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*Denotes author requested writing be withheld from publication.*
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/). 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
Assistant Editor: Tom Pankiewicz

This edition is available online at http://www.missouriwestern.edu/mowriting/youth13.html. For more information about the Missouri Region for the National Scholastic Contest, see http://www.missouriwestern.edu/mowriting.
Artist / Writer statement

1. I don’t look like a writer, or at least I don’t think so. When I think “writer,” I imagine Kurt Vonnegut’s untamable curls or the great greybeard of Walt Whitman. I am thickly built and my hair is cropped close to my head, pixie style. I wear high heels because Seventeen told me that they would help my cottage cheese ass look less “dairy.” Writers don’t read Seventeen and should be unpopular, unloved—struggling in some way that I don’t. What is the struggle of a well-liked, middle-class seventeen-year-old girl? That the guy who sells her weed went out of town on a long weekend? She feels fat? Her favorite Oxford blouse isn’t pressed?

2. But isn’t that the point of writing? To make the tiny crises into things that matter? Into smell-able, feel-able parts? And to make the big crises even more frightening, thigh-clenching, world-altering?

3. I think it is.

4. The Internet ruined the female teenage writer. Imagine Sylvia Plath’s Tumblr, if Emily Dickinson could write fanfiction. Teenage girls share so much of themselves with everyone, and this inundation ruins the image of our experience. Our experience is raw and bloody and new. The teenage girl writers are the Lost Generation of the 2010s. We count.

5. That said, I hate fanfiction.

6. I write to redefine teenage girl writers. I write to give us a voice in a world that relegates us to Twilight books and Hot Topic bathrooms. Our anxieties, our terrors, our hate and love: it is what is true, too. It is why I write.

Mad About You, Mark Rothko!

i am the girl in the red coat—and you are a mark rothko, who greets me taking my rainboots and placing them gingerly on the backseat, among stretched canvas and duck tape

i am the girl in the red coat—with a cherrybomb childhood that you watched melt into the asphalt to the tune of “moon river”

winter. i hug the red coat tight, Schindler’s List style, thinking of how i am still green around the edges. like a too-young strawberry a virginal strawberry, green and green, all the way through

you drive me there

i am the girl in the red coat—who expels the salt tasting, ichor-oozing mass of cells and forgets it, shoving the sheath of prescription papers into a Minnie Mouse knapsack as though they are pennies from my change at the counter

you are the man in the black suit whose final, and altogether reddest, greatest work lies sick and writhing behind the Coke factory
i am the naked girl who will be discovered
by an employee whose fingers shake for lack of nicotine

naked, red, dead, alone

**Edie**

you and i were blonde
on blonde summer days when we would
roam outside the sun room until
some moon shone in from a far-off place until
the stars spelled bedtime until they screamed bedtime for our
spray painted palms and peppermint lip balm lips

you and i were white light
white heat in secluded, bare, bar basements for sample sales
remember who we were when the leaves began to fall
when i told you the stories about new mexico
about forlorn cowboys and the ranch and the
big bronze statue of a stallion that i saw once

you and i were radio
ethiopia-- sound waves that bounced off of walls that
expanded contracted with the breaths of the city with the
sounds of the fists on the floor that the couple upstairs made every once in a while
the whispers that made the hell worthwhile the sliver of silver in that awful year
the food we ate with our palms like orphans on the streets that was the reason

you and i were modern
lovers the kind of lovers that love ephemerally
whose affection burns until the leaves of autumn aren't enough to sustain it
whose affection fizzles out after enough time our palms
our legs our embrace—everything breaks sometime,
and my hands become burned from trying too long to hold on
and i wrap my hands in bandages and slam my fists against the floor and
choke to death on peppermints and
spray graffiti onto the horse-- and then, with hair short and earrings long
and eyes wide and heart open heart broken heart soaked in oil paint and vodka

you halt i halt we halt she halts, and the world is silent again.
Icarus

Your voice
finds the pitch, settles there like a
book on a shelf. Just hovers,
sturdy, before sinking
into a luxurious vibrato. Occasionally,
you allow huge, brassy dips, and the madness
shines through. Dare
to toss it too high,
though, and you lose
control. You
plummet, beating
your head against
the lines of
the staff, ragged
eighth notes clawing
your clothes. So you
don't sing high,
and no one asks.

Your voice
is the color of pumpkin
guts and murder
as you retch, body shaking
like a tuning fork. I'm
huddled in a blanket
of shadows, watching. I
want to
lay my palm
between the sharp, starved
blades
of your shoulders, caress
the pearls of
your spine, and remind you
that you once
knew how to sing. But your voice is a
flush, an E-flat.
Songs from the Pink Lemonade Room

Flashes of motion betraying them, they come—creaturely, the stones and the coins. Crawling from lake bottoms and unfortunate eyelids, gathering at the bottom of the well. They nuzzle into the silt and listen to a girl play guitar—somewhere, beyond, beyond. Their desire is a moist sucking sound; they absorb the tinny, unstructured melodies. The frayed lines from her own songs.

She sings about starched denim; a heartbreak that stung like vinegar; why people want to shatter fragile things when the seasons turn. I don't mind. A flat voice, lazy and supple as warm putty. Give me stockinette stitch and oranges bloated with cloves; give me ombre sunsets in casino towns; hearty soup and forgotten half-birthdays. It's okay. I don't mind.

Memories touch them, the creatures—these observers of bizarre human games; these touches of heaviness long ago buried. Maybe they remember when they were yeast, when they were dust. Maybe they sigh as they wait for the time Hafiz knew about: when we will be down on our knees, offering unreciprocated kindness.

But, for now, when the imaginings dry up, there is still her soundtrack of the night shift, carried to the top of the well as easily as a stone thrown through a tunnel. Still the time when she was a single cell, delicate and woven, able to duplicate herself in forty minutes.
Also, in the Trees

One hand woven in the foliage, the other reaching back, stroking safety—a boy, and the forest examining him.

He used to climb trees for fun, not to prove things. He used to say, “Tree”, but now he disgusts himself by knowing their names. Oak, dogwood, spruce. It was a code and he didn't want to break it; it was the tactic behind the trick, pressed into his grasp by an amateur, over-zealous illusionist.

He carries the magic now; like smallpox; like a carpetbag.

He is the magician who sleeps under his bed, sneaking down to the kitchen on nights when the moon is neither waxing nor waning. Wide, gawky hands playing with the faucet, hypnotized by the spray that never fails. Part of him believes that, if he jerks the lever quickly enough, he'll con time; gravity. In the morning, his mother will find him reclined against the lower cabinets, sucking a stick of margarine. They won't speak.

But, before, she was the goddess of lint rollers and Campbell's, the one who knew how to call the water—and scrub everything clean, new.
Vanessa Daves
Curiosity
Shawnee Mission East High School

December 2008
She checks back over all her work. Done. Sixth-grader Clara Ma turns in her worksheet to Mrs. Estevez and grabs a Time for Kids magazine from the bookshelf.

Skimming the pages, one by one, she comes across a story that changes her life forever. It’s about a girl named Sofi Collis, a third grader from Russia who named the twin Mars rovers Spirit and Opportunity. The article gave directions to enter an essay contest on the Pasadena, Cal. Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) website. The winner would name the upcoming Mars rover that would be launched in 2011.

I have to do this, Clara thought. I want to do this.
The rest of the day is a blur. By the time she gets home, she already knows what she’s going to write in her essay and what she wants to name the rover — Curiosity. So she starts writing.
“Curiosity is an everlasting flame that burns in everyone’s mind…”

May 2009
Clara is seated on a leather brown chair in the sitting room, watching a National Geographic special on mammoths when the phone rings. Too engrossed in the program, she lets it ring until her mom, Lisheng Cao, answers.

Clara hears her mom gushing from the office. She sneaks down the beige-carpeted stairs and listens to the end of the conversation. Vaguely, Clara hears the woman on the other end. And by what she hears her mom saying, she thinks that maybe it has to do with the contest.
Her mom hangs up the phone, and Clara looks at her expectantly. Beaming, Lisheng tells her the news, “You won.”
Nine thousand applicants. One winner. Clara can’t believe it. She’s screaming and running up and down the stairs and smiling with excitement.

As the winner, Clara got to take a trip to Washington, D.C. in preparation for the press release. She was interviewed and filmed reading her essay. While in D.C., she had the opportunity to see NASA headquarters and take a tour the Air & Space Museum.

They sit around their wooden dinner table. It’s a normal family dinner. Except they’re speaking Mandarin Chinese. And they’re talking about neutrinos.

