far out as I must have been in Alaska it was not useful when trying to attract anyone attention. If I didn’t find shelter, water, or natural herbs I would die. Then again, maybe dying was better than this.

3 months later

His name was Scott, but he went by his last name, Shaw. We met Shaw, and I hated him. My mom thought this was one of my stages of grief, but she didn’t know. She was happy, and that was the only reason I didn’t drive him off. He would never be anything to me except an enemy. My siblings loved him, and he knew it. Of course, my siblings didn’t know my dad like I did. They knew the stair rail was broken due to me and Dad, but they didn’t understand that my mom didn’t have it fixed because it was how we remembered Dad. They didn’t have the little memories I did. Like the day we played cats and dogs, and I fell down the stairs and broke the rail. My dad held me and smoothly said I was so lucky I didn’t get seriously injured. He told me he would never let that happen. Can you protect someone when you’re not on the same planet as them? No one knew why Kit-Kat was dad’s nickname for me. It was our little secret, but now it was only mine.
The days and nights blurred together. All I had was a broken watch that I imagined worked. I had come close to death over and over. Had it not been for the little shack in the woods I would have died. At first I thought the shack was abandoned, but then I noticed the blood stained floor boards and knew better. The first month after the crash had been miserable. My Boy Scout skills I never thought I would use came in handy. The shack's owner was very prepared; he had all kinds of medicine and even guns along with ammunition. I mended the wounds with anti-septic and lots of bandages. My left arm had been useless for a couple weeks, but after constantly building up strength it healed. I looked bad, no doubt, but I was alive.

Within three months, I was running out of meat from the bear I shot, my supplies were running thin, and more firewood needed to be gathered. I would have to go into the woods, shoot something else, and get wood. Grabbing the gun, I went to my favorite spot and set up camp. The prey would come to me. Within hours of waiting I saw out of the corner of my eye a wolf. The gun was brought to eye level instantly by my body, and I looked to shoot. Aiming precisely and slowly adding pressure to the trigger, I pulled up immediately, the bullet shooting above the target. As I was aiming I saw along the wolf's neck hung a collar. The animal wasn't a wolf but a husky, some one's dog. Someone was close.

Shaw came over at least four times a week. He would always come around dinner time and without realizing it sit in dad's chair. This man's sole purpose must have been to ruin my life. Everyone loved him. He was starting to play games with Norah and Tygen. My mom had even gone as far as having him babysit the kids and that had been my job. I was never close with God, but my dad always was. He would beg me to go to church with him on Sundays but I never would. Now I couldn't stop talking to God. Our conversations entailed me asking why and ending with me screaming for a reply. Of course there was none, so I decided to go to the little church on the corner of 45th Street and Mime Road. As soon as I walked in, I felt closer to my dad. I walked through the foyer to the service area, stayed there for the day, and finally let my emotions bubble to the surface. The only thing echoing off the walls was my loud uncontrolled sobs.

I ran to the woods, bringing everything I would need. If someone was here they would take me to civilization. I had to find them. I fled the shack and ran as fast as I could to where I saw the husky for the first time. Searching the area I couldn't find anything to point me in the right direction. Walking around I was growing tired, and my body couldn't handle much more of the cold. Turning around I looked straight into the muzzle of a firearm. My heart skipped a beat. I had made it this far and would probably be killed after all.

"Who are you and what are you doing on private property?" the owner of the gun asked.
"Please don't hurt me," I pleaded.
"Then answer my questions boy!" the gunmen barked.
"My name is Devin, and I didn't know this was private property," I replied.
"Just because I happen to be away from my summer home doesn't mean you can park yourself here," the mysterious person fired back. "How did you get here and how long have you been using my shack?"
"I was in a plane crash, and I needed a place to stay. I didn't know it was still occupied. I have no clue how long it's been."
"Of course you have," the gunmen said sarcastically, pulling off the ski mask the gunmen had been wearing.
The elderly lady under the mask told me to follow her. Then I did all I could do. I followed the lady to the uncertainty that lay ahead.

When I finally composed myself I stood up to leave.

“You must be Shyla Natlynn,” the preacher sitting in the back pew said.

I screamed.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you, miss,” the preacher apologized.

“That’s okay, and, yes, my name is Shyla Natlynn.”

“I figured you’d come around here sometime. That’s what your dad told me at least,” the preacher explained.

“I’m sorry but I’m running late if you’ll excuse me,” I lied.

“Of course, feel free to come back soon,” was the last thing I heard.

When I returned home I saw my family and the dreaded Shaw all hovered in the great room. The sounds of squealing reached my eardrums. Upon walking into the room I saw Shaw playing with Norah and Tygen.

“Hey Shy,” Shaw greeted.

“Don’t call me Shy,” I barked.

“Shyla! I’m so sorry, Shaw; she’s in a mood. Get in here now, Shyla,” my mother ordered.

“How was your day, Shyla,” Shaw asked.


“Shyla Lee Nat...,” my mom started when she was interrupted by Norah.

“Mommy?”

“What baby?” my mom smoothly said.

“Mommy, why don’t I have a daddy? Can’t Shaw be my daddy?” Norah asked followed by an awkward silence.

“Well, Norah, I would love to be your daddy, but I don’t know what your mommy would say if I asked her,” Shaw replied.

My mom’s and my mouth fell open.

“Caroline would you give me the pleasure of being Shyla, Norah, and Tygen’s daddy and your husband,” Shaw asked.

“Shaw, are you sure?” my mother asked.

“Yes,” Shaw said, and he was echoed by my mother’s yes.

After checking up on my story the mysterious stranger said it checked out. She asked me if I had anyone I knew of or if I was alone? I told her I wasn’t alone and had a family somewhere, three kids and a wife. As I spoke the words one thought hit me like a brick. What I was telling this woman was the truth. I was remembering.

“My father has been dead for three months, almost four, and you’re saying yes to this man already?”

“Shyla, what is your problem?” my mother fought back.

“You’re replacing my dad already!” I yelled storming back out of the house and retracing the familiar steps I had taken earlier on in the day.

1 year and 3 months later
“Mary Lou, I can’t remember anything except the fact my name’s Devin, and it’s been over a year!” I said, frustrated.

“Sweetie, I feel like your grandma, I’ve know you so long. You’ll remember eventually,” Mary Lou reassured.

“I’m not so sure Mary Lou,” I said letting my mind wonder.

“Well, since you’re not so sure, why don’t you just keep thinking and help me go through the attic?” Mary Lou asked.

“Alright,” I gave in.

“Dad, I have a gift for you,” I told Shaw.

“What?” he asked.

It was Shaw’s birthday, and the preacher, Mr. Lowth, had given me the idea of a great gift.

“I know you don’t like the broken stair rail and you wanted to get it fixed but I wouldn’t let you. My gift to you is I want you to fix the rail.” I told him.

In a little over a year Shaw and my mom had gotten married making him my step-dad; I had started therapy with the preacher my dad saw every Sunday, and Shaw and I had finally made amends. I won’t lie. I missed my dad, but Shaw was actually a good dad figure. After telling Shaw that he could fix the stair rail he had so badly wanted to fix but didn’t know why I didn’t let him, my mom began to cry. Today would always be the day this family who had fallen apart and been put back together would remember.

“Mary Lou, do you mind if I go through these newspapers?”

“Go ahead, sweetie.”

Going through the whole stack, deciding which papers needed to be thrown away, I stumbled across an image.

“Mary Lou, come here!”

“Oh, I see,” Mary Lou exclaimed staring at the image.

Looking at the newspaper, the familiar reflection of my own face stared back. The heading read, missing person, and in the next newspaper my name was listed under obituaries. Then everything came flooding back, and I remembered it all. I had a family: a wife named Caroline and three kids, Tygen, Norah, and Shyla. I had to get back to them; they were probably all alone. Caroline would never get remarried. My children would never have another dad.

“Mary Lou, I need to get home.”

Hours later

When we reached the house, Mary Lou told me she would stay in the car.

“You’ll do fine, Devin. I’m sure it will be a glorious reunion,” Mary Lou assured.

Walking up to the door, I rang my own door bell.

“Daddy there’s someone here,” Tygen said.

“Tygen come here,” Caroline yelled.

“I’ll get it,” Shaw boomed.

“Hello, you must be the carpenter. Come on in,” Shaw greeted.

“Actually I’m...,” Kevin started when Shaw interrupted.

“See the rail needs to be fixed,” Shaw was explaining when Shyla started to walk down the stairs.
“Kit-Kat?” Kevin lovely said.

I had been awakened by the doorbell when I heard Shaw say it was the carpenter. Since this was a very important stair rail, I figured I would watch it get replaced. After all it was my only keepsake to my favorite memories, and I was letting it get fixed. Coming down the stairs I didn’t see the carpenter.

“Shy you know this man?” Shaw asked confused.

“Dad, I’d like you to meet my dad.”
Leather Looks Good On You
by Tyler Heckman
St. Joseph – Central High School

I have a super power. I can’t claim any credit for having it, though. I wasn’t born with it, a spider never bit me, and my parents weren’t from another world. Heck, I don’t even deserve my power. It was sort of a gift. A horrible, splendid gift, that was years in the making.

I was a child, crying in my basement. Our family was in a huddle waiting for the sirens to go back down and let us know when the tornadoes wouldn’t be a threat. The threat was actually very small for us, though; we were so far underground, nothing could touch us. However, the same couldn’t be said for Uncle John. Well, he was technically my great uncle, but whatever.

Uncle John had been paralyzed from the waist down for nearly all his life, after falling off a bridge while skipping school with some friends. This was back in the early sixties, and he has always been a “stubborn ass,” like my mom calls him, so the treatment and physical therapy proved to be very ineffective. Anyways, about forty years later here I was worried for his safety because his wheelchair couldn’t get him to the basement. He was totally vulnerable. I insisted upon calling him, and when he was on the other line, I heard the most incredible thing: “Don’t you worry about your Uncle John. I got skin made a’ leather. Nothing can hurt me.”

What would you say if you were six years old and found out you knew an indestructible man? Not much? Me either; it was our secret. I was proud to know a super hero, but I realized something, also. In that moment his life made more sense than ever. Here’s what I mean: For instance, when Uncle John was in love, he was married to a woman named Betty. She was never very happy, but she at least thought the marriage was funny. He was stuck in the house when she drove to the bank and stole all of his money. He was still stuck in the house when she went to another man, too. I’m sure that man had working legs, but I wouldn’t know. I wasn’t concerned; it never seemed to bother Uncle John very much. I didn’t know it at the time, but it must have just bounced off his leather skin. How lucky, he was.

Uncle John couldn’t leave his house very much, so he didn’t get to see his friends often, with the exception of one very special friend. Her name was Peachy. She was the sweetest little dog. Golden and feisty, she was always at his side or on his lap. They were really nice to each other, but eventually Peachy had to leave Uncle John, too. I don’t think she wanted to, because it really hurt her, but she must have not had a choice. Uncle John cried a little bit, but that was all. I could tell you more about how his skin has protected him through the years, but I’m going to skip ahead to the part where I start getting my power.

It all started one night when my uncle’s super powers got stranger. He was sitting in his house, visiting with family members and friends who had passed before him. There were so many people showing up to his house, from nowhere, and he didn’t know how they were getting there. He missed them a lot, but he was starting to get scared. He called the police, and when they got there to help him, they found him sitting in his house all alone. My parents and the police and the doctors all swear he was hallucinating because of his diabetes, or blood sugar, or whatever, but I didn’t buy it. They obviously didn’t know about his skin; diabetes couldn’t touch him.
Anyways, from that point on, he started getting worse. I was confused at first, because he had to go to the hospital. He seemed really sick, but then I figured out what was actually happening. After visiting with his friends and family, he missed them so much; he couldn't live without them. There was just one problem: the skin. He couldn't die unless the skin was gone.

He had to start giving his power to someone else. So every day when we would visit him, he would give a little bit of his power to me. I couldn't really feel it, but it had to be me. Nobody else even knew about it. Now, I don't know if you've ever seen a real life hero die, but it's hard. It’s especially hard when you’re the one taking the power away that made it possible for him to live. The more power he gave me, the worse he got. All the years of struggle caught up with him, and his body began shrinking. He started wearing hospital gowns and crying and throwing up a lot. It hurt to see him hurt.

Eventually he had to live on our house so my parents could take care of him. He only got worse and was dead before he even spent three months with us. I didn't expect it to be so sad, because of the new leather skin I had, but I've never felt worse. He was gone, after all that suffering, and my skin wasn't working the way I thought it would. Everything was my fault.

Then I, I found my strength.

It took me a long time to find out how the power actually works, but now that I have a better understanding, I've never been more thankful for anything. Unfortunately, not very many people share the power, but I'm trying to help others get it. I don’t know how, but hopefully I won’t have to die to do it.

Anyways, my power doesn't keep me from getting hurt. I feel things just like you. My power just keeps me from staying hurt. Maybe that’s not as cool as Uncle John’s power, or maybe I’ve just been misinterpreting his power all these years. Either way, that’s how I got my super power, and I’m proud to have it.
Unwritten
by Antonette Hellebusch
Washington High School

The page was as blank as my mind. That cursed cursor blinked mockingly at me, telling me I was just an amateur in a world of real writers. I was nothing but a one-hit wonder.

My first book, Whisper, took me to St. Louis. However, my second book took me to a rundown building in an apartment with six floors and no elevator. My futile attempts at a comeback spilled over my trashcan, none of them good enough to show my publisher, if he even was that anymore.

After my first book, Mr. Cantz fawned over me like a prized possession. He insisted on a sequel, but Whisper was over; it deserved to end there. Now, I was like a flu he couldn’t avoid, rarely, if ever, returning my phone calls. So, here I was, barely making a dime in a city that insisted on dollars.

I sipped my coffee, disgusted by its cold bitterness. I had been sitting here too long. A delicious café down the street called out to me. I threw on a jacket and scarf before striding out the door.

St. Louis carried a chill by mid-October. The two trees I saw were long withered without a leaf on them, just like me: a shriveled up writer without an idea.

As I made my way through warmly bundled strangers, I couldn’t help but notice a small crowd had built up around the entrance to Joe’s Café. The people seemed circled around something, or someone, in particular. I went to the first person who would talk to me.

“Hey, what’s going on?” The stranger gave me a once over, seemed unimpressed, and shrugged her shoulders.

“Some homeless guy snuck some food out,” she said, turning back to the action. I sighed as I shoved my way through the crowd. I just wanted steaming hot coffee, not drama.

“Hey Joe,” I called to the owner, finally emerging. The onlookers turned their attention to me instead of the burly man hanging onto the collar of a young boy. This was the notorious ‘homeless man’?

“Hey Price,” he greeted. Ah, the last name. I didn’t know what was so catchy about it, but no one ever called me by my first name: Charlotte. Even my elementary teachers had called me Price. Then, to my dismay, I was even introduced as Price. I seriously began to contemplate changing it to something foreign and hard to pronounce.

“Joe, what’s going on?” I asked. Joe’s Café had gotten me through many nights of writing. It was like a second home.

“Thief stole muffins and gobbled them up. I’m just waiting for the police.”

“Joe, come on. Those muffins cost a dollar. I’ll pay for them. Just put the boy down and let us all get our coffee,” I offered. Cheers sounded out all around me.

“Ok,” he finally decided, taking the little money I had before freeing the boy. The crowd went inside while I sank onto the curb.

“Miss, aren’t you going to get some coffee?” The little delinquent leaned down to face me. I shot him a glare that melted at his sullen appearance.
“No, Joe took my last dollar,” I sighed. “All I have left is a wallet full of credit cards.” I pulled out my wallet to look at it. The poor thing was practically infested with moths. I was in too much debt to charge a cup of coffee.

“Thanks!” Danny Delinquent, as I dubbed him, snatched my wallet and took off at full speed down Main Street.

“Hey!” Before I realized it, I was taking off after him. Danny’s big grin disappeared from his face when he noticed how fast I was running. All those nights of jogging when I had writer’s block really paid off.

“Just let me steal it!” Danny sounded a bit panicked at this point. His pace was slowing as I held up a constant speed. I almost knocked over a man with a newspaper, but he moved just in time.

“No way, you little brat!” We somehow ended up in a park, surrounded by plenty of people that could have easily snatched him, but my yelling was futile. I was finally gaining on him when a stick shot out from a nearby bush and sent me tumbling. I landed with dirt in my eyes and my palms burning. Once I could finally see again, he and his accomplice were long gone.

“Just great!” I flopped onto my back, looking up at the cloudy sky in despair.

“Hey, sir, stop it!” I sat up and looked to my right. An angry customer had begun tossing cups of hot cocoa on the ground as the older vender tried, in vain, to stop him.

“Well, one good deed did me wrong, maybe two will get me my wallet back,” I muttered, dusting off my jeans before walking over. From what I heard, the hot cocoa had been so hot it burned his tongue.

“You didn’t have to buy any cocoa,” the old man cried, grabbing the man’s arm. I stepped in as the attacker reached for another cup.

“Boys, just relax. I’m sure we can talk about this,” I said, approaching them with hands up.

“What do you know?” Business Bob, as I so dubbed him, didn’t think my interference was necessary.

“I know how to call 911. Get out of here,” I warned. He glared daggers at me before leaving in a huff.

“Thank you so much,” Gramps said.

“Oh all in a day’s work,” I joked, taking a superhero pose.

“There’s something you should have. Consider it a reward,” he smiled. Oh, I hoped it was cash. I still hadn’t given up on that hot cup of coffee from Joe’s.

“Oh, thanks,” I smiled, giddy.

“Close your eyes and hold out your hands,” he laughed. I knew this probably wasn’t a good idea when it came to strangers, but I could practically taste the coffee on my tongue.

“Her name is Doll,” he said. A warm, furry animal met my fingers. Good-bye, sweet coffee.

“I can’t take this dog!” Doll was a Shih Tzu, complete with a red bow atop her furry, white head. She was really cute and happy to see me, but I just couldn’t afford her.

“Nonsense, you’re welcome,” he called out, already peddling his wares down the road.

“Hey! Hey!” He didn’t turn around. Doll looked at him, back at me, and then decided licking my face was the best option.
“Oh, ew,” I sighed. Doll came with a leash at least, but I just couldn’t keep her. I couldn’t even afford a cup of coffee. I’d have to drop her off at the human society.

As if I spoke some sort of pet telepathy, she began to wiggle in my arms. Doll was on a mission to get out of my arms. I silently apologized for my previous thoughts, but she still squirmed. I figured something else had called out to her.

“Ok, Doll, go on. Go potty,” I said, setting her on her feet. She shot away like a bullet. I had no choice but to chase after her.

Her red leash bounced on the ground behind her, temptingly close but just out of reach. I almost barreled into a man drinking the cup of coffee I should be enjoying, but he slid right past me, shouting something.

“Sorry!” I called over my shoulder. I began to tire after a few minutes, and Doll didn’t seem like she was slowing down. We were almost out of the park and heading back towards the city. I tried to bargain with her.

“Hey, Doll, you want a treat, huh? Maybe a nice long... walk? I was just kidding about the Humane Society.” I realized that this probably wasn’t completely sane, but I was out of all my cash and chasing a dog I didn’t even want.

Doll broke out of the tree line and onto the street, barely avoiding an oncoming car. I charged even faster now, invigorated by the need to save her. As soon as she turned the corner, I almost snatched up her leash.

Then she had to go and hop into the back of a truck, which slammed shut right behind her. Her captors didn’t even notice.

“Come on!” I stopped to catch my breath, doubling over to suck in more air. Just perfect. The huge truck started up and turned as I tried to hail a cab. “Boho Circus: Fun for the Whole Family!” the side read.

The cab I finally got reeked of old cigarettes and vomit when I climbed in.

“Follow that vehicle!” I know it was cliché, but it felt good to be able to say it. Unfortunately my driver just sat there.

“How are you going to pay?” I glared at him. Now wasn’t the time to talk about money. I already lost my wallet, and I sure wasn’t going to add a dog to that list.

“Credit, let’s go!” he moved with deliberate slowness. My driver even had the nerve to try and pick up some other passenger. I verbally attacked him until he drove past the guy.

“Hah, sucker!” I shouted out the window. The happenings of today had finally begun to weigh on me, making me a bit crabby.

When we finally stopped, the circus tent hung overhead ominously. Someone up there must be having a good laugh.

“Here we are, Ma’am. $25.36.”

“In your dreams, buster,” I cried, throwing open my door and rushing out. I felt exhilarated and daring, telling the universe I wasn’t going to take this abuse. Just when I began to slow with a laugh, I realized the cabby hadn’t given up on his fare. I felt like Danny Delinquent when I saw him enter the circus tent.

The crowds were thick, and I tried to immerse myself in them until I was jostled into a seat.

“Ladies and gentleman, welcome to the Boho Circus!” The ringmaster commanded the attention of all with his pinstripe suit and overly tall top hat. I found myself slightly intrigued.
He began with a lengthy speech, meant to put the audience on the edge of their seats with equal parts curiosity and awe.

“How about a look at the animals we have for tonight? I’m going to need some silence.” The crowd went wild, eager to see the show before they slowly eased into a whisper. Elephants, followed by horses and a little white puff began to trot around the arena. That little white puff looked extremely familiar.

“Doll!” I all but screamed, causing the attention of many onlookers. My sudden outburst caused a stirring among the animals as Doll shot up the steps towards me. I scooped her up, allowing her to lick my cheek twice.

“Hey!” Shouts erupted around me for the second time today. This time, they weren’t that nice. Apparently, I caused a bit of confusion; the animals had begun tugging at their masters’ leashes.

“Oh, I just have to…” I took off. I ran higher, taking the stairs two at a time. I decided grabbing the pole that kept the tent up was a good idea and slid down it, fireman style. I didn’t take into account the rust or the force I cause when I slammed into it. Down I came, with Doll and the pole as well. Oops.

Doll was easily pushed out from under the collapsing side. I didn’t even think about putting her down when we both were free of the fabric. She had caused me too much trouble already.

While I was checking out the damage behind me, I ran right into a guy holding two cotton candies. The stickiness covered my shirt and Doll’s fur.

“Oh lovely,” I muttered, pushing the guy to the side. I kept up a brisk walk to the street and climbed into the back of the first cab I saw.

“Main Street please,” I sighed, finally deciding to just steal the coffee.

“It’s you!” I jumped when I heard that voice. The cab driver spun around to curse at me venomously, insisting I pay my fare. The car doors clicked, locking me in. I began to roll down the window, shoving Doll out first before following her.

“Hah!” I exclaimed, scooping up Doll and ignoring how the climb out tore my jeans and caused a few curious stares. I wouldn’t let him catch me anytime soon. So, I ran. I didn’t slow until I was well out of sight. Doll seemed pretty obliged to the idea, too. She followed me slowly, panting from heat. There was a pond in the park nearby; maybe she needed some water.

The stares didn’t matter to me much since I was too tired from running. I had cuts all over, my jeans were torn, my hair was a sweaty mess, and my shirt was still sticky with cotton candy.

I set Doll’s leash right next to my foot as I stuck my hands in the cooling water. They had a layer of mud and grime I tried to scrub away.

“Feels good to just relax, Doll,” I smiled. Unfortunately, there was no dog there to hear me. She was swimming halfway across the pond. I knew I couldn’t swim, but Doll wasn’t doing much better. Without thinking, I dove right in.

“Doll!” I was doggy paddling, towards her, kicking my legs with as much force as possible. I kept swallowing gulps of water, fighting for breath. When her furry little body met my fingers, I was beginning to think I was drowning.
I fought. Somewhere deep inside me was a maternal instinct to get Doll safe. I shoved her forward, pushing her as close to the other side as possible, but I found myself going under as a small crowd of people welcomed Doll. They kept shouting to me, but soon, they were a blur before it all went black.

“Ms. Price?” I blinked a few times before opening my eyes. A wet tongue met my cheek. “Ew, Doll!” I pushed her away before pulling her back, pressing my face into her fur. I looked around my hospital room as a nurse smiled down at me. “Hi, I’m Rhonda,” she smiled, shaking my bandaged hand. She began to question me about all my scratches. When she was satisfied I wasn’t abused and trying to drown myself, she laughed.

“What’s so funny?” I asked, flipping Doll on her back to rub her belly. “That water was only five feet deep,” she chuckled. I stared at her blankly before throwing my hands in the air with a huff. “Just great!” I snapped. I lost my money, got my wallet stolen, stole a cab fare, broke a circus tent, and made a complete fool of myself.

“You have a visitor,” she finally said, thinking that would soothe my anger. “I don’t know anyone,” I said, confused. When I moved to St. Louis, I moved alone. “Well, he says he has something for you,” she smiled. Oh lovely. I bet the cabby driver came back to get the money I didn’t have. Not to mention, I now had a hospital fee to pay.

“Hello, Charlotte Price,” a man said, entering the room. He held a coffee and something else in his hand. “My wallet!” I exclaimed. He handed it to me. I didn’t want to seem rude by making sure all my things were there, but I just couldn’t resist. Luckily, it was all there and accounted for. I was also secretly hoping he didn’t see my license, wishing I had fudged the weight a bit.

“And here. I saw you fall into the pond, so I got you some coffee from Joe’s,” he said, handing me the still steaming cup. I could’ve wept.

“How did you find me?”

“Well, I saw you chasing down that boy while I was reading the newspaper, and I caught up to him for you. He felt pretty guilty about it and handed over your wallet without much fuss. I tried to find you later, but when I finally caught up, you almost knocked the coffee right out of my hands,” he laughed.

“So, I decided to just go to your place and wait. I tried to get a cab until you passed by, calling me a ‘sucker’ as you went,” he continued, chuckling. “I did get you some cotton candy, maybe ease your mind a bit. It just seemed like you had a hard day. Then you ran straight into me before shoving me aside.” The wheels in my head began turning.

“I’m so sorry!” I could suddenly remember seeing his face. He chuckled at my apology. “That’s all right. I think you can get a pretty good story out of this,” he joked. A light bulb went off in my head.

“Yeah, a real good story,” I said more to myself than him. Mr. Cantz would be returning my calls now. I turned my attention back to my savior. “But I never got your name?”

“It’s Todd. Todd Wojciechowski.”

“That is a great last name, Todd.”
"We are saddened by the loss of this young woman, so abruptly taken from us on July 20, 2011..." the all too composed preacher began.

"Are you kidding me? He didn’t even know her.” I thought.

The room was stuffy and although it was late July, I was wearing black, and this tiny church with no air conditioning was packed with way too many people; I was cold. Unlike my siblings, my eyes were dry. I hated crying, especially around relatives who acted like they suddenly cared.

"Beth was survived by her oldest daughter, Kayla, and her husband, father of her other three children...” the preacher droned on and on.

I didn’t hear the rest of the funeral, and I didn’t remember them putting the wooden coffin into a dark and dirty hole in the steamy ground. I didn’t know where my reeling mind was at this point. All I knew was I couldn’t stop shivering. I couldn’t stop replaying the image of my little sister screaming as she ran frantically into my room to tell me she couldn’t wake up our mother. I couldn’t stop hearing the words the doctors had mentioned. Suicide. Pills. Overdose. The words drummed loudly in my ears, so loud, they began to overtake me. My head was pounding, and my ears were throbbing with the syllables of those three words replaying over and over and over again. I had to sit down or I would fall over from the deafening noises that were going on in my head. Where was I?

Oh yes, I am at my house. The memories continue to flood my brain, and my heart begins to pound quicker and quicker as I hear sirens come up the street and EMT’s rush past me to try and revive my mother. But wait, I’m sitting in a chair at my house. There are no EMT’s or sirens, just a plate in front of me and the calling of my name is not my sibling’s panicked screams. It is my grandmother.

The same grandmother that disowned my mother after she had me was trying to snap me out of this trance I was in and feed me a dozen casseroles her perfect friends had brought us.

"Kayla! Come on, honey...eat this please!” she ordered me in that loving but demanding way of hers.

I said nothing, reached for my fork and took a bite. I couldn’t taste it, so I figured I might as well eat the rest so she would quit annoying me. I took three more bites, and, all of a sudden, they didn’t agree with my stomach. I cupped both my hands over my mouth and ran to the bathroom. I puked into the toilet and sat against the wall in a cold sweat.

"Honey, is everything alright?” asked my grandmother in as sweet of a tone as she could muster.

"No. Please go away. Leave us alone, like you did for the past sixteen years of my life.” My mind raced. She had left my mother at the time when she needed her most. Now, she somehow believed she could possibly be there for me? I don’t think so. I couldn’t betray my mother like that.

I sat against the wall on the bathroom floor for a good three hours. The yelling started and stopped frequently. I could only hear muffled words and wondered how in the world there
was anything to fight over at a time like this. I knew exactly who it was; my step-father and
grandmother. They had been fighting the whole time she had been here. Every time, it was
over something a little different.

Finally the sobs came. I couldn’t control them. I didn’t know if they came from the
horrible sounds that had drifted my way from the fighting or the sound of my younger brother
hysterically yelling at them to stop. The only sound that was now coming from our darkened
house was the roar of my tears. My heart was shattering into pieces, and I didn’t know what to
do about it. The house was dark when I unlocked the bathroom door and staggered up the
stairs to my bedroom. Everyone was asleep.

My eyes slowly closed as I pulled the blankets tightly around me. I was thankful for the
sleep because maybe, somehow, when I woke up, this would all be a nightmare.

My eyes fluttered open at the sound of a knock on my door. When I didn’t answer, the
doorknob turned slowly, and the door slid open. I realized I wasn’t in a dream at all when my
grandma, a short, disproportioned lady with steely gray hair, slipped in. It seemed so odd for
her to wake me up when we had only met a few days before.

“Hon, you need to get up. We have some things to discuss.” She said as sweetly as
possible.

When I didn’t reply, I figured she would leave, but to my surprise, she stayed.

She spoke again, harsher this time, “Kayla, I’m serious. We have things we have to
do. Get up, now!”

I refused to look her in the eyes but reluctantly followed her down the stairs in the same
clothes I had been wearing yesterday.

She led me to the guest room where she had been sleeping and told me to begin
packing my things.

“No.” I countered.

“Yes, you are. You are moving in with me right away.”

“Why?” I asked, holding my ground.

Quietly, not daring to look at me, she said, “Because your step-father is not willing to
take care of you. He has a lot on his mind.”

My eyes lowered, and tears began to build ever so quickly. I turned and walked out of
her room and ran up the stairs as fast as I could. I slammed the door, locked it, and fell to the
ground. My heart sank to my toes at the thought of leaving. It wasn’t as if I liked my step-
father; I actually hated him, but it was my siblings. They needed me, and frankly, I needed
them. I screamed into one of my pillows and then began throwing things.

I was furious. I picked up picture frames and dropped them, shattering the glass
everywhere. I threw books at the wall and adored the sound of gravity pulling them to the
floor with a loud “thud.” I tried to destroy anything in my sight.

How could my mother do this to me? How could she desert me like this? Why was I the
one having to live with the woman she hated the most? How could my step-dad just kick me
out like this? What has happened to my life?

I was glad no one was home but my grandmother, because I didn’t want anyone near
me. They were all at church for the first time in a while, a place I refused to go.

I finally collapsed onto my bed, exhausted. My things were everywhere, some broken,
some just strewn out on the floor.
Over the next three weeks, boxes gathered in my room, and I had to say goodbye to my beloved brothers and sisters. I wanted none of this to happen, but I finally realized I had no choice.