Neutrinos are subatomic particles. An experiment was recently conducted, and based on the findings, some scientists hypothesized that neutrinos could potentially move faster than light. Clara and her dad, Frank Ma, are discussing whether or not this is even possible.

“IT wasn’t a deciding factor of what the name of the Mars Rover would be but it was part of their decision,” Clara said. “And I remember whenever we went to the computer lab [my teacher] would make everyone log onto the website and vote for my name.”

As the winner, Clara got to take a trip to Washington, D.C. in preparation for the press release. She was interviewed and filmed reading her essay. While in D.C., she had the opportunity to see NASA headquarters and take a tour the Air & Space Museum.

The day of the press release arrives just in time. Clara can barely stand keeping the secret any longer.
The last day of school is a half day. NASA told the media that national news would be occurring here, although they couldn't give them any specifics. Media outlets like Fox 4, KCTV5, and the Kansas City Star showed up for it.

All students are called for an assembly in the gym. As they file in and sit down, three NASA representatives begin a presentation about Mars, complete with 3-D pictures. It's followed by a video about space exploration and the new Mars rover, revealing the name that was chosen as the winner.

The rest of the day is a blur. Clara is interviewed by various reporters, and she's just trying to take it all in. 

“I felt kind of overwhelmed that day,” Clara said. “But having that, and just getting to talk to so many people who were interested in this experience kind of made me come out of my shell.”

As winner of the contest, Clara's initial prize was a trip to Pasadena, California. JPL partnered with the Disney/Pixar animation of “Wall-E” for the contest, so Clara and her family were treated to a trip to Disneyland and stayed at a Disney hotel. She also toured JPL, learned the science behind creating the rover, and got the chance to leave a piece of her with Curiosity by signing the rover before it was launched.

It took her 30 minutes of preparation to even get to be in the same room as Curiosity — from suiting up head-to-toe in a white cleanroom suit, to going through a tunnel whose purpose was to clear any bacteria off of Clara and her family. But when the moment finally arrived when Clara could sign the belly of the rover, she was ecstatic.

“They set aside this part of the rover,” Clara said. “They taped it off with yellow tape, and I got to sign it. I signed my English and Chinese name, and I wrote ‘Curiosity.’”

Clara is off in her own little world. Her grandmother, her “Lao Lao,” is telling her myths and stories about the constellations in Mandarin Chinese. She’s only here for a few months, visiting from Beijing, China. And every night, right before bedtime, she and Clara go out on the deck to look at the stars.

For Clara, it’s more than just quality time with her grandmother. It’s more than constellations or stars or stories. It’s more than space. For Clara, this is their connection.

“I realized that what she sees in China is the same as what I see here,” Clara said. “They’re constant, and in that way we’re connected even when we’re not together. That was just an amazing thought for me.’”

November 28, 2011

Clara and her family are sitting together under an overcast sky in Pasadena, Cal. Across Banana Creek is the launch pad with the Atlas V rocket holding Curiosity.

Nervous glances are cast at the clouds. They’re anxious and unsure: What if the launch doesn’t go as planned? The hours pass quickly. Clara catches up with all the NASA representatives she’d met and worked with two years before. Sitting in the stands together with all the engineers, scientists and workers that helped make this happen, it feels like one big family. As the time of the launch approaches, a hole opens up in the clouds above the launch pad.

“It was absolutely perfect,” Clara said.

And then it’s time. Clara and her sister, Renny, go to the edge of the creek, next to the clock counting down the time, and watch in awe as Curiosity begins to take off.

“Five...four...three...two...one. Main engine start. Zero and liftoff...”

Curiosity gets smaller and smaller and smaller. And then it’s gone, disappearing into the blue sky.

August 5, 2012

It’s her second and final trip Pasadena, Cal., and Clara knows she’ll remember this for the rest of her life. She’s savoring every moment. Making appearances at educator workshops and other NASA events. Catching up with people she’s met in her previous trips. Learning even more about the science and engineering behind Curiosity.

And then it’s time for the landing — the moment they’ve all been waiting for. Clara sits in the auditorium on the second row of the stands with her family. All eyes are on the big screen. Watching. Waiting. Hoping. As the parachute is deployed, people stand up, cheering. And when Curiosity lands, Clara is overcome with emotion. Tears stream down her face, flowing rapidly across her cheeks. She hears a woman’s voice over the crowd.

“Tengo Delta Nominal.”

It’s the scientific term for saying that the rover successfully touched down on Mars without any extremely serious problems, although scientists don’t know if everything is still in perfect condition.

“I just remember the first words after the landing,” Clara said. “They were very powerful.”
All of a sudden, she’s surrounded by journalists and reporters taking her picture and capturing her reaction the moment of the landing.

“I was the oldest during the landing, so I think it had the largest impact on me,” Clara said. “I don’t know if it’s possible, but I think it was even more spectacular than the launch.”

For Clara, it’s back to being a normal teenager. Back to tennis. Back to her honors classes and straight A’s. Back to watching National Geographic. So she says goodbye to everything for a while. She’s not sure when she’ll be back, although she plans to apply for an internship at JPL next summer. After all, there’s no stopping Clara’s curiosity.
The pounding, grueling feeling that pulsed in my ankle started to make its presence known once more. I was only a third of the way through this half marathon, which was so far full of pain. Wondering, questioning started to grow throughout my head. Why did I do this? These thoughts pulsed as I began the final stretch of the path towards the halfway point, where dreams are broken or where aspirations carry.

While I ran, a shiver of accomplishment, wonder, awe and satisfaction spread through me, starting a feeling of true worth that I treasured. The breeze overcame me and seemed to pick me up, the yellow leaves pushing me to finish, blasting music fading away to thoughts, and most of all, the feeling that I could do anything in the world racing in my system. My body began to soar with confidence, and I knew why I put myself through this painful journey. I was taken back to what now seemed like a stranger's life, when confidence seemed lifetimes away.

It was a bright, red soccer jersey for my third grade team, and it was too small. The tightness of the shirt harnessed my embarrassment, smothering it, not letting it escape. Until Jack made fun of me.

"What is that, an extra-large, and it's still too small?" he mocked. As I heard the tense uncomfortable laughter of others around me, my face heated to the color of the jersey. I saw the unwanted sympathy in my friends' eyes as I ran to the bathroom, with tears staining the red jersey, and my self-worth.

Mile seven. I felt the irksome rubbing of the rough tag against my shirt. Participant. The word screamed at me from the shirt. My mind grasped the idea of the word that had eluded me for so long. I had moved on to bigger challenges. This day too, I would always remember.

I flashed back to the days of the person I knew so well at age 11, when my body was bigger than life and my confidence was nowhere to be found. "Come on, Matt, I'll race you to the car," said my Dad, almost pleading. I proceeded to jog, laughter coming from inside of me to hide my disappointment, buried in the heavy breaths and slow legs of the insignificant jog.

That same year, we had a school costume party. I heard my teacher state the dreadful words, "All boys in this room, change into your..." Before the frightful words could leave her mouth, my feet had begun to flee to the corner, attempting to hide while changing, the wall masking my real self.

Mile nine. Runners high had captured me, and I could do the impossible. Impossible. I realized how seven years ago, this race defined that very word.

No matter what I said to attempt to disguise my rising weight, the ultimate enemy would always bring me back to the start. I would look at the cold, dark scale, hearing my whispered prayers that my tears would change the mounting devilish red numbers it showed. My inner self pleaded that it would be alright; in time the nightmarish red numbers would change their harsh, cruel glare to bestow the confident glow of hard work. I stepped away from the cold struggle of the scale, lunging into reality, when something inside told me I needed to change. But I couldn't, because life was the way it was and I was fat.

While my weight continued to increase, my social skills decreased. A third grade party highlighted the epitome of my monstrous weight holding me back. It was Christina Wylie's birthday party. I remember the sparkly blue invitation. The thought of a birthday party delighted me, until I came across the sickening fact that there would be swimming. Both boys and girls would be attending. The party went fine until a single horrific moment. I was the only one not in the pool, sitting in the patio chair, which seemed to squirm back and forth, screeching the concrete, while I simply prayed it could take me anywhere but here. "Matt, come on, get in the pool!" A nervous stammering seemed to stretch the length of the pool as my eyes scattered around the judgmental grounds. I said I had baseball that day, while the only thing that was practiced was my self-esteem breaking. My weight began to run its own life, taking me captive.

In the coming time, my Grandma passed away. I stopped caring about my weight, proceeding to cultivate to an even bigger weight. I was driving home with my parents when I first heard. The unsaid strain passed in the air from the front seat while my mind wandered over the new situation. She was gone, but the road ahead of me was under my control. An image struck me, finishing an amazing feat, becoming someone I could be proud of. My dream hit me. I was going to run a half marathon. My emotions slammed into a brick wall, and I woke up.

Reality struck once again, this time at mile eleven. I had two miles unchecked until I finished the race.
My journey started long ago straining to run one mile, in a cold basement, on top of a wobbly treadmill. “Why am I doing this? I wasn’t going to change, so why try?” My feet shuffled around the treadmill until I stepped back, the picturesque vision of fitness taking control of my feet. Below the heavy gasp for change was an unparalleled feeling, something that lifted my legs to step back up and do one more mile, a sensation I experience my body crave, a feeling of determination.

I had begun my path, but still had a long way to go. The crisp flyer I received at the end of my ninth grade year, its bold letters urged me to attempt the once seemingly impossible journey. The epitome of fitness; if I could overcome the challenge, my heart told me it would be fulfilled, but not one ounce of me believed I could run with these people, who seemed impeccably fit.

Mile twelve. The crispness in the air was present as I reached for it, as I hit a hitch in the run. I looked around, realizing a transformation of sorts. When I first started to run, I struggled to run for twelve minutes, and I had just run twelve miles. The wonder and amazement led my mind astray from the pain, only two small miles away from my picturesque vision becoming reality.

As I reflect on my once heavy weight, I come to understand how I not only padded my body with insecurity, but kept my determination padded up inside of the true me. I was afraid of reaching for my limit, which now seemed nowhere in sight. The thought blended sweetly with the sweat pouring down my face, the cool autumn breeze, and the refreshing air I so readily gulped. I heard something that day, pulling me to a life of physical fitness and emotional pride in myself. A promise rang within me, an oath to run forward in life, and never take a step back. I swore if I ever thought about hiding myself again, to run away from it. I heard this pledge ring inside of me once again, as the words trickled out of my Dad’s lips, “So what would you think about doing a half-marathon?”

Before the imminent doubt could swallow me, I saw myself crossing the finish line. The image of me in the sweat-soaked red Cardinals shirt, passing under those red numbers, the ever so rewarding glow they give off against the crisp white finish banner made a powerful feeling a reality. Then, I let that doubt crash into my mind, and realized that is why I would run this race. I would run to finally prove to myself doubt could no longer guard the starting line of success, and to confirm to all who I really was. As I pictured myself finishing the race, I realized how wrong I had been, how one of the few things I was able to do in my life was change what I wanted to be, while inside, I just wanted to be myself.

Mile thirteen. The reality hadn’t truly sunk in until I saw him. He was a chubby boy of about eleven, a railing segregating his look of awe and want as others, glowing with confidence and perseverance, ran by. My legs dragged me over by him. I heard the words, “You know, you can do this one day. I was just like you, just don’t let anyone tell you that you can’t, especially yourself.” The goose bumps picked up once again, tears coming for reasons unknown, disbelief spread across my face as I ran through the once impossible.

“So, you’re in?” I heard my Dad ask. “Of course.” Something deep inside me answered, and I felt that incomparable feeling start up in my gut again, determination. I was about to run to it and never turn back.
Artist / Writer statement
As long as I can remember, I have loved books. I read in the shower and at the dinner table and while I brush my teeth. I delight in beautiful sentences and intricate plots. But there’s more to it than that. I believe that, by providing an intimate window into other people’s sorrows and dreams, great stories make us more compassionate. They remind us that we are not alone.

For this reason, three of the four works I submitted deal explicitly with books. In “Professor Linden Goes to the Library,” books become the professor’s most treasured companions, saving her from crippling self-doubt. The young teacher in “Steven” discovers that his passion for teaching literature is proof against disillusionment. And in “Learning to Read,” I explain how my own encounter with John Milton made me fall in love with the English language all over again.

The exception to this motif is “Walking,” a brief story about a girl who grows apart from her best friend. This piece explores a sense of loneliness, a feeling that everything we love is transient. Characters in “Professor Linden Goes to the Library” and “Steven” experience this loneliness, too, but they seek solace in intellectual passions, which immerse them in a world bigger than themselves. No such comfort is available for the unnamed narrator of “Walking.” She must simply walk on, deprived of friendship.

Each of these pieces explores the tension between inner and outer worlds, between the life of the mind and the life of the heart. For me, writing is a way to connect those two worlds. It allows me to communicate my own passion, my own loneliness, my own uncertainty, to people I have never met and will never meet. I write because I hope to someday show readers what my favorite books have shown me: that however empty our lives may at times feel, our individual struggles are part of the human experience. They are embedded in the rich tapestry of stories that make up our past and our future.
Madelyne Hartleroad
In the Woods: A Memoir
Mud-Covered Summers
Platte City Middle School

Summer 2008

"I'm beating you!" I said to my sister Heather, who was frantically pushing her up arrow in attempt to use a
power-up.

Mario-Kart raced before us on the screen, since our first set of plans had been ruined by an unpredicted
rainfall. Now the woods were soaked, and we both thought that we wouldn't be able to go today, even if we
wanted to pretend otherwise. There was so much mud down by the creek, even without the rain, that galoshes
were a necessary accessory.

We much preferred outings in the woods over gaming, and our adventures often included my friend Tris. She
wasn't the girly type who would squeal, "Eeek! Crawdad! Get me out of here!" which made it a lot more fun. So
Heather and I ditched the game, called an agreeable Tris for an adventure, and hurried to find our rain gear.

Walking along a path, we passed an area we commonly referred to as "The Muddy Swamp." It was basically a
couple square meters of mud. Sometimes it dried into dirt, and sometimes it was as wet as sludge. That day, what
cought our intention was in the mud pit, not the mud pit itself.

Heather, of course, wanted to stomp into the mud. It was some sort of silly ritual of hers, and she teetered to
the edge of the filthy muck. Her eyes zeroed in on our prize for the day.

"Look! There's bones in the swamp!"

"Bones?" Tris and I both turned, and saw the horribly-cool bleached white bones sitting together on the top
of the mud. Of course, no ordinary group of kids could leave something that fascinating undisturbed, so we
unearthed the bones from the pit and carefully carried them home.

I got the femur, naturally, because I wasn't going anywhere near the skull that Heather was lugging, or the set
of teeth that we left behind. Tris was carrying a long bone, and as we walked to the house we discussed what sort
of animal the bones belonged to.

"I think it's a cow!" I said. It had undistinguishable horns and the skull of one too.

"Yeah, I think it's a cow too!" Heather agreed. We told Tris that our neighbor had quite a few cows, and you
could even see the fence from the swamp. We were ecstatic about our bones; the adventure to the woods had
been a success.

We opened the kitchen door, and I said, "Mom, we found cow bones!" Mom walked over, looking kind of
puzzled.

"Oh, those are probably deer bones, honey. They're a bit small to be a cow's."

"Where do you want us to put them?"

Mom did a good job masking the look of disdain that any parent would have. Your children and their friend
waltz home, each carting their own share of relics *cough bones*and they ask you where to put them, as if the
bones were some class project they had won a medal with at school. Yes, honey, you can put the bones on the
mantel, inside the house for everyone to see. Not.

"You can leave them in the garden, right there," Mom told us, gesturing at the mulch surrounding her
flowers. We set down our bones and went inside for lunch after our day of treasure-hunting.

Summer 2009

Often, Heather and I would group with Carol and Kaitlin, our friends who loved adventuring outside as much
as we did. The four of us marched down to their creek, determined to catch frogs. At one point, the creek snaked
across our path, and one by one we readied ourselves to leap it. After a few minutes, all of us had jumped across
the muddy bank, except for Heather, who was still standing nervously on the other side.

"Come on, Heather!"

"You can do it!"

We shouted words of encouragement at her, and then Kaitlin stepped forward. She was a year younger than
me, a year older than her sister Carol, and two years older than Heather. Kaitlin stretched out her hand and told
Heather, "I'll pull you up if you fall."

After a few more minutes, Heather finally made the jump. And missed.
Her shoes went sinking into the mud, and we managed to pull her out, leaving one brand new tennis shoe behind.

"I'll get it!" Carol told us. She reached forward, Kaitlin holding onto her arm, and then her shoe went splashing into the mud.

"Carol!" We said in unison.

Kaitlin pulled Carol back, and we all took off our shoes. In the next twenty minutes, we began the muddy fight to retrieve Heather and Carol's shoes.

After a while, Carol managed to yank her own shoe out of the mud, along with a huge chunk of sludge hanging from the bottom.