My friends came to say goodbye but left only minutes after they came. There wasn’t much to say, especially because I had become a different person. I didn’t tear up as they left, and I didn’t return their tight grips as they hugged me and walked out the door. I was bitter and distant.

We made the road trip from Iowa to Colorado in rough silence interrupted by the muffled screams that came from the band, Disturbed, who I was listening to through my headphones. I unpacked and got settled into my new, small room in my grandmother’s outdated ranch style house.

Soon enough, it was time for me to start school. I didn’t care that it was a new school, since I didn’t plan on making friends, anyway. They would just eventually leave, and I wanted no part of that. The night before, my grandmother tried to break our spell of dead silence by asking if I was nervous or excited. It didn’t work. I didn’t reply, went to my room, locked the door, and went to sleep.

I woke up and got ready quickly but stayed in my room until the last minute. I could hear my grandmother scurrying around and making my lunch as if we even had a thread of a relationship.

“Kayla, the bus will be here soon. Get out here!” she yelled into my room from behind the closed and locked door.

“I know.” I said flatly.

The bus brakes squealed as I looked out my bedroom window. I grabbed my bag, unlocked the door and began to head outside. My grandmother was getting ready to yell about the bus but stopped when I walked out my bedroom door. She tried to hand me the lunch she had made. I pushed it away and walked all the way to the bus with her following me, climbed the steps, and sat in the very back seat.

My first week went by slowly. My teachers didn’t care if I was in their class or not, and I made absolutely no friends, which was exactly what I wanted.

My grandmother truly believed this is what she would have to live with until I graduated. She had no idea that every night in the shower I cried my eyes out. I cried for my mother, for my friends, and because I longed with all my heart to be someone else. I hated the person I had become.

After two more weeks of silence, my grandmother tried to pry at the iceberg that lay so thickly between us. She handed me a photo album. Before releasing her grip from the album she looked at me with stern eyes and said, “I’ll give this to you, if you to promise to go to church with me this Sunday.”

I was about to reach out and take the album, but I quickly dropped my hands and coldly said, “No.”

“It’s of your mother.”

That’s all she had to say. I grabbed the photo album, jumped off the ugly floral couch, retreated to the safety of my room, and replied, “I’ll go.”
I didn’t turn around to see the hurt look in my grandmother’s eyes. I needed that photo album. I needed to be by myself. I laid on my bed, and the minute I opened the worn book, tears spilled out of my eyes.

There was my mother. She was beautiful. Baby pictures, school days, new puppies, and her father’s funeral lined the pages. Then there were blank pages except for newspaper clippings of my birth announcement, her wedding announcement, and all my sibling’s birth announcements.

I studied every picture long and hard. I made sure I copied every detail of her into my brain so I would never forget her. All of a sudden, my heart was filled with complete fury. How could she leave me? Why was she only thinking of herself? What did I do wrong?

And then it hit me; like mother, like daughter. After my grandfather had died in a tragic car accident, she had turned to boys for love and solace. She was numb and felt alone. To somehow feel something, she slept around. Eventually, she got pregnant. My grandmother found out and threw my mother out on the street to live on her own.

That church is where all our problems began. It was the kind where you had to be perfect or you would go to hell. My mom got pregnant; therefore, she wasn’t perfect. Subsequently, she was thrown out of this house like a stray dog because my grandmother had asked her church “family” what to do. That was their answer. There was no way I was stepping into a place that had a part in killing my mother.

Early Sunday morning came way too quickly. My grandmother unlocked my door, opened my blinds, and threw my covers off.

“Get up.”

She knew I wouldn’t get up so she came back five minutes later. She stared at me a long time before she said anything.

“You promised me. I have given you a place to stay, and I ask for this one thing. I don’t know what to do anymore.”

Tears filled her eyes as she spoke, and for some reason, my heart went out to her. I got up, threw on some nice clothes and stood in front of the door. She came out of her room, all prim and proper. When she saw me standing there, she ran to hug me. I began to push her away, but as I fell into her plump, grasp I halfway melted. I pulled myself together, pushed away, and walked out the door.

We rode in the car for a while until we pulled up to a gigantic building. Mom had said that prison of a church was small and smelled like dated perfume and mothballs. This didn’t look anything like perfume and mothballs.

The huge building was cream colored and was built with modern architecture in mind. I was quite confused and started to ask, but she interrupted my thoughts with her answer.

“I switched churches after your mother died.” She looked at her feet while walking through the crowded parking lot.

“Why?” I asked softly.

“Because…” she answered.

I was about to let the silence fall back in its place between us. I was too curious though, “Why?”

“Because I…” she drifted off while I waited for more. “Because I knew the minute your mother died, I was wrong. I felt so guilty for what I did to her. I know what I did to her was my
decision, but the church had a big part in that. I couldn’t continue going to that place after what my ‘friends’ were beginning to say about her.”

“Oh...” I trailed off. I tried not to act like my heart was overwhelmed with thankfulness as I opened the big doors and walked into a place that was different from anything I had ever seen before. I thought churches were supposed to be aged, tiny places with old people and sleeping children lining every pew. I thought they were supposed to smell like three week old potluck food and a musty basement. This one didn’t.

Lights flashed all around the sanctuary and people smiled at me. I looked the complete opposite of what I was supposed to look like, and they were still smiling? My lips started to curl into a smile, but I quickly stopped myself. These people don’t actually care; this is all just an act.

We located some seats easily with the help of an older man who looked like he just might have had a little crush on my grandmother.

“Thank you, Stan.” She blushed.

“No problem, Naomi, anytime!” I almost joked with her but came to my senses. What was this place doing to me? The songs that started resembled a concert. I chose not to sing. I wasn’t going to sing to or about a God who had taken everything from me.

The songs ended, and the preacher walked to the stand. He propped up his iPad, which held his sermon notes, on a small table close to him, and I was impressed. He was wearing jeans. No three piece suit or even a suit jacket, but jeans and a polo.

I was having a really tough time not liking this place. I tried to stare off so I could put my mind elsewhere. I can’t like this place. I refuse to like this place. The preacher smiled and welcomed us. He began his sermon, and I looked at my cell phone to see how much time I would have to endure this.

“God hears you. He knows your pain. It’s okay to be hurt...” the preacher said with a tone filled with compassion.

It felt like he was looking right at me when he spoke those words. There were five hundred people in the church; I realized he wasn’t just looking at me. I tried to count the blonde curls of the woman in front of me so I wouldn’t have to focus on what he was saying.

He began to raise his voice, “You’re not alone in this pain. You have a big God who is here through your sorrow. He died to set you free of this guilt, hurt, chaos, and confusion...”

Counting the curls wasn’t working for me, and by the way my grandmother kept glancing over at me, I knew she was having the same issues. We both had trouble hearing that we could find a way to be healed. We were already beginning to feel so comfortable in our pain.

The passionate preacher continued to find words that tore into my heart. They cut deeper every moment they were suspended in the air. I tried hard to thicken the walls I had built around my guarded heart so I wouldn’t have to feel anymore. Every time I believed I could stare off into space and not listen to these truths about my life, the man in jeans would make another statement that applied directly to me. I wanted to know there was hope for my life, that my heart could somehow heal. For the first time, I began to believe in something greater than my pain.
From Angry Polar Bears to Daunting Tests
by Selina Kendall
Platte County High School

The other day, I found myself wanting to draw an angry polar bear. Right as I was about to start drawing a rather enraged polar bear in my studio art class, I stopped. The creative gears shuddered to a halt in my head, and I began to worry. *Wait, an angry polar bear? That's a bit weird. Oh man, what will other people think? Ugh, that's such a weird thing to draw! It's not normal. People won't like it! It's so unconventional.* Needless to say, I still haven't drawn my slightly irritated polar bear. Worry kept me from creating art, one of the things that (usually) gives me joy and helps me relax. Instead, I wondered at the conventionality of my idea. Looking back, I think, how ridiculous! Art isn't *supposed* to be conventional. So, why did my artistic moment become ruined? The answer is simple: school.

Yes, the glorious system of education that is supposed to help me get ahead in this world also happens to be the very same institution that makes me question my self-expression. I have had so many standardized tests and learning curves forced down my throat in the past thirteen years of my schooling, that I’ve lost more space for creativity in my head. The amount of pressure in my head from the sheer expectation of memorization of useless facts is comparable to the pressure of Old Faithful (which, no, I do not know the exact pressure of its force. I don’t plan on studying geysers as a career). Now perhaps my words fall on deaf ears, because what could I, a high school senior, possibly know about matters such as this? I have not done the scientific research; I do not have bar graphs and standardized tests to back up my words. But the fact that I am a victim of a relentless machine that destroys the creativity and dehumanizes the people within it should be more than enough reason to assert my validity. To justify the crackdown of more standardized tests and a tighter hold on classroom curriculum, we are told, “Oh, research shows that these tests will help us gain ground in the world! They show that our students are getting smarter!” But did anyone ever stop to measure the level of creativity along with the rising test scores? Did anyone ever check to see if perhaps individuality and imagination were being marred while seventy-five question tests were being jammed down the throats of reluctant students? It's been done, but not nearly enough to make a difference.

The fact that we don't really know where this information from research comes from anyways makes me question its validity as well. Did any one of the researchers who claimed the curriculum was improving the national school system ever once step into the shoes of a student who was actually being forced through the system? I don't think many "researchers" of this field can say that they wrote half of a seven page essay for an Advanced Composition class, took a ridiculously hard trigonometry test and assuredly failed it, spoke in a completely different language for an hour straight, knocked out a full-fledged acrylic portrait, struggled through half of a Shakespearean play, completed every single bit of their homework, went to musical practice for four hours, and then came home and showered, *all in one day.* That's just my schedule from only one day, and I know of others who had far more events in between than what I had. Now, you could ask, "Why put so much pressure on yourself? You don't *have* to do all of those things, like the musical or take three years of French," and you're right. I don't *have*
to. But I do. Because, if I don't, I won't get into my school's National Honor Society, which means I probably won't get nearly enough money for my college tuition, so I probably won't get to go to the right school that I want to because I can't afford it, and then I shall emerge from college with more debt than should ever be allowed on a twenty-four year old. Also, I like taking French and being involved with my school's musical. It keeps me sane after seven hours of a hectic school day that leaves me feeling more like a robot than an enlightened individual. John Taylor Gatto, a well-known teacher and librarian for almost twenty years, elaborates on this in his essay Against School in which he takes myths of education and wrestles them to the ground. He mentions how "we have been taught (that is, schooled) in this country to think of 'success' as synonymous with, or at least dependent upon, 'schooling,'" and he then denounces this myth by saying that "historically... this isn't true in either an intellectual or a financial sense" (154). He brings up enlightened individuals from our nation's history who never endured twelve years of monotonous tests and lesson plans, including George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln (153). Sure, they were educated individuals, but they are proof that standardized schooling isn't necessary for "success" in this world.

With all of our research, we're also not asking the right questions. We're asking, "How do we make these kids smarter?" rather than going to the actual kids and asking, "How can we teach you in such a way that works with you?" Not every student is going to need four years of math for their future career, just as not every student is going to need three years of a fine arts credit for their future career. I took an Honors Biology class my sophomore year, and although I found the class interesting, the only thing I can tell you that I remember from that class is that RNA makes up one half of DNA and I could probably list off parts of animal and plant cells. The reason why I've practically deleted everything I learned from that class? It doesn't pertain to me. I am not going to grow up to be a microbiologist or study the patterns of the genetic code. I want to be an artist. Nonetheless, I have only taken three art classes since my freshman year, because my schedule has been flooded with classes that I am required to take, and yet they have nothing to do with my future goals. I even had a Goals and Motivation class for a semester that counted as a P.E. credit. Apparently, as a teenager, I need to learn how to form goals and how to be motivated to do "stuff."

One day in my Goals and Motivation class, my teacher brought up the quote, "Perfection is what you are striving for, but it is impossible," and then he went on to say that we should strive for it anyways. This is what the school systems are searching for: a perfect curriculum that will educate its students and make the very best of the best, to set America right back at the top once more. But the problem with perfection is that it generally means high standards and a sameness that seeks to knock out any "imperfections", that is, deviations from the system. In her essay From Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum of Work, Jean Anyon analyzed five different types of schools. One of these schools that Anyon analyzed was the middle-class school, which is what I would generally classify my school as. Anyon stresses how generally in this type of school “work is getting the right answer” and the answer is usually “words, sentences, numbers, or facts and dates,” usually found in the book or given by the teacher (180). There is some flexibility in the search for answers, as students are expected to use deductive reasoning at times to figure out problems. However, the middle-class school closely mirrors my own in that its
curriculum focuses on the memorization of facts and ideas, rather than the understanding of concepts, and it also puts off creative assignments as just “for fun” (181). To me, this is frustrating as I've always believed that school is more than just “stor[ing] up facts in your head like cold storage – until you need it later for a test or your job,” but far too often that is exactly what my school has to offer me with education (182).

A major issue with all of these classes that are not tailored to their students is that we are being forced to memorized useless facts and statistics and formulas that some of us will most likely never use again. In his essay The Achievement of Desire, Richard Rodriguez discusses how he was the model “scholar boy,” starting out not speaking any bit of English and then rising to be a top student. He faced the separation of the two spheres in his life: his family and his schooling. Rodriguez mentions at one point when discussing the attributes of “scholar boy” that “the boy needs to spend more and more time studying, each night enclosing himself in the silence permitted and required by intense concentration. He takes his first step toward academic success, away from his family,” and this intense studying mirrors what students must face today (197). As a student, I am made to focus more and more on my studies and education because I’m really hoping to pass high school and get the heck out of here. But, as I dig in to study for tests and to complete essays and finals, I am tugged away from the spheres of my life that I love. I’d rather be working on my art, but instead I am unwillingly being turned into a “scholar girl” in order to achieve the “academic success” that is expected of me under the current schooling system. This is forced into me with government policies like the No Child Left Behind Act, which ensures that I’m going to get an education and by-golly, I better learn while I’m at it! Of course, this mindset hasn't gone unnoticed. A popular political cartoon by David Horsey shows a little girl trying to escape the conformity and monotony of tests and run away to a land of fun and P.E. while her teacher is trying to coax her back into “academic success” in order to not be left behind. The cartoon makes it pretty obvious that a standardized education system is not meant for everyone. Tests that are the end-all for grades at the end of the semester and the year are pretty overwhelming to students, especially those who didn’t even really care about the subject matter in the first place.

I've gone along ranting about the education system and how I don’t really care for it, but I’ve yet to actually put forth any way that this system can be improved. After doing a little research in my own backyard of going around and asking various teachers what they felt was the ideal education and how our schooling system differed from that, I received some pretty interesting answers. The one answer that stuck out to me most was: “The ideal education system is one where every student shows up wanting to learn. Every student wants to be at school, and we never have any tests. Of course, that’s Utopia, and it could never exist because not every student wants to show up and learn,” which is definitely true. However, this utopia could be achieved if perhaps the schooling system began to appeal to every range of student, not just the “scholar boys” and “scholar girls” that it has created. The standardized tests are especially hard on students, because they demand so much and expect that students all learn in the same way to reach similar end goals of getting the right answer. In his essay Idiot Nation, Michael Moore criticizes every angle of the American schooling system, from its illiteracy to the standardized tests being forced upon the kids. He mentions how the “politicians and education bureaucrats have created a national obsession with testing, as if everything that’s wrong with the educational system in this country would be magically fixed if we could just
raise those scores,” and he is correct (142). We need to focus on individual learning styles and group children according to their learning abilities. By doing so, then we can truly achieve a more successful educational system, perhaps a utopia where every student wants to be at school.

Now that people are aware that all this standardization isn’t really helping our country come out on top against countries like Germany or Japan, hopefully those who lead the education boards of America can begin to re-shape the system to where it works for everyone. Maybe then the creativity of students everywhere will be able to thrive, and they’ll have the heart to draw angry polar bears and whatever else they want.
On a warm July night in 2004, vibrant singing filled the hall, echoing over the passionate waves of harmony from the Chicago Symphony Orchestra at Ravinia. Deborah Voigt was dressed in a gold dress with a dark blue bolero jacket. Singing Act I of the famous opera music from Wagner’s “Walküre,” she effortlessly glided over the lush accompaniment of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra led by James Conlon. The president of Ravinia, Welz Kauffman, planned this night to be a stupendous musical concert of the Ravinia Festival. Voigt, a popular and acclaimed singer, should have brought in a full house. And, yet, when she gazed at the crowd engulfed in the passion of Wagner, the seats were half empty. “It’s a moral issue,” said Welz Kauffman. “There should not be anyone missing this. There are people who would really love this. How do we get to them?”

Indeed, that seems to embody the current alarm sounding throughout the Western classical music world. According to the 2008 Survey of Public Participation for the Arts conducted by the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA), the percentage of adults attending a public classical music concert has dropped from 12 percent in 2002 to 9 percent in 2008, a 25 percent decrease. This decline has been steady since the 1950s when the NEA first conducted this survey. All officially recognized fine art forms besides classical music, such as jazz, opera, theater, and ballet, have also faced a sharp decline in participation. Another concerning long term trend noted by the survey is that those who attend classical music performances are getting older. In 2008, 40 percent of classical music audiences were older than 55. Unfortunately, younger audiences were shown to attend fewer concerts than older ones. In fact, recently the number of 18-24 year olds who attend classical music concerts has been lower than any other age group since the 1960s. Quite simply, the participation in classical music has steadily dropped in America and does not promise a bright future in many activists’ opinions. The elegant Mozart sonatas or the passionate Brahms symphonies do not seem to captivate large numbers of people lately. Modern generations of people are considered to have lost interest in this traditional fine art form that has lasted for over a millennium. However, although many factors have contributed to the decline in participation for classical music performances, the main cause is the failure of classical music groups and institutions to adapt with the flow of American society. If classical music is to be preserved, orchestras need to change.

Classical music activists from all across the country frequently blame the US economy for causing the recent downfall of classical music. Economic conditions do have an impact on arts attendance. Consumer spending on performing arts admissions tracked closely with the trends in the US economy, which was very weak. The price of gas rose from $1.51 in 2002 to $3.00 in 2008, leading to reduced traveling from home to attend performances. Because music is seen by many as a form of entertainment, like movies and amusement parks, it is often cut out of home budgets during hard times. Even before the recession, however, the 21st century has marked hard times for classical music institutions. The oldest orchestra in the country, the Philadelphia Orchestra, celebrated its 111th birthday as well as filed bankruptcy this year. Likewise, numerous other big name orchestras around the country have faced budget cuts and
a decrease in demand.

But classical music has endured many economic downfalls throughout human history all over the world. A more significant factor for the seeming downfall of classical music lies in cuts to arts education in public schools. Susan Mayer, director of communications for the Lyric opera, was quoted for the *New York Times* one year ago, saying that older adult opera subscribers “almost invariably had some kind of exposure when they were kids.” She also adds that “times are very different from 20 years ago.” The reason classical music has been declining recently is simply because people of recent generations were simply not exposed to classical music during their childhoods as much as those of older generations. School and education is becoming an increasingly larger influence for children in the 21st century.

So, yes, classical music has been influenced by multiple factors, leading to a decrease in participation for live concerts. However, decrease in participation for classical music concerts does not correlate to a decrease of interest in classical music. In fact, although classical music concert halls and orchestras are declining, interest in classical music has not been sharply declining. What many people fail to realize is the effective shift of preferred media of Americans. The true cause of the decrease in participation for classical music performances is due to the constantly evolving American culture. It is the 21st century Western philosophical mindset of efficiency that has had the greatest contribution towards the downfall of art participation. The technological boom in Western culture has, in a sense, doomed live concerts. According to the National Endowment for the Arts, participation rates for low-cost, low-travel opportunities, such as watching or listening to performances over the Internet, rose in 2008. Today, we live in a technological society that is vastly different to American society 20 years ago. IPods allow individuals to hear music of their choosing anytime, anywhere they want. The desire for traveling to concert halls decreases dramatically with new technological advancements. With higher quality sound and video from innovations in technology, less people feel the necessity to endure traffic, parking, or even just a terrible concert.

While the National Endowment for the Arts announced its results as “disappointing,” one should look at them with a different perspective. The decline in public participation does not illustrate a decline in interest of classical music. The decline is a reflection of the evolving American culture in the 21st century. Many individuals in American society lament what seems to be the fall of classical music and the rise of pop, rap, and rock music. The true distinction between the two categories lies in the level of integration with American culture. Formal classical performances where individuals sit and are expected to watch the same famous masterpieces over and over again simply do not interest the common modern American young adult. Classical music has failed to achieve the same standard of attunement with society as rap and other music forms. Rap, with its very explicit ability to express feelings and emotions, is a much more appealing type of music to the complex society in which we live. Unfortunately, when young adults listen to the great works of Mozart, they do not feel any emotional connection. This lack of connection and technological boom marking American culture leads to the beginning decrease in participation of young adults. Meanwhile, those in society who have not conformed to the radical ideas and innovations of the 21st century, many of whom are in the older age groups, are generally more attracted to classical music performances than younger age groups.

What does this mean for classical music? It means that classical music is not dying but is
doomed to fade unless it merges along with Western culture. The main problem is that young adults are simply uninterested in classical music compared to any previous generation. Orchestras have to adapt, to implement other means of attracting audiences rather than formal performances. First, it is imperative that fine art music, especially orchestra programs, be mandated in school curriculum. It is the youth who dictate the future, not the elders. A bit of music when people are young motivates them later to continue their habit. Music is not an accessory that one can just cut; it is the thread of our culture, a leading form of expression for centuries. Today, the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra has already recognized this need. Their “Education Programme” allows thousands of children and teenagers to explore, play, and listen to music in community workshops. The San Francisco Symphony also provides extensive education programs by their Adventures in Music program, a free comprehensive music education program which introduces every elementary school student in the San Francisco School District to music from all over the globe. Next, orchestras and chamber ensembles need to change, again by adapting to the current Western culture. Unlike other forms of music, concerts have not changed at all over time (Mozart is always played like Mozart) and, unfortunately, do not have much flexibility to adjust. Classical music needs to expand its reach by extending its influence more into the community. Orchestras today focus too much on their summer festivals or evening concerts at big concert halls. Instead, they need to focus on having multiple community programs. After declaring bankruptcy, the Philadelphia Orchestra has tried numerous ideas to recover. One of the ideas that seemed to benefit them the most is their membership as part of the Free Neighborhood Concert Series. The program includes small-ensemble community concerts, school visits, volunteer work, and related events in specific neighborhoods. This encourages more people to be involved in music as well as advertises the orchestras to a more wide-reaching and personal extent.

However, if orchestras are determined to survive, it is imperative that they take advantage of the recent technological trend. The Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra has created what is called a Digital Concert Hall, where members can view past concerts, experience past Education Programme videos, watch exclusive interviews with top class performers such as Itzhak Perlman and Yo-Yo Ma, and even watch live concerts online via HD live streaming. Thousands have obtained memberships, and, thus, the Berlin Philharmonic has expanded the size of its audience. Unfortunately, classical music is losing interest due to the competition of a constantly growing number of other daily errands leading to less people willing to attend concerts, especially with free YouTube videos. Orchestras worldwide have been frustrated by YouTube for years. But they have seemed to find the perfect solution, by coming together to create the first collaborative online orchestra in 2009, the YouTube Symphony Orchestra. Attracting millions of viewers, the worldwide classical initiative strives to foster a sense of global online community and to facilitate musical thoughts and ideas between musicians all around the world. Through the YouTube Symphony Orchestra Program, the London Symphony Orchestra and the San Francisco Symphony have both garnered more attention and support from the classical music community. In order to save classical music, orchestras need to follow the Berlin Philharmonic, the San Francisco Symphony, and the London Symphony Orchestra by using the Internet to effectively spread classical music through other mediums besides live concerts.

Classical music is like an endangered animal. Rather than using the current technological
boom as a benefactor, too many classical music institutions are being hindered because most have not adapted their programs in twenty years. It is time to change; it is time for classical music institutions to bare their teeth, adapt to the Western trend for change and development, and to fight back by finding other means of attracting audiences rather than old-fashioned traditional concerts formatted hundreds of years ago. Michael Tilson Thomas, the music director of San Francisco Symphony, offers this statement when asked about the importance of classical music:

Classical music is a thousand year-old tradition that witnesses the human spirit. It has preserved the songs and dances of our ancestors and made them into a language that is equal parts thought and feeling. This language has been passed on from teacher to student and parent to child from generation to generation. We will explore new ways for music lovers of all levels to use technology, to discover how vast our tradition is, to create new work and learn from one another.

Classical music shows the development of our culture; it can be enjoyed with our eyes, ears, and mind. Maybe once we realize the importance of music, more institutions will work towards the preservation and spread of our culture in the classical music form. “There shouldn’t be anybody missing this. How do we get to them?” Welz Kauffman asked, desperate for a solution to save his orchestra and classical music itself from demise. We get to them with proper education, with direct involvements, but most importantly, we adapt and follow what literature, art, and other forms of human expression have already done: we implement the power of technology of the 21st century.
An Otter Disaster
by Paul Lackman
Blair Oaks High School

As I step out the front door into the cool, crisp November air, I realize just how much I love this time of year. From November to February, trapping the wild furbearers of Missouri will be the one thing on my mind. Looking for those perfect spots where I will strategically set my traps, the intense, hopeful moments of waiting to check these killing contraptions, and the exhilarating moment of approaching the beautiful, luxurious hide of an animal laying on the ground just waiting for me are all thrills of the game, the trapping game, a champion of seasons. From the slyest fox to the laziest possum, no creature is safe from my conibear kill trap, but the other weapon of choice is a much less fearsome tool. This trap, the foot-trap, once drew me in an ordeal that scared me so much, I now have a certain respect for the creature that wandered into my trap on that fateful day.

* * *

I had been trapping for a little over two weeks when I got news of some nuisance beavers in a creek close to our farm. Seeing as beavers were fifteen dollars a pelt and I had never caught one before, I decided to move my traps from the deep woods to this tree-lined, swampy creek. Unknown to me at the time, beavers were the least of my worries. With ten conibear-traps and five foot-traps, I explored the waterway with my chest-high waders, looking for a good place to set them. I noticed many trails leading from the muddy creek banks to the thick brush around the creek. Here, I set most of my traps, but when I came across an old hackberry tree, I knew I had hit the jackpot. A twisted, gnarled mass of roots sprang out of the creek bank and grew into a hackberry tree. At water level, there was an old, abandoned burrow running at an angle between the tree roots into the muddy bank. Having placed all my conibears, I thought to myself, these damn foot-traps better get the job done. Placing the trap into the hole and wiring it tightly to the base of the tree, I felt for sure I would trap some critters. As I headed for home, I could not help but think of the freezer full of hides I would have the next day.

Waking up the next morning, I knew it was cold. The irresistible pleasure of two heavy blankets and a warm bed discouraged me from dragging myself out and into the icy November morning to check my traps. Once up though, the excitement running through my body sent the blood pumping through my veins, enough to get me to step outside into the frigid weather. I jumped on the four-wheeler and headed to the creek, not knowing what was in store for me on this magnificent day. Once I reached my destination, I flew off the four-wheeler and raced to my first trap to find a huge surprise waiting for me. Nothing. A sense of dread wracked my body, and a feeling of disappointment almost made me want to quit, but I figured I might as well check the rest of my instruments of death. Trudging along, I see a bundle of fur near a conibear, and the lump in my throat vanishes a little. At least I won’t be headin’ home empty handed. My mood is lightened by the possum I caught. Even though it is only fifty cents, I now know this place has wildlife to offer. Rounding the bend, I look for my next trap, which is also a conibear, on the opposite bank. Not seeing it, I start to worry and get angry with myself, thinking, you dumb ass, you forgot to anchor the trap down, and now, not only do you have nothing, you lost one of your most valuable traps! I cross the creek, feeling like
an idiot, to search for the trap. As I get closer, I realize, wait a second, that trap is still wired to the tree. Where’s my trophy? I slowly pull on the wire and see that the trap has fallen in the water. I pull harder, and I see a broad snout with long white whiskers like nothing I have ever trapped before. Laying the trap and animal on the bank, I am at a loss for words. Before me is an otter. A rare, secretive creature I have never seen in the wild, much less trapped. I reach into my pocket and retrieve my cell phone. I have to call Ted. I try to keep my voice calm as he answers.

“Ted,” I say, “you ever got yourself an otter?”

Through the phone I hear his voice, “You gotta’ be shittin’ me!” he hollers, “I been trappin’ my whole life and ain’t so much as seen one.”

“What’re they worth?” I ask.

“A hundred forty bucks,” he comments, and my heart skips a beat, “but that was four years ago.”

As we continue talking, he mentions how otters will usually travel together in pairs. Too excited to pay any attention, I disregard this and give him a hasty, “See ya’ later,” so I can check my remaining traps. Little did I know, my day was far from over.

I head down the creek to my next set of traps. I look ahead and see no promising sign but continue on to make sure they are still set and good to go for the next night. Within five feet from that old hackberry tree, I stop dead in my tracks, and my blood runs cold as I hear the deep, throaty growl of some miniature devil. I stumble back, almost falling into the icy water, but I manage to catch myself. I look up, and the sight astounds me. I cannot believe my eyes. Before me is a pair of cold, hard eyes staring me down, daring me to come an inch closer. His back feet are resting in the water, his lean body tensed like a coiled spring, his front paw held securely in my trap. I have no idea how to go about this, so I crawl up the bank and grab hold of the wire fastened to the tree. I start to haul the otter up, along with the trap, which he does not like one bit. He bites at the wire and twists and turns, trying to escape from me. Eventually, he scrambles back down to the water and tries to flee down the hole in the bank, but his progress is halted by the strong wire. He stops and stares up at me with those fearsome eyes. I back off to find a better way to subdue this terror.

Thinking quickly, I run back to the four-wheeler and grab a string of wire. I fashion a noose out of it and run back to tangle with the otter. Once again, I crawl up the bank. I lower the noose toward the otter’s head, and he bears his glistening fangs, sharp and lethal as steak knives. A sharp twist puts the noose around his neck, and I swiftly pull the otter up and out of the hole but not before his fierce fighting pays off. He escapes from the noose and is now only held captive by the foot-trap. With lightning quick speed, he sinks those formidable fangs into the toe of my rubber boots, nicking the skin and really pissing me off. I kick him as hard as I can, and he flies farther up the bank away from the tangled roots. Thinking aloud to him now, I give this otter a piece of my mind, “I had enough of yer’ shit, otter! I’m gonna’ kick yer’ ass!” I grab a log, about the size of a baseball bat, crack him between the eyes with it, and he goes down. Cautiously, I walk up and inspect him. The hide is not damaged, and he is still breathing. The next thing I notice sends a shiver up my spine. He is only caught by his toe! I unclamp the trap and reset it farther up his leg. For precaution, I also put the noose around his neck to keep him from escaping after I finally had him captured. I carry him to the four-wheeler, and for the first time, I notice the dense fur and soft coat of this spectacular animal. I
think to myself, how can such a cute animal be so menacing? I tie the noose firmly to the rack of the four-wheeler, so the otter is just hanging there, and I go back to reset the trap, thankful the fight was over.

Upon returning, I hear a sputtering and a gurgling sound. No way is that some bitch still alive! Jumping the creek, I see the otter writhing and twisting in the air trying to escape. By now, I am shaking like a leaf. This thing just won’t die! I am so scared of this demonic otter that I no longer care for its feelings; I just want it dead. I take another log and bust him right between the eyes. He finally lies still, and I know I have won the wicked battle between me and this fierce, satanic creature.