But no matter what we did, we couldn't get Heather's shoe back. Each time we grabbed for it, it just sank deeper and deeper into the mud. Until we couldn't see it at all.

Kaitlin and Carol's mom called us, saying, "Girls, their mom is here!"

We all shared a brief look of uh-oh. Our moms were not going to be thrilled.

Later on, Kaitlin and Carol's dad marched up from the woods carrying a big shovel, and Heather's ruined tennis shoe was in the trowel. The thing had absorbed the mud and was way beyond rescuing.

A year later, I remembered that incident as Heather and I tried to jump another muddy stream.

**Summer 2010**

Another summer day, clear and sunny. Heather and I decided to hunt for the start of our creek, where the very spring bubbles water from the ground. Our mom had told us about her creek growing up, how she could actually see the water coming up from the ground, so naturally Heather and I wanted to see this phenomenon for ourselves.

"We need to cross here," I told my sister. A bramble patch to our left was blocking further exploring, and across the creek stretched a clear bank we could walk across before crossing back over.

"But there's mud," Heather informed me after a cautious foot tapping. The mud was moist, so of course it had to sink under the weight of her foot.

"We can jump this. Ready? I'll go first!"

We needed to cross the creek to find the magical spring. I knew that nothing was going to stand in our way.

I leaped forward, and my feet went squish in the mud. "Oops."

Heather jumped across and helped pull me out, but by then both our rain boots were coated with mud. Hers had allowed the mud to seep in around the tops.

"Oh, mom's not going to be happy," we agreed. We hunkered down in a rockier part of the creek bed, balancing on cinder blocks and scrubbed our mud boots and soaked our jeans in the rushing water until they could have passed a mom's scrutiny.

We resumed our journey, but after an hour or two of searching, Heather was moaning to give up and go home. Our jeans were soaked, our boots were squishy, and worst of all we hadn't found the spring, even though we'd closely inspected a ring of water circling a too-steep-to-climb dirt mountain for any suspicious activity. That expedition had been a bust, but we'd have plenty more.

**Autumn 2010**

When I think of fall, I think of the time I could've got myself impaled by a bull. And before anyone suggests any lawsuits, it was entirely my own fault. I was walking on my pride, that day.

We were with our neighbors again, Carol and Kaitlin, near The Muddy Swamp. The cow fence was right in front of me, and behind it was a brush-free pasture that went all the way to the other side of the woods. While pushing aside bramble and leaping the creek stunk, the pasture looked like an inviting yellow-brick road: no creek to leap and no bramble to dodge.

"You know, I bet I could beat you to the other side if I went under the fence," I told Heather, Carol, and Kaitlin.

"You can't do that!" Kaitlin argued. "There's cows in there! What if you get hurt?"

"I won't," I said plainly, inspecting my path again.

"I'm going under, and I'll meet you guys over there," I pointed, "on the other side of the woods, where the fence ends. Okay?"

"Fine," Kaitlin argued. "But if anything happens, it's not my fault."

"We're gonna beat you!" Carol told me.

"I don't think so," I said back and then wormed my way under the fence. "Ready, set, go!"
I was off, trumpeting through the pasture. I eyed the cows every few seconds, but thankfully, they kept their distance.

Past the last splotch of trees on my opponent’s side, the field rolled my right. The problem was there was a fence separating me from it.

I inspected the last few yards, looking for some kind of loophole or space where I could crawl beneath. I saw one that would have to work. I hunkered down and squirmed beneath it, face up, watching the barbs pass above me.

On the other side, cow free, I had beaten my opponents. Around thirty seconds later, I saw them, peeling back weeds and struggling to climb the steep slope to my victorious perch. “I win!” I cheered.

My sister just shook her head.

Winter 2010

Years after the cow bones discovery, we returned to the woods with Tris and one of Heather’s friends, Lucia. That time, the woods were coated with a light dusting of frost and a couple inches of snow. The weeds had died, making travel much easier. And, to our delight, parts of the creek had frozen over.

The four of us dropped down onto the creek, careful not to crush the ice, and started walking right on the surface. The water under the ice trickled in shallower places, and bubbles of autumn air had been frozen into the ice of winter. Tris and I slid ourselves along, pushing off of the brush and jumping experimentally on the ice.

That started the jumping war.

The four of us jumped like madmen, trying to see who could crack it first. And then, when it finally did crack, Tris and I stood on the surface as Heather and Lucia handed us chunks of ice. We repeatedly threw the ice into the creek, seeing who could create the biggest splashes possible.

All of us got soaked.

“Whoah!” Tris applauded after I slammed a chunk into the creek. The ice sent freezing cold water flying up into the air, where it splashed against us.

“Ha!” I cried. “It was huge!”

“I think I got a bit wet,” Lucia laughed.

Then Heather threw her chunk of ice, and we rated it like professional ice-throwing judges before moving on to a different part of the creek, with more ice.

And that was how we spent that lovely winter day, before retiring into the house for hot cocoa and cookies.

Winter 2011

If you ask any kid what she wants to do on a snow day, I’ll bet you the answer will be to go outside and sled. And the best sledding hills are the steep ones that hurl you down at a dangerous rate toward ditches and bramble patches at the bottom.

We had one of those, right at the end of our cul-de-sac. The hill stretched from our neighbor’s house to the house on the other side of the road, which left tons of space for each kid to have her own racetrack with icy speed bumps and worn paths through the snow. But sharing paths was more enjoyable, so we’d all work on building bumps and wearing paths over the best parts of the hill.

“Come on, Kaitlin! Let’s go down!” I shouted at her. She sat down in front of me, and we pushed off, gaining speed. Snow slid into our faces, and Kaitlin jerked on the sled, trying to steer. Up ahead loomed a hay bale we were zooming towards.

“Jump!” Kaitlin shouted, and we abandoned our sled.

From the bottom of the deep hill, we watched as Carol and Heather sped down after us. It was going to be a long hike up.

Rather than waste energy climbing back up for a second go, why not explore the frozen creek at the bottom of the hill? Along with some other neighbors, we made our way to the edge of the woods.

There was a slight slope, ending with a ditch, and beyond that the creek stood like treasure. One by one, we carefully picked our way through the bramble and slid down onto the ice. That was the scary part. If it cracked on us, we would be doused.

Then we waited as the rest of the kids pleaded not to go on without them. Finally, we were all on the ice. It was wide enough that the ten of us could walk in rows of five, up and down the creek.

“We should go that way,” I said, pointing downstream.

“No,” Kaitlin argued. “The ice is always thinner over there.” So we started walking upstream.

“It’s cracking here,” one of our neighbors said, poking the ice with her boot.
“Then walk over here,” someone else said, and we continued like that, someone stepping on weak points, and the whole group moving to the other side. The worst was when air was trapped in the ice, making it thinner. Thankfully we could usually see the air bubbles, and sometimes we’d uproot the ice for fun.

After clamming around in the snow for a while, we made our way back, which was when Carol stepped in a weak spot.

“It’s cracking,” she said. She began to inch off the ice.

Kaitlin told her, “Come this way.” Carol took one step, and the ice gave in beneath her feet. She splashed into the freezing water and stumbled to get back out. It cracked wherever she set her feet. By the time she found a strong point, poor Carol’s snow boats were soaked. At that point we hurried to get back because of recurring thoughts about frostbite, and once we collapsed at the bottom of the hill.

Spring 2012

That spring, the woods were churning with life due to the mild freeze we had had. Giant dragonflies with purple wings buzzed through the air, landing on grass blades further away from us as we tromped after them. We returned to explore with our neighbors, Kaitlin and Carol, with a new sport in mind: frog catching.

The four of us, including Heather, knelt down on the once again weedy banks, bent over with butterfly nets, hunting for spring croakers. Their brown, slimy skin blended in well with the mud, but once we saw one, we’d point at it excitedly and take a strike.

“It got away!” I complained as I shook my empty net over our bucket. It was no doubt that Kaitlin was the best at catching frogs, but the rest of us liked to have a go at it too. I handed my net to Heather and rejoined the search. Carol spotted another one and swiped her net over it. I quickly grabbed the net with my hand, trapping the frog in the netting. Once by the bucket, I let it untangle, and Carol’s catch plopped into the water.

“Wait, there’s only two in there!” She said. “One of them escaped!”

“We only had two,” Kaitlin said as she tried to catch another with her bare hands.

“But I just put one in there, and there’s only two now!”

Then of course, we all had to come see if we really had lost a frog. Yep, we had.

Pretty soon the two of us with mud boots were tromping in the water, eyes keen for croakers, and the other two balanced on rocks and crouched on the banks, looking for frogs as well. When we finally were back to our old hunting spot, we set the bucket down and looked at our three remaining frogs.

One of them looked like it was dead. It was floating on its back, which didn’t look like a good sign.

“Aw, Heather, you killed it!” I told her. She had been carrying the bucket, after all.

“I didn’t kill it! It’s not my fault!” Heather argued.

“I’m kidding!” I said.

Kaitlin scolded, “No fighting, you two!”

But, we decided to release the frogs so the rest didn’t die, and we made our way back home.

Winter 2012

Now, I’m typing in an apartment, snow on the ground, unable to go outside. We don’t live near the captivating woods anymore, and I’m sure that by now it’s overrun with vines and weeds. I’ve been clinging to the hope that someday I will get to tromp around in the woods again, and even though it won’t be the same woods, what matters is being outside with your friends. I will always treasure my adventures through the undergrowth, sliding under cow fences and testing the limit of winter ice.
The next round of go-karts whizzed by as I casually stole off the racetrack. Having just won the first go-kart race of my life, I could not help the prideful smile stretching across my face. Brushing off scattered offers at rematches, I hastily excused myself and left the scene to retire undefeated.

Upon arriving at the adjacent building, my implacable pride was momentarily checked by the odd scale of the room which I had entered. The foyer opened up to an atrium which would have ideally been smaller, yet the presence of a rock climbing wall on one end rendered any better design impossible. It left the owner with a building which, despite the vast amount of empty space it occupied, boasted a mere handful of arcade games and a small snack bar. I squinted in the dim lighting.

The chaotic shouts of exhilarated racers ceased as the glass doors behind me clicked shut, and the soft murmurs of those inside blended into a single hum that rose and fell like a gentle sea tide. The rhythm’s tranquility was cut short by an anguished cry followed by a solitary thump whose source seemed to be the arcade. I scanned the vicinity, somewhat irritated by the uncanny noise that had disturbed my comforting peace, until my eyes fell upon Connor Bagila, leaning on a claw machine, whose forehead brandished a red mark and whose empty wallet was strewn across the floor.

Connor and I had met the week before at summer camp, the same summer camp program that had brought us to this Speedpark. Connor possessed a peculiar personality, yet he reminded me of myself. He had initially lied to me about his last name, but he relented at my persistence, claiming that he had only hidden his last name because he had “lost faith in humanity.” I took his admission as a token of our mutual trust, perhaps even a budding friendship. We were both sixth graders at the time and, although I had no idea by what philosophy he operated, I took his word for it.

Connor’s face was twisted into a scowl, so I, sensing the fragile state he was in, approached him carefully. He saw me coming and scooted aside; the glass box fogged with my warm breath as I ogled it. The display case flaunted a handful of iPod Nanos, the sleek new generation, upon a red fabric mat. I understood why Connor had busted his money on this particular game.

I inserted the last of my change which, after two clinks, caused the machine to whir back to life. My fingers curled around the knob, cringing as they embraced the warm sweat that had once belonged in Connor’s hand. Undaunted, I proceeded to align the claw laterally with a red iPod while Connor directed me from the side of the glass box. Having reached an agreement, we pressed the button. The claw groaned of oil deprivation as it lowered and encircled the iPod. Still, the claw merely grazed the sides of the box and rose grasping nothing but a sense of disappointment which it dropped into the prize box, mockingly, for us to take.

I shared Connor’s frustration and kicked the worthless machine. So close, yet I ventured to guess that immeasurable victims before me had come closer and had walked away even more empty-handed than I. An employee at the snack bar glared at us. We looked the other way. When she had returned to her own business, we turned back.

Abruptly, Connor froze in place as he noticed something I had overlooked: as I was kicking the machine, its bottom half had bounced back like a sliding drawer. My eyes quickly widened as Connor pointed it out to me. I slammed the machine shut and my eyes darted, first towards the snack bar, and then all around us. The spacious building had suddenly refashioned itself into a Panopticon and the eerie sensation of being watched forced my hair to stand on end. However, no eyes were upon us. We slid the drawer open slightly more than an inch; it rolled smoothly; it was not locked. Heart pounding uncontrollably, I couldn’t think straight. The air seemed thinner. Immediately, Connor spoke.

“We can’t take any,” he said, shaking his head. “It’s against the law, I think.” He sent me a cold, hard stare.

“If it’s left out in the open,” I whispered in response, babbling my justifications. “It’s because they want us to take some. Like samples at Sam’s Club.” Desperation had set in, and my mind operated like a criminal’s. “Plus, the fact that they have so many iPods in the same square meter of space means that they’re doing fine financially. It won’t hurt if we take just one—or two—for you and me.” All morals that had once been a part of me had fallen victim, momentarily, to the demon of irrepressible want.
Like prattle, my distraught pleas fell in vain. Connor would not relent. Anger flashed in my eyes, and I abhorred his impeccable virtue.

As my mind cleared, I realized I was on my knees, maniacally pulling the drawer back with my fingers while Connor stood with his foot, propped upon it, preventing its opening. I gave up the struggle and let go; a band of red marks branded the tips of my fingers. I stared at them in shock.

A burning sensation overwhelmed me as I stood up, for my head had grown heavy with blood and my face red with embarrassment, perceiving the discrepancy between the temperaments of us standing at the claw machine. He stood tall because moral obligations had kept him righteous; I cowered in humiliation at learning of the artificial nature of my conscience.

“You’re right,” I conceded shamefully. “We should tell her.” I was desperate to atone, to prove my worth again.

Before Connor could respond, I made towards the snack bar and informed the employee that the claw machine was unlocked.

She snatched the keys off her belt, and we walked towards the machine together. Promptly, she locked the drawer, sealing the barrier between us and the iPods. Putting the keys back onto her belt intently.

“You boys didn’t take any, did you?” she asked.

Unsure of how to respond, I stole a glance towards Connor. His eyes were directed at the ground; I understood I was on my own. Several uncomfortable seconds passed before my gaze shifted towards her.

“No.” In reality, this was true. Nonetheless, my voice was choked up with guilt.

“Okay, I trust you. You two are good boys for letting me know,” she returned to the snack bar.

The rest of the day passed quickly. Connor and I wandered around the facility and revisited the go-karts. I won every race, yet not an ounce of pride rose within me. So concerned was I about my senseless behavior at the claw machine that any vibe of delight was smothered by the thick blanket of guilt enveloping me. And we never spoke. Two hours later the bus arrived to bring us home.

Connor chose a seat in the front while I sat in the back. Our silence was not that of enmity, as I knew we didn’t hate each other; we needed time to think about what happened.

Temptation had driven me up the wall, and I was no better than any greedy scoundrel. I realized what Connor had meant when he said he had “lost faith in humanity.” We remained friends, for he spoke to me the next day as though nothing had happened. But why should he trust me? I had manifested the precise behaviors that had fostered his sense of weariness regarding other humans. Connor, the only one to have witnessed my behavior, had all the right in the world to hate me. I knew he had forgiven me, but I had not; I was disgusted with myself.

Yet, as the bus drove on, I realized that my struggle had developed within me a sense of vigilance. Not only had the degrading experience showed that I did not possess the virtue I always assumed I had, but it also gave me the capability to recognize and avoid such lapses in judgment.

I wondered if Connor’s just demeanor had once been the result of the same experience.

The bus arrived, and we unloaded. I was the last one off while one of the counselors waited on the sidewalk.

“You and Connor don’t seem to be getting along today. Is something wrong?” she asked.

I felt my mouth open, but it snapped shut almost immediately. Suddenly, I couldn’t comprehend why I was still upset; Connor had encouraged a change in my character that was undoubtedly for the better. Swallowing the last of my grief, I looked her in the eye.

“No.” I meant it.
It sounds.
Vociferously booming, it is the only thing I hear. Everything has to be dropped and forgotten, and the only thing I think of is running. Feet slamming, bones jolting, head skipping. A timer counts my steps. Panic is chasing me.

Then, I stop.
Relief saturates me when she turns around. Like always, she is waiting. Her fingers release the piano keys from the merciless pounding.

"Guess what?? OOG BOOG OOG BOGS!!!!!!" she cries. And I smile.

** **
The bouncy chords of Heart and Soul represent her “urgent” thoughts; it is our secret signal for me to rush immediately to the piano room, no matter where I am, what I am doing, or who I am with. These brief visits usually include an eager me flashing like a bat out of hell, an impatient sister bashing the pitches infinitely, a brief three sentence exchange, and a quick dismissal. I never fail to appear.