I call up Ted one more time, and before I can say a single word he asks, “Ya’ got the other un’ didncha’?”

I reply, “Yeah, and I hope I never catch another in a foot-trap as long as I live.”
Whispered words

by Janelle Langner

Platte City Middle School

Autumn

"Ugh!" I yell in frustration as another wad of paper hits the rim of the full trashcan and tumbles off. It's going on midnight. Mom will kill me if I'm up much later, but it's not my fault Mrs. Myers had to give us a topic to write a poem on. "Worries," I mumble the word over and over. The words for my poem dance in my head as I quickly jot them down.

As I roam the hall to homeroom, everything seems blurry. I rub my drowsy eyes and immediately run into something, or someone. I look up to find Blake, the biggest jerk in all of Northwood High. "Watch where you’re going!" he yells, slamming his big arms onto mine, making me drop everything I own. I scramble to the ground as my yellow dress drapes behind me. "Beeeeeeeeep!" Gosh darn it! I'm late. Mrs. Myers hates that. I scoop as much as I can into my arms and run. As I enter, everyone is already in their seats, and I quietly take mine. For some reason Mrs. Myers isn't in the room yet, but as soon as I finish the thought, she comes in.

"Class, get out your poems!" she says in a rather harsh tone. I look through everything I have, but it's gone.

Trent

"Whoa! Dude, what the heck?!" I yell as I slip just as a hand touches my back to catch me. Jake, my best friend, draws his hand back as I regain my balance. On the floor behind me is a wrinkled piece of paper. As I turn it over, I see it's a poem, written in neat bubbly handwriting. The name at the top says Autumn. I have never met her, but the poem is beautiful, and now I want to.

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Suddenly, I’m asking everyone if they know this "Autumn." Apparently she isn't very popular.

"Hey, Trent!" Jake yells from behind and catches up.

"Hey," I say.

"Any luck finding this Autumn chick?" he asks curiously.

"Nope, been looking for two days, no luck," I respond. Just then a girl hops in front of me. She has dark brown hair with slight curls, blue-green eyes and a few freckles on her nose. Her blue shirt and skinny jeans emphasis her smallness; she just barely peeks my shoulder.

"Did you say that you were looking for Autumn?" she asks.

"Um... yeah. Do you know her because I found this poem with her name on it?" I pull out the poem.

"Yeah I know her, probably better than anyone else." She extends her small hand. "Can I have my poem back now?" she puts the other hand on her hip.

"You’re Autumn?" I feel stupid even though I know I shouldn’t. I give her the poem after she gives a slight nod of the head. Jake at this time pats my shoulder and heads to class. "I'm Trent. I'm glad I finally found you. That poem is amazing." I babble on like an idiot.

"Thanks, so you have a taste for writing and poetry too?" she gives a barely formed smile.
“Yeah. Where are you going next?”
“Music.”
“Cool, that’s on my way,” I say and walk her to class. By the time she gets to her room, we have plans to see each other tomorrow.

**Autumn**

As I walk in the room after saying goodbye to Trent, I hear giggles. My bestie, Alyssa, is smiling helplessly as me. Anna, Mikayla, and Erika are giggling away. I walk over with a confused expression. “What’s so funny?”

“Who. Was. THAT?” Alyssa asks with her eyes 3/4 out of her head. “He is cute! What are YOU doing talking to a guy like THAT?” Alyssa bursts into giggle. I giggle back in a sarcastic way then take a deep breath and sigh. “Ha-ha, seriously though,” Alyssa comes back, “ who was that?”

“His name is Trent; he’s a year older than us. He found my missing poem, and we’re going to see each other tomorrow. Any more questions?”

“AW! Autumn has a boyfriend!” they squeak in unison.

“I do not! Stop being so immature!”

Alyssa puts her arm around my shoulders. “Too bad you are going to die soon.” She wipes an imaginary tear. “Such a tragic love story!”

“Oh yeah! You have that appointment tonight to see if you have that one thing.” Erika and Anna have a look of remembrance.

“Ha-ha, yeah, I’m sure I don’t. My mom is just freaking out over nothing.” I say. They all nod in agreement, and we take our seats and eighth hour begins.

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School the next day is torture. I want to skip, but they have to know that unless a miracle happens, I will die soon. The thought runs through my mind again and again, and I walk like a zombie until I run into, of course, Trent. “Are you okay?” he asks a little too worriedly. The thought runs through my mind again, and I burst into tears, falling to my knees. Trent gets me back on my feet and calms me down enough to tell him. I don’t want to tell him, but what choice do I have after the scene I just made? When I’m done explaining, he freezes. I turn to walk away, but he grabs my arm and pulls me back to my spot. He opens his mouth to say something but Anna, Mikayla, Alyssa, and Erika show up and freak out. I look down and realize that his hand, which was on my arm, has slid down to my hand and I’m holding it. I blush but I don’t let go. I don’t want to.

“Oh! How was your appointment?” asks Alyssa. Tears swell in my eyes again, and I nod my head. They all go pale. Alyssa nods toward Trent who now also has tears in his eyes (which is surprising because we just met) and says, “Does he...” her voice cracks on “he,” and she trails off. I only nod my head again.

From there, everything is a blur, but I know that after the girls ran off crying, trying to keep their mascara in place, I find myself in Trent’s arms. I may have just met him, but it feels like I have known him forever.

**Trent**
I hold and hush Autumn, but I can’t help but cry myself. I like her. I really do. I feel as though we have known each other for years.

The bell rings to go to class, so we slowly walk hand-in-hand to our first hours. The whole day is a blur, and I don’t remember anything any teacher said. I can only think of Autumn. I draw pictures of her or what she reminds me of. I build a small art gallery. All of it for her.

Autumn

As weeks go by and turn into months, I find myself often at the hospital. When I’m not, Trent and I spend as much time as possible together. He is my most frequent visitor at the hospital. The nurses know him by name, and at the front desk he is greeted automatically and told the updates without even asking. We hold hands, and I share new poems I write. That’s another thing I have been doing now, writing more poems. He shows me pictures he draws; I have learned he is a very talented artist. As I get worse, his visits become more frequent until he is there every day for most of the day. He is the only one who can make me laugh anymore.

My eighteenth birthday is spent at home with the four girls, Trent and Jake. It is mostly a talking session, and Trent is, of course, the last to leave.

Trent

While I’m walking, my phone rings. I pull it out and see it’s from the hospital. The doctor says that she is getting worse. I find a teacher and quickly explain. Before I go, I run to my locker and grab my mini art gallery. I get in my car, and within thirty minutes, I’m by her side. I grab her hand, and her eyes open. Her smile is so weak it frightens me. I hear the steady beeping of the heart monitor. We stare into each other’s eyes, and I know I don’t have much longer to have her. The doctor says it could range from minutes to months, but it’s not likely she will make it.

I tremble as I hand her the packet. “I made this for you.” She carefully flips through the drawings and smiles at every one of them. She puts the packet in her lap and grabs both of my hands, intertwining our fingers. I choke down tears that threaten my already burning eyes.

“I love you,” she whispers just loud enough to where I can understand. She lets go of my hands and reaches under her pillow and pulls out a folded piece of notebook paper. She touches my cheek. “Don’t cry.” Her eyes close, and her chest stops moving up and down in a steady rhythm. Seconds later a long beep exits the monitor. I begin to weep but continue to hold her hands. Eventually I stand up and plant a small kiss on her still warm lips. As I exit, a nurse comes in. I glance at her with red eyes and proceed into the long hallway. Only then do I open the piece of paper.

A poem written in neat bubbly handwriting sits before my eyes. My tears, that I thought were dried out, return. The words flood my mind as I drive home, remembering.

“Take my hands, and close your eyes, and I will whisper my words. No matter how far away I am, remember my true distance. You are a part of me, you always will be.
We were made as puzzle pieces, fitting perfectly together. With your hand in mine, we face the world, taking steps together as one. As you live, remember who you are and how much I love you.”
The ivory flakes gently drift through the air, twirling in the wind’s soft breath, blanketing the ground in silence. The sun had long since sunk beneath the horizon, replaced by a myriad of stars, dotting the inky canopy. The moon hovers tenuously in the twilight firmament, bestowing a dim light upon the land. Chilling fingers entwine with his, and a sigh escapes his lips.

“Do not sigh,” a velvety voice coos. “Enjoy the snow, if only for a short time, love.”

“It’s not snow,” he whispers, pulling away from his female companion. “It’s not snow.”

“I know,” she says quietly, closing her eyes. She pulls her shimmery cloak tighter around her thin frame. “Sometimes you must lie to yourself. Sometimes you must lie to keep your sanity. So for now, it is snow.”

He slowly shakes his head, wrapping his arms around the woman. He burrows his nose in her silky hair, breathing in the light scent of jasmine—musky and exotic, yet gentle and calming. “How can you say that? How can you pretend the ashes of the innocent are snow? How, Madel—”

“Perhaps it is because I know my time is short. I know I won’t remain here much longer. No one will,” she murmurs, gazing across the desolate landscape. The moon’s translucent fingers shine from the heavens, reflecting off of the ashes strewn across the ground—an entire void of what once was. “Tomorrow will leave nothing in its wake. All will cease to exist. Why shouldn’t I enjoy one last moment of peace?”

“We can try to stop this. We can stop the pain and suffering—“

“We chose our sides long ago. You cannot rewrite history, Alistair,” she whispers grimly, brushing back a strand of his ebony hair. “We will get what is due—nothing more, nothing less.” She lightly touches his arm. “Please, enjoy the snow one last time. Enjoy the armistice while it lasts. I fear we won’t have the pleasure once we leave this world.”

He presses his lips together, allowing himself to become swallowed in the silence, if only for a short time. The final battle will take place tomorrow, wiping the world of all its inhabitants. A global cleansing, his father used to say to him after reciting the old stories of the previous realm—fables nearly forgotten in the tongue of his people. It will destroy the entire world, just as prophesized. The oracle had said the corrupt will gain power and force the land into war. In the end, nothing will be spared. Nothing.

“Ah, there you are my boy,” a deep, bellowing voice proclaims. “Alistair, my prized jewel.” His eyes widen as he drops his arms from his dearest’s waist. He slowly turns to face the voice, genuflecting.

“My liege,” he whispers, nodding. His eyes trail to the man in front of him—seemingly larger than life, his silken cloak billows in the gale, ashen flakes whirling around his figure. Alistair rises from his knee once given the nod. “To what do I owe this pleasure?”

“Mhm, ‘tis beautiful, isn’t it? The ashes, blowing in the wind,” the king muses, wrapping his robe closer around his bulky frame.
Silence trails the statement, broken by the king’s exasperated sigh. “I have a question, Sir Alistair,” he says, his fingers brushing against an unseen item hidden within the folds of his cloak.

“Yes, my liege?” he asks, his fingers sweeping past hers. He quickly wraps them in his own, like a mother embracing her child—warm, protective, loving.

The king’s gaze wavers upon the two lover’s hands; a sly smirk lights up his face. Though, there’s something underneath it—pain? Sorrow? “Just what would you risk to see our operation a success?”

“Sire, I don’t—“

The king launches himself at the girl standing beside Alistair, pinning her arms against her side. He pulls a dagger from the folds of his cloak and holds it against her pale throat. “Just what I said—what would you risk for the success of tomorrow?”

“You can’t do—“

“I can’t do what? Kill my daughter? I assure you Sir Alistair, I can.” The king smiles once again, his eyes glittering with a hint of madness... and confliction. He presses the wicked blade harder into her pastel neck, a thin line of crimson gathering at the touch.

“Madeleine,” Alistair whispers hoarsely, staring earnestly into her brilliant azure eyes. They sparkle like a midnight cenoté, and oddly enough, show no fear, as if she has accepted defeat.

“Tell me, would you sacrifice my daughter for our success?” the king asks once again, letting loose a hearty laugh. The stiletto glints in the pale moonshine as the precious cerise liquid flows from the wound.

Alistair’s eyes narrow, and he grits his teeth. He tenses and whispers, “Over my dead body,” then launches himself at the blue-eyed princess. The king’s eyes widen, and he quickly drives the wicked knife into his daughter’s tender flesh. Her mouth opens as blood seeps out, and Alistair catches her in his arms as the king flees, dropping the dagger as he goes.

Alistair briefly hears the sound of a cannon fire as he gazes down at the beatific façade of his lover. “Madeleine,” he wails, tears falling from his eyes, rolling down his cheeks. He presses his hand on her neck, hoping to stop the bleeding.

“The snow,” she whispers, her eyes clearly seeing something other than that in front of her. “So beautiful... so... beautiful.”

“Madie, I love you,” Alistair whispers, stroking her pastel cheek. “I love you so much, I—“

“The light, Al,” she chokes, spitting up a globule of blood. “It’s so bright. Come with me...”

“Madeleine...” he stutters. Her ragged breathing stops and her body becomes still. A small smile graces her lips, as if to embrace the new world—or perhaps to reassure her lover. A tear drips from Alistair’s nose as he closes her eyes one last time.

More cannons sound, and gunfire breaks out. Has midnight fallen across the land? A loud thump sounds, and he slowly turns. A short ways away, barely visible through the thick blanket of ash, lies the form of the king—the murderer.

“Help me, boy,” the loud voice demands. “I’ve been shot. Help your king. Help your master.”
Alistair frowns, but makes no indication of rising from Madeleine’s side. He gently brushes back a strand of her glossy raven hair and bends over to kiss her forehead.

“I said help me! I command you to help me!” the king shouts.

Alistair lets a small laugh escape his lips—a laugh not unlike the king’s—a laugh laced with madness, yet a sense of utter hopelessness—a laugh whose owner is truly alone in this world. “Evil deserves no aid,” he says lightly, turning away from the king. He shuts out the dying man’s screams, the sounds of approaching gunfire—all sounds completely—and instead focuses on the ashes falling from the heavens. Or rather—the snow. He owes himself the pleasure of peace; after all, he probably won’t see it again.

A minuscule blue butterfly gently bobs across the bleak sky, its wings the very color of Madeleine’s eyes. Alistair smiles at the brave little comrade and holds out his hand for it to land. The butterfly takes its place on his finger, and the two of them quietly wait. Soon it will all be over. Soon he will join his dear Madeleine. After all: Ashes, Ashes, we all fall down.
Dear Henry,

I admit, it's been a while since we've last spoken. I almost forgot about you. Almost. Memories fade with time, and when they did, I forgot your teachings. I gave in. The mindless self-indulgence of modern life hit me like a tsunami. I was enveloped in it. Every night, it was Facebook, texting, TV, and music. Sometimes, I would do all of those at once and even throw homework in there. But I remembered, Henry. I remember what we decided.

Unfortunately, it took a three-day, fourteen-mile, primitive hike for me to remember. “The Pike's Peak of Missouri,” it's called by some. Taum Sauk Mountain. To some of the Boy Scouts, the hike was a walk in the park; to others, mostly the younger ones, the mountain seemed as tall as Everest. To me, it was neither and, in some ways, both. The hike itself was grueling and easy, but it became more than just a hike; it became an exploration.

I didn't make my find on the way up though. In fact, I didn't explore at all on the way up, and I missed all of the scoutmasters' nature talks. He pointed out edible berries, poison ivy, and the tree that can be used to make root beer, sassafras. If I had paid any attention to him, I would have loved the hike. It probably would have reminded me of our nature hikes. But it didn't.

Instead of admiring the scenery around me, I was distracted by my backpack. It was huge, like a bathtub strapped to my back. And worse, it was a full bathtub. Nearly two gallons of pure, crystal clear water trapped in nine plastic containers weighed me down. Combined with my basic hiking gear, the weight was oppressive. Halfway up the mountain, a friend of mine, Quinn, who only brought four water bottles, sped ahead of me. As I watched, he picked berries, jumped over rocks, and weaved under hanging branches, while I was behind him, swinging under the weight of extra water, a sloshing sound with every step. One time, he looked back at me, smiled, and motioned for me to walk faster.

“[name]! You brought too much water, I usually never pass you,” he joked. I laughed and asked him how he knew. “I heard it,” he shrugged and turned around. I sloshed another step. Well, at least I won't run out like last time, I thought. But that didn't comfort me much, not when it felt like I was carrying the whole of Walden Pond on my back.

For a while, the weight only grew heavier. Modern life's worries crept into my bones alongside fatigue, adding to the weight. Soon, my mind was racing. I don't want to be here; I don't want to be here; I have better things to do: student council meeting amnesty international meeting physics homework Key Club meeting; calculus is so hard I have to study. Study. Study. I have to go home. What about my friends, my girlfriend; I miss them; I miss Facebook TV my phone. This pack is so heavy. So much to do, not enough time, so much, so much, I can't be here. I need timetimetime.

I had a stroke. I died. I remember seeing a clearing ahead of us, full of light. Somebody pointed and yelled, “We're nearing the top!” I smiled and let the light hit me. The sun was warming, and I felt a cool breeze through my sweat. I looked up and saw a curved path through
the tall grass. For a while, my legs moved independently from my mind as I watched the line of heads and backpacks snake along the path.

Five minutes, or maybe an hour, passed and we settled under the shade of a few trees on the mountain top. I let my backpack fall and slumped onto a flat rock. I reached into my pack and grabbed a new water bottle. My fingers twisted the cap, and I drank deeply. As I drank, I watched the line of the water descend slowly down the bottle. It tasted so pure. So simple. I needed it at that moment. Not wanted, but needed. And with every drink I took, I felt the water dissolve the impurities of my mind. Facebook? Don't need it. Gulp. TV? Don't need it. Gulp. Texting? Don't need it. Gulp. After two bottles, I got my fill. There were five bottles left. Some of the other scouts needed water, so I handed them three of mine. No one wanted the rest. I slipped one bottle into my side pocket for the way down, took the remaining one into my hand and unscrewed the cap. I wanted to drink it, Henry. I did. But I couldn't. It seemed so unnecessary. I stared at it for a moment, not knowing whether I should force it down my throat or consciously choose to burden myself by putting it back. The water is so pure, I thought. So natural. So clear. I noticed the light shining through the water and became aware of the plastic cage surrounding it. It confined the only purity I knew. It forced shape onto something naturally shapeless, and eventually, it would contaminate it with deadly carcinogens. I realized this plastic jail cell is a product of our modern society. It's borne from our need to control, to corrupt, and to complicate anything simple, anything pure. Just like our indulgent technology, it takes away from simplicity, confines it in plastic, and complicates it by putting brands and labels on it.

The water is so pure, I thought. So simple. I had to release it.

I tipped the bottle over and watched the water slip out of bottle. I remember the gleam it had as it splattered on the rock. I felt elated then, joyous even, and I didn't know why.

Looking back, I realize that I had remembered our decision. I wasn't wasting the water, I was freeing it. Just like how I would go on to let go of five different extra-curricular clubs and focus on the one that mattered: Key Club. Just like how I let go of all the fair-weather friends in my life to focus on the friends and family that really mattered. Just like how I would let go of my Facebook and TV addiction and finally take control of my life, regaining the purity and simplicity I thirsted for.

It was in that moment that I remembered our decision.

"I went to the woods because I wished ed to live deliberately... I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life...To put to rout all that was not life, and not, when I had come to die, Discover that I had not lived."

I won't forget Henry. I never will.

Always,

[first name, last name]
Beauty versus beast

Dear unborn child,
I dread the day that I will tell you about how the innocence you will be blissfully born into will not last forever. You will not always believe in a prince in shining armor or the idea of him saving you from your wicked mother, (and sometimes you will think I am the worst).
But remember one day I will have to let you slip through my open tentacles where I have been trying to keep you close.
I promise you:
I will never steal your voice.
I will, however, sit you down in our broken down kitchen from which you have always wanted to escape and tell you a story of heart break, lost tears, and a fatherless child.

You won’t listen to my warnings of staying away from the frothing black surface, because you are ‘too cool’ for your own mother, and you’ll have your own “land” friends and a forbidden boyfriend that I will not approve of, because I “JUST DON’T UNDERSTAND,” but Pocahontas, you are my first and only child. Your mother has walked on earth, has been with boyfriends who stole her only set of rugged lungs.
Dear unborn child, the inconvenience of memory summons my prince back from
his fiery pit; like Hades
he would dangle exit signs by my life thread
over the pools of stolen souls
that moaned and mourned beneath him.
Dear unborn child,
He made breathing as simple in air
as it is in sloshing jello.
Bandits truthful only to him,
rode up on startling white horses,
stealing my only set of chapped lungs.
I belonged to the prince of my dreams.
My sanity became the strings strung tight
in the simple smooth oak piano
in his darkest room.

Seeing the faults in such a gorgeous prince never
was as easy as finding the faults in myself.
The smell of his breath as it screamed in my chilly face
that I’d never be
his everything.
But all I could see were the reasons he left
protruding from my once virtuous body.
My eyes betray the truth
to my mom, dad, sister, best friends,
while my mouth spoke the lies:
“He wasn’t responsible for this bruise;
No, Mom I want to have his child.”
I could only glance at myself
in glass mirrors that shattered as he slammed the perfect door.
I didn't know who I was without him.
Who was I without him?
Without him?
I fooled myself,
Kept telling myself that I was just misreading the exit signs.
I thought I was dying
with his words raped into my mind and
remembering that he
gave me a child that,
trust me,
I was never ready for,
by forcing himself into the corner of my
closed bedroom mind.
And one day,
Father, in all his
shining lights, snapping like
pines off of trees,
snatched me by the ears and pulled
my head out of my ass and made me
realize as I choked down some chicken soup
(the first thing I thought I’d eaten in a million years)
that the prince gave me the best thing:
a chance to raise a...
Dear unborn child,
I’m telling you this story now,
before you get that princess mindset
that no one will ever hurt you
because you are one of God’s
most precious creatures,
you are mighty,
and you are beautiful,
before you lose the ability to
hear the comfort of the calming ocean rocking you
as you listen to the
th-th-thumping of
the only heart that will beat
just for you.
Understand that sometimes the
oneswhohurt,
the oneswhocry,
and the oneswhoareabouttodie,
just need a change in perspective:
God will not give you more than you can handle.
Trust in Him.
He has yet to let your mother down.

Lost-Stolen Child

I stopped playing on the playground,
when the muses started to hide from my fingertips,
as I tried to advance into
the god forsaken future.
The inconvenience of memory
summoned back demons
who broke
just one
of my stone wings
with the tip of their wasp nest words;
as they whistled merrily;
as they slammed the door for the last god
damn time;
as they reminded me that sometimes I
let my sentences run on and that I sometimes
get lost in a crowd and that
no one cares about,
changing the future because everybody's
stuck in the past.
I never let go of the yellow slides
I was doomed to sit underneath.
I only speak damaged graces,
pretending they’re the word of God,
pretending the future can save us,
pretending as I pulled the sweater
(the one you gave me the first time you made my skin cry),
and I wrapped it closer to my sides,
trying to keep the fierce cold
of my insides from escaping
in a dead silent shriek-----
through the gaping hole existing,
not only in my broken back,
but in my invisible future.
Light exclaimed from my hinged
red lips,
as I screamed
“I don’t want a future!”
blood frothing over the side—
I emerge
shiny, crumbling, molten pink.
And you. You cannot touch this.
I will not scream.
I am new.
I stopped playing merry-go-round,
when I was thirteen,
and the angels stopped singing.
I lost my wings.
My Mamaw  
by Kendall McEntire  
Blair Oaks High School

I had just turned thirteen the summer before eighth grade. Mom, my sister, and I drove from Bixby, Oklahoma, to the cute, little town of Paris, Texas. The drive was way too long, and by the time we got there, we were glad to get out of the car. As I walked in the door of my great grandmother’s house, I noticed that I was being escorted by two huge, creepy cockroaches. I later learned that the house had been taken over by the pests. We got inside and hugged Mamaw, glad to see her. As always, her short, thin, pepper colored hair was curled, and she was wearing red pants with a gray blouse. It was evident by the nasty smell that her Chihuahua, Tiny, had been using the house as his bathroom. My sister, Kaylan, and I sat on the couch, exhausted from the trip. After cockroaches started crawling on us, we decided that we were safer standing. Mom was helping Mamaw get her things packed while Kaylan and I were looking around at the figurines Mamaw had made. There were several of German people dancing. Our favorite figurine was a grand horse carriage that sat on top of the 50 year old television. We grudgingly went to bed that night, afraid of the roaches crawling on us in our sleep.

After a restless night, we awoke that morning, got the car packed with all of Mamaw’s ancient, green suitcases, and headed back to Oklahoma. As soon as we got there, we started getting Mamaw settled. My parents moved upstairs to Kaylan’s room, because the only room accessible to Mamaw was the master bedroom on the main floor, and Kaylan moved into the guest bedroom. Getting Mamaw unpacked was a breeze that hardly took the day. What was more difficult was the major lifestyle change we all had to adjust to.

I was in my room when I heard my mom laughing, so I went downstairs to see what was going on. Mamaw had Life Alert and needed a landline for it to work. “We’ll go to Wal-Mart tomorrow and get you a phone,” my mom told Mamaw. They went back to unpacking, and Mamaw pulled out her late husband’s electric razor.

“Kandy, we don’t need to get no phone, I got one right here!” Mamaw exclaimed. Mom laughed and told her, “That’s Granddaddy’s razor!” Mamaw looked at the razor, realizing what it really was, and said, “Well, shit!” and threw the electric razor across the room. I arrived just in time to see her throw it. Mom and I just laughed. I was in the kitchen when I heard Mamaw say, “Kandy, look! I got a telephone right here!” This was my first encounter with Alzheimer’s. It was also the moment I realized that we were really in for a ride that would change all of us forever.

It always warmed my heart to come outside of school and see Mom and Mamaw waiting for Kaylan and I. As soon as we got in the car, Mamaw would ask, “How was your day, Sug?” I always replied with the usual, “It was fine. How was yours?” She also loved asking, “Well! Did you learn anythin’ worth the tellin’?” I always tried to think up some useless fact I had recently heard to tell her.

Every day was pretty much routine. Dad went to work, Kaylan and I went to school, and Mom stayed home sewing and taking care of Mamaw. After school, Mom and Mamaw would pick Kaylan and I up. At home, I stayed on the computer doing nothing important, and Kaylan
played mostly in her room or sometimes with Mamaw. When Mom came to a stopping point in her work, she would start making dinner. Mamaw tried desperately to help and Mom tried to find little tasks for her to do. Mamaw had cared for someone her whole life, and not doing anything was really hard for her.

Dinner was interesting at our house. We have been interested in trying new and sometimes strange foods. Mamaw had lost a lot of weight, and her dentures didn't really fit anymore, which made it difficult for her to chew anything tougher than a baked potato. Her solution to her chewing problem was to chew the food a little bit then spit it in her napkin and throw it under the table. Our dog quickly became very attached to Mamaw and didn't leave her side much. There were several evenings when we would leave the table with stains on our pants from Mamaw throwing chewed food under the table. No one ever said anything to her about it, as to not embarrass her.

My mom liked to do work out videos in the mornings. One Saturday when we were all home, Mamaw decided to try some of the exercises with Mom. Kaylan and I were watching the hilarious scene of Mom and Mamaw working out together, and just when we thought it couldn’t get any funnier, it did! They started doing leg lifts and every time Mamaw lifted her leg we would hear her flatulate. This happened several times, and we were all roaring with laughter. Mamaw was laughing so hard she flopped onto the couch and couldn’t move. We still laugh about it, definitely one of the funniest memories of her living with us.

In late October, we learned that we would be moving to Missouri and had to make some big decisions. Would we take Mamaw with us? Where would she go if we didn’t? I didn’t know what was going to happen, and to be honest, I was scared. We spent Thanksgiving in Arkansas with my grandparents, and Mamaw stayed there with them until after Christmas. It was a nice break, especially for my mom. It was also a kind of trial to see if she could live with my grandparents after we moved. My grandpa has several health problems, and it was too difficult on my grandma to take care of him and Mamaw. After lots of long family talks, we decided it was time for Mamaw to move into assisted living.

My grandma, mom, and I spent a weekend touring different assisted living facilities and some nursing homes. We finally came upon one facility that we immediately knew was the one. The owners and employees were so friendly, nice, and helpful. The facility itself was also very nice, clean, and smelled good which was very important to us. We also picked out a nursing home so that when the time came, it wouldn’t be so overwhelming.

When Mamaw was told that she would be moving into assisted living, she was very upset. “You just wanna dump me off and f’get ‘bout me!” she said over and over. It was a hard day moving her in. We took all her clothes, big butterfly paintings she made, and a lot of family pictures. My grandparents visited her multiple times a week, but she still felt like she had been dumped off.

A year passed, and everything seemed to be going great. Then, the owners of the assisted living facility called and told us that Mamaw had tried to run away; it was time for her to move into a nursing home. She still had enough of her mind left to know what was going on, and she was really upset about it. My grandpa, mom, and I took her to the nursing home and showed her to her room. I stayed there with her while my grandpa and mom went to get the rest of her belongings at the assisted living facility. That’s when trouble started. Mamaw and I were sitting in the main area trying to make friends with some ladies when Mamaw just started
bawling. She kept saying, “Yens just wanna f’get bout me” and “I just wanna go home to Mama and Daddy. They’s gettin’ old and need me to take care of em’.” Her parents had passed nearly four decades earlier. I didn’t know what to do. It took all of me not to break down and cry with her. I did my best to show her how much I loved her and comforted her. My effort seemed useless.

It took about a week for Mamaw to forget about the move, and everything was fine again. The summer before my sophomore year we spent a lot of time in Arkansas with my grandparents, so we all got to spend lots of time with Mamaw at the nursing home. I liked to paint her nails while I was there. “Don’t mind my ugly fingers,” she would say. Her knuckles looked like giant marbles, and her fingernails were worn from years of hand washing dishes.

The Saturday after Thanksgiving, Mom and I went to visit Mamaw. When we walked in she was waiting on her lunch in the cafeteria. Mom came up behind her and hugged her as I stood aside, waiting my turn. Then I saw the look on Mamaw’s face. It was frightened and very confused. “Hun, who are you?” she said to my mom. I was shocked. I looked at Mom and could tell she was heartbroken. Mom tried to explain she was her granddaughter and that I was her great granddaughter. Mamaw acted like she knew, but I could tell she didn’t really understand. We stayed about ten minutes and didn’t even make it to the door before we both burst into tears. Mom and I sat in the car for an hour just crying. We knew this day would come, but we weren’t expecting it yet.

Christmas soon arrived, and our family was very apprehensive about going to see Mamaw. Her memory of people had been coming and going. Dad and Kaylan decided they didn’t want to see her, but Mom and I did. We weren’t expecting her to know who we were. We got to the nursing home and found Mamaw. I can’t explain the joy we felt when she saw us and her face lit up. “Girls!” she proclaimed, “I’m so glad you’re here!” It was the best Christmas gift we could have received.

That following fall, Mamaw tried to escape more frequently. She pulled the fire alarm and flirted with the firefighters in an effort to get them to take her home. “Sorry ma’m, I don’t think my wife’d preeshate that much.”

Mamaw also became physical during this time. She would hit employees when they told her she couldn’t leave. The nursing home had the last of her when she bit another resident. The nurse told us, “Even with her mind completely gone, she’s in great health. She could live to be a hundred.” This time we didn’t get to pick where she went. She was put into the only nursing home that had room and would accept her. Being in school, we didn’t have time to go visit until early November.