However, these little things and many more make me feel like I revolve around my seventeen-almost-eighteen year old sister. I never circle her in neat little oval; it’s more of a crazy and continuous jagged shape that goes in, out, stabbing in different directions. Sometimes, I am her shadow. Other times, I am lost in hers.

I don’t want to forever lie in peace on the line of fantasy and reality. I don’t want to forever rest comfortably in her shade. I long for myself. I long to come into the light. I long to shine in the purest form of me. I want to be solid, not forever a liquidation of my sister. I want to come out into the world, without her towering over me like a baobab tree.

** **
I can’t help but feel small and ugly when my mother introduces us to her greasy haired friends. Their cheeks twitch at the word college, and their eager beady-eyes scratch for information. As my mother mentions my sister’s acceptance into Yale, they suddenly light up like lost fireflies, crowding and slithering into the small space that separates me from my sister. After making minutes of cluttering chaos, one of the women with slick teeth whips around and grins, "Your sister is fantastic. You have to be exactly like her one day." Their eyebrows flicker up and down in disapproval, obviously sneaking hints to each other about how hopeless and pathetic I am.

I wanted to scream at them. “Hey! Stop looking at me like I am a Shrinky-Dink of my sister.” Then, all too suddenly, I was tossed aside, forgotten and disappearing into the ground.

** **
“MADEMOISELLE!!!” she hollers.
Her arms go up and escape towards the ceiling. Her legs split into a perfect A, and my legs instinctively plunge towards the floor. Her fingers wiggle, and my fingers flutter like eyelashes. I prance behind her, perfectly mimicking her every pose as we flounce perpetual laps around the house. My limbs are creaking, and my voice is croaky, but as long as she dances, I dance. As long as she sings, I sing.

** **
Lying on the prickly smoothness of my spread out sleeping bag, I talk for hours about Toady Mushroom Land to her: a perfect place where I am the Toady Mushroom Queen, where nice and chubby mushrooms nap on the ground, where flimsy fairies scatter in the wind, and where the weather is always blue and green. Her eyes are closing, her ears are standing up, her head is lulling into my neck, and in those few rare moments, her usual strong façade slips off. She completely trusts me, breathing evenly into my clean, flowery pillow. It’s 3 am, but I know she would stay up forever if I want to talk to her. I let her sleep. Soon, we gently fall into Toady Mushroom Land, hazily dreaming in its feathery grass meadows.

** **
I feel the thin little hairs kiss my cheek, making me blush with color. Swirling my brush back into the rouge, I pause. I look at my sister as she peels off her crackled lip skin; waiting patiently on the bathroom floor, she gazes up intently. So harmless and childlike, it’s almost too funny. I touch her face with the pigment—a pink blemish on her clean face. She closes her eyes.
* * *

They say an ocean is nothing without water. But then, what will it be? A desert? A canyon? Maybe nothing will want to live there, maybe it will be naked and bare, maybe it will be boring and useless. But perhaps in sacrificing the water, it becomes something different, something previously unimagined.

* * *

I know she’ll leave for college someday; I’ve always known this. But tonight, I’ve never felt so lonely, so lost. Gliding my knuckles across the fine mahogany wood, I cautiously open the case. I play Heart and Soul slowly and listen for what I know to be absent footsteps.

I hear them.
Christina Rouse
Chopsticks
Mary Institute and St. Louis Country Day School

The most recent local online review says the Dragon Palace is a “small, quaint restaurant with friendly service and bottomless potstickers.” My father does not scrimp on smiles or portions; he’s more likely than not to heap two dozen on a plate when 12 is spelled out on the menu. “A delight,” Bá said. “A good review.” He was so proud he bought a new ink cartridge at Office Max so he could print it out and tape it to the dirty front window. Bá is always trying to make the restaurant live up to its name, but it’s neither good fortune nor riches that bring the customers here. “Inexpensive Chinese food” and “open late” in the middle of a university town is all the advertising required. That doesn’t stop him from trying DIY repairs and endless touch-up paint jobs.

Truthfully, the place needs it. One look at the outside and you aren’t sure whether it is a cheap restaurant or an even cheaper strip club. The “Pa” of Palace is burnt out on the neon sign above the door. I told Bá to fix it once, but he was so wrapped up in perfecting the gold awning paint he must have forgotten. My father would stand there for hours on a shaky ladder, pushing his circular glasses up on his nose, squinting at his canvas, holding the tiniest paint brush and a little jar of paint, dabbing the gold into the cracks and insignificant chips. Even with the flashing sign and the flashy awning, it is an unassuming building, nestled in between a vacant row of shop windows and a perpetually empty mattress store.

Once through the red door, you walk down a skinny path fenced in by a twisted iron cage meant to look like something you would find in a garden with knots of vines and flowers growing on it. Where I sit — by the cash register and a bucket of fortune cookies — is to the left, so I can watch everyone as they walk in. Drunk college students stumble along, grabbing onto the metal leaves, their laughter rising above the smell of ginger. Friends of my father, the regulars, enter quietly in immaculately pressed and starched white shirts. They nod to me, polite. The murmur of Mandarin: “ni hao” and “zui jin shen ti hai hao ma?” These greetings soothe Bá. And every night, the table-for-ones arrive, predictably, unassumingly, a book or the Chinese Daily News tucked under one arm. Sometimes, they look around nervously, but to be seen alone at the Dragon Palace is not the same as being seen alone at a P.F. Chang’s. Bá loves those table-for-ones, perhaps because he thinks they are all food critics or undercover health inspectors.

The inside of the building is full of trinkets, the smell of spilled soy sauce and steamed water chestnuts, and accidental mood lighting. The dull fluorescent bulbs cast shadows on the dragon figurines, making them look large and menacing. The pathway opens to a larger dining room, big enough for about 10 tables. Bá makes sure each table is furnished with a red table cloth and a trivet for a steaming pot of Ms. Zhou’s tea. He doesn’t believe in utensils. “There is something about chopsticks, Zian. There is something about chopsticks.”

It’s the family business, my Bá tells me, your future. He points to the phone, unattended. It sits on the little counter, which is cleaned almost constantly to give the Palace an air of organization amidst the random collectibles. Like most things at the restaurant, the phone itself is in a state of disrepair with a yellowing keypad and fraying cord. The ring is like a rattling alarm clock inside your skull.

“Hey, uhm, man,” Slurred words melt together then into my ear like hot butter. “Do I know you? Sound like I know you.”

“Would you like fried rice or white rice with that?” Bá does not approve of the drunk college students, but he accepts their business and their money, all in the name of the Dragon Palace.

“How about school? Take classes at the U? Sound like a kid in my economics class. Real smart guy, man. Sound like it.”

“No, I don’t.” Bá is getting older. He won’t give up standing on that creaky ladder with his creaky bones, but the winds are blowing harder than they were before, tearing leaves off the trees and rattling the ladder and Bá — I don’t know which one more. He takes care of the Palace, and I take care of him.

“Oh.” He finishes his order, something which will probably never make it all the way down. I hang up the phone, tear the cheap paper off the pad.

Trill, trill, trill.

It’s like phone is softer, more angelic. Like the noise in the kitchen stills, the clamoring customers stop asking for receipts and exact change and extra fortune cookies.

“Hello?” Her creamy voice fills the receiver, my head, my veins. My mouth is dry. I can’t speak. “Hello?”
I have answered phones here since I was twelve. Six years, one million phone calls. Pretend it is grandpa. Just yéye, wanting beef and broccoli driven over to his apartment for later. “Can, um... Can I help you?”

“Phone number?” I say. It is Bá’s system. “First name?” I say. “Spell it, please.” I must get it right. The pen I cradle like a single chopstick is getting a little slippery with sweat.

Okay,” she says. “E-L-L-E.” Amusement bubbles in her voice. And then she is gone, the line dead, and Bá is yelling at me to put down the phone so another customer can call, ripping the order ticket out of my hand to send to the kitchen. But I don’t want another customer to call. I am hooked on her smooth, dulcet voice. So I sit, patiently, staring at the iron cage surrounding the door. I stack outgoing orders in their brown bags on the counter, drop in the fortune cookies, straighten the pile of tickets.

A full figure breezes through the door. Alone? Blissfully alone. The shadows from the metal weaving and the dim lights cast down on her alabaster skin, her shiny blonde hair and revealed her candy lips. She glows. I try to take in everything—the scruffy brown boots and orange socks, the gold sweater, the heart-shaped bruise right above her left knee.

“Hi,” she says. Her mouth turns up in a smile, and she tips her head to the side. I just look. I look at the hole in her sweater right below the collarbone, look at her jade eyes. She tilts her head to the other side.