The week before Thanksgiving my parents called Kaylan and me to talk in their room. This doesn’t happen very often, and it usually means we’re about to move. Mom told us that Mamaw had gotten pneumonia and bronchitis and was in the hospital. Mom left for Arkansas the next morning. Dad, Kaylan, and I didn’t go until that weekend. By this time, Mamaw had been moved to a hospice center. This meant she was too sick to get better. The hospice was nice, and they did everything they could to keep her comfortable, which meant lots of morphine.

Getting there I expected much worse than I saw. I had never seen anyone so swollen, especially her face. Her hair was a mess, and she was still wearing her gold, diamond earrings.
and gold wedding ring. She couldn't really talk more than incoherent mumbles. Every few minutes she would moan really loud and kick or throw her arms up.

That first night with her was long. Mamaw was in and out of consciousness. I was holding her hand, telling her I love her, and everything will be alright. I’m not sure if I was saying it more for her or myself. She was awake, and I was rubbing her hair back when she grabbed my arm and mumbled, “I love you, sug.” That moment was a gift from God that I will cherish forever.

Monday night my dad woke me up at about three in the morning. He told me that Mamaw had passed. I had already come to accept the inevitable. We went to my other Mamaw’s house and readied for the funeral. The Mamaws were good friends and had spent most every holiday together since their children married.

The funeral was the most dreadful event of my life. I didn’t look at her body because I was so emotionally drained, and I didn’t want to see a waxed up figure of Mamaw. The people who showed up were some distant cousins, Mamaw’s sister and niece, some neighbors, and friends. The man who directed the funeral never knew Mamaw. Everyone could tell it was awkward for him, and he mostly just read scripture. The reading lasted way too long and was way too boring. I hardly paid any attention at all, and any conversation I had with anyone is a blur.

It’s almost been a year since Mamaw passed away, and it’s still hard to deal with it. Mamaw had become such a huge part of my life. Without her, I wouldn’t be the person I am today. I now have a huge heart for the elderly, especially those with Alzheimer’s. I learned to be more grateful for the time I get with my grandparents, and I don’t waste it. I miss my Mamaw greatly. Most of the time I feel like I haven’t seen her in a while, forgetting that she’s gone. I’m so glad for the time I spent with her and the relationship we built. I will always hold my memories of her close to my heart.
I didn’t sleep much the night before. It was my last night at American University, where I attended the National Student Leadership Conference on Law and Advocacy. Working closely with ninety other bright, talented, and enthusiastic individuals, I had explored the many steps involved in a criminal trial, prepared my own direct and cross-examinations, and spent more than a few moments in the communal bathroom of my residence hall’s fifth floor, hiding behind the safety of a fading shower curtain, waiting for my anxiety to pass.

I didn’t know if I was ready to be a lawyer. Obviously, I wasn’t actually about to represent the prosecution during the “trial” in which we would participate the next morning. It was only a simulation, meant to introduce us to the fascinating, prestigious – and intimidating – field of criminal law. But that night, lying uncomfortably on the thin mattress that separated me from the metal springs of my top bunk, I couldn’t get my sixteen-year-old mind to be placated by the truth.

My anxiety originated from earlier in the week, when I learned I would have to carry out a cross-examination. My thoughts had immediately transported back to my freshman year, in the middle of my first debate round. My determination to be aggressive, like Diane Neal on Law and Order: Special Victims Unit, had hidden the nerves that compelled my body to shake in silent tremors of anxiety. The problem was that I stood up and realized I had no idea what to say. My mind might as well have been a blank sheet of paper. Painfully aware of my opponent smirking at me from the other side of the room, I stood there, gradually beginning to shake as I desperately searched my brain for a sentence, a word, anything that could break my silence. It was not how I had imagined that moment. I looked thoroughly incompetent, and I was humiliated. Ever since, a lack of confidence had always hindered me as a debater, and it revisited me now, when I should have been resting in preparation for my first trial.

Morning finally arrived.

I vaguely remember that it was a beautiful day. I think the sky may have been cloudless and blue and that birds may have been chirping despite the early morning heat. But what I remember much more clearly are the vivid images of my pathetic stuttering or even sobbing as I struggled to poke holes in the defense witness’s testimony. It didn’t leave me a whole lot of room to notice much else.

As we loaded onto the huge coach bus, I couldn’t wait to get home. I kept thinking about how, if I survived the next few hours, I would be fine. At that moment, though, I didn’t feel anything close to fine. I wanted to disappear into some parallel realm, to be anywhere but where I currently was.

Then a familiar song came on the radio, one I had been hearing all week during our commutes to places like Baltimore Harbor and George Mason University. It was a song I liked and one I could easily sing along to. Before I knew it, I became one with the music.

“Can we pretend that airplanes in the night sky are like shooting stars? I could really use a wish right now...”
In that moment, I was Hayley Williams. In that moment, I was onstage, reaching for the hands of screaming fans as I sang into a glittery-covered microphone. In that moment, there were no worries, no stress, nothing except having the time of my life. In that moment, I realized that all I had to do during cross-examination was have fun doing something that I loved. And I do love law, but it took something as simple as a popular song to remind of it that day.

Maybe twenty minutes later, we pulled up in front of the county courthouse. There was an intense, excited energy on the bus, so strong that I could feel it vibrating all around me. By now, I was a part of that energy. The enthusiasm coursed through my veins, traveling down the lengths of my limbs to the tips of my fingers and toes, and I felt like I would burst from eagerness if I didn't soon find an outlet for my vivacity. I was a very different person than the girl who had been tossing and turning sleeplessly in the top bunk the night before. I was pumped. I was ready. I was a lawyer.

One of the trial advisors, Nisha, called out above the sounds of our animated chatter, "Guys, this is what you've been preparing for all week. Some of you might be nervous, but let me tell you, it happens every year, and they always do fine. Just go out there and have fun; I know you can all do it!"

Earlier that morning, I would have desperately needed to hear those words, but now I was simply itching to get in the courtroom. We walked through the entrance and under the metal detector (I remember finding it very funny that anyone would suspect ninety-six-year-olds of posing a threat to security) and then headed upstairs. My prosecution team and I climbed a wide staircase, spotted the rounded windows of the door that designated our courtroom, and walked inside.

It was a lot plainer than I had expected. There was no marble, no high arches, no large audience like you might see on TV. Everything was wood: the walls, the judge's bench, the jury box, the attorneys' tables. It helped to lower my expectations, because I could no longer expect events to unfold as I had seen on Law and Order. Feeling surprisingly calm, but still very excited, I set my materials down on the table and waited.

Just when I felt as though I could contain my energy no longer, the judge arrived. My friend Josh stood up, straightening his tie as he took one last deep breath. Then he began our opening statement. He was great. Speaking to the jury as though they were his friends, Josh laid out the facts of our case, those facts that we would all work together to prove. It was a speech that kept me excited even when Denzell's direct examination of our first witness lacked fluidity.

Eventually, it was my turn. I confidently pushed back my chair, not a single one of my limbs shaking, and stood up. Taking firm steps towards the witness stand, I looked right into the eyes of my target and commenced my cross-examination.

"Ms. Turner, you stated in your testimony that the victim was probably beaten with a thin, rounded object, correct?"

As I progressed through my duties, a list of possible questions lay forgotten on the table behind me. I had written them on a now wrinkled, yellowing sheet of paper, lest I find myself stuck, as I had during that first high school debate round. But here, in this Washington, D.C. courtroom, I never once stumbled. The list of questions had imprinted on my memory, allowing me to access all the information I needed from within the pages of my own brain.
Before long, any traces of anxiety that remained disappeared. I could sense that I was succeeding, and I had to resist the urge to smile as an aura of calmness settled over me. My performance was better than anything I would have expected and better than anything I would have produced had Hayley Williams not brought me back to my senses.

Afterwards, my personal trial advisor pulled me aside, "I heard some damn good things about you!"

Hearing those words, I realized what an important lesson I had learned that day. I had arrived in Washington believing I could never succeed. It was an assumption I had lived with my entire life and one that had held me back from reaching my full potential. Now I realized that just because an activity required lots of preparation and skill didn’t mean that I would automatically fail at it. As long as I did my best, it would be enough. This was probably my first significant success at overcoming my erroneous assumptions about my inadequacy.

Bearing this lesson in mind, I returned home with a new confidence. I continued to experience self-doubt, but now I was ready for it. I knew how to push it aside and how to pursue my goals even when they wouldn’t necessarily come easily. This past spring, I auditioned for my high school’s female a capella group. I had to work up a great deal of courage to sing alone for a room of people who all had extensive musical training, but in the end, my courage paid off, and I was accepted into the ensemble.
“Next stop, Ceremony Hall.”

The bus driver’s announcement pulls me out of my reverie. My eyes shift to the screen in the front of the bus, which informs me that I have exactly four minutes and fifty-four seconds until we reach my destination, and then flick back to the window. I can see my reflection in it: mahogany hair pulled back in an elegant chignon, sparkling diamond earrings which offset my purple gown so perfectly, and an unblemished face. Absentmindedly, I trace my nose, cheekbones, and jawline. The familiar landscape will be altered tonight—shifted and decorated as part of my transition to adulthood.

The realization disturbs a thousand butterflies in my stomach, and I quickly look beyond my reflection for a distraction. The night is dark, interrupted only by the occasional streetlight that is activated by the bus’ presence. When we near it, the light hastily flicks on, like a sentinel who has been caught sleeping on the job. As soon as the bus rolls past, the light fades away, pulling the blanket of darkness back over my eyes. I amuse myself by predicting what I will see during the intervals of illumination—a bank, a bakery, an office building. The streetlights gradually get closer together; one light has scarcely turned off when another winks on. Suddenly, the whole street is illuminated, and the bus slows to a stop. People all around me get to their feet, adjusting their dresses and suits as the driver makes his final announcement.

“We have arrived at Ceremony Hall, where you will take part in The Inking. We look forward to having you join the Working Class. Good luck!”

The doors hiss open, and I join the throng of people making their way onto the pavement. All around the square, buses are unloading teenagers who have just turned eighteen. Their formal attire creates a kaleidoscope of color that swirls around me. I am content to drift, letting the crowd propel me toward the large oak doors of Ceremony Hall.

Once we enter the building, we are greeted by a tall, slender man. His handsome face is covered with dark blue tattoos; I know instantly that the government has sent him to provide the introduction to The Inking. He leads us into a cavernous hall with high, arched ceilings and a marble floor. A small platform stands at the center of it, surrounded on all sides by rows of wooden chairs.

There are approximately 500 of us, and it takes several minutes until everyone is seated. The man watches from the stage, waiting to let us quiet down, or perhaps to heighten the level of excitement. Some of my peers talk to calm their nerves; I have always preferred silence in any uncomfortable situation.

Such tendencies don’t bother me, however, and I listen politely to the blonde girl next to me, who is afraid she’ll be placed into the wrong Work Category. Her name is Anna, and she continuously bites her nails as she outlines her dreams to be a Producer. Judging by her mannerisms, I am fairly certain that her wish will be granted, and I tell her so multiple times, in increasingly soothing tones. Finally, I quiet her by gesturing toward the man on the stage, who has just cleared his throat, apparently coming to the conclusion that his mere presence is not enough to stop our conversations.
Five hundred unmarked faces swivel toward his decorated one. The room is now silent as a morgue, ready for the funeral of adolescence to begin. He clears his throat once more, then begins.

Unfortunately, his speech is anything but brief, and contains the same material I have been taught in school for years. He explains The Inking’s ability to recognize unique traits and match people with their perfect occupations and stresses the importance of unity between the Working Categories. Although he is an excellent orator, my nervous mind soon wanders. I imagine myself going through the testing process, but I can’t seem to picture the outcome. Out of all the categories, I believe I am best suited to be a Helper, whose work centers around human interaction. Nevertheless, I have been continuously warned not to exclude the other categories as options, because there is no guarantee that I will be given the job I desire.

My musings are cut short by the sounds of restless stirring around me. The speaker’s voice has become louder and more animated as he nears the conclusion of his speech, and I force myself to focus.

“Whether you are a Producer, Healer, Helper, or Builder, you will be invaluable to our society! We look forward to you joining the Working Class. And now, without further ado, let’s begin The Inking!”

Applause rumbles through the hall like thunder, and I join in, cheering enthusiastically to make up for my attention lapse. When the clapping begins to fade, the man walks toward large wooden doors much like the ones through which we entered, and the crowd follows.

On the other side, it is as if I am in an entirely different building. Refined, old-fashioned glamour has been replaced by a sterile environment similar to that of a hospital. The room is twice as large as the hall, but instead of chairs and a stage, it is filled by row after row of small, identical cubicles.

I slow and glance around, unsure of where to go. In answer to my silent question, the man calls out, “The Inking Cubicles are labeled and arranged in alphabetical order—starting with the A’s on the left!”

I turn right and set off in search of my cubicle. Once I reach it, I pause, staring with considerable apprehension at the opaque curtain labeled “Sasha Williams.” Never again will I see my name written like this; after tonight, it will always be accompanied by my Work Category. I linger for a few moments until a boy enters the aisle and breaks the spell.

I take a deep breath and enter the cubicle. It is small and sparsely furnished, dominated by a reclining chair, much like that of a dentist. The walls are decorated with posters about the four Work Categories, and I skim the options they outline to pass the time.

The poster about the Producers contains an idyllic agrarian scene, with cheerful farmers harvesting their crops. The Healers are represented by a smiling woman in a white lab coat, a stethoscope in one hand and a clip-board in the other. Children in a classroom are being taught by a Helper, his hands gesticulating as he explains a mathematical equation. Meanwhile, several Builders are perched atop a house, looking highly satisfied as they attach what look to be the final shingles.

On each poster, the people’s faces are adorned with different patterns of tattoos. The general scheme of the designs and facial features is the same within each category; the Helpers have a mix of the shapes and patterns that characterize the other groups. I try to
imagine these lines crisscrossing my face, but they refuse to stay defined in my mind’s eye, quickly dissolving into blank uncertainty.

Doubts fly through my head like mosquitoes, and the queasy feeling in my stomach has returned. I sit down on the reclining chair and close my eyes, trying to calm my nerves. Just then, I hear the curtain rustle, and a woman enters. She looks very similar to the Healer on the poster, except that her tattoo is the dark blue of government workers.

“Hi, Sasha. Are you ready to join the Working Class?” she asks and begins gathering her supplies from the cabinets on the back wall of the cubicle.

“I— I guess so,” I stammer.

The doctor smiles. “Good, then let’s get started.”

She attaches a large mirror to the reclining chair, so that it hangs several feet above me. In it, I watch her begin cleaning and disinfecting my face, memorizing the imperfections that will soon be adjusted—my thin lips, broad nose, and flat cheekbones. I have never liked these features, but I feel a twinge of sorrow at the thought of losing them.

The doctor applies a final coat of cream that leaves my face feeling slightly cold, then pauses. “I will now insert the needle just below your jaw,” she says softly. “The procedure is painless and completely safe, but I’ll be right beside you if you need anything.”

After a moment, I feel the soft pressure of the needle as it injects the Ink into my face. As soon as I see the first trace of it, the rest of the room falls away. I am no longer aware of the doctor, the cheerful posters on the walls, or the buzzing fluorescent lights; all that exists is my face, a blank canvas ready to be decorated.

The Ink is warm, but not uncomfortably so. Slowly but steadily, it advances across my face until it is completely covered. The liquid rests just beneath the top layer of skin, its color not black as I had assumed, but iridescent, glimmering in myriad hues. My green eyes stand out in stark relief, and widen as the Ink in my cheek suddenly flashes so hot I fear it will burn through the skin.

The heat dissipates seconds later, and is replaced by a tingling feeling as my cheekbones are slowly adjusted. I begin shaking slightly, an earthquake that accompanies the shift of my face’s tectonic plates. Next, the epicenter shifts to my nose, then my lips, pushing and prodding them to perfection.

When the landscaping has been completed, the tingling ceases, and all is calm. For a split second, I am gripped by the irrational fear that the test is over, that my Inked face will be devoid of patterns. A moment later, I feel an icy sensation near my jaw, and breathe a sigh of relief.

The Ink on my chin is parting like a curtain, revealing my olive skin. Its chilled path winds in a spiral, slowly creating a design with the available ink, now a deep black. I have always assumed that the patterns were drawn with the technique of a painter; now I see that they are created with a method more similar to a printer’s reduction process. The Ink is visible on my face, but by now its genetically engineered search molecules are testing my entire body, seeking clues to my identity. When the ink latches on to a characteristic, it is pulled under the surface, leaving behind no trace.

The process has picked up speed now, caressing my face with a dozen icy fingertips. It creates an intricate topography, the various lines and shapes outlining the landscape and mapping out my future. The activity is concentrated in my face’s upper hemisphere, forming
miniscule swirls along my hairline. The Ink recedes into my skin at breakneck speed, following the canyon of some unknown trait, until it suddenly comes to a stop, apparently having reached a dead end. After unsuccessfully searching for a way around it, the Ink finally admits defeat, letting the victorious characteristic pull it under the surface. An expanse of barren skin remains on my right temple. Somehow, I know this isn't just a pause in the process. I have completed The Inking.

"I believe you are done, Sasha."

I had forgotten the doctor’s presence, and her voice startles me. I notice she didn’t say whether I had passed the test, and panic rises inside me.

"Is the blank spot normal?" I blurt out, my voice unnaturally high-pitched.

"I've heard of several cases, but I've never seen one myself," she answers, then smiles. "Fortunately for you, there are enough results to make a decision. You are definitely a Helper."

My fear is instantly replaced by an overwhelming feeling of relief, and I let out a euphoric giggle. I try to stand up, but sudden dizziness forces me to remain seated.

The woman chuckles. "Hold on, you still need the final facial cream—it will make you feel better."

Obediently, I settle back into the chair. The lotion feels pleasant when she applies it, a soft breeze over the completed landscape. My cheekbones are more accentuated than before, my nose slightly thinner, and my lips wider: I am now an adult, and the tattoos are the verifying stamp.

"Welcome to the Working Class!" the woman exclaims when she finishes. "You may now go to the celebratory dance, which is being held in the hall."

I rise slowly, and this time I am able to maintain my equilibrium. The cream has left me feeling refreshed, and I smile and thank the doctor enthusiastically before I exit the cubicle and make my way back through the silent aisles.

The hall has been transformed in the hour I have been gone. The chairs have disappeared, revealing a wide dance floor, and a thousand tiny lights hang from the ceiling, providing illumination in an otherwise dim room. After the utter silence of the Inking Cubicle, the pop music is deafening. In the center of the room, my peers form one large, pulsating mass, rejoicing in their freedom from the testing cells. I am pulled in the moment I walk close enough.

In the crowd, the air seems thicker, steamier. Warm bodies surround me, moving in time with the inescapable beat. They are the same people who nervously entered the building with me, who applauded the introductory speech, and who have just undergone The Inking in the adjacent room. The same people, but not quite. Not really.

Their faces have been reshaped and adorned with patterns. I see circles and swirls on the plain, forgettable faces of the Producers, and the harsh features accented by pointy lines that characterize the Builders. Several fellow Helpers smile at me as I walk past them, their stunning facial symmetry momentarily illuminated before they continue dancing. They all share similar elated expressions of the kind I must have worn when I entered a few minutes before. Now, it has slipped off, revealing a vacant façade.

Feeling strangely empty, I make my way through the forest of my fellow applicants; I might as well be traversing a barren wasteland. Someone taps me on the shoulder, and I spin around. It takes me a moment to recognize the blond girl standing before me. Anna’s new features and tattoos make it clear that she is a Healer, but she displays the ubiquitous grin, her
earlier desire for a job in the Producer category apparently forgotten. I force a cheery smile onto my face, a brilliant mirage in the desert.

She falls for it. We talk for several minutes, but her easy acceptance of her new Work Category unnerves me. Finally, I excuse myself under the pretense of going to get a drink.

Once again, I am alone in the crowd. All my life, I have felt safer among people, preferring their company to even the shortest interval of solitude. Sometimes it is enough to simply observe their interactions around me. I have a knack for reading people, connecting with them even before they notice me. Now, I find myself unable to do so—as if all my peers are still inside their Inking Cubicles.

As I walk through the crowd, I notice that, despite their unique faces and outfits, they are astonishingly similar. All of them seem to be thoroughly enjoying the dance, although several people must have been given an undesired occupation. It is my hobby to pick out the most interesting person in a crowd, the one who stands out from the rest. Here, no such person exists.

The Inking Ceremony, instead of pinpointing unique characteristics, has made everyone part of a large, monotonous landscape. The realization makes me feel nauseous. The crowd is suddenly stifling, and I feel lost in the maze-like topography of barely disguised conformity. For the first time in my life, I am struck by an uncontrollable urge to be alone.

As soon as I leave the building, I let out a breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding. The night is pleasantly cool, and the fresh air calms me. My racing heart slows with every step I take, returning to its normal rate by the time I reach the square’s fountain. I sit down on the low wall that surrounds it, and marvel at its simple beauty. In the pool of water, I can see the coins of countless teenagers who hoped the small offering would affect the outcome of their Inking Ceremony.

Helplessly, I stare into the fountain’s pool. The nearby streetlight illuminates the water, and I can see my face reflected among the sparkling ripples. It is hardly recognizable, the altered features almost completely covered by tattoos. Almost, but not quite.

The blank spot on my right temple stands out among the countless lines. The skin looks soft and pure amid the complex patterns and creates a whole new world of possibilities. My future has been mapped out on the rest of my face, but this area is uncharted territory.

I don’t know what is destined to fill the space, but I find that the uncertainty doesn’t scare me. A confidence unlike anything I have ever felt is growing inside me. I slide off the stone wall and begin the long walk home. When I reach the edge of the square, I look back at Ceremony Hall, wishing I could rejoin the party, but knowing this is impossible. Finally, I turn and continue walking. After a few seconds, the streetlight fades, leaving me alone with my thoughts.
Wanted: One Intact Brain. Performance, Optional.

“Something about a pen and paper…”
Yes. How good to have a witness to this exchange.
Do you think my brain’s up here?
Well, it’s not.
Watch me.
It’s a delicate process.
How do you even know your brain is missing?
You still feel pain.
[too little]
You still prattle on.
[too much]
The words burst from your cheeks vigorously – you wait in angst as others’ words are longer than yours, better than yours, loop and lilt and run circles laughing about yours.

But eventually, you just know.

You dig your hands into your brain
[or is it your soul]
Your fingertips playing in the softness of it, up to your wrists in brain –
You pry it out of the vice, and greet it briefly. – Hello, how nice to see you, how nice to have you back –
This is a once-every-eon occasion, after all.
Cut a nice, round hole in the top of your head. Pop it off, just like a pumpkin. Plop the brain in, seal up your skull, press the skin together.
Until you can get that scar fixed, you’ll wear a hat. How chic!
(You don’t want anyone to know you actually have a brain.)

Uh-oh.
What is this?

Your newfound brain begins to beat – yes, it beats, just like a heart. You can feel it thump-thump-thumping on your pasted-together skull.
Thoughts come.
You pace you
Blink you
Taste your own lips you
Cannot operate, like you are coming off caffeine and nicotine you
Knew you shouldn’t have downed that cup of numbness and frivolity every morning, knew you shouldn’t have puffed clouds of illusion around your head –
“Something about a pen and paper…”
Pen. Paper. One brain, please, and me, watching the world turn, I guess.

**The Happily Marginalized**

I set my eye on the lake – it is not just a lake, it is the sea –
The lake-sea is the green of olives; the lake-sea is artificial blue and the blue of night –
I can feel the lake-sea ebbing from above, from far above I feel it
   By the edge I stand, I wobble over her stones,
"I’ll write in the margins if I want.
I’ll write in the margins if I want."
Darling
   My eyes are winking as you pull me into the Cave and
Dear
   What you see and hear is ludicrous, and all this comes to nothing,
And oh, Hell,
Are you in the margin, or am I?

I do not know.

But the lake-sea is in the margin.
And yes ma’am, I
Make them see, I
Own this place, I
Am contradiction.

**LunchTableGossip**

The sea
Pulls and draws –
The pulse
Slithers through the sand
And winds
Through the forest
She gnaws at the dunes – hungrily –

Ankles bound first – waist
Gripped
Arms
Forced into embrace
Body
Engulfed by the sea.
Scenes from “A Playful Life”

Scene I

A grocery store in the evening. Two young women, each about twenty-three or so, are grocery shopping. KATE pushes the cart. She is of average height and build and wears an absentminded expression. ELLEN, slim and about the same height, walks beside her.

Kate: I need…that, and some bread. Whole wheat. And Kumatos.
Ellen: Kumatos?
Kate: [picking up pack of Kumatos] These little brown tomatoes.
Ellen: Why would you buy brown tomatoes? Are they rotten?
Kate: [Now looking at a large purple potato] Hmmm? Oh, no, they’re much more flavorful than actual tomatoes.
Ellen: So they aren’t tomatoes?
Kate: No, they are.
Ellen: Oh. [Beat] I buy the same type of tomatoes every week during the summer. Northern Light tomatoes.
Kate: [Staring at something out of view in the store] Would you look at that? That man is buying seven bottles of Bitch wine.
Ellen: What?
Kate: And he has mangoes, too…that genius!
Ellen: Genius?
Kate: Do you have any idea how many things you can make with a bottle of Bitch and mangoes?
Ellen: [pause] I’ve never considered it before.
Kate: Why not?
Ellen: Buying Northern Lights tomatoes is about as far as I go.
Kate: No mangoes? No Bitch?
Ellen: No mangoes, and no Bitch. Especially no Bitch.
Kate: Hm. I must say, I’m a little jealous of that man.
Ellen: [Tosses a bag of tomatoes in the cart] Not anymore. We’ve got Northern Lights now.
Kate: That’s stupid. I’m not buying those.
Ellen: Why not?
Kate: They’re not homegrown.
Ellen: Homegrown? Look at your fancy little knock-off tomato things.
Kate: They are NOT knock-offs.
Ellen: But they aren’t homegrown.
Kate: Ah…but they’re from the Galapagos.
Ellen: What?
Kate: The Galapagos. So, they’re better than homegrown.
Ellen: Enlighten me.
Kate: Darwin set foot on the soil that these tomatoes grew on. They are filled with the dusty remains of Giant Tortoises and iguanas.
Ellen: I think I’ll stick with Northern Lights.
Kate: Wait! [grabs Ellen’s arm] He’s leaving. After the Bitch!
[Kate and Ellen exit U.R.]

End of Scene. Blackout.

Scene II

KATE and ELLEN are at Kate’s apartment. They are sitting on the floor of the living room, located in the stage left area, playing the board game Life. A bottle of wine, presumably one that they talked the man at the grocery store into giving them, sits nearby. Kate has poured herself a glass. The front door to the apartment is U.L. Stage right is furnished as a kitchen, with counter space, a sink, jars, a refrigerator, etc. A small kitchen table and chairs are pushed against the D. R. wall. A small sofa, table, and lamp sit against the back wall of the living room area. The living room is modestly decorated. Both rooms are a little untidy, with random objects scattered about.

Kate: Have you noticed that there’s no way to win this blasted game except to gamble? If you don’t gamble, you’ll never get to be a millionaire.
Ellen: I always do perfectly fine without gambling.
Kate: That’s because you have children, which you get paid to do. I refuse to have children. Look at that, they’re spilling out of your car and on to the game board! That’s disgusting.
Ellen: This one’s name is Amber, this is Ashlyn, this is Josephine...
Kate: Are we in Jurassic Park? If you want to breed more of the little monsters you might want to have some gender variation.
Ellen: Regardless, I don’t want to gamble.
Kate: You don’t have to gamble, necessarily. You can just collect money off stock. But it’s much more fun to play the market.
Ellen: I don’t want to play the market. And I don’t buy stock.
Kate: [musing to herself] But it’s not just that it’s more fun to play the market. You actually have to play the market to win.
Ellen: I could easily argue that. [Takes her turn] Bankrupt? What?
Kate: I’m telling you...[moves her piece into the millionaire space] I bet if we’d talked that guy into giving us more wine, we wouldn’t be sitting in my house playing a stupid board game, and I wouldn’t be having to play any little games at all.
Ellen: You’re right. But as long as we’re here, try some Northern Lights.
Kate: If they’re not Kumatos, I don’t want them.
Ellen: Just try one –
Kate: Will you forget the tomatoes?
[brief silence]
Ellen: Alright. I’ll leave some of these for you. [Crosses to kitchen and sets bag of Northern Light tomatoes on the counter]
Kate: [Frustrated] Okay. Goodnight.
Ellen: [Also frustrated] Goodnight.
[Kate walks Ellen to the door. Ellen exits. Kate crosses to the sack of tomatoes, picks one up, and begins to slice it contentedly.]
Kate: I love this kind of tomato. [reflecting] Yes. Yes, I bet he has it much better.

End of Scene. Curtain.
Suddenly stems break off, and the plump orange bodies of two hundred and sixty-seven pumpkins lift into the air, drifting over to stack themselves into a wagon in a neat pyramid.

A few minutes later the wagon starts to move. The pumpkins bump against each other, but not a single one comes even close to falling.

Finally, they reached their destination: a big towering castle, home to the king and royal family.

The wagon turns down a path circling around the castle getting closer to the delightful smell of cinnamon and whipped cream. The wagon pulls to a stop. Coarse rough hands pick up the lifeless orange bodies and set them on rough splintery tables.

Sharp knives rise up without a hand to support their heavy weight and jab into the tops. Goopy orange insides lift out, hover, and zip to the waste pile by the door, plopping down with a squishy thud. Knives jab into the leathery sides, forming precise shapes into the skin. Chunks pop out like stencils.

Candles lift up and settle inside the now hollow pumpkins and magically light all at once. The room is illuminated fully. Not a single corner darkened by shadows.

The luminescent forms lift up and glide out the door in a single file line, drifting down twisting and curving corridors before halting before a double door with ornate gold decoration. After entering, they line the ballroom walls, settling on the imperceptible ledges that are hidden from view. The flickering lights bouncing off silver candle holders make the room shine with new vigor.
Growing up I was always aware of my German heritage, my grandmother’s accent, her Goulash soup, and the singular German word thrown into our constant English conversations, \textit{brot}. At home and with my grandmother—at breakfast, lunch and dinner—the German word \textit{brot} was used to say bread. While I was aware of my heritage, I never knew the full extent of it until much later in my life.

My mother spent much of her childhood in Kelsterbach, Germany. She attended school, frolicked in grassy fields with her sister and cousins, and often rode bicycles with her grandmother to the market. Unfortunately, her parents were divorced shortly after she was born, and when she was eight years old, her mother brought her to America. The move occurred in short because of her new stepfather.

Once she arrived in America, she lost all contact with her father’s family, being forced into a new life with a man she barely knew. Years passed, and eventually my mother created her own family with my father, my brother, and me. While my childhood was full of good memories, I still grew up unconsciously missing half a family, unaware of their existence until the death of my grandmother.

My relatives’ apartment was modest and nicely furnished. An air of nervousness was obvious as my family and I pooled into the sitting area; taking a cue from the drinks on the table, we chose to sit on the long U-shaped couch behind it. Conversation began, and I felt myself relaxing, my body easing more comfortably into the cushions of the couch. These people seemed genuinely interested in my family and me; therefore, no time was wasted making small talk.

"Was machst du in der Schule?" my great uncle asked, curious about my school activities.

As I mentally transposed my answer, contemplating how I would respond in German, I gazed about the apartment which had taken on an almost dream-like quality.

My family had arrived in Germany just 2 days before, and my senses were ablaze with all the unfamiliar stimulus. While I was excited about the many historical sites we visited, connecting them to similar images from my German textbook in school, I felt something much bigger looming.

Ever since my mother located our German relatives online and called them earlier in the year, I anticipated the moment we would meet—and in particular the impact it would have on her.

"Ich lerne Deutsch in der Schule, ich habe eine Eins in der Klasse," I finally responded.

As I shifted my gaze, every eye in the room was on me, each person wearing an eager smile, as if they wanted to extract every piece of information about myself and my life. A warmth, a sense of security emerged among these strangers, encouraging me to continue. Soft yellow light shone in from the lacy window curtains, giving the room a glow. Deserts and drinks covered every surface, chairs from the various rooms of the apartment were brought into the sitting area, which with its small perimeter somehow seemed to expand throughout the day to include each new arrival of family members. I began translating short phrases from
my father to the other relatives and continually answered questions that seemed to surface from every angle and corner of the room. Distant relatives, great aunts, 3rd cousins, everyone in our family line who was in Kelsterbach came to meet us.

Growing up I never felt deprived or cheated out of a family experience such as this one; I never knew any better. My mother, on the other hand, remembered with clarity all she had left behind. Answers were not given, questions were evaded, and eventually these people she had grown to love became a distant memory, causing her to ponder whether or not they were merely figures of a dream.

Naturally, it was hard to grasp that almost forty years later she would meet these very characters that she had closed away in a forgotten book. The phone call made that spring brought an onslaught of emotions which permeated the house during the months leading up to our trip.

As we pulled up to the address we programmed into our GPS my mother calmly said to us, "If things go badly today with these people, we can leave soon under the pretense that we have a long drive to our next city." In agreement we all disembarked from the car, unsure of what we were about to step into.

I heard a man’s deep and choked up voice cry out, "Kerstin!"

Turning around I saw the warm and tearful embrace, indicating that all was in fact quite well. As I stood by watching my mother hug her uncle, I witnessed a return home, compassion, understanding, and unconditional love in the fullest.

The scrapbook my mom composed of all us cousins growing up was a hit among the relatives. As I skimmed through the pages, offering verbal captions to the pictures in German, I suddenly felt overwhelmed. Yes, I was able to share this book with them, but it only offered a very minute fraction of my 16 years of life. I felt that somehow we would never be able to catch up or be on the same page because of that lost time. Despite these feelings, I continued on with a smile on my face. By the end of the scrapbook, when all the older women around me were still musing at my ability to speak German, it finally hit me: this day was enough. To me, they were hardly strangers at all. We made jokes, reminisced about the past, ate and drank until we could no more. The entire group laughed and carried on as if those 30 years of waiting and wondering were only the blink of an eye.

I do believe that my family history may be a little messy, however, because of our attempt to reconnect. Being welcomed back into an entire family with open arms after almost 40 years without contact to me is monumental. Before this event occurred, I thought it would only be significant to my mother; after all, they didn’t ever know I existed. However, that was not the case.

When we returned home, the dynamic in my household had changed for the better. There was a kind of peacefulness, almost like the still of the air after a great storm. The choppy and uneven subconscious undertones of our family’s communication had settled.

On one occasion after our trip to Germany, a miscommunication of plans, which would ordinarily turn into a catastrophic meltdown on the part of my mother, was digested and dealt with in a calm manner. My mom even apologized afterwards, taking responsibility for the mistake as a member of the family rather than finding blame in others. Her reflection on the event was obvious, and it was also clear that in the moment she had been able to rationally
compartmentalize her feelings towards the situation instead of letting them drive the outcome of it. I felt both impressed and relieved. Something in my mother had changed for the better.

This subtle difference in atmosphere to a stranger would seem imperceptible; however, after practically walking backwards in time through my mother’s footprints, I became all the more aware of how we operate.

I found that, regardless of the past, a foundation of true unconditional love bears all things and believes all things. Those members of my family went all that time believing they would be reunited with us in spite of all the odds against it. Unfortunately my mother never actually got to reunite with her father after leaving Germany at eight years old. He passed away when she was in her twenties, and I too never got the chance to meet him face to face like my other relatives. There is a sadness that we all carry—mistakes made that hindered the happiness of my mother, her father Arno, and now his grandchildren. However, instead of the anger we could choose to foster, I believe the acceptance of the events of our life, leading up to this moment, are vital in the repairing of this lost connection. As I go forth, someday with a family of my own, I will share this story with my children in an effort to never let go of the one thing promised to us in life, family.
Rain

Gray.
Slashed through with white,
Like jagged scars.
The skies howl and pour out their sorrows and tears.
The pavement darkens with every drop that falls,
splatters.
It rushes in torrents down the street.

Gray.
But it’s soft. Gentle. Like down feathers.
Spider webs strung between blades of grass form cradles,
catching.
Breaking that long fall back to Earth.
Ceaseless patter against the windowpane.

Gray.
Everything.
Visibility is low.
And silence reigns, besides the occasional car driving through a puddle.
Splash.
Feet slosh through the mud. Squelch. Squelch.
On the way home from school in March.

Ocean

Water dances in an unending ebb and flow;
never changing, yet always moving.
Sunlight glitters on the waves.
The water becomes liquid diamonds; diamonds softer than butter.
Boats slice through, engines putt-putting gently.
People murmuring under brightly-colored umbrellas and sitting on brightly-colored towels.
Staccato seagull cries punctuate the sound of the waves beating the sand.
Words and waves mingle into white noise.
As Darkness Falls

The clouds look bloodstained.
Red, orange, and black.
The sailboats turn into specters, floating silently in limbo.
Seagulls are merely silhouettes, on the backdrop of gathering night.
Channel marker buoys are beginning to blink; red, green, red.
The sound of creaking boats in the marina drifts up the side of the cliff.
The last sailboat disappears around the bend.
As darkness falls.

Death

Giant rocks tower without casting shadow,
Yet shadows shamble,
The sighs of unseen spirits tremble in the melancholy twilight.

There is no sun,
Yet there is light.
A murky purple-red haze,
Like a sunset.
The sun has already set in this land of the dead.

The silence is a force.
Nothing stirs, because nothing lives.
The universe, the fabric of reality
Has even stopped shifting here.
Empty words, hollow words,
Laments of spectres—

Whispers, cries,
Promises, curses.
Heard but not spoken,
Seen, but not understood

Chill without air,
Words without noise,
Light with no sun,
Presence with no substance.
In this land of the dead.
The System

Flashes of color,
Lights switching, from green to yellow to red. Green to yellow to red.
Left to right, back and forth, left to right, back and forth.
Little white men and little red hands.
People risk their lives treading upon the blackness.
A ton of metal against 150 pounds of human is a constant danger.
They scurry in and out of buildings.
Doors open, doors close.
Elevators ding as they deliver their passengers.
Reflections mirror the busy streets.
This happens twice a day;
Coming, going, coming, going.
All day, every day, all day, every day.
Over and over and over and over.
This is what we strive for.
Coming, going,
Work, recognition,
Advancement, no difference.
Education to provide the same environment.
For a living.
Coming, going,
Work, recognition,
Advancement, no difference.
Predecessors instill the same beliefs in the generations after them.
Nothing changes,
Every day is the same.
As he stabbed the knife into his victim’s throat, a surge of power emerged deep within his soul, dark, yet strangely satisfying to his greed. He stepped back to admire his work, a ragged smile fixed on his bloodstained face. Then, he turned around and waltzed away, drunk with the power of evil.

“Welcome to Applebees, how may I help you?” The waitress said as she nonchalantly pulled out a pad of paper and poised her pen to write as her lanky shadow loomed over the trembling man. A loopy smile adorned his face as he gazed up at her from his spot in the plush booth chair.

“I’ll take a Bloody Mary,” he chuckled, his eyes flashing, “It fits this... momentous occasion.”

She raised her eyebrows, “Whatever.” Popping a piece of gum into her mouth, she walked away.

Sipping his Bloody Mary, the man began to look back on his extreme actions, realizing that this had been the harshest of them all. His brows knitted together as he pondered the fact that what he had done could be considered as unforgivable to the outside world. To the people who didn’t understand that game.

He smiled at the thought of the game. He had been invited to join when he was a teenager, when they began to see the great potential that lay within him. They had said he was perfect for the game. Though he had never actually seen them, he knew they were there. They contacted him in his head almost every single day—telling him what to do, encouraging him. He couldn’t explain how to play the game, but ever since he had started it, nothing else mattered. His smile faded as quickly as it came. Never before had this fun extended to such personal affairs. A small sob created by loss began to form in the back of his throat. The complex web that was his mind began to open, revealing to him the true raw horror of what he had done. Terror, shame and guilt, emotions that he had never felt before, began to invade his body and take control. Immediately he fell to the floor, convulsing while screaming his confession for the whole restaurant to hear.

“I killed my daughter! I killed her! I didn’t mean to; it was all supposed to be a game!” His voice cracked as the sobs finally escaped, echoing across the silent and baffled crowd. Crimson dots crept into his vision as he screamed, trying to swat the memory of blood away. Staff surrounded him, some calling the emergency line, others trying to calm him. But to no avail. The man would not stop shouting, desperately pleading for the voices and memories to leave. Police sirens sounded outside, coming closer. The man’s last words were heavy, seemingly coming from a place that lied deep within his mind.

“I have failed them.” With that, his eyes rolled up into his head, and his body hit the floor, limp. The voices had left, and they had taken his soul with them as they went off to claim another.
It was like someone had socked me in the stomach with a 50 pound weight. I couldn’t breathe; the room was going fuzzy. All I could do was cry as I tried to wrap my head around that evil word: divorce. Such a simple eight letter word, full of sorrow, anger, hate, and confusion. What had I done wrong? Where was I going to live? Would my parents get remarried? Did they not love me anymore? At 7 years old, no child should have to be asking those questions, yet it was all my mind could think about.

I don’t remember much from that horrid day, except the tan and rose upholstered love-seat I was laying on, the blue carpet underneath me, and my parents had decided to get a divorce. Being a first grader, I had no idea what the word meant; it might as well have been Chinese for a new baby in the family. When we drove across town to a set of little white duplexes, I finally got the picture. Dad was going to live there, without the rest of us. It was like a piece of my heart had been ripped out of my frail little body and put through a garbage disposal. I thought he didn’t love me anymore.

Months passed, and at the start of second grade, we moved to Platte City. My brothers and I saw Dad every couple of weeks and stayed with him on certain weekends. Things weren’t perfect, but we all had reached a state of acceptance. We went mini-golfing, swam at the public pool, and played golf. We would relax with video games and eat pizza. It was like life a year earlier, minus Mom. I no longer felt like my heart was sinking in an ocean of frustration; I had found a Spongebob floatie to rest on. That was until Trisha came into the picture.

At first, she seemed like a nice friend of Dad’s: pretty, sweet, and a kindergarten teacher at the local elementary school. Perfect, right? Wrong. As soon as she and Dad tied the knot, her Galinda the Good Witch routine melted away to reveal Cruella de Vil: black hair and all. Her first acts of evil were simple, like forcing me to play with her daughter Reagan (a Cruella de Vil in the making) and making rude remarks about my mom. As time went on, her acts became more bold and maniacal. Dad, who was perfectly fine with our visits every couple of weekends before Trisha, now pursued visitation every other weekend. He won, and with his victory, the world as I knew it came crashing down.

I cried every single day, more on the weekdays before I had to go to Dad’s. I would starve myself while I was there, refusing to eat anything that my Devil of a Stepmother would cook. At times, I thought of running away or jumping out of the car to escape the disastrous weekend ahead. The courts had screwed me over, and now I would have to live with their mistake.

One weekend, my little brother Zack and I were watching TV downstairs. Dad called us from the upstairs, telling us to join him. Thinking nothing of it, we walked up the stairs to the living room. The house was dark, except for the electric fireplace casting a ghoulish glow over the furniture and Dad’s face.

“Umm... Dad? Why are all of the lights out?” I asked.

“The fireplace is going, there’s light. Do you guys like it here?”

“No, we hate it here Dad,” my older brother Nick and I replied, almost in unison. With that, Dad flipped out, big time. He called Trisha and told her the whole conversation. Nick and I
were told to pack our bags and to get ready to leave. As we were loading up in Dad’s truck, Trisha came home; how convenient. Le Witch then proceeded to call Nick and I multiple names, all worse than the nickname I had given her at the beginning of this sentence. We were taken to the Atchison Police Station (my dad was a cop there at the time) and forced to wait for my mom in the chairs criminals were put in before questioning. Who does that? What kind of father scares his children so badly that their teeth are chattering from uncontrollable fear? What kind of father takes his kids to a police station when they say something he doesn’t agree with? I’m not proud of it, but that is the kind of person my father was.

Even after Dad’s psychotic episode, the court ruling stood. We were forced to go back every other weekend and spend 72 awful hours with Dad, Trisha, and “The Kids:” Tanner, Brett, and Reagan. Again, like when Dad and Mom legalized their divorce, things weren’t perfect, but a state of acceptance had been reached. Except it didn’t feel like I had my Spongebob floatie this time; I felt like I was walking on eggshells, trying not to break what little relationship I had left with my dad.

Finally, it happened, an eggshell shattered. This time, however, it was not my doing; it was Dad and Trisha’s. They were going to have a baby, due sometime in the summer. Whoop-de-freaking-doo. To make matters worse, Cruella had decided that the new baby would take my room. I would have to move out of my newly decorated room, the only place I felt safe in the entire house, into the storage area, complete with concrete walls and a drain in the floor.

“We’ll put up drywall and carpet the floor Sarah,” my Evil Stepmother explained.

I couldn’t do anything but shake my head in agreement; to fight with Trisha was pointless. The Witch always got what she wanted. The house was a prison, and I finally had my own cell to prove it.

The room never got refinished.

I can’t remember what exactly happened, but apparently Dad had shown one too many “outbursts” (adult temper tantrums in my book) and was given an ultimatum by the judge: either go to anger management counseling or lose visitation every other weekend. He chose the latter. Elated, I cried the last tears I would ever shed in regards to my dad. I was a prisoner who had her sentence lifted permanently. I thanked God for delivering me from my own personal Hell.

When I think back to those days when my life seemed as black as the hole where Trisha’s heart should be, I don’t cry anymore; it’s the past. I get along with the only coping mechanism I can use, love. The rest of my family and friends are so caring and fulfilling that I almost forget I don’t have my dad in the picture. They used to come to cross country meets and try to talk to me, but I refused. They would tell me how much they loved me and missed me, but I honestly didn’t care; the scars on my heart are too thick for a reunion. Sometimes I still feel like I’m drowning in an ocean of hatred and confusion, but I always seem to find my Spongebob floatie while Dori from Finding Nemo sings in my head,

“Just keep swimming, just keep swimming, swimming, swimming...”
Sunday

Sitting in the pew, I felt the underwhelming drone of familiarity. I had been here many times before—dragged to church services by my grandmother. Like many kids, I did not look forward to sitting quietly for hours. I was wild as a child, preferring the backwoods to the pigtails and frills of my Sunday best, which on this day was black.

I half-heartedly listened to the tides of the pastor’s sermon. I had heard this all before and occupied myself with doodling on empty offering cards and sneaking candy from Grandma’s purse. His words rose to a climax of fire and brimstone and broke with a plea for an “Amen.” While finishing a game of Tic Tac Toe with myself, I saw the shiny box behind the podium. At that point, my only other experience with a casket was something the villain popped out of on Scooby Doo. The realization that this foreign element had been transplanted into the usual Sunday program jolted my senses. I suddenly smelled the sweat of the masses in black in the Florida heat, felt the somber emotion that filled the church, and heard the soft weeping from the widow in the front row as her three children sat idly by. The oldest boy was sitting stiff and motionless in his chair, his eyes hard-focused straight ahead.

Then, as if by silent command, the black masses rose and headed towards the casket. My grandmother grabbed my hand and whispered, “Get up. We’re going now,” and led me toward the source of my fear. I did not resist. When I was six years old, Grandma could have been God in the flesh. Her word was final. As my grandma found us a place in line, I noticed the lid of the casket had been opened. In a flood of anxiety and curiosity, I looked around for another face of panic, anyone who looked like they’d be willing to push against the crowd and leave the terrible scene behind. None were found. There would be no escape, so I bottled my fear as I arrived at the side of the coffin.

The man for whom everyone had come was nothing but a shell, a dead body in living-person disguise. There were stitches sealing up deep wounds all over his face, gaudy and covered in a thick layer of dark makeup. He had been put in a suit two sizes too big and was wearing a face more expressionless than I knew was possible. Even so young, I took offense. I had not known the man who died, but looking at his body, all dressed up and put on display, disturbed me deeply. As the pastor squeezed in a last boisterous comment on the dangers of sin, I knew I would never be able to see church the way I had before.

As I dressed Jenna for the service, I decided not to tell her it was a funeral. I knew that if I told her, she’d try to weasel her way out of going, and I could not leave her home alone. I don’t know why she didn’t love church like her mother. It probably had something to do with the tomboy way her father encouraged her to behave, but the congregation loved her, so I was sure, with time, she’d come around. As I buckled her in the back seat, she looked so sweet in her Sunday dress.

I drove to the church and thought of Evelyn and her family. She was forty-five at the time of James’ death, about ten years younger than me. James had only been fifty-three.
wondered how it would feel to be in her position. I didn’t know if I could’ve raised the kids without Lester, especially if they were so young. I was just finishing up my prayers for Evelyn as I pulled into the parking lot and saw her walking down to the church, holding her babies’ hands. I could not fight back the tears. We had never been very close, but it was sad imagining her shock when she got the call her husband had passed and then having to explain it to the children. I thought of Jimmy, who would be going into adulthood without his father. Young men need a father figure.

I had come early, so I took a few moments to compose myself. Jenna would be alright in the car for a moment. She had fallen asleep on the way over and did not notice when we stopped. As I approached Evelyn, I asked God for the perfect words to say, but there were none. What could be said to someone whose whole life had changed without warning? I simply embraced her. I felt her shoulders tremble, and watched her wipe away tears, the first of many that day. It broke my heart to see this woman so burdened with pain. It is hard to understand when someone dies, but God has a reason for everything and wisdom we cannot comprehend. I knew he would give her the strength to overcome and make it through the days ahead. We prayed together for a few minutes, as her kids waited by her side. The babies were crying, too. I’m sure the youngest one was crying because her mother was. At three, she could not have understood death. This was even sadder than the older girl and boy’s experience, because at least at ten and seventeen they understood their father was with Jesus now.

A good amount of people attended my father’s funeral, and in a way, I was proud of that. My father was a hard man. He did not talk much, but you always knew how he felt about you. In the tradition of the generations of men that came before him, Dad never complained, and worked hard to provide for his family. His presence was naturally intimidating, and he did not bother much with social functions, regardless of my mother’s near-constant attempts to get him to go to the pot-lucks and holiday parties held in the neighborhood. But he had always been committed to this old church, despite the fact it was going to shit, and the preacher was long past senile. The congregation wore their best black dress clothes and sat quietly with long faces, while whispering “that poor, poor family” to each other. I respected that the people he had prayed with, tithed with, and took communion with the first Sunday of every month made an effort to honor him, even if it was with the cliché words and sentiments church people have used for centuries.

My father had not been an emotional man and could only share his feelings under the guise of religion, so it was in this rickety, decrepit church that I saw my father be vulnerable. He was not one to be overwhelmed by God’s power to the point of falling out or yelling unintelligible words, but you could always find him at the altar with his hands up, worshiping openly. One Sunday, I even saw him cry while singing some old hymn. I used to resent the church for getting through his tough exterior when I couldn’t, but now that he’s gone, I am just glad he had a place he felt free.

Like always, Dad was coming home from the bar the night he drove off the road. Stupidly, no one minded the drunk driving laws in our small town. I watched the people go by the casket and place a hand on my mother’s shoulder. Some of those men were probably throwing them back with Dad at the bar the night he died. Mom tried to form a “Thank you so much” or a “Jim would have appreciated you coming.” Some people even wrote her a check or
offered to do this or that around the house. The acts of charity chipped at my pride, but it was no secret that my father was the breadwinner of the family, and we were not prepared for his death. I knew we could use the help.

I watched the old people slowly march past my father, giving him a frown of pity or a nervous smile. A little girl in long braided pig-tails approached the casket with her grandmother. She looked anxious but did not shy away. I studied her face as she peered in at my father on tip-toes. A flash of something like anger appeared in her face for a brief second. The expression resonated with me. At only seventeen, I was being thrust into the role of man of the house, ill prepared for the responsibility. Within the week I would have to find a job and would never have a chance to be selfish and reckless. From that day on, I would live for my family, trying my best to imitate my father’s quiet strength.

Listen

Downtown is quiet and, tonight, dead with apathy.

The nymphai look like girls stood up for prom.
The fountain is their company, moving with them, shining their skin like stones in a river.

Rain is pouring hard and the wind is toppling the fountain spray on me, soaking me absolutely, but I stay a while longer out of respect.

In all there are nineteen, all stunning, but my eyes fall on the more feminine forms.

These women are real. There is nothing forged in their figures, and they are completely unapologetic.

They look so soft and tranquil—it intimidates me.

I know I will never be that centered, regardless of how much yoga I take, therapy I sit through, and poetry I read.

I walk up to the most alluring one as if I am entering a temple and she seems to say

You are lucky to see me.

She’s right.

The silhouettes merging against the night, nearly too subtle to be seen, could pass for divine, and like the Gods, they whisper just below your awareness.

Listen—the sirens deserve to be heard.
A Writing Collection
by Zachary Riel
Sherwood High School

Nouns

Person: Me
My hands,
The music,
And the piano.
Nothing else matters.
Focus.
The City of Art,
The city of my dreams.
My melody is heard
In New York City.
A mental picture, at first,
Blurry, and unclear;
But the musical palate
Slowly takes over;
The image comes into
Focus.
The notes u-n-i-t-e,
Each an individual color;
They paint a masterpiece
With my dreams.
Place: New York City
Lights.
Colors.
Signs everywhere,
Advertising and marketing
To millions of consumers,
Attempting to persuade
Naïvely curious minds.
BLOWN UP and Accented
With a rainbow of colors,
Promoting everything
From brown hues
Of candy wrappers
To red shades
Of sugar-filled aluminum.
Yellow cars line streets,
A soft hum of car horns
Lingers
In the air.  
Buildings of extreme height  
Cast dark shadows away  
From a rising

Musicians play,  
Surrounded by trees,  
Soaring melodies  
Of genuine instruments  
Blessing all passerby’s  
With beauty.  
A performer  
Takes a seat,  
Surrounded by an expansive  
Concert hall,  
Fulfilling a dream  
That the heart  
Has always longed for.  
Thing: Piano  
All of my effort  
In all my life  
Has been practicing  
For this very  
Moment.  
I touch it.  
A hammer strikes a string  
Causing it to vibrate  
And emit a sound.  
A note.  
I hit two keys,  
Three, and then four,  
The splendor  
Of the strings  
Echoes throughout the hall.  
Both black and white,  
The 88 keys  
Sing a song  
Pleasing to the ear.  
My fingers dance in the room,  
The room of music,  
The piano,  
A ballroom for my hands.  
Everything fades away  
Life dissipates into darkness.
All that remains

My hands,
The music,
And the piano.

Searching My Heart

The heart is an interesting thing. It contains a plethora of emotions, longings, and desires. It is also the place where we store what is most important to us. Sometimes, what is really important to us is unclear or we are unsure of it. Our deepest loves and needs are not always obvious. We occasionally must take unorthodox approaches to find out what is hiding from us and search for what our hearts truly desire. This past summer, I went searching for what my heart truly desires deep in the villages of Togo, Africa. This is what I found.

I began my journey on a Sunday afternoon. I was eager to embark on my expedition, but at the same time, nervous. I was going to a place totally unfamiliar to me. I had never in my life ventured this far outside of my comfort zone. As I said my final goodbyes, I began to contemplate a crucial question: What was my mission? I realized the answer to this query as we soared over the Sahara Desert. When the lyrics from the popular Newsboys song came to mind, my mission was clear. “It’s the song of the forgiven, rising from the African plain . . .” repeated over and over again in my head. It was my mission to make sure that the song of the forgiven could be heard anywhere and everywhere, even deep in the jungles of Africa.

With my mission clear in my mind and my heart focused on what needed to be done, I entered Togo with a resolve that I had never before experienced in my life. I ignored the uncertain feelings and misgivings that were attempting to plague my mind as I took my first steps on African soil. I knew that God would be with me every step of the way; there was no need to fear. I was ready to serve. My search had begun.

Unfamiliar and inspirational happenings began to invade my world instantly. There is one particular memory that I continue to ponder daily that stands out from the rest. As I was walking along and taking in all of the new sights and smells, I came upon two African children playing together. I noticed a cardboard box lying near them and thought nothing of it. I had seen trash everywhere since I had arrived in Togo, so there was nothing particularly significant about this box. It soon became obvious that it was much more than a cardboard box to the children, however. They began kicking it around, running and jumping jovially, and I immediately realized that they were using the box as a soccer ball. In the moment, I was taken-aback, unsure of how to react, but what would later hit me right in the heart is the image of these two smiling and laughing. They were so excited to be playing with this simple little box, when I knew for certain that I would never have been content with an identical box when I was a child. They were simply making do with what they had, and it fascinated me how content they were with their circumstances. I asked myself, “What do they have that I don’t? What makes them so satisfied with their environment?” I knew I was on to something. I was getting closer to discovering my heart’s wishes.
The local villages were comprised of many unique elements, but the most interesting factor of any of the villages was the children. When they heard us coming, they ran towards us as fast as their grimy feet would carry them. They were so happy to see us and felt honored to just hold our backpacks or get their picture taken by us. Many of them did not have adequate clothing or nourishment, so the smiles that they constantly retained on their faces were unbelievable to me. These kids loved us when they had almost nothing.

The churches in the area stuck out to me as well. Some churches met in nothing more than large shacks, while others met under trees. Most of the people who attended these churches lived in mud huts and managed their lives on a day-to-day basis. How they continued to worship God in their church despite their circumstances is astounding to me. One village articulated this characteristic so powerfully that I frequently reflect upon my experience there. When the church was first formed in this village, the congregation began meeting under a tree. People with no money, not much food, and little clothing took time out of their schedules to meet under a tree and praise God. Such a loud dedication to the church resounded deep within my heart, for I cannot honestly say that I’ve ever been that dedicated. As the emotional stories continued to hit me right and left, I quickly realized that searching your heart is not always a pleasant journey, but I had to keep pushing forward, no matter what, for my journey had just barely begun.

These emotional phenomena came in all sorts of shapes and sizes. I felt like I may soon regress into an endless state of amazement if these events continued to occur at their present rate. My group presented bibles to local church pastors who did not have one, and the effect was very humbling. I had never seen anyone so happy to receive a Bible. They were overjoyed, and I watched in awe as they praised God for the gifts that we had presented and thanked us for our generosity. This caused me to question myself that day: “Do I value my Bible nearly as much as they do? Have I become so accustom to the immense comfort of my life that my Bible has lost its value to me?” These pastors helped me move closer to my destination; that is, the end of my thorough investigation of my heart.

I had always heard people in our church talk about members of the church who have a servant’s heart, but I had never heard of an entire congregation having such an attribute. While I was attending an outdoor church service, it started raining. To my pleasant surprise, everyone immediately jumped in to help move the congregation inside. The drums and music never stopped as people were grabbing benches and dancing into the church building. The number of people with a servant’s heart impressed me. I always think back to this and wonder: “Do I have a servant’s heart? If I was in their shoes, would I have done the same thing?”

Not all of my heart’s longings were illuminated by Africans and their behaviors, although many were. Some were brought to light by the people that were on the journey with me. One night, Gerald Winegardener, an inspirational man who is no longer with us, said something that will always stay with me. While my group was discussing the process of sharing the story of Jesus through our colored bracelets, Gerald made the following comment: “It doesn’t really matter how you tell the story or in what order you tell the story in … the only mistake is to not tell the story.” I instantly knew that God wanted me to hear this and to fully comprehend what Gerald was saying. This quote may seem like it’s just a simple statement, but it holds a great deal of weight on the scale of my heart. I knew that I needed to tell people about Jesus, but now I know that I can do it anytime and anywhere, no matter what the
situation is or what my available resources are. Gerald had an unending love for Jesus, and his thoughts brought me closer to the end of the process of exploring my heart.

Music also had a large part to play in my daily emotional adventures. I attended the Togo Baptist Convention’s annual concert and marveled at yet another mind-blowing affair. At one point in the concert, between singing groups, the power went out. Almost immediately, the host of the concert improvised and began leading the audience in hymns. A female singer also got up from the crowd and helped lead the audience until the power returned. Electricity or no electricity, these people were going to worship their God in some way. I could only shake my head and laugh. I would have never had the guts or determination to begin leading an audience in song, not to mention without music. The persistent determination of everyone that I had met in Togo glaringly exposed my weak dedication, and it started to become obvious what examining my heart would show me.

Witnessing was not a new experience for me. I had told people about the sacrifice Jesus made and His unending love in the past, but witnessing to someone who has never heard of Jesus? I definitely had a huge eye-opening experience on my hands that day. You don’t really know what introducing a person to Jesus who has never even heard of Him feels like until you actually do it. I will always mark this memory as a landmark in my walk with Jesus, for he opened my eyes that day to the world’s immense need for his name.

Many of the Africans that we met seemed to always have very wise insight on their faith in Jesus. One man in particular had a great deal of wisdom. This Jesus-believer declared to us that, “I am black and you are white, but we both worship the same one true God.” This will stick with me for the rest of my life. The man had it right; God brings people of all races, cultures, languages, and walks of life together to fellowship in his presence. My heart was ready to go home. It was time to leave.