“Sesame chicken?” I say. She laughs. “I’m Elle.” I feel a rush of warmth, for Bá, for this restaurant, for his system of Chinese characters, phone numbers, and names.

“Zian,” I say, ducking my head. My black hair is longer than Bá would like, and it falls in my eyes. I turn and collect the double-bagged containers off the counter, set both next to the cash register. She pulls a bill from her pocket and exchanges it for the takeout.

“Thanks,” she says and is gone, without her change, the door swinging shut. Bá is back to tell me we are out of duck sauce, and the phone is ringing urgently because drunk college students are hungry. I greet the regulars as they trudge indoors. I sort through the receipts, the scribbles of characters. I find it, her name, written in my best cursive. Elle. Her phone number. My fingers tremble, smooth the paper out, fold it once, slide it in my shirt pocket.

It becomes a routine. Elle calls on Friday. She floats into the Dragon Palace, says hello. I am waiting, thinking of something to compliment. Her earrings, her bright yellow coat. Saturday I spend the day reveling in our past encounter. How she wears her hair directly impacts my mood. I love it loose and down, and down only. Sunday, I mourn her. Miss her. Her physically, certainly, but more than anything, her voice. Monday I crash. Tuesday I desperately hope she will call early. Wednesday I resign myself to waiting. Thursday, I count down the hours.

Friday, my world changes. The phone rings.

“Hello.” Elle says. “I’d like to place an order for takeout.”

“Hello. Elle.”

I ask her about her classes when she comes in. “What are you studying?”

“English mostly,” she says. “I might want to be a writer. I like words.”

I don’t want her to notice that I am the only one our age not rushing across campus, late to something important. “Do you have a favorite author?” I ask her. She looks thoughtful.


One Friday, Elle doesn’t call. She doesn’t walk through the door. I feel I have the days of the week wrong. I check, double check my calendar. Certainly, it is just a busy Thursday. I even ask Bá what day it is. Then Saturday passes and Sunday. Maybe she is sick. Or on vacation. Is she in trouble? Probably just busy. School, Bá assures me, is a lot of work.

And so I show Bá the receipt. He sighs. “Zian.” He shakes his head at me. I don’t know if it is out of sadness, or hope. “This is foolishness.” I go to the phone anyway, untwist the curly cord, push the numbers slowly, accurately. There is a ring, then a second.

“How?”
“It’s Zian. Elle. Friday, you didn’t call. I haven’t seen you. Are you okay?’ My hands are getting slick, and I am holding the paper so tightly that the ink might start to bleed to scribbles. I can think of nothing worse happening to me in that moment.

“Zian? How did you get my number?”

“I have it. On the tickets.”

“Oh. You have my number,” she says.

“Well,” she says, after a pause. “I am tired of carryout. I thought I would come in, you know, dine in. Friday?”

“It’s a date,” I say. “Friday. I will see you Friday.”

Elle says nothing, just hangs up the phone. I place the phone in the cradle, gently, reverently. I fold the creased receipt for the hundredth time and slip it into my wallet.

Four days to wait; four days to perfect the Dragon Palace. I take the carpet sweeper from the storeroom and meticulously run it over every inch of fiber. Bá watches as I wipe down the laminated menus. I dust the statues, polish the metallic leaves by the entrance.

On Friday, I am ripping off an order ticket to bring to the kitchen for Bá when I hear her voice. Her laughter cascades through the open door. I turn my head, to be certain it isn’t a dream, or a hallucination. It is dark outside, but somehow, when she steps into the metal cage, the room is bright. I smile, brush imaginary crumbs off the counter, turn toward her voice. Another shadowy figure enters the restaurant. Coincidence, it has to be. A nice stranger holding the door open. Do strangers put their arms loosely around each other’s shoulders? A stranger with a handsome face, not enough alike hers to be related. Elle reaches her hand around the stranger’s neck, whispers something in his ear. She looks away. He looks over at me. They seat themselves.

I try to busy myself with the ringing phones, the orders and receipts and change and fortune cookies. But every once in a while, her laugh carries over to me, and I breathe it in. The room is too small. I imagine his fingerprints smudging the Dragon Palace menu, my father’s menu. Bá hobbles over to their table with gleaming silverware, then comes to take an order from me.

“It’s okay, Zian,” he says, “she doesn’t know how to use chopsticks.”

The phone rings again. I walk away from my station. Elle is watching me get closer. Her eyes seem to narrow.

“Hello Zian.”

“Elle.”

She clears her throat, continues. “This is my boyfriend, Mark. He is going to be a doctor.”

“At least a biomedical engineer.”

I think of how I carried her number around. How I pined for her. How Bá shouted at me to hang up the phone.

“Tea?” I ask, hefting the pot I carried, steaming, to the table. “Ms. Zhou says it is best when it is served hot.” I raise Ms. Zhou’s tea above the white ceramic mug he holds between his fingers. I tip the kettle and watch the pale chartreuse liquid splash out, vapor rising and clouding my eyes. It fills up my nostrils: warm and sweet and dry.

“That’s enough, thanks.” The tea keeps coming, rushing out of the spout like a recently undammed river. “I said that’s enough. Stop.” There is so much tea in this kettle. All the tea wants to get out. It must have been trapped in there for so long, waiting. “Jesus Christ, that’s hot! Stop! Elle!”

“Zian, please!”

“Elle!”

“Zian!”

The kettle falls to the ground, like a suit of armor collapsing in on itself. On the tip of the spout, a small droplet of tea quivers. It grows, swells, as if it is about to burst. The drop is heavy, too heavy to support itself now. The connection between the tea and the kettle is cut, severed, like snipping a stretched out piece of rubber. The droplet trembles in the air, bouncing twice, sticking like a tear on the newly cleaned carpet. Bá grabs me by my elbow, yanking hard. “What are you doing? These are customers.”

“It’s okay, Bá,” I say, “they don’t know how to use chopsticks.”
Standing in front of the mirror, a girl stared back at me. Her thin face was framed with sleek black hair, the greasy kind of sleek. Her skin was as pale as the light that comes from a flashlight beam in the dark. Her wide blue eyes made her look permanently scared, and her long fingers reminded her of trees in winter: sad, bony, and useless. I turned away from the reflection, venturing out of the girl’s restroom and into the empty hallway.

Halfway down the dark hall, the voices didn’t inhabit my head yet. A good omen.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, pulling me out of the reverie I was sinking into.

“Are you at the choir room yet?” McKenzie asked. Her voice sounded tinny through the metal flip phone pressed in my sweaty hands.

I nodded. “Yes.”

“Good,” she said. She paused, waiting for me to say something. I remained silent.

“Listen, I have to go. I have tennis, but I know you’re goingtorockthisokaybye!”

“Bye,” I said, a second too late. I was always a second too late.

All too suddenly, I was standing outside the door at the end of the hallway. The room looked dark and forbidding through the small window in the door. I stood, frozen, waiting for a sign of life.

Maybe McKenzie was wrong, I tried to convince myself. Maybe the auditions aren’t today.

“Or maybe they were at 3:00 instead of 4:00, and you missed them completely,” a voice suggested to me.

“Or maybe they just didn’t want you to audition in the first place,” another voice taunted me.

“You shouldn’t audition; this is a sign,” a voice echoed from within my mind.

I tuned my voices out. They were a part of me, or rather, they had become a part of me. We were a fading organism, my voices and I. A wretched excuse for life.

The handle on the door clicked as it opened. An old lady with silvery flyaway hair jutted her head through the crack.

“Hello, are you here for the auditions?” she asked. Her voice sounded helpful and innocent.

“No, she’s not,” argued my voices.

I nodded.

She opened the door and let me inside.

I was not met with the darkness I anticipated. The room gave off a simplicity that I didn’t expect but liked immediately. Dim florescent lights buzzed and blinked from the ceiling, but in my eyes they were the light of the rising sun, bright and blinding. Maybe my voices couldn’t follow me here.

The carpet was intricately designed, colors swirling about, red and beige and pink and hint-of-blue. I could have examined it for years and still not deciphered all of its mysteries. An old, scruffy looking piano loitered in the corner, positioned so I could see its keys, which were sunken and desolate. On the piano a wooden carving of a girl with her hands in the air and her mouth open wide sang silent songs.

A small cluster of kids sat stiffly on the carpet, most of them my age. I sat down at the edge of the group. The wispy-haired lady who had opened the door perched in an old, crusty armchair that was in front of us.

Mrs. Cadence hoped we would find a way to block the flutter of all the small butterflies that she was sure were in our stomachs at that very moment.