After inspecting my heart for two weeks, I finally found what my heart desires. My heart yearns for the dedication that the people of Togo have. They took so much time out of their lives, ignoring the day-to-day problems that life continued to throw at them, and they worshiped their one true God. Whether they were in a nice building, a shack, or under a tree, they worshiped. My heart also longs for the simple joy and happiness that the children of Togo always seem to possess. I want to be happy with what I have and content with my life, whether I have a brand new soccer ball, or just a simple cardboard box. Finally, and definitely most importantly, I desire the unconditional and unending love that these people have with God. No matter where people live, how they live, how much money they have, where they come from, or what’s in their past, God loves them unconditionally and wholly. He can and will cleanse them from the inside out. God is in Togo, the United States, and the world. God is in my heart.
As the Sun Rose

There was a meadow where our friendship lived
Where gilded sun caused dappled petal to unfurl
And golden day gave way to purple starry night
The four of us lived there in happiness unscarred by tragedy
The flame of our friendship burning bright

We were young, and as the young do,
We saw life through a haze of blind joy, adopted by the untroubled mind
On each other we unburdened our troubles, petty as they were
Laughing them off, our hearts light in a free melody
Never seeing what was about to occur

And one day the sun rose, bringing hatred with it, seeping over the horizon
Poisoning our meadow; our friendship, riddling it with mistrust
Salty rains fell and bitter soil they made
Softening the ground of the grave where our happiness lay dying
And unbeknownst to me, plans of my betrayal were being laid

And four happy we
Turned to one lonely me
Cradling my wounded trust, slashed deep to the core
Lamenting a friendship that had been poisoned by lies
I limped out of the meadow, knowing the truths of the people that I thought I’d known before

A year had come
And a year had passed
And I’d returned to the meadow, finding it choked with the weeds of the land
And a dandelion seed blew by, caressing my cheek
That my friends and I once would have tried to capture in a hand

My fingers floated to my face at the phantom touch
Feeling the meadow stroke me once again
And I walked to the edge of the field
And stood on the bank of a glassy-watered creek
A single tear shattered the placid surface
When the rippled died, I watched the stillness as it healed
Nothing is as it seems*

A poetic palindrome

We have evolved into monsters
I refuse to believe
There is hope for humanity for the reason that
When you see goodness in someone
You must be dreaming because
Hearts are just too opaque to let light in
When you believe
People are capable of love
You must remember
All anyone feels is greed or hate
If you take it for a fact
Nothing is as it seems
You'll understand the way of life when you realize
Kindness is dead
It can't be that
People will go out of their way to do things for others
When you see the world the way I do
It will open your eyes
To the unbelievable things people will do to each other
All you need to do is look
Something is always around the corner waiting to surprise you
It's well known that
Oppression and prejudice are human nature
And not that
Peace and coexistence can be possible
Someday I will tell my grandchildren
The shocking tales of this planet
Everyone already knows
I will never cease to be amazed by the behavior of man
I can't believe I live in such a world.
These sad things and more will become a reality
Unless we learn to halt and reverse this self-fulfilling prophecy

*Read the poem forwards and then backwards line by line.
Salted Fingers

A man,
wise with age,
sits at the piano.
Slow he taps a note,
another,
another.
Long moans exit from his being.
His fingers begin to play faster,
flat
against the keys.
Another moan echoes,
a quiet one now
the keys, his wife’s fingers,
and as he begins stroking them,
curling and intertwining
his fingers into her soft hands.
They are wet now,
his hands,
and taste of salt
as he puts them in his mouth
like tasting the world
for the first time.
“Bitter” he says
“So bitter”

My Wild Little Tiger

I feel the underside of your black paws
as you find your way through my dark and bloody veins
and as your strong yet wobbly newborn legs
suddenly feel the urge to jolt forward.
I feel how you teethe at my muscles
like the fresh meat of a gazelle,
and how you nudge your head,
forcefully against the inside of
my shoulders, my arms, my neck
until I move,
until I can't stop.

I feel that desperation with which you wish
for the wind to play gently across your face
and for the metallic nighttime grasses
to sweep against the stripes of your fur.
I feel it every time your paws scrape and pound
against the sides of my body.

You are mine in a way,
wild one;
there is no latch
to open the cage that is my body,
no way for those black eyes that shine
like a darkened moon to know light.

Oh my wild little tiger,
at times you make standing in one place
like running barefoot through an empty parking lot
that stretches endlessly into the frigid night.
At times you make the cold air that sits in my throat
like the jagged edges of black rocks.
At times you
make me different.

Oh my wild little tiger,
my curse,
my almost
constant companion,
my unwanted teacher,
you and I are one yet
so often I feel that I am your
play toy and that one day you will
rip me to shreds
from the inside out.

More than anything
I want to scream out to you,
make you feel how much
it hurts, how much my muscles ache
after just a day of your relentless torture.
I want to make you know
that I sit on the other side,
swimming backstroke through this whir of noise
which one might call life.
I want to make you know how I want to hit back,
so, so hard.

The Light Switch

Now the boys are
curled in the sheets,
tackling each other, pulling
white blankets off, pushing them
on the wooden floor.
One turns on and off the light switch,
leaning out of bed,
pulling at his mouth with excitement.
They are ticklish,
are still wearing their soccer jerseys
and underwear,
have taken off their pants.
Their feet are bare soldiers,
their hands,
steal canopies.
They have been wet all day
from water buckets
and neighborhood pools
after soccer.
They know not the meaning
of the day quite yet.
The TV is on,
speaking in Spanish and
flashing in the room’s
one corner.
It is 12:11. Late.
They are too young to stay up,
but I let them because,
because their eyes
are my demigods and their teeth
have yet to fall from their soft gums.
One still sucks his thumb,
but only in his sleep.
The other is asking for
his first motor bike.
I let them pull off covers, lay their pillows half off the bed. I let them pull at each other’s hair because this is the only time for that. Soon their words, sentences will be grammatically correct, coherent. They will not say things that do not make sense, that do not need to. There will be no joy in turning off and on the light switch.
Flowers*
by Jenna Smith
Central High School

* This piece pays homage to Margaret Atwood's short story, “Bread.”

Envision a bouquet of flowers. You clasp them tight against your chest. Their soft petals against your skin calm the rapid beating of your heart. You look ahead at the worn white doors of the chapel, the color matching your dress perfectly. You hold the bouquet up to them and squint. Beautiful. The velvety irises contrast nicely against the old wood, making you smile with satisfaction. You close your eyes and inhale deeply, the veil around your head enveloping the flower's delicate aroma. You then turn toward your dear father and open your eyes. He's smiling, but his brimming tears bring attention to the realization in his eyes. He has raised you, watched you grow since you were born. You shed a quiet tear in spite of yourself and watch the clear orb reflect blue as it rolls off the smooth petal of a flower. You think of the man that you love behind those doors and feel pure happiness and certainty. With this, you give your father a quick hug, nod, and turn towards your future. You are ready.

Envision a funeral. You walk up to a black casket and glance down at the cold body of a friend. You look away. You divert your attention and stare at the neglected flowers beside your black polished shoes. You realize you dropped them and bend down to pick them up. White carnations and red roses—your mother said those would be appropriate. In your haste you forget about the thorns on the roses. You watch your blood swell on your thumb but feel no pain. You are numb. You stand up with the flowers in hand and turn toward the casket once more. The deep red drop on your finger matches the velvet that surrounds the empty corpse of your best friend. For the first time in days you are able to cry again. You've woken from your daze. You stare at the flowers—identical to your own—that are held by a person you hardly recognize. These flowers are thankful for your tears, soaking up your pain as the last bit of life they will receive.

Envision a classroom. You sit slumped in a desk while the teacher lectures. You're hearing, but you're not listening. Instead, you focus on the glossy finish of your folder. You look away quickly in disgust when you see a warped face return your gaze. At the sound of the bell, you hide your reflection in your book bag and walk out of the class. Drifting through the hallways with your head down, you hope to hide the self-consciousness that dulls your eyes. You arrive at your locker and open it. You blink in surprise. Cautiously, you lean closer to the alluring vibrancy of orange and red daisies. The bright blossoms seem to glow in the dingy darkness. Gingerly, you lift the bouquet from the locker. A tiny card is tied to the boldest of the buds—strategically placed to be initially overlooked. It reads of as much love and kindness as it does of mystery, leaving you enthralled and glowing. These flowers will wither, but you know that the words they've hidden, the glow that they've given, will stay with you forever.

Now envision a child; one that you love so dearly. You can't help but grin to yourself as you glance out the window and watch him play outside, without a care in the world. You yearn to feel the same as you look hopelessly at the paperwork enveloping the entire dining room table. You walk to the kitchen to start dinner and nearly trip over a pile of your son's toys. You realize that he is your everything. Just as dinner is ready, he bursts through the front door and
stomps loudly down the hallway. You turn to see him standing right in front of you, pure eagerness in his eyes. He is holding something behind his back, but before you can get a chance to ask about it, excitement and impatience overwhelm him. Giggling, he pulls out a flower arrangement of sorts and hands it to you. You take a closer look at his gift. You see two wilted dandelions, bruised and battered from the multiple rearrangements of a five year old, surrounded by a handful of grass and a few mangled honey-suckles. You look back up at your son and see him shifting, waiting anxiously for you to react. You hug him tightly and tell him they're beautiful. You find a makeshift vase and put the bouquet carefully inside. You know they won't last long, so you take a picture. As you sit down beside your son, you realize that anything can be beautiful if given to you by someone you love.

Flowers themselves aren't so special. They grow in places in which others have died. What makes flowers so special, however, is not their initial appearance but the vein in which they were given. They are made beautiful not by the richness of the soil or the quality of the market but by being a gift.
Redemption

by Alex Stelter

Maryville High School

As I walked out of the courtroom, the cop released my now blistering wrists from handcuffs. I am free. Well...not quite, but I was at least given a minor punishment. After spending two nights in jail, the judge released me with only eighty hours of community service at Gable Cares Center for the Retired, the local hospital, and an anti-theft class at the small cost of three hundred dollars. All of this for stealing a box of cigars. Right then, I didn't care. I just wanted to go home and sleep. *I'll make it back to my bed.* Dragging myself into Mom’s car, my eyes slowly started to close as her useless words passed between my ears. Darkness overcame me before we reached the first stop light.

I rolled over feeling a tapping on my shoulder and hearing my stepdad’s low, indistinct voice. After having the thick wool blanket ripped from my freezing body, now exposed to the bitter winter air, I sat up quickly, confused. I didn’t remember walking from the car to the house, but as I thought about what was coming, my stomach dropped, and the mystery of how I awoke in my bed became unimportant. Today, I would have to start my journey of volunteer work.

I’ve never been an outgoing person. I’ve never gotten along with everyone or been popular or rich, but I did find my group of people. They were the socially awkward ones, but at least they accepted me. Sure, they might drink, smoke, and in this case, occasionally steal, but I found my place. I had to fit in, and in order to do this, I took on the challenge of completing my initiation. The task included breaking into a house and stealing a laptop. Unfortunately, when I entered the home there was no computer. I rummaged around for other goods to take but an elderly man awoke. As he ran down the stairs, I sprinted out the door and hopped in Jack’s old ’97 Saturn decked out with rims and radios from previous initiations. Looking down into my hands, I realized I had failed. All I managed to yield was an old box of cigars.

Prying the door open to my room, my mom demanded, “Tyler, get your ass out of bed; we need to get going. I have work in forty-five minutes.”

“Yeah yeah, give me a second,” I mumbled as I rolled back over.

Thirty-five minutes later, I entered into the Gable Cares Center for the Retired. The hospital was a decrepit building, probably built in the seventies, with rotted window panels and paint peeling from the exterior. The hinges creaked noisily as I opened the door. Upon entering I noticed a lady, a few years older than me, dressed in a black and silver dress sitting at the front desk. With the fakest smile I have ever seen, she asked, “Hi, can I help you?”

Still thinking of the phony face she put on when I entered, I replied, “I’m here for community service. I’m not exactly sure where to go.”

“Oh, no problem! Let me look at this sheet right here...There you are! Looks like you’ve been assigned to Mr. Miller. He’s a new patient, just moved here six days ago. Follow me, and I’ll take you to his room.”

As I trailed the lady down the long hallway that projected from the main entryway, she opened the door to room 228, and a wall of a horrendous odor hit me. *Typical hospital smell.* Putting on the happiest face I could, I said “Hello Mr. Miller, I’m going to be visiting with you for the next few days.”
As I walked over to sit down in a chair alongside his bed, the young lady at the front desk quickly remarked, “I’m going to leave you two alone,” and then she shut the door.

Awkwardly, I started a small conversation with the man and asked, “Mr. Miller, how long have you been here?”

“Six boring days. Maybe I’ll get out of this hell hole eventually.”

Great personality. Looking down at the bed, I saw that something had gone wrong. Attached to his hip region was some sort of mechanism. Not knowing exactly where the apparatus attached, I decide not to ask in fear of embarrassment.

He must have seen me staring because he replied, “Don’t be afraid. It’s just a broken hip. Happens all the time with folks my age. Should have a new hip and be out of here soon.”

I kept asking Mr. Miller, who I now knew as Kenney, questions, and as he opened up, the hours started rolling by. After a few minutes of talking, I took him to physical therapy, to lunch in the cafeteria, and finally through the hallways of the hospital. He went back to his bed, and as Kenney’s eyelids closed, I looked up at the clock. Three-twenty. I had worked seven and a half hours.

“Not too shabby for my first day,” I thought.

That night in bed as I pondered the volunteer work and the way I was spending my summer. I thought of everything that Kenney had said. He seemed like a nice guy, and maybe, just maybe, this whole community service thing wouldn’t be too bad after all.

The next day, Mom woke me. And once again, she was in a hurry. Rushing my shower and my breakfast, she drove me to the hospital. Upon entering, I didn’t need to ask the lady at the desk where to go. I just walked straight to room 228. With much more optimism this time, I opened the door with a sincere smile on my face. To my surprise, Kenney was laying face down on his bed moaning. Worried, I ran over to him and tapped his right shoulder. He looked as if he were in severe pain so I ran out into the hallway to get help. A nurse walking by heard me and rushed into the room. After a few minutes of commotion, everything became calm. The nurse came over to explain to me that Mr. Miller had a severe reaction to his hip replacement, which apparently happened to most patients. I wasn’t allowed to see Kenney for the rest of the day, so I decided to start sweeping and mopping the floors. At around one, I called it a day. It seemed as if I had been there for one hundred hours straight.

As I went to sleep that night, the thought of poor Mr. Miller ran through my mind. He seemed like he was in so much pain. Hoping that I could talk to him tomorrow, I went to bed.

The sun rose bright and early on Saturday. Waking up on my own, I hobbled into the kitchen and allowed myself a generous portion of eggs and bacon. Today seemed like a good day, and I hoped it would continue at the hospital. I eagerly searched the house for my mom and when I was ready to give up, she walked in the front door. I had forgotten that she worked out on weekend mornings.

“Mom, can you drive me to the hospital in about an hour?”

To my surprise she responded, “No, I’ll give you back your keys. The court's punished you enough. I suppose I don’t need to also.”

Taking the keys, I hopped in my truck and drove myself to the hospice. When I arrived, I briskly walked straight to Kenney’s room. To my relief, he was awake and looked ten times healthier than yesterday. I asked if he felt better, and I received what I had come to know as a
typical Kenney response: “I've lived on this damn earth for eighty-eight years. Never been better.”

With a slight chuckle I said, “Well, that’s always good. So what happened yesterday? I worried about you all night!”

“Well, those doctors think I was having some sort of pain attack or something. I'm not really sure. I haven't been feeling too well lately.”

“What happened to your hip?”

“I fell down the stairs and broke it.”

As I started asking more questions about his narration, it became clear that he didn’t want to tell me exactly what happened. I gave up after a short time and changed the subject. We talked about World War II. He explained that he was a soldier, and twenty years after he returned, he had suffered from cancer, probably caused from some sort of radiation that he came in contact with while in battle.

When I left on the third day, I forgot to count the number of hours that I had volunteered. I really didn’t care. I enjoyed talking to Kenney Miller, and I think he might have liked returning the favor even more. My labor at the hospital wasn’t caused from the court forcing me to work anymore; it became my passion to see Kenney.

On the fourth day, I entered Kenney’s room, and he was once again in a good mood. I helped him with the routine task of shaving his face and then finally tucking him into bed. I knew he didn’t feel the greatest, but he still acted joyful towards me. After a few minutes of small talk, he asked me why I chose to volunteer at this hospital rather than other places. After thinking how to answer without offending him, I decided to just tell him the truth.

“Well, I got in a little trouble and was sentenced to eighty hours of community service, and well, I guess this is my service,” I explained.

“What the hell did you do, boy?” he asked with an irritated tone.

“It's a long story, I'd rather not tell.”

“Son, I've lived through World War II, the Great Depression, made it through the Nazi lines, lived through almost seventeen presidents, and saw the shooting of Kennedy through my own eyes. I think I can handle the truth.”

After deciding that he had made a good point, I chose to tell him everything. I informed him on how I became an outcast, how I hung out with the troubled kids, how I stole for friendship, and how I was caught. I figured Kenney would have a million questions or smart ass comments after I told him my fifteen minute story, but he didn’t. He just sat there quietly for the rest of the day. At around noon, I couldn’t take the awkward silence anymore and decided to leave. Driving my own truck on the way home, I thought about what I had said to Kenney. Had I offended him? Had I said something wrong? Had I cussed in front of him? I couldn’t think of a reason for why I had silenced the man.

The next day, I entered Kenney’s room and assumed he would be in the same mood I had left him in the day before, but to my surprise, he was the happiest I had seen him yet. When I came in, he didn’t even call me “Pudge,” which he had done since the first day I walked in his door. I asked him why he was in such a good mood. Kenney didn’t have a real answer. This day was by far the best I had spent with Mr. Miller. We talked for three hours straight about girls (which for some reason wasn’t weird at all), what my future plans were, and college. I then turned the subject to what he would be interested in: the war, politics, and childhood
stories. Kenney and I just seemed to click. I could tell we cared about each other. He didn’t make me be someone I wasn’t, and he sure as heck didn’t make me steal to fit in.

Before I left that afternoon, Kenney said to me, “You know, Pudge, you’re a pretty good kid. We all make stupid mistakes, and I hope you learn from yours. I’m not married you know, and I have no kids. You’re the only one I got. Thanks for doing this for me. I appreciate it.”

He thanked me one more time, and as I opened the door, I saw a little tear run down his cheek. I turned around and smiled, keeping in my own tears. As I walked down the hallway and out of the hospital, I let them roll. It was a good day. I knew I had become attached to Kenney. He was the best friend I ever had, even if he was in his eighties.

The next few days flew by. We kept talking, and I became even fonder of him. I have never spoken to a wiser man. I learned nothing but life lessons from him and took something out of all of his stories, even the boring ones. I wished my own father had been this caring and intelligent. After this day, I went home and added up the hours I had volunteered. I counted seventy-eight. I only need two more. For some reason, I wasn’t happy. I wanted to keep seeing Kenney.

The next day, I went into the hospital to finish up my remaining hours. I walked into Kenney’s room, only to find him asleep. I chose to sit in the nice cushioned chair next to his bed, but after about thirty minutes, I decided it wasn’t so comfortable. Luckily, fifteen minutes later, Kenney woke up. He looked horrible. His face was pale white, and his eyes were glazed over. He tried telling me how he felt, but his voice barely made it out of his throat. Miserably, he sat up and tried to take a drink of water from the glass sitting on the night stand. While grabbing the cup, he dropped the container, and it shattered everywhere. I rushed over to pick the broken pieces up, and by the time I finished, Kenney’s eyelids were shut again. I sat back down in the chair until I was able to leave. I went home slightly disappointed that I wasn’t able to talk to Mr. Miller.

I awoke late the next morning but decided to still make my way to check on Kenney. After all, I owed him a true thank you for all he had taught me. I drove to the hospital, walked in the main entrance door, and passed the rude lady sitting at the front desk. A little ways down the hallway, I saw nurses rushing in and out of Kenney’s room. Panic set in, and my heart dropped. I sprinted in, only to see him lying on his bed facing away from me. I went up and touched his shoulder. Cold and stiff. In fright, I turned around and left weeping. I walked out in the hallway searching for a hospital employee to check on him, but I knew what had happened. I didn’t need a doctor’s confirmation to realize this. One of the five nurses came out of the room and hugged me. She asked if I was his grandson, and I stopped sobbing long enough to reply, “Sort of.” She walked me to the chair sitting in a lobby and sat by me. After another five minutes passed, a new nurse brought me out a note. She explained that she found it on Kenney’s bedside table. I grabbed the piece of paper and tried reading it. I wasn’t able to make out the writing through my tears, but once I calmed down, I unfolded the note once again and began to decipher the words.

Dear Pudge
I’ve loved being able to see you these past couple days
I’ve never really met a kid like you before, so polite and intellectual
Thank you for giving me someone to talk to about anything and everything
And someone to relate to. I’ve enjoyed every second of it
Unfortunately, it was my time to go
I’ll see you in the next life

P.S. I don’t have a laptop in my house. But enjoy my cigars.
I bought them a couple years back. You never told me you smoke
It’s too bad that I missed that top step running down the stairs after you,
I always have been a little clumsy.

Love,
Kenney Miller
dear god, if you should find me
i really do wish i could love you like
i used to, blindly, bringing my cold hands
to your neck for warmth, kissing my pink
fingernails, delicate as pearly
seashells. no. somewhere far away, a
monk might paint your portrait,
the adirondack portrait of an ivory man
he hardly knew, the sunshine a bullet between
his teeth, rolled around on his tongue.
the gravel is broken beneath our feet,
the weeds are tender; queen anne's lace,
narcissus, trampled rosebuds.

i keep you behind the locked doors
of my mind, though sometimes as
i sleep, i tiptoe down and open them slowly
and find you waiting, cobweb body as gentle as silk.

oh hold me, sweet god, me with my
foxglove fingers in your bible, blood-red
words seeping out of peter, a song on the lips
of a tender flute, a bird leaping off a spanish moss
branch, the sketch of grass on a wall.
all the king's horses can't piece us together again.
their hooves too thick, too wet, too dark?
like folding the night, stitching closed the gaps to heaven,
swallowing the stars.
meanwhile I will wait here,
the dampness of your love running
as a comb through the thickening grasses
and sparing no one.

Last Night I Dreamed

that I was dying,
slipping off a frozen ark, something like Noah's
but encrusted with ice, a mourning bride in a frozen gown.
Falling, falling, cracking my spine
in the flood. The lions yawned at me, 
gaze down their warm throats, 
and the elephants wobbled their sad gray heads, 
their eyes fudgy and clouded. I was flying 
through these dream-waves, I was pale as 
salt. I was tangled in brine and mangled by 
olive branches. A wonder the dove didn’t drown, 
a wonder the dove found land at all, 
her warm body like a whisper 
over the sea, or an unraveling promise, 
as graceful as my hair, illuminated by the sun, 
floating on an ocean dream-wave.

Honey, they will say later, you were kicking the wall, 
you were drowning in your sheets like a thrashing bird 
with broken wings.
Title IX, Good and Bad
by Michael Tanner
Chaminade College Prep School

Ever since “second wave” feminism began to gain support in 1953, women all around the United States have been clamoring for equal opportunity in all aspects of life, and rightly so. In 1972, Title IX, which bars sexual discrimination from all aspects of education, was passed to protect women in the collegiate atmosphere. Over the years, Title IX has been interpreted many different ways, sometimes as a strict mandate and other times as a loose concept. Title IX has brought about greater opportunity for women, especially in sports, but it has also negatively affected other collegiate athletic programs. Title IX has good intentions and has proven so, but it requires substantial reform in order to reduce its adverse effects.

Title IX has a thirty-nine year history that must be discussed in order to fully understand its overall effects. Title IX specifically states:

No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any educational program or activity receiving federal financial assistance.

(Anderson, Cheslock, and Ehrenberg 227)

Title IX was originally interpreted by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, now called Health and Human Services, whose interpretation was called vague and inadequate by many universities, and compliance remained low until the rules could be more clearly defined (Anderson, Cheslock, and Ehrenberg 227).

A more clearly defined policy then came from the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) in 1979. In addition to a clearer definition given by the OCR, Title IX’s scope was clarified by the courts. A main issue surrounding Title IX in its early days was whether or not its reach extended into intercollegiate athletics. In Grove City College v. Bell in 1984, the Supreme Court ruled that only the intercollegiate programs that received federal funding could be influenced by Title IX, allowing most athletic programs freedom from Title IX’s grasp. Conversely, that ruling was completely reversed by Congress when in 1988 it passed the Civil Rights Restoration Act. The new act says that all programs, whether directly receiving federal funds or not, at a federally funded institution must follow the Title IX guidelines. Furthermore, in 1994 Congress passed the Equity in Athletics Disclosure Act. The act forces institutions to release any and all data pertaining to the operation of men’s and women’s athletic programs (Anderson, Cheslock, and Ehrenberg 227).

Then, after a somewhat clear policy had been established, compliance began to be more tightly enforced, especially by the Clinton administration. In one of the first instances, the Supreme Court decided in the 1992 court case, Franklin v. Gwinnett County Public Schools, that if violations of Title IX appear intentional, then plaintiffs can receive monetary damages (Anderson, Cheslock, and Ehrenberg 278). In another court case, Cohen v. Brown University, the Supreme Court upheld the decision of a lower court, therefore requiring Brown University “to adhere to strict criteria for demonstrating gender equity in intercollegiate athletics” (Thelin 391). The Brown case was hailed as a “landmark victory” for women’s athletics by the media (Thelin 391).
Although the media liked the court’s ruling, universities did not. Brown University was the second best school for women’s athletics; thus, all universities felt at risk. If Brown could get in trouble, then they all could. Still, university resistance began much before the *Brown* case. Title IX had been disliked ever since it had been discussed. After the passage of Title IX, one of the most common complaints from colleges was that they do not want to be forced to give information about the “character and composition of their varsity sports programs and athletics departments” (Thelin 401). Even so, the largest complaint from universities having to with Title IX is not about the accessibility of information, but rather about the money.

Cost is an issue that has been brought to the fore-front in discussion of Title IX. Many universities claim that Title IX cannot be followed due to the large amount of money that it would cost. But first look at budget trends in intercollegiate athletics since 1970. Although the universities claimed that new programs (women’s programs) would overburden the budget, the truth was that the budgets were messed up without the women’s sports. For example, “revenue producing sports” get a large and disproportionate amount of funding. Such sports receive many large athletic scholarships; have colossal athletics facilities built for them, and have a highly paid administration and coaching staff (Thelin 393).

Just how expensive are the new women’s sports? When the NCAA did an anonymous survey of Division I-A schools, it was estimated that about 14 percent of the total varsity athletics budgets went to women’s programs. A claim made by top intercollegiate athletic programs was that women’s program received 55 percent of their funding from the men’s programs. But, upon closer inspection, this number is deceptive. It may be a high percentage, but the total women’s funds were still low. One instance in 1976 depicts the issue perfectly. In 1976, the University of Kentucky offered Pat Head (later Pat Summit) an annual salary of $9,000 to coach the women’s basketball team. At the same time, the base salary of men’s basketball coaches was around $60,000 yearly. Thus, Pat Head, who is arguably the best women’s coach to date, was offered $51,000 dollars less than the worst men’s coach (Thelin 396).

In one instance, at Brown University, there are more than 30 men’s and women’s sports, but 42 percent of the school’s athletic budget went to its “revenue producing teams” – men’s football, basketball, and ice hockey (Weistart 40). Most universities do not want to cut the spending of these three programs. The way that the athletic boards are now, it looks as if the funding will be the same for a while. Weistart states, “Even today, one does not become an athletic director in a substantial program without understanding that the revenue sports…come first” (39).

Instead of delivering fair budget cuts across the board in order to integrate new women’s sports as mandated by Title IX, the boards cut funding from less visible men’s athletic teams. Sports such as wrestling, swimming, and gymnastics, for example, are some of the first to go. In addition to the cutting of entire programs, for every new dollar spent on athletics only “5 to 7 cents” go to nonrevenue sports (Weistart 41). These facts clearly show that some sort of reform of the boards will be necessary to ensure fairness in the realm of intercollegiate athletic opportunity. As long as the boards are corrupt and work to maintain the current large amount of funding for “revenue producing sports,” lesser sports will be neglected. The goal of Title IX is “to ensure fairness for both sexes, and that is not what is happening” (Stossel).
In addition to the issue of the budgets, many claim that fewer female students wish to be in sports, and it makes sense for there to be more support for the men’s programs than women’s programs. Expressing this view, John Stossel writes:

Insisting on equal participation [in sports] is absurd. The Title IX zealots may not want to admit it, but men and women are just different. Fewer girls than boys want to run around and smash into each other. In school, girls dominate chorus, student government, and the yearbook. Dance classes don’t get an equal number of boys, even when they recruit them.

Many people and organizations, such as the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), agree with Stossel. The NCAA even released a statement saying that the guidelines of Title IX fail to display the “rational, real differences between male and female athlete and differences related to the nature of particular sports” (Miller).

Clearly, Title IX needs reform. It seems to embody good ideas; its goal is to give everyone the same opportunities in the college atmosphere, but it is just so difficult to enforce. As it is now, Title IX is enforced by using one of three methods. The first method is known as “substantial proportionality,” meaning that the number of women playing sports to the number of women enrolled as undergraduates must be proportionate to the number of males playing sports to the number of male undergraduates (Van de Graaf 1211).

Although they are difficult to use, two other methods may be used to show compliance. The first alternate method is that the school can prove that it has “engaged in adequately planning and, in a meaningful sense, is on its way to providing sufficient opportunities for women” (Weistart 42). The second alternative, which is impossible to use, allows the school to show that the women’s athletic programs supported by the school meet the level of athletic interest of the female athletes. Just about the only way to do so would be to survey the students to see what the students want to have available to them. Although a survey would give students a direct say in the way athletic resources are handed out, the NCAA immediately wrote to its members, warning them not to adopt it. Gender activist groups followed suit, saying they would sue schools that attempted a survey (Stossel). The NCAA, as well as feminist groups, did not want any such survey, claiming it violates rights and only “measures the effects of prior discrimination against women” (Weistart 43).

If a school is unable to pass these tests, then the school risks having a lawsuit brought against it. Such cases include Virginia Tech, the University of Kansas, and Howard University. “Nearly all high schools, colleges, and universities are vulnerable to Title IX lawsuits. As part of a school’s effort to comply with Title IX, it is wise to prepare for potential lawsuits before full compliance is accomplished” (Tungate and Orie 604).

In the case at the University of Kansas, the university already had a plan in place for creating equal opportunity in athletics, but some of the female athletes filed complaints with the OCR. After the complaints were filed, the OCR informed Kansas that it was to be investigated. Following the investigation, Kansas was given a list of things to do in order to comply with Title IX. The university accepted and thereby avoided a costly legal suit. Not all cases proceed this smoothly. Others have led to huge legal expenses and punitive damages that do not seem to be deserved (Tungate and Orie 603-4).

In conclusion, Title IX has come a long way, but it has much farther to go. It has had many “harmful unintended consequences” (Stossel). In one instance, Quinnipiac University cut
two men’s athletic teams and one women’s team. The American Civil Liberties Union then sued the school on the women’s side, discarding that two men’s programs were also cut. The judge presiding over the case chastised Quinnipiac and re-established the women’s team. As a result, Quinnipiac was forced to drop men’s indoor track (Stossel). Thus, three men’s programs were eliminated and the women’s programs remained untouched.

Overall, Title IX embodies the yearning for social equality by women. Women want to have the opportunity to compete in sports, and they should have those opportunities. Title IX was enacted to create these opportunities. And yes, Title IX has caused some changes in the intercollegiate atmosphere, such as the dropping of lesser men’s programs, but that is not the fault of Title IX. As discussed earlier, introducing women’s athletics does not place much of a strain on athletic budgets. The real reason that lesser men’s programs have been dropped is due to the utter gluttony of “revenue producing sports.” Thus, although Title IX requires reform, revisions need to be sought in other areas, such as the how funds are doled out by athletic boards. In my lifetime, many of these reforms may be made. Hopefully I will live to see the day when both males and females participate (or have the opportunity to participate) in intercollegiate athletics.

Works Cited
I squinted at the page of music before me, my fingers somehow finding the keys, and I began matching them to the tiny notes in rhythm. I was doing pretty well, in my opinion, until one of my fingers slipped and hit a black key. “No, no that’s not right,” Maude, my piano teacher, scolded. I could smell her musty perfume as she reached over me, pointing at the page. “That was supposed to be G not G sharp. Here, let me show you.” I stood up and switched places with her, and as she settled down on the bench of that old piano, I looked around the room, as I often did when I wasn’t playing. The chairs in the corner were stained with age, and the carpet below my feet was matted and tired. The muted colors in the paintings on the wall suggested that they were just as excited to be there as I. My eyes finally settled on the old woman at the piano. Maude looked at home there, sitting in front of the chipped wood and yellowed ivory keys.