“Don’t be nervous,” she advised us. “There is no reason to be.”

She gave us ‘The Plan,’ which basically said that she was going to call each one of us to sing “The Star Spangled Banner,” and she was going to do it in alphabetical order by last name. She was sure to assure us that she wasn’t going to judge us on our appearance. And finally, she said the golden words, “If you mess up, just keep going.”

Easier said than done, I thought apprehensively to myself.

“Iris Darnell?” Mrs. Cadence called, making my name a question.

“Are you sure about this?” asked a voice.

“You are better off not doing this,” another voice stated.

I shook off my voices and raised my trembling hand, feeling the rush of air between my fingers.

Mrs. Cadence played. I sang. I didn’t sound deficient. Maybe, just maybe, I could pull this off.
Then the voices started chanting in the tones of the shadows. And I listened.
"You aren’t cut out for this."
"You will stop."
"You must stop."
"Stop."
"STOP!"
They burned me and made me determined to rid myself of them, once and for all.
I built a wall to separate myself from my voices. Brick by brick they faded. But my voices are not like most voices. My voices are cunning and not to be trifled with. They pulled out their wrecking ball at the last second, as I was about to go into the red rocket’s flare.
"You don’t belong here,” they said, “the world would be a better place if YOU WEREN’T HERE.”
And just like that, my wall came crashing down. I winced at the sound, and suddenly I wasn’t singing anymore. Silence filled the room. Mrs. Cadence looked up from the piano. I don’t know what she saw; I wasn’t in control of my face anymore. I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. I could not breathe.
The silence was choking me.
The voices inside my head were a different story. They were as loud as the room was quiet. Their sounds were rough, like the crowded hallways of my school, making me want to curl up in a ball and never unravel myself. I shook my head as if doing so would allow them to tumble out through my ears.
A sudden thought occurred to me.
The voices will never leave me unless I allow them to.
I breathed in the musty air of the music room as if it were the crisp, fresh air of the spring. As I breathed out, I felt the voices, with their horrible slander, leave my head. They flowed out of my fingertips and flooded out of my pores. I closed my eyes and found my mind my own again.
When I opened my eyes again, it was as if someone had just shut a screen door behind me with a snap. Now the world was clear.
I nodded to Mrs. Cadence, and she started playing on the dragging keys again. My voice flowed out—beautiful.
Paige Shankland  
My Way  
Notre Dame de Sion Elementary

They tell me to be fresh water,  
Drinkable, lovable, someone they can work with.  
I tell them I am saltwater,  
Daring, uneasy, closed, and secret.

They tell me to be a pond,  
To stay within the limits, to be obedient.  
I tell them I am an ocean,  
Always open to new ideas, limitless.

They tell me to be a pencil  
So I can erase my mistakes.  
I tell them I am a marker.  
I want to leave my mark on the world.

They tell me to be a stripe,  
Always a line with social status.  
I tell them I am a polka dot,  
Popping up everywhere when you least expect it.

I wear snakes  
like a dark memory,  
haunting me, ruining me,  
Pushing me to the edge of fear
Ben Shinogle
#first world victims
Park Hill High School
Missouri Writing Region American Voices Winner

Just so you know ... my speech probably won't be that good. I've been having a rough day. I mean you can't blame me; this morning the temperature in my room was at least five degrees hotter than it should be. Then I realized that my mom hadn't packed my bag right, so my tie was wrinkled, and I had to completely reevaluate my outfit. Then I was running late and forgot my lucky penny, and without my lucky penny, everything goes wrong. Which is probably why Starbucks was out of those delicious little bites of vanilla heaven they call scones, and the barista didn't even seem sorry, after all, those were MY scones. And then she messed up a simple grande three percent no-whip classic ristretto cappuccino with extra-dry microfoam, so I didn't have a palatable coffee to distract me from my sufferings, so I checked Facebook and found that only 4 people had liked my new profile picture, so now in battling emotions of hurt, loss, bewilderment, and rage I realized...something... NO ONE has even MENTIONED my birthday yet, and it's only three months and two days away. Now I feel hurt and angry, and I can't perform when I am angry, so now I'm nervous and still self conscious because my tie is wrinkled, and someone must have noticed because they mistook me for an extemper—I mean really?—I have a sense of humor and style. So here I am with the ENTIRE world against me and no scones to make me feel better. (sigh) I have a difficult life. And since everyone cares, I decided to tweet about my troubles. After imbuing the impassioned Tweet with the required #firstworldproblems, I saw complaints littering the webpage: people griping about parties, too many shoes, no scones. What would be considered blessings to many were construed as misfortunes to my first world followers. All considered, I actually have it pretty good. Yet despite this truth, I was able to persuade myself that our world—a world distracted by war, unemployment, and genocide—had focused its unpleasantry towards me. Furthermore, it seems I am not alone. In fact, Steven Pinker, of Harvard University, states of this deception that we are victims when in reality we are blessed, “Self deception is the cruellest motive of all, for it makes us feel right when we are wrong and emboldens us to fight when we ought surrender.” So today, we will explore the nature of #firstworldproblems by first examining the causes behind self-victimization. We will establish the effects of this epidemic, and finally we will discuss how to turn firstworldproblems into firstworldsolutions.

But first, why do we embrace such a negative state of mind? Recent psychological discoveries seem to suggest that our primal tendencies play a prominent role. According to the New York Times of March 2010, self-defeating behavior such as victimization originates in ancient demonstrations of love. See, in times of scarcity, early humans displayed affection by giving up basic needs to benefit loved ones. This sacrifice is linked to what may be the first feelings of moral superiority; that is, our ancestors felt good when they victimized themselves for a larger cause. #Mesozoicprobs. Yet this association of happiness with victimization plays a substantial role in our daily lives. Whenever we take the blame, concede loss, or admit fault, we are taking something that is rightfully ours and giving it to someone else.

In addition to this grim satisfaction, motivation for victimization takes a more lucid form. We self-victimize to make ourselves feel better, to provide an excuse for not achieving a potential, standard, or goal. “I got an F because my teacher sucks. I wrecked because the other driver wasn’t paying attention. I lost the round because the judge was stupid.” I don’t really think that. Our victimizing tendencies start with insecurity, then morph into a belief that we would have achieved our ideal had our situation been different. Though we may not like to admit it, we all sound a like this at one point or another. This is how we get Lindsay Lohan who goes from movie star to blaming her friend for her cocaine addiction, the paparazzi for her drunk driving, her accountant for her refusal to pay taxes, the federal government for printing money to snort cocaine, her nose for actually snorting it, etc. Lindsay Lohan is a classic example of an individual abandoning responsibility by playing the victim.

In consideration of our firstworldproblem we must now recognize the real world effects it yields. A victimized state of mind is powerless. In fact, according to Psychology Today part of the allure in making oneself out to be a victim is the fact that one does not have to take responsibility for a given situation. The article goes on to explain that these ideals do not manifest themselves productive in stressful situations. We passively complain about a problem instead of actively solving it. Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl contends in his autobiography, Man’s Search for Meaning, that survivors of the Holocaust were only able to persevere when they didn’t give in to
feelings of victimization. Despite being stripped of possessions, pride, and freedom, he was able to sustain his vitality, resistance, and ultimately, his life. Frankl realized that the only thing he had control over was his outlook and ensuring it was positive.

Perhaps more disconcerting is the fact that victimization yields a separation in our emotions and relationships. Because victimization is a form of self-deception, or lying to ourselves, we naturally mute some truths we would rather not acknowledge. These tendencies can be witnessed in the character Miss Havisham from Charles Dickens’ classic novel Great Expectations. Miss Havisham is given a spoiled, comfortable life from the start; however, she is tragically abandoned on the altar of her wedding. Her natural reaction is to distance herself from these painful events by refusing to go out in public or take another love in her life. By ignoring certain emotions she psychologically distances herself from others. By ignoring a painful breakup, she keeps herself from realizing the many happy things present in her life as well. For the rest of her life she lives in misery because she refused to acknowledge this single problem. The scary thing is we do this all the time. Whenever we ignore a strained relationship, a looming stress, or simply a bad day, we are closing ourselves not only to the bad, but the very things that make life worth living.

Having established our effects, let us discuss solutions. We can begin by being more self-aware. We need to realize for ourselves this tendency to self-victimize. Steven Pinker shares in his book How the Mind Works, “The mind has many parts […]. One self may deceive another, but every now and then a third self sees the truth.” So, all it takes is an open mind. If we force ourselves to demand reasons for our frustrations, purpose behind our emotions, and simply think about why we feel what we feel