“Let me show you how it’s done,” she said and started playing the scales, just as I had. Her fingers danced easily from left to right in perfect rhythm. I studied her face. Usually, Maude sported wrinkles and knotted eyebrows, all part of that cranky old woman stereotype. But as she gazed at the notes on the page, she looked almost happy. I felt out of place sitting there as she played her scales. I wondered why she taught piano lessons when all she really wanted to do was play it herself.

Week after week I begged my mom to let me quit. Finally, she agreed because I never practiced, and she didn’t want to waste her money anymore. But my reason was different. I was tired of sitting on that old piano bench in the spotlight of that harsh lamp that cast a glare on a sheet of music I couldn’t even read. I was even more tired of Maude chastising me with every wrong note and slip of my finger. I had started taking piano lessons because I wanted to be good at it. But as much as I wanted to learn, I wasn’t getting any better. I didn’t understand how Maude could make sense of all those little dots and lines like she was reading a book. “Just keep going through the motions, and you’ll get it,” she told me when I grew discouraged. But her advice did not work, and I had to give up.

I thought about Maude from time to time, wondering if she still taught lessons or if she had grown tired of frowning at small children who couldn’t read notes. But there was something I just couldn’t shake about the way Maude looked when she played for me, the way her frown disappeared. I remembered how young and happy she looked, the way her drab living room seemed to brighten, the colors on the wall becoming more vibrant with each stroke of her fingers. I wanted to find that colorful happiness through the piano like Maude had.

One day, I sat down in front of my piano at home, the one I’d been avoiding for years. I placed my fingers gingerly on the keys, afraid of making the wrong move like I always was with Maude lurking over my shoulder. I played a few scales from my practice book, making the same mistakes I always had. Then I realized that Maude wasn’t there to correct me. No one was. It was just my piano and me. I tossed the practice book on the floor and started picking out “Free” by Jes Hudak, a song I had always wanted to play. It was rough at first. I missed a lot of notes, but I knew what it was supposed to sound like so I kept at it. It felt so liberating playing from memory rather than out of some stupid lesson book.
Every day for the next few weeks, I escaped to the piano in the basement and played “Free.” It didn’t seem like work anymore. I was no longer going through the motions like Maude had advised me to do—I was letting the motions move through me. Maude may not have been a good teacher, but I learned so much from her. I learned that if I closed my eyes and felt my fingers float along the keys, they would grace my heart with happiness and my ears with beautiful music. I didn’t need to know how to read notes. All I needed to see were the bright colors behind my closed eyes that danced to a song called “Free.”
No moon, and the stars were obscured by a thick mist. Kirin leaned on the old stone wall, sleep dancing in the corners of his mind.

No, he couldn’t surrender himself to such notions; he had a job and his honor to protect. Sleep was not a considerable option. But, oh, he was going to have a talk with Uriah. His brother seemed to think that showing up for his scheduled night rounds was an optional circumstance, not mandatory to keep one’s job.

Something moved in the corner of his eye. Uriah? No, it was a figure but not the tall and bulky figure that his brother preferred to shift into. The figure was about his height but much leaner. Though, it was hard to tell with that traveling cloak he or she was wearing. He quickly shifted into a bird for a closer look. The figure was running from the school carrying some sort of bundle or package. It was a student.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

The girl dropped her bundle in surprise as he shifted back to the boy that he had decided to keep as a base this week. The girl gained composure quickly and picked up her bag.

“They need me home now,” she replied with a firmness that seemed not to come from a person of her age, yet he’d seen stranger during his two years guarding the school. He’d seen girls even younger than her with the personality equivalent to that of a senior citizen. They had to be if they were going to be their realm’s protectors. Kirin and his brother were shape shifters, a race of superior magic-users that could change shape at will. Legend claims that the Protectors of the Realms were the only ones to have any power against them. But, that was over fifteen years ago, when the chief had rebelled, along with the majority of the shifters, releasing terror on the realms. Long story short, shape shifters and trust no longer belonged in the same sentence. Kirin’s mother, a non-shifter, decided to keep her family’s honor and sent her two sons as an offering to the Council of Protectors. That’s where they’d lived thirteen years prior to landing themselves jobs as “caretakers,” basically unpaid guards, of The School of the Protectors. A school where successors of the protectors learned enough so that when they succeed their masters, they don’t blow up their realms and, God help them, themselves.

That’s where the girl comes in. She was a student. He had to make sure that she didn’t go off and get herself killed. If he didn’t, he’d lose his job. She’d probably just had a bad dream; Kirin had to reason with her.

“It is the middle of the night; you probably just had a bad dream.” He stopped; a familiar scent washed over him like a serpent over fallen leaves. He darted around, and Head Mistress Adelinda Ormr was standing there in all her snaky glory. In this situation and in this situation only, Kirin was actually glad to see that puckered lemon face and too-tight bun. In short, Ormr was malicious and cruel, but her students feared yet respected her. That’s what he needed right know.

“As you see Mr. Kirin, Ms. Aina feels that she is above all other students and our carriages...”

“I’ve waited a week for a carriage, and it still hasn’t arrived! The realm is in trouble, and I am needed now. Cassamay needs me,” Ms. Aina cried, nearing hysterics.
Her pleas began to tug at a feeling that had been gnawing at him for quite some time. It wasn’t as if Ms. Aina had just wandered off. She had begged the head mistress for help. But, that wasn’t just it. Protectors gain power from their realms and residents; she had been so weak before. He would bet his house that she wasn’t in the mood to give up any power. Is that why she had given him and his brother the job? She had opposed all measures to help shifters in the past. Protectors were not supposed to covet power. What had corrupted her? Now was not the time for such queries; now was the time for a decision he knew might change his life.

“I’ll take her,” he said with assertiveness that surprised him. Ms. Aina looked taken aback, and Ormr could have caught flies. It only took a second for Ms. Aina to respond. “No, I can go by myself.” Her confidence seemed to wane.

“For one thing, you’re going straight towards the lands of the Soulless Ones, and another thing that bundle, if it contains food at all, most likely won’t be able to carry about a month’s supply of food. I can tell you’re from the Far Coast by your accent.” She hung her head in resignation. “Give me 5 minutes, and I’ll have everything we need.”

“How dare you disobey me! What is the meaning of this?” Ormr had finally found her voice, and her anger practically made the surrounding air steam.

“Because Milady, it is right. Because Ms. Aina was begging for help, and her cries should not go unanswered.” Ormr’s face was turning various colors. He hoped his next statement stuck her mind for the rest of her life: “Because I have Honor.”
The sun shined fiercely that day. Lazy clouds meandered through the sky. Underneath the grape vines, my skin was speckled gold and brown. As a soothing breeze blew and shook the leaves, my head moved to avoid the glare of light streaming into my eyes. A book lay slump in my hands, its pages cool beneath my fingers while I reread the first sentence again and again, willing myself to focus, but my mind was always wandering. A sharp thump, and my book closed; its adventures would need to be explored another day.

I leaned further into my white lawn chair and swung my bare feet, brushing the soft grass on each swing. A single bead of sweat ran down my forehead, dripping off my nose. Closing my eyes, I let the insistent chirp of frogs and crickets tingle in my ears.

A stream of laughter drew me from the darkness behind my eyelids. Its melody danced and fluttered across the open air. Following the noise, my eyes glanced to the right, towards my neighbor’s yard where two small figures chased each other. Squeals of giggles erupted as their shoes pounded the earth. As one got closer to the other, playful taunts were thrown, and the laughter swelled.

A smile crept over my face, and my heart seemed to lighten and float inside my chest as my eyes chased and raced along with them on that green hill. They sprinted in endless circles, tumbling and flailing in somersaults, but they ran on. Dirt and grass stains smeared their newly ironed, white polo shirts, but they ran on. Sweat streamed and stung their eyes, but with a quick swipe of their dusty hands, they ran on. Their mouths, turned up in smiles, panting for breath with each footstep. Blind to the world outside their backyard, nothing mattered to them except for their play. Not once did they see me sitting lazily under the grape vines only twenty feet away.

I pictured a younger me, unhesitant and daring, immediately sprinting over to join their merriment. My giggles would ring out. I would have also been tumbling, taunting, and running faster than the wind, free and impervious to the outside world. Then, exhausted, our legs would give out, and we would fall among the soft grass to chortle hysterically at the sky. Before our laughing echoes stopped, I would have gotten up and run at the others still upon the ground, who would scurry and stumble to get up and run away, and the laughter would ring louder.

Now, I could only sit and watch silently by the sidelines. Somehow, I felt my presence would have stained the innocence and splendor of their child play. An invisible barrier had arisen. At 16 years, I was not a child anymore; I could not be blinded by the bliss of their ignorance anymore.

I bolted up. The sun’s glare was becoming unbearable. The grass began to itch and gnaw my feet. All the clouds seemed to loom gloomily in the expanse of a never-ending sky. The breeze, once so refreshing, now only stirred the muggy air around uselessly. Even the pleasant sound of the frogs and crickets was now deafening and overwhelming. After four long steps, my feet burned from the concrete step leading to the backdoor. I swung it open.
The door clicked behind me, and I stood with my back against it, transfixed by the kitchen’s darkness. As my eyes adjusted to the change in brightness, I saw my mother at the stove.

She stirred the dumplings inside a pot and threw me a quick glance.

After a while, she asked, “Why’d you come in?”

“It got too hot.”

Summer passed all too quickly after that, but somehow, the heat remained into the early autumn. Standing by my car, I impatiently waited for my sister to get out of the house since we were already running late. I tossed my bulky backpack into the backseat, and irritation flooded me as all my empty notebooks scattered upon the driveway. I cursed and picked each of them up.

As I stooped to reach the last one, I became aware of a young boy walking past my house. It was the eldest of the two boys playing that summer day. Wearing his clean-pressed khaki pants and white polo shirt, he carried a small, black book bag on his back. His hair had been combed into a part and tamed with water.

I gave him a wave and a weak smile. He waved back and walked on to the bus stop. My heart sank a little again. He too was growing up. I would never fully embrace the loss of blissful, childish innocence, but a reluctant acceptance was already spreading into my chest.

My sister stepped out of the house. “Are you ready to go?”

Still watching the little boy, I smiled and replied, “Yeah, I am.”
The Fish and Bear Paw

“Shishi.”

I look up as I hear the sound of my family nickname being spoken. Is that the oh-so-familiar contemplative tone I detect? Alas, it is time once again for my parents to bestow upon me the gift of a piece of ancient Chinese wisdom. At this moment, the proverb of choice is “fish and bear paw cannot both be gained,” a loose English translation. Growing up in a household in which parenting techniques are governed by aphorisms of another era, I have often been introduced to this particular axiom, the two of us far closer than mere acquaintances.

While I hold no resentment towards the proverb, I struggle constantly to grapple with the issue of my cultural identity. Moreover, I am concerned with the role my cultural identity is to play in my overarching definition of self. Who is Shiyu* (Sophie) Wang? (In case you are curious, yes, I do write my name like that under certain circumstances, i.e. debate tournament ballots, piano competitions, essay contests, etc.) How much of “me” is defined by Shiyu and how much by Sophie? Or, as my great-aunt, an ex-journalist who finds conversation starters in her pool of interrogation questions, likes to ask, “Do you see yourself as Chinese or American?”

Unfortunately, quandaries are not so easily answered. My cultural identity is shaped as much by my conscious decisions as it is by experiences and circumstance. In a perfect world, I would choose to retain both influences, my identity becoming a synthesis of the two cultures. However, living in a world in which no genie resides in my lamp, I turn to my Plan B, to retain my Chinese heritage, which is more precious to me, attempting not to yield to the formidable onslaught of the pressure to assimilate. Therein lays the conflict I am faced with: Chinese versus American culture. The solution? Find balance between two worlds—resolve cultural polarity.

Since our backgrounds play an inextricable role in shaping who we are, I must not examine my identity without considering my “context.” Born in Kunming, China, to parents whose childhoods coincided with the infamous ten-year Cultural Revolution, I was fortunate to be provided with the best my parents could afford. Three years later, my family moved to Thailand. As a disoriented toddler, I was immediately enrolled in school because kindergarten began at the age of three. With a native-like Thai acquired, I moved to the U.S. at seven-and-a-half, promptly forgetting all the Thai I had learned. Five years’ worth of memories of being discriminated against has a funny way of erasing linguistic ability. Three countries and seven schools later, I find myself in Kansas suburbia. Climbing the globalized ladder of advancement, the international-version of the American Dream, came at the cost of my childhood sense of stability.

It’s not really that I mind being constantly uprooted. The story of one’s life is merely the compilation of obstacles and the ways in which they were overcome. I appreciate the proverbial hand that I’ve been dealt and would not have it any other way. Throughout the process, I have matured and that’s really all I can ask for.
Although not at the heart of my identity crisis, the fact remains that throughout my life I have intermittently been ashamed of my heritage, a detail that I am reluctant to even admit to myself. Recollections of my stay in Thailand flash through my mind like movie stills (still frames?). I see myself picking up crayons that have dropped onto the floor of my first grade classroom and hearing a boy yell, “You should just go back to your country; just go back to China!” I turn around and cannot identify the speaker of those hateful words. Yet, their sting remains.

Flash forward (fast forward?) to a self-titled (self-deemed?) Upper-Middle Class Kansas high school in which classroom “discussion” is merely a practice in a mob-like expression of hatred of a targeted enemy: China. Had the teacher posed the question, “In what ways might we revel in our superiority complex?” the response elicited would be no different. Listening to the students who know nothing of which they speak, I silently wonder, What have the citizens of China done to these teenagers to deserve their relentless contempt?

I recall once being addressed as “China” by a fellow student. Whether that was a premeditated attack or just a slip of the unconscious, it revealed much to me. If the latter was the case, then the remark truly bared the view a white-majority high school has of its minority students, a view that these students represent nothing more than their ethnicities and countries of origin, that a person’s layered identity rests solely upon the superficial strata of skin color.

One day, following a PowerPoint-presentation I gave my class on Chinese culture, a boy who knows only a life of privilege (and who, I have no doubt, will continue to perpetuate that cycle of privilege) was called on to ask a question.

“Um, I know this is completely random, but...how are you still alive?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, since Chinese people, when they have girls, either hang them on trees or drown them in rivers, how are you still alive?”

I was dumbfounded, but my social studies teacher, rushing to my defense, said matter-of-factly, “Well David, that’s because she came to America!”

From then on, I joined my Chinese American peers in loathing social studies class.

I realized that these prejudiced views are cultivated within prejudiced households, whether they exist in the impoverished Thai countryside or in the self-entitled American Mid-West. In the cultivation process, parents transform children into machines that view life through a color-sensitive lens, programming the automated process in which their children stamp the heads of their peers with the words “WARNING: FOREIGNER.”

While one’s identity is commonly viewed as an internal conflict, I view my conflict as both internal and external. My context and experiences of interactions with others fulfill the external component of this two-fold dilemma, serving as the background of the problem.

In the foreground of my cultural identity crisis is the internal struggle of the languages. Immigrating to the U.S. relatively later than other Asian American families I’ve encountered, I was able to witness the phenomenon that would eventually happen to me. I had always told myself that I would not become a “banana,” as is the name given to a subset of Asian Americans, the ones who are yellow (Asian) on the outside and white (White) on the inside. It pained me to watch them throw away the second most precious gift their parents had given to
them, their Chinese heritage—the first being life itself. They lost the ability to speak Chinese and, with it, the cultural context of being Chinese.

My epiphany came one day when I found myself having a Chinglish conversation with my dad. It was the Chinglish occurrence of the most abundant variety: the child speaking English and the parent speaking Chinese. When had I been transformed into the quintessential Asian American, the very image that I had not-so-long ago held simultaneously in pity and contempt? Instead of doing the logical thing of retracing my steps and rediscovering my cultural identity, I decided to take a round-about approach. After all, where is the enjoyment in life without a couple of detours? Furthermore, the truth was, with my mother living in Michigan and my dad and I in Kansas, the Sunday learning with Mom sessions have been frequently put on hold to make room for the other hectic components of my life. The drive I once had to learn Chinese was absent in a learning environment in which I had no students to compete with. Perhaps what I needed to do was reignite that passion. While this was not the main goal I had in mind when I had first envisioned the Linguist-in-Residence Chinese Workshop to be taught at Johnson County Public Library, I hoped that perhaps teaching others Chinese would remind myself of the enthusiasm with which I had once approached my heritage. Furthermore, I knew that misunderstanding was decreased by understanding, and I planned on promoting understanding by means of teaching the workshop. I was also told that the single most effective way to decrease prejudice against a culture was to be taught about that culture.

Throughout the six sessions of the workshop, I studied the children. I was horrified to find that the kids were younger versions of me, easily bribed by candy and arts and crafts and confronted with the difficult task of learning a language that was not of the environment they were currently in. I realized if I wished to retain my Chinese, I would have to work at it and reorder my priorities. Another insight gained from this experience was I was able to better empathize with my mom. I was able to experience the frustration of teaching students who did not wish to learn. While our personal obligation to teach stemmed from different sources, I understood and mirrored the grudging reluctance and determination with which she approached teaching me Chinese.

While my cultural identity crisis has not been resolved, I have gained the valuable insights of understanding and perspective. With this newfound knowledge, I will be able to once again continue on this journey of self-decoding. I have come to terms with my identity and have worked to help those around me come to terms with it as well. With an appreciation for what I have and what is to be gained, I have found one piece of the puzzle that is the soul search. Lastly, I reflect back to the proverb that is a favorite of my parents, “fish and bear paw cannot both be gained.” Asserting that one cannot obtain the best of both worlds, this food analogy draws on ancient Chinese cuisine, in which the fish and the bear paw were both regarded as two of the best foods available, both equally nutritious and valued. For whatever reason, the proverb insists that people must choose between these two most prized foods and that in life one must similarly choose between two excellent options. If I had to choose between Chinese culture and American culture, I would choose the former. However, I will forever remain hopeful and beg to differ with the ancient Chinese philosophers. Perhaps with hard work, determination, and a meaningful solution, I have begun to find a place for both cultures in my life.
*Names have been changed*

**It's Okay to Cry in the Dark / We Can't Hide in the Light / Mother Nature’s Nurture**

*This is my Triptych poetry about revelations I encountered during a living-learning community’s summer program that took place within “the House”*

**It’s Okay to Cry in the Dark**

July 22nd p.m.
blurry, dwarfing. vast, crisp, calming

Night sky stares into
self-doubt, unrelenting
*speck within a void of mysterious infinity*

She stares into
comfort, forgiving
*an enveloping acceptance*

Escaping the House air
close-human-contact-overwhelming
on balcony’s edge,
life accompanied by friends, notes
piercing, simple, melancholy

Transformation
July 22nd p.m. to 23rd a.m.
*required reading foregone,*
*tissue-box depleted by young men reaching,*
*just-in-case . . .*

**We Can’t Hide in the Light**

July 23rd a.m.
hollow, distanced. lit, triumphant, tangled

Morning sky stares into
charaded existence, standardizing
*unit within a known world*
She stares into
shrouded souls, baring
a forced exposure too free

Escaping purple solitude
self-consuming thought-snares
on crux of infinite connections,
life engages busy, intricate productivity
breathless, exponential, ablazed

Confrontation
Library Sunrise to Front-steps Sunset
Glares on personality-ideology unforgiving
Insecurities and hurt my countenances reveal,
looked-in-the-eyes . . .

Mother Night’s Nurture

secrets flow unrestrained
floodgates of catharsis.
Strange: darkness garnered concealment
grants leeway for trust.

Shed facades. Everything---
when lit by the moon and infrequent streetlights
Just How Little I Know whispers
Mother cushions
uncomfortable truths and enigmas.

Sometimes dominant silhouettes
shift attention away
allow slipping of masks.
as can She
who feeds living-breathing space.

Forcing me to stand
alone, examined
I relinquish the luminance crutch
accepting her peace offering.
The Encounter


After logging out of my email, I find myself once again surfing the internet’s news articles, my habitual method of procrastination. (Hey, if I’m gonna avoid doing my homework, ’might as well get informed about current events. My potential “waste of time” becomes an enrichment of my mind and preparation for my Public Speaking event of Domestic Extemporaneous Speaking on a current U. S. issue.)

The warm rays of sunlight filtering through my white, wooden blinds sharply contrast the cold horror I experience as I read Yahoo! News’s featured article: “IMMIGRATION RULING COULD SEND MESSAGE TO STATES.” Inciting national uproar, the Arizona Immigration Law is criticized due to containing severe racial profiling. (How else may the police, by means of appearances, distinguish an “illegal alien” from a “legal” one?) At the very least, the law limits civil liberties of lawfully present aliens and signals America’s growing (or perhaps shifting) anti-immigration sentiment.

I take a deep breath and read the line again.

“[a] law professor [from a nearby university] helped write the law and train Arizona police officers in immigration law . . .”

Alas, I was not mistaken. The professor-politician who wrote the Arizona Immigration Law turns out to live in my state (not Arizona). Saving the article, I immediately email it to my parents. How can a major perpetrator of such legislative injustice be so close to home?

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Summer 2011. I am attending Girls State, an American Auxiliary state-by-state program for government and leadership, on a full-ride scholarship.

The week’s learning about civic engagement culminated in an inauguration of the elected Girls State officers.

Settled in my seat in the university auditorium, feeling the cool linoleum floor against the bottom of my soon-to-be-blister-ridden, high-heels-wearing feet, I open my brochure for a cursory skim. My eyes and brain begin spazzing, caught on the words: “KEYNOTE SPEECH: Secretary of State. . .”

Missing from his description was “The professor-politician who wrote the Arizona Immigration Law.”

I sit through his speech about the passage of his bill for more stringent regulation preventing illegal immigrants from voting in elections and think, I am NOT going to let this opportunity slide by. I’m meeting the mastermind behind the suffering of so many people. These Girls Staters might be unaware of what this Keynote speaker has perpetrated. It is my DUTY to bring his actions to light, to speak for the Arizonians who may never meet him in his legislative hideout! Decisions, decisions, decisions . . .

He finishes his speech. The polite applause follows. Now time for the Q&A.

As audience members respond, voicing the perfunctory Ooooo’s and Aihhhhh’s, simultaneously I feel my conviction strengthen and my determination wane.

After a quick deliberation with and encouragement from the fellow Kansas Girls State Senator sitting next to me, I muster up my courage for my scheme’s execution. Every cell of my body is laced with anticipation and the feeling of doom. I experience the cliché pounding of my
heart. *(Why are my hands shaking so violently?)* Moments like these bring me back to Anatomy and Physiology class. My teacher’s warning about the permeating of stress “juices” is felt within every one of my multi-nucleated muscle cells. I can feel the erosion of my flesh take place. *This is so not worth it*—*What if, as my teacher warned, I experience the adverse side effects of this undue stress in twenty years? I can already picture a microscopic cross-section of my deteriorated tissue . . .*

*(I coach myself. Don’t look too eager. He might think you’re deranged or recognize you as a detractor of his policies. But you must look eager enough. “Speakers call on audience members with fire in their eyes,” my English teacher’s policy.)*

Thus, in front of the several hundred citizens of Girls State, I raise my hand. I choose to live within my truth, to accept the consequences of pursuing my curiosity and putting my ideological preoccupations to rest.

“Young lady in the fifth row,” he addresses me, grinning. His brilliant, practiced, politician smile pans the audience.

*Breathe. Exhale. Speak.* “To confirm an article I read . . . Can you please explain your involvement with crafting the Arizona Immigration Law?”

The crowd stirs. The ladies of the American auxiliary seem confused. My fellow Girls Staters snap back from their daydreams.

Sweaty and flustered, he launches into a defense of the law’s racial profiling that has become all too familiar to him in the past year.

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After the ceremony, the Girls Staters pass the newly inaugurated members of the Girls State government and shake hands with our wonderful speakers.

It is my turn to thank the Keynote speaker. Smiling sweetly, I ask, “May I take a picture with you?” handing the camera to a bystander.

Photographic evidence of such a momentous occasion? Priceless.
She was never proud of the brown eyes you gave her, because they looked just like yours. Every day she woke up, dreading the image in the mirror. She couldn't bear to see the terror you permanently etched into her face. She couldn't see past all of the lies and insults you threw her way. She didn't see her beauty. She was blinded.

All of her life she was told that her eyes were gorgeous, but to her they were only the witnesses of an unloving father. People told her that she had to use those eyes you'd given her to look past all of your insults and see that you loved her. She felt no love.

Your little girl unwillingly accepted the blows you dealt out of a forced respect and a faint hope that, if she did, maybe you would love her, but now she's learned. She now knows the truth. She knows that she will never see you care. She will never see you change, and now, finally she has grown to accept that. Instead of looking to you, she has turned her gaze upon herself. She will make her own way and find love instead of waiting for it. She has grown.

She's realized that all the years of striving, every breath she gave to earn your affection, and every blow she took to win your approval were all in vain. It was all useless because your "love" was fake, temporary, and superficial. You based your love on the behavior of a child and took it away when her actions didn't meet your expectations. You wanted her to change; you judged and criticized her. In you her eyes only say how temporary love is. Finally, this little girl has realized that there is more to see. She is trying.

She finally opened herself up to find love's definition. She searched, she sacrificed, and she questioned. She never gave up, but she never found what she was searching for. While she attempted to rediscover all that was lost, her brown eyes opened to her past. She has seen.

Her eyes saw all of the walls she had built to keep others from injuring her heart any further. Those eyes witnessed everything she did and how many times she had denied herself for your sake. She was disgusted by how she had lost herself in search of you. She has discovered.

Then, as she allowed herself to look within, someone approached. This man had a soft glow about Him and looked almost heavenly to her eyes. This Holy Stranger looked past everything. He acted as if He did not see all the scars, all the pain, and all the mistakes, though she knew it was all visible to Him. He knew about all of the heartache this little girl suffered when you hit her for her mistakes, and He felt the emotional trauma that far outweighed any physical wounds. He tore down the walls she had built and brushed past the fortress surrounding her heart. As He looked within her, she recoiled from the blows that her mistakes would cost her. He looked deeper, however, and saw the very center, the core of her heart. She has been opened.

In this secret place He saw all that remained of her, the things that no one had ever looked hard enough to find. All of the talents and longings she had hidden from the world rested there, secretly inside the depths of her soul. Despite the terror she felt to let down her guard, she allowed Him access to her secret heart, and there, in that secret chasm, He saw the
same thing that rested in His heart: the desire to be loved and the capacity to love another. She has been revealed.

At this point, she dreaded what would happen next. She turned her eyes away, trying to block out the pain His departure would cause. She had always been left. As she stood trembling, trying to hide her fears of further abandonment, He did something she did not expect. He held the face of the little girl gently and looked into her eyes. He looked past all of the hurt, brokenness, and denial and offered Himself to her. He promised to fill her life and replace the terror in her eyes with love. He told her He would be the father that you had failed to be, the father she needed so desperately. The little girl crumpled to the ground and begged Him to do all that. She has found hope.

Then He began to chisel away all of her past. As she stood confused and wondering when He would fulfill His promise, He chipped away every lie she had ever told to cover your abuse. Before her eyes, everything He scraped away vanished at His touch. As all of her walls and protective coatings were stripped away, she felt fresh and clean but also exposed. Nothing she had ever hidden behind remained, and she still didn’t know what He was hoping to accomplish. She didn’t see how the exposure of her soul would fill her life. As He stepped back, looking at His work, He said three words that washed over her, giving her a warmth she had never experienced. She has heard.

“I love you.” He wrapped her in His arms, and for the first time in her life, she felt a Father’s love. She is whole.

That little girl no longer dreads the mirror. She has now become a young woman who opens her eyes to a new day every morning and faces her reflection with joy. When she greets that girl in the mirror every morning, she sees in her beautiful brown eyes a love from her Father that glows from within them. Although she never had a physical father, she now has a Heavenly Daddy who daily shows her that she has beauty and worth. And His actions speak louder than your words ever did. She is whole.
Saturday, and all of his movements were lethargic, as though weighed down by some immense force, giving him the appearance of a man who was far more advanced in years. If I had to guess, I’d say his true age was around mid-twenties. I’d never seen his eyes; they were always downcast. He had dark brown hair, cropped close to his scalp, and sun-browned skin, as if he spent much of his time outdoors. He walked amongst the bookshelves for a while before leaving without checking anything out. We’d never spoken two words to each other, yet he was a regular of this community library, just like me.

I finished browsing and decided on one novel. Walking to the checkout counter, I greeted the elderly librarian, "Good afternoon Mrs. Cooke." I liked Mrs. Cooke. She was always kind and bothered to remember my name. She would ask about my day and genuinely cared to listen to my response. That's more than what I can say for Ms. Burnett, who was skin and bones, with face all angles and a perpetual frown.

Mrs. Cooke smiled warmly at me. "Hello, Vanessa. Only one today?"
"Yes ma'am. I've got midterms throughout the next two weeks. Not enough time to read as much as I'd like."
She nodded in understanding. "And how are you doing, dear?" She continued to talk as she scanned my book.
"Fine, thank you ma'am. And yourself?"
She chuckled, "A little better knowing that there are still children in this world who speak politely to old folks like me."
I was twenty years old. But I suppose even my mother at forty would be considered a child by Mrs. Cooke.

"Oh, we just got a new book in that I've read, and I think that it's absolutely marvelous!"
Her statement didn't mean much to me after she gave me some sappy-sounding title. Our preferences were very different; I knew that she loved romances while I was more partial toward action and adventure. Still, I gave her an appreciative smile, said that I might check it out sometime, even though we both knew that I wouldn’t, and exited out the front door, my book in hand.

I walked into a thick cloud of acrid smoke that made me want to gag. Someone had clearly taken the liberty to light up outside. I dropped my tote with the book and dug around in my purse. My eyes watered, and violent coughs wracked my body. I could feel tight swelling beginning in my throat. Falling to my knees, still rummaging, I couldn't breathe. Dammit, where was it! Finally, my hand circled around a small cylinder. I pulled it out and took two great puffs from my inhaler, gasping gratefully.

The man had long since stamped out his cigarette and was wildly waving the smoke away, all the while saying, "I am so sorry, I didn't see you coming! I did not mean for that to happen!"
I coughed a little, found my voice, and choked out, "It's okay." He couldn't have known that I suffered from a severe case of asthma. I never grew out of my condition like most people did.
I got to my feet and looked up through the black locks of hair that had fallen across my face. And stared. It was the first time I'd seen his eyes. They were a blend of coffee and chocolate. Then, regaining my wits, I bent down to pick up my purse and tote. He joined me, reaching for the book that had fallen open.

"Hey," he said, "I've read this. It's really good."

"Really?" I was surprised. "But you've never checked out any books before..." I cut myself off abruptly and bit my lip, face hot.

He seemed unperturbed by the fact that I'd just admitted to watching him in the library. He shrugged. "I certainly don't check out four books at a time like you do. It looks like you're going light today." He was indicating the one novel I was taking from his hands.

His observations made my own slightly less mortifying.

I tucked a tuft of black hair behind my ear and stretched out my free hand. "I'm Vanessa."

He took it, the tan skin of his hand almost pale next to the brown of my own. "James."

"Nice to meet you, James."

"Sure, if you consider near-death experiences nice." He gave me an apologetic smile.

I laughed. "See you later," I said, and began to walk away.

He suddenly rattled off a few names, a couple of which were already familiar to me, and said, "You should check those authors out, if you like the one you have now."

I nodded. "I will," I said, meaning it this time.

"See you around, Vanessa."

"Bye."

I turned away from him and walked to my beat-up navy blue car. When I looked back toward the steps of the library, he was gone.

A week passed and in the midst of midterms, the library incident was filed away into the almost-forgettable recesses of my mind. In reality, I'd been prepared for midterms for a couple of weeks, and the tests in each class seemed to flash by in a blur. I'd even managed to finish the novel I picked up from the library. College life couldn't always excite me the way a good story could. This one had been riveting.

I walked up the steps and passed the lone lioness that sat majestically in all her bronze glory in front of the library. I entered the building and frowned slightly when I saw that it was Ms. Burnett behind the checkout counter and not Mrs. Cooke. I walked stiffly toward the end of the counter top designated for returned items and placed my borrowed book there. She gave me a sideways glance before returning to her novel with no further acknowledgement of my existence.

I navigated my way to the Action/Adventure section and searched for the three authors that had been recommended to me. I saw a title that intrigued me and reached for it above my head, but in all of my five feet and two inches, I was about four inches short of obtaining the hardback book.

"That's a good one," said the voice of a man close beside me, startling me. "Here," he reached up, a whole head taller than me, grabbed the exact book I was wanting, and plunked it into my open hands.

"Thanks," I thought for a second, "James."

"Any time." He turned and walked away.
I looked down and read the summary of it on the inside flap of the cover.

Approximately half an hour later, I was headed toward the checkout counter with three more books under my arms. “Good afternoon, Ms. Burnett,” I said.

“What are you checking out?” she asked in a clipped tone.

“These four.”

We stayed silent as she went through the process of checking out the books I slid across the counter to her. When she was done, I said, “Thank you.” She grunted and I turned to walk out the building.

I nearly tripped right over him. He was sitting on the ground beside the entrance, leaning against the bricks of the building. Not smoking. He cocked his head toward my tote bag.

“You checked out the books I told you about. Nice.”

“I finished the other one.”

He smiled. “Yeah? What was your favorite part?”

He appeared truly interested to hear my answer. I leaned against the lioness for support and talked about a scene that had had me flipping pages all throughout the previous night. Every now and then he piped in with a confirmation of what I’d just said. I was terrible at idle chit chat, but when it came to books, talk was easy, especially with someone who’d already read them.

“Sorry,” I said later on as my pocket buzzed. I pulled out my cell phone and brought the receiver to my ear. “Hello?”

“Where have you been, girl?” My roommate’s frantic voice sprang from the line. “You left over two hours ago! I thought you were just going to get some toilet paper and toothpaste! You should have been back by now!”

Oops. “Taylor, I am so sorry. I got caught up at the library.” I paused. “Two hours?”

James was checking his watch, his eyebrows halfway up his forehead. He nodded at me. Apparently we’d been talking for nearly an hour.

“Caught up?” Taylor asked, incredulous. “With what?”

“Ah, I, uh, met a friend. I was actually just leaving.”

She was silent for a few seconds. “You’re okay, right?” she finally asked, her voice subdued, no longer on the verge of hysteria.

“Yeah, I’m fine. I’ll be back soon, promise.”

“Okay, later.” She hung up.

I turned back to James. “I’ve got to go. It was really good seeing you again.”

“Where are you headed?”

I looked sheepishly at him. “I’ve got toilet paper and toothpaste to pick up.” With those parting words, I walked to my car, got in, and drove off.

This became our way of things. Through some unspoken arrangement between the two of us, every Saturday found James and me at the library together, outside, talking by the lioness. He’d said that these were the moments that he allowed himself to quit smoking. At every exchange, we spoke about books that we’d both read and ones that we hadn’t. I loved to hear his opinion on them; most times we agreed on the same things. I once joked about us being an exclusive book club. We fell into an easy companionship. Saturdays became something of an event to look forward to. We rarely delved into the personal history of the
other. All I knew about this man was that his name was James, he was twenty-seven, he loved books, and he was on his own.

The sixth week, I asked, “How do you do it?”

“How do I do what?”

“You never check out any books, yet you seem to know everything there is to know about all the books. How do you do it?”

We were sitting on the ground outside the entrance to the library, eating sesame chicken and white rice. He’d shown up that day with a bag of hot Chinese food, and I’d happened to be starving.

He smiled teasingly and said, “Do you think I only come to the library on Saturdays?”

I shrugged. “I have no idea what you do with the rest of your life.”

“’I’m a nomad,” he said. “A domestic one anyway. I’ve lived, at some point, in almost every state but have never felt grounded enough in any one place to stay. I guess I’m sort of restless. I pick up temp jobs to make ends meet.” I stared at him. “What?”

“You’ve lived in fifty different cities?”

“I said almost.”

I sat and thought aloud, “I guess you haven’t found your place in the world yet. I can understand that.” I picked at my food, suddenly not as hungry as I was before. I turned my head from him and looked at the lioness when I said, “I suppose you’ll be packing up and leaving this little college town at some point.”

There was a short swollen silence before he said, “Who knows? I’ve grown a liking to this place…and the people.”

My head still facing the sculpture, I allowed myself a small smile before turning back to him. “Maybe it’s something in the air.”

“Maybe,” he mumbled. “Why do you come to this library? Colleges usually have their own library on campus. Why come to this one?”

“Variety,” I answered. “This library has a much more vast and diverse selection. At least, that was the reason at first. If I could get a free meal out of this every visit, I’d come here on a day-to-day basis,” I said, gesturing to our small feast.

His laughter rang out and mine joined his soon after.

I sighed, content. “The sun is setting,” he said. “You should probably get back to your dorm. Don’t they have, like, curfews or something?”

I raised an eyebrow at him. “Have you been in college?”

He rolled his eyes. “Why yes, I graduated with two PhD’s. I have imaginary certificates to prove it.” I waited. “I went to college for two excruciating years in Kansas, the longest I’d stayed in any one place that I can remember.”

I glanced at my little car in the parking lot and said, “To answer your question, no, I don’t have a curfew. Although, I probably should head back to my dorm. I’ve got about a million papers to compile into a portfolio for my American Lit class.” I sighed and got to my feet, taking food and books with me.

I looked down at him, still sitting on the ground, leaning against the building. “I’ll see you around,” I said and departed once more.

I felt utterly miserable waking up the next Saturday for no reason in particular. I had a headache that seemed would last forever. Still, I trudged on over to the community library.
I nodded at the lioness before entering the building. I must’ve spent an hour browsing the shelves. Not once did I see James. His input would usually help me decide on which books to check out. It began to creep slowly into my mood, the disappointment in his absence. I ended up only deciding on one book, and walked to the checkout counter.

“Good afternoon, Miss Vanessa,” Mrs. Cooke greeted me.

“Hello, Mrs. Cooke.” I decided to go ahead and ask, “Have you seen a man named James? He’s taller than me, has brown eyes, and comes every Saturday but never checks anything out.”

“Oh!” she gasped, as if some great truth had just occurred to her. “I know who you mean, child. He was here two days ago. He actually left something that he wanted me to give specifically to you.” I was puzzled as she reached under the counter and fumbled through her purse. She retrieved a piece of folded paper and handed it to me.

I unfolded it and read the tight, neat script:

Dear Vanessa,

I’ve resolved to quit smoking. I owe this decision to you. I know it’s easier said than done. I’m sorry that I’m not there today. I’ve been thinking about what you said last week, about me not finding my place in the world. You’re right. I haven’t found my place. In fact, I’ve been running from it. I’ve been avoiding responsibility and long-term commitments for years. I look at you, smart and young with the entire future laid out before you with so many options, and I see the person that I want to be.

I’m going back to school.

I dream of owning my own publishing company. I want you to know that I’d never been more comfortable with a complete stranger than I was with you. I hope that someday, like you, I change a life. Thank you.

Joy, Peace, and Sesame Seeds,

James

P.S. I knew about all of those books without checking them out because I’d already read them at the library every other day. I read them because I knew you did too.

I looked up at Mrs. Cooke with a crooked smile and tear-filled eyes. She looked sympathetically at me and said, “Oh, dear, whatever it is, I’m sure it’ll be okay. And, I know that this is none of my business but, he was too old for you anyway.”

This brought laughter to my lips and a lightness to my chest. “I know, ma’am. We were just friends.”

She was clearly unconvinced. “If you say so. You only saw the boy six times. That’s the shortest friendship I’ve ever seen."

I shook my head at her and glanced through the transparent glass doors at the lioness outside. “It didn’t matter how much time we spent together,” I said. “He was someone special.”
Lightning flashed, and thunder rumbled as our car swerved around potholes. The windshield wipers scrubbed furiously while the downpour pounded on the windows. Miserable and restless, I picked up my iPhone to occupy myself. The Chinese countryside, in my shallow mind, was nothing special.

“Daddy, I don’t think this is the way to the mall,” whined my sister, glancing up from her Nintendo DS. “Why are we going farther away from the city?”

“Sweetie, we’re just taking a quick detour,” my father replied as he stopped the windshield wipers and slowed to a stop on the side of the road.

“Where in the world are we?!”

My sister was going to throw a hissy fit if I had not tapped her on the shoulder and told her to keep her mouth shut. She quickly obeyed but shot me a glare in response.

As we opened our umbrellas, a surprising scene unfolded before us. I found myself in an unfamiliar world: a bumpy stone road winding past my line of vision, crude stone houses, a group of frail men smoking under a makeshift tent.

My father was leading us towards an obscure structure, which I later found out was an indoor market. The stench of animals struck me before my eyes could even perceive the chaos. A jumble of noises erupted in my ears as the sound of splashing rain diminished. The humidity in the room was nearly unbearable. My clothes clung to my skin, and I could feel my carefully brushed hair slip out of place. I was greeted by a headless chicken lying on its side, waiting to be purchased. Its living relations clucked at us when we passed, as if they knew we weren’t natives. Sitting on low stools, young boys with grimy faces guarded baskets of eggs, flapping chickens, and filthy vegetables. My sister and I stared at them through the eyes of the privileged, repulsed by the scene.

The beating rain on the ceiling resolved to a gentle tapping as we concluded our tour. Relieved to finally escape the horror, I strode towards the exit, but something caught my eye.

I noticed a little girl, sitting alone on a splintered stool, stringing chains of pearls. She was not more than ten years old, but her countenance expressed her maturity. Her dark, tousled hair corresponded to her ragged clothing, which hung formlessly on her frame. She was accustomed to physical labor, as evidenced by her tanned skin. She had laid out a tray of freshwater pearl necklaces, which I assumed she strung herself.

A million thoughts soared through my mind within a blink of an eye. The glimmer of the pearls briefly attracted my attention, drawing me in with their gentle beauty. However, the “rational” voice in my mind ultimately convinced me that the quality of her pearls wouldn’t surpass the quality of those at the mall.

Within minutes, I found myself in the car. We were already on our way.

***

The shimmer of the moonlight danced off of the foot of my bed. My lethargic eyes traced the edges of the luminous furniture in my hotel room, appreciating the beautiful carvings. The soft murmuring of the air conditioner relaxed my senses, as I sunk into my down pillow and hoped to encounter sleep, but my mind continued to wander.
I could see myself back in the village market. The stench, the heat, the noise—it all came back to me. Suddenly, the image of the little girl flashed in my mind. She was about the same age as my sister, but something made her seem so mature. Why was she alone, selling pearl jewelry amidst the ruckus of the market? Her appearance suggested her precocious maturity and hinted at the constant pressure she bore on her tiny shoulders.

My sister’s soft breaths soothed me and reminded me of sleep. I wanted to tunnel into my down comforter and refrain from contemplation. However, the image of the girl drifted through my thoughts, never failing to penetrate the boundaries of my torpid mind. Was she still working meticulously on the necklaces in this dark of night? An uneasy feeling churned in my stomach. I felt a twinge of guilt. An echo of regret. I was on the brink of falling asleep...

***

“Sissy! Daddy’s going to take us to the mall today!” my sister called joyfully. She plopped onto my bed, nearly suffocating me.

“Get off of me!” I groaned with a playful shove.

I was still acting under the mask of contentment. All night, I had been concerning myself with the little girl. I needed to atone for my wrongdoings.

“Daddy, let’s go buy pearls today,” I called to him.

***

“Are we there yet?” my sister nagged with Nintendo DS in hand.

I echoed her in my heart.

We were strolling up the mosaic road under the warmth of the morning sun. Lush shrubbery welcomed us into the market as we entered. As I stepped into the building, I immediately located the little girl on the far end. Like the last time I saw her, she was carefully stringing chains of pearls.

As I approached her, she quickly glanced up with dark, beady eyes.

“Hey, your pearl necklaces are really pretty!” I smiled.

Her cheeks glowed as she replied, “Thank you. I chained them myself.”

“How long did each take you?” I inquired.

“It only takes me about two hours now, but a year ago, it would take me four hours even with my mother’s help. She’s sick now, and my father has to work in a city far from here.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I’d like to buy one,” I stated, looking down at the assortment of jewelry. I quickly pointed out a piece without examination.

“Here, you can buy this one instead. I worked a lot harder on it.”

“Sure.”

In response, she grinned back with a missing-toothed smile.
Adam

You
you are beautiful
with your eyes of steel
your heart of coal.
They mined you from the mountains
made your soul of gold.

You
you are beautiful
with your barrel chest
your grizzly teeth.
They cut you from the forest
and planted your feet.

You
you are beautiful
with your iron hands
your forest fire grin.
They built you out of copper
and welded your spirit in.

You
you are beautiful
with your river delta veins
your mountain top lungs.
They carved you in the earth
and spilled oil on your tongue.

You
you are beautiful
All Our Time is Gone

rest my head on your heart
wrap a cocoon of veins across my skin
warm blooded lover keep the fire in
my chest as it swells with a painful breath
I will steal your marrow
to build a castle of bone under my flesh

science kidnaps my soul
binds it with sterilized steel
won't you come rescue me
with a rush of air forced into my lung
pluck my disease out
bare fingers stained with blood and bile

whispers drip through plastic veins
the whiteness has stolen me away
these shattered eyes cannot see you
thank god for that final mercy
keep tears like acid from my bed
the dead should not feel so guilty

this is the breathing that came so naturally
evacuating with an uncanny speed
cotton ears amplify my butterfly heart beat
is that your hand resting on my cheek
farewell with a kiss to my brow

the grass is green and sticky with summer
scuffing your funeral shoes
turning them a nauseous green
empty seats for all the children that will not be
quiet prayer, amen, amen
Tornado Season

A wind blows through and over the plains.
It has a creeping cold that digs in my bones past the marrow and veins.
I feel rain on my skin.
It floods at my feet and shoves me indoors.

The children are screaming, squealing and shrieking.
Oh, how they wail with each bend in the roof.
Frightened eyes in dark corners of a cellar shadow.
I can hear tornadoes twist in the sky.
They thunder by like angry trains.

Stillness becomes stale, pregnant with fear.
Baby lungs are impaled with hungry pleas.
A car engine tumbles over the dining room floor.
Fine wedding china rests in its place.

Sirens crescendo in a panic and pierce the horizon.
Corpses lay mangled in the middle of town.
Hail shatters shingles and single pane glass.
Car alarms echo through debris littered streets.

The wind parts with a kiss to the trees.
Sunlight trickles down on nature's crime scene.
Strangers stumble up from shelter into a new world.
I watch death mingle in the decimated crowd.
Words Will Always Hurt Me

Fat,
counting the calories in water
sweating out the self-loathing
and still the mirror is haunting
with a wraith as my reflection.

Ugly,
scrubbing skin raw
with scented exfoliation
and painting a new face
but still I hide in corner shadows.

Stupid,
trusting every word from your tongue
making them into a philosophy
and idolizing the way you speak
even when you break me.

Whore,
clinging to the pillows
soaking them through
and still my heart is aching
when you leave me bleeding.

Freak,
I skirt the edges of conversation
laughing to fill the silences
hoping to drown the past out
but still I hear you saying

Fat, Ugly, Stupid, Whore...
I Read Again
by Lydia Young
St. Joseph – Central High School

Into the dark and I read again
(even as the night hunts me weary)
I remain undercover,
torchlight guiding me through rivers of ink, deep and riveting as moon craters.

Where am I to go this eve? I’m the paper boat pirate!
To what shore do I sail?

Pages turn, each one the crest of waves
and I follow the consolations in the sky ahead when I feel most heavy-hearted.

The yellows speak of weathering
and the creases at my eyes run deep with the stories
I have read, and read again.

Just when I fret my last page folds away
and I must go into the dark

I read again.

Another map a new glossary; and I’m in like a lion
out like a lamb, waltzing over bean stalks
taking out the old clocks
mad watch! Mad watch!
clean cup, clean cup, move down, move down!
and go dancing
retreating, at midnight away from happily ever after

to where the story never ends

and windows are never closed and you never ever grow up,

even when you’re old.

I’m still awake, in the dark and I read again.

A flashlight glows adventure,

teases and fleshes out demons, from corner webs that would stalk my starlight,

I bid them good night, I promise

the story isn’t over.
“That’s stupid.”
“God, what are you, in preschool?”
“Probably. God.”
“Yeah.”
“Don’t you know anything?”
The boy kept quiet, continued with his actions: shovel in, shovel out. Toss the dirt, continue. Above him stood a small circle of older boys. Worms crawled, blind, in the sunshine.
“He can’t be serious.”
“I think he is.”
“This is the stupidest thing I’ve ever seen.”
“What an idiot.”
The boy ignored them as he continued to softly shovel dirt onto the grass. In, out, in, out. Toss the dirt onto the grass.
They had asked him, and he had told them.
When the last school bell finally rang, they left, laughing, high and shrill, revealing their disbelief and their youth.
And the little boy stayed. Long after the buses and the teachers left, he was still there.
Quietly, silently shoveling dirt onto the grass.
And each time the small hole in front of him widened a little more, the pile of soil beside it grew a handful taller.

*****

The sun was gone, hidden by gray clouds and gray sky.
In the small playground, the wind picked up, slowly rocking the empty swings back and forth.
The little boy continued digging. High above, thunder rumbled. And slowly, softly at first, it began to rain, only a drizzle at first, but it grew, drops hitting the ground in a crescendo of water.
The rain soaked the boy’s thin shirt and let him shivering, but he welcomed it, as softened the dirt softer, making it easier to remove. And the hole, though still shallow, grew; nearly two feet deep now, though still narrow. But it was progress.
“Oi! Charlie!”
The boy started, stared wildly around the deserted playground.
And from the across the schoolyard, he came, a mass of brown hair and worn flannel and whiskey-sodden breath, pulling the small boy up by the collar.
“What the hell, Charlie?” Bloodshot eyes, angry as large hands clutch tattered cloth.
“What the goddamn hell do you think you’re doing?!”
The boy shivered, looked down from furious eyes, did not answer.
Blood erupted as the man hit him but washed away, pink and faint in the pouring rain.
No one saw. No one heard. And, all alone, the little boy bit his lip, wiped the blood from his face, and closed his eyes.

And yet –
Someone did see, did hear. And, high above, winced at it.

****

Bruises color the boy’s face when he comes to school the next day and a dullness in eyes, not red, but tired.
Long ago (he did not know when), he had heard (he did not from whom) about it: about how, if you went deep enough, dug enough, you could do it. And there, on the other side, it would be: perfect, shining, the air perfect and blue, the buildings red-lacquer, the air fragrant with cherry blossoms and a dozen types of frying foods. On the other side (if you dug deep enough, long enough) another world, another place, exotic, beautiful, perfect.
Of course (of course) it wasn’t true; he knew that, wasn’t stupid, wasn’t in preschool. And he did not believe it, even, not really.
He wanted to, though.
And now this. Now, the small hole filled up, gone, dirt packed tight into the two feet he had excavated.
Beside it rested his shovel, yellow plastic, a child’s toy. So small, compared to the magnitude of the job it was meant for.
He stared at it, just a little sadly.
Then, very quietly, very gently, he picked up the shovel and began to dig.

****

“What *is* he doing?”
“He says he’s digging to China.”
A sigh, careening softly into a girlish giggle. Laughter.
Footsteps on concrete. Then a hand, waving furiously as giggles surrounded it.
“Hey! Charlie!”
He ignored it. Shovel in, shovel out.
“*He-llo, earth to Charlie? Anyone there?”*  
(Because maybe, if you only *only* went deep enough – )
“Hey, what’s the matter? You deaf? Or do you just have shit for brains?”
“Probably, yeah. The shit-for-brains thing.”
“*Heee-ey, Charlie!* The hand, flashing across his vision, moving in front of his face when he turned his neck. “*Cha-r-lie, hello, wake up, wake up. Trying to talk to you here, you know?”*

The hand still waved wildly across his vision. Irritating. A muttered wish.
“*What* was that, shit-for-brains?”
“Ohoo, I think he just told you to screw off, Joel.”
“Really? Well then this,” and then another hand on the scruff of his shirt, pulling roughly up and away, “should,” and then a foot descending, scuffing excavated dirt back into the hole, “teach him,” foot stomping on the filled dirt, “something about manners, hmm?”
Laughter as the hands let go. Laughter, as footsteps slowly softened and died away.
In horror, he stared at the place where the hole once was. And then sighed, eyes dulling into something different, something sad.
He glanced at the shovel, for a few moments more, then looked away. There is something terrible in it, something so much worse than the blood or the horror – something broken.
And, high above, something broke: crackled and splintered into millions of tiny diamond pieces, fragments of glass flinging into the clouds.
And the earth opened.

****

For a moment, he saw it all: crust, lithosphere, mantle, core, a series of red-hot, shimmery images blended together like pieces of translucent paper.
He waited there, above the hole, for a moment, awed.
Then gravity pulled and somehow he fell, at an impossible rate, slipped through fire and stone as though they were nothing, air that whooshed pass, cushioning his fall –
Landed, upright and dizzy, solid ground beneath his feet.
Eyes closed, he concentrated on breathing: breath in, breath out, breath in, breath out.
When the images in his head stopped whirling, he opened his eyes.
A black-haired man stood in front of him, eyes worried. Short, dressed in a worn shirt and blue pants.
“Are you alright?” he asked.
The boy stared at him, blinked a few times before realizing that the words were not in English and that, miraculously, he understood.
“Where –” he began. Then stopped. Paused, to taste these new sounds on his tongue:
another language, exotic vowels rippling with ease over pink canvas of flesh.
“Where,” he began again, trying this time not to marvel at the strangeness of the familiarity with which the words form themselves, “am I?” Staring around him. Staring down at himself, at new sneakers and a crisp t-shirt with foreign words.
The man smiled; lines pulled at the corners of warm, gray-flecked eyes as he reached one hand forward.
“Home.”

****

Tap. Tap.
Listen to this: Click-click-clack-clack-clock. Tick, tock. Tick, tock.
Clickclickclickclickclack.
The sounds of order. Gears, turning in the paths, moving always forward, always ahead.
And yet –
Click-click-click-click-click-clunk. Springs breaking, delicate machinery unwinding, tendons slowly separating from bone.
Clunk. It stops.
And reality breaks.

****

The first day he stayed, the kind lady with the graying hair (mother, she stated, a word foreign yet somehow deeply right) made dumplings (thick, fragrant, so hot the oil dripped off onto the paper plates), tucked his thin blankets into the corners of his plain bed (though he remembered not needing it, he was so warm and full it seemed extraneous, unnecessary), turned off the lights with a smile and a kiss (another foreign entity, strange yet wonderful).
Mother. It is a strange word, odd syllables against the tongue. But he liked it. Like father. Or brother.

He had them all now, an odd set of labels and people so beautiful and wonderful it seemed like fantasy. A mother, to wipe away his tears. A brother, only four, yes, but someone to laugh with, play with. A father, to find him and bring him home.

In a whirlwind couple of days, it is October cool yet sunny, and ruby and topaz mix with emerald on the trees that reach into their apartment flat. The first few days he did not go to school (National Day, his father told him; a public holiday, when the air was perfumed with the smell of crying pancakes and the street vendors pressed paper kites and toys into the hands of tourists), stayed merely inside the apartment complex. Exploring.

A boy his age lived next door. With dark hair and mischievous dark eyes, his name was Liping, and they played together, laughing as they ran through the streets, eating bars of red bean ice cream and pressing the change into the hands of beggars.

A girl, Xiaoming; also lived next door; another boy, : Daling, in the apartment above his; there is a girl, adopted (as he was told he was) from Russia, a tall, pretty girl who wore makeup and gave them tangerines when she saw Charlie and his new friends.

Halcyon days. Halcyon days, passed in a halcyon daze.

****

The newspapers were the first. Tabloid papers, light gray things emblazoned with red bold letters: proclamations, true reports of sightings of dead musicians and secret alien bases:

World Rips Open! Is This a Sign of the End?
Earth Suddenly Transparent! Witnesses Report Heavenly Lights!
And, in the more sedate, local papers, or on the large, faded pictures peeling off supermarket walls:

Have you seen this child?
Charles James Kirdik
Age: 7
Height: 4’4”
Last seen at St. Mary’s Elementary School. If found, please contact ***-***-****

No one, of course, called.
And in Beijing, China, in a quiet corner near the foreigners’ quarters, a little boy slept.

****

Shifting now, an unsettling, a deep uneasiness and a quiet murmur that reached into the depths of eleventh dimension.

Someone knew. Someone saw. And now it was happening, the fabric of reality slowly unraveling thread by thread.

A quiet murmuring, a soft, undercurrent that never quite bubbled into talk –
And then someone spoke:

No.

****

“So where did you come from?”
Natasha asked him that one day, as they sat in her kitchen, devouring plates of egg tarts and drinking metal cans of sweetened almond milk.

Charlie swallowed, then, sipping his almond milk, answered, “America.”
“Really?” Natasha asked, leaning on the kitchen counter and smiling at the retinue of children sitting at the table. Though her Chinese was fluent, it was tinged with the lightest shade of a soft Russian accent, and her blue eyes were exotic in this sea of black and browns.

He nods. “Uh-uh. From Ar-i-zona.”

“Arizona? Where’s that?” Xiaoming asked, slurping her milk.

“In, uh, kind of down and on the left. Um. It’s pretty dry. And boring.” He finished the almond milk, tossed the can into the trash can, and reached for another egg tart.

“Not as boring as here,” Liping groaned dramatically as he continued cramming pieces of flaky crust into his mouth.

“Mmf,” Natasha slowly wandered away. She stopped in front of the fan pinned to the wall, and softly stroked the cloth held taut in between strips of light bamboo. She stood there, for a while, silently staring at the delicate flowers and letters painted on soft silk.

And then she turned, smiled at them so bright the light seems to reflect from her delicate face.

“Why for you, Charlie?” she asked. “How did you get here?”

He stared.

“My parents died when I was little,” Natasha said, conversationally, sitting down next to him. “Mama was on a diplomatic journey – you know, to the new Russia, since the old one’d gone away, so they wanted to make sure the new one still liked them – and she went to all the usual places: St. Petersburg, Vladmir, Moscow. And she found me, at the Moscow orphanage. I was six. And here I am.”

She smiled, again, almost by habit.

“But what about you?” she asked, turning her friendly gaze to Charlie again. “You came from America; but how’d you get here, huh?”

“Yeah, Charlie,” Xiaoming lightly shoved him, “tell us, tell us.”

“That’s right,” Daling grinned as he put his egg tart away. “Tell us.”

“Tell us – tell us – teellll us –”

“I, uh, well,” Charlie said, his face reddening – “well, I uh – it was like Natasha, too. I came from the orphanage. And, uh, my parents liked me so they took me here.”

“That’s all?” Xiaoming leaned over and inspected him as though he were a new species of bug. “I thought it might have been something interesting. Instead, what we get is the same thing as Natasha! How boring.”

“Sorry,” Charlie whispered.

“What’s there to be sorry about?” Liping asked. “It’s okay,” he told him, “it’s not your fault nothing interesting ever happens here. It’s,” he said, smiling cynical and world weary as he chewed, “always been boring here. Always will be.”

****

In the dead of night, when the house was dark and the only sounds were the crickets: She watched over him. He smiles as he sleeps. And she smiled to see him so.

****

“This is...an aberrance.”

“Indeed.”

“Matters are unraveling.”

“Intensifying?”
“Yes. The hole is growing. This is not allowed.”
“Not allowed?” A strange twist of neck, wide eyes staring, glassy and glossy in alien colors.
A nod, a gentle affirmative.
“Not allowed.”

****
Slowly, slowly the news seeped. From the crevices of supermarket tabloids, it leaked: jokes, at first, soft, insidious hints on radio and television that creeps, crawls, elusive. And yet it stained
The grief-torn father – the babbling schoolchildren – the slow, occasional ripples that turn the ground translucent – the lost, little boy sleeping soundly in an apartment miles away – All tore, all ripped, all brokebrokebroke apart.

****
Two weeks elapsed, though, before they truly began to notice; two weeks before rumors became not just stories, the fabrications of wayward teenagers drunk or high, but something tangible.
On news channels, they discussed it: the psychics, with their wide glasses and purple beads, waving their arms and explaining, explaining – ah, my dear, yes, the earth lacked balance, balance, really, was all it needed – to skeptical hosts and skeptical viewers, but still. Something stuck. Behind the scorn, in with the confusion and the floating objects and sudden animation of inanimate objects and the nail-biting, lip chewing nervousness and that nagging, nagging feeling that maybe, maybe it would happen, Armageddon would descend tomorrow on clouds of black feathers and carry with it all its sinners – there was a fear—as dark and slick as oil on white feathers.

****
A beautiful day in the late 1600s, maybe 1700s. There behind the wall of glass and wood, they are, as one bent over microscopes, notes, paper and pen. Newton, Copernicus, van Leeuwenhoek – a million brilliant men, their minds bent on one thing: discovery, knowledge, truth. Delicate instruments to work apart woven metalwork of magic and superstition, to gently hackhackhack at the core of belief. Reason will kill superstition, the Enlightened thought; reason and science will kill magic, will kill prejudice, leave nothing behind beside a stark, solid core of cool truth.
And yet—one thing they forget: in magic, there can be a science, and science, whatever else it may be, can be a form of magic, too.

****
“You will find her.”
“I will find her.”
“And when you find her...?”
“I will bring her back.”
“Yes.” A pause. Then quietly, meditatively –
“And then, when you do, we will put things right.”

****
It happened so quickly – one moment, he was there, laughing and eating ice cream with Liping and Natasha – and then, he was gone, disappeared into thin air.
Natasha told a joke, and they laughed, as though the boy had never been there. In a small apartment, a black-haired man blinked, and wondered why the guest bedroom was set up.

The birds sang.

She blinked, and then her eyes widened.

Oh no nonononono –

But it was too late by then, too late as her screams were gagged and the world turned black.

****

Quarks and gluons, bosons and space-time and strings, vibrating, vibrating, vibrating – What turns these things? What keeps everything together, powers the world’s daily rotations and yearly revolution? And what, what if it is instead who that holds reality together?

Another thing: what if they find reality flawed?

****

“There must,” he told her, “be order.”

****

The boy blinked, rubbed opens his eyes. Before him, the world spun before– slowly – beginning to realign itself.

Where – what –

He realized, with a sudden icy coldness, that this was his room, not the guest bedroom in Beijing he had inhabited for the past few weeks, but his room, the familiar four-walls-bare-mattress-bare-floor room he had lived in since his mother died.

And there, on the other side of the room, he sat. His father. Eyes cobalt, not coal, a scowl in place of a smile on his face. He stumbled as he walked towards him, and – instinctively, cringing – the boy crawled to the farthest corner of the room.

****

As the guards lead her away, he allowed himself a small, quiet smile as the sun slowly began to set.

The world was right again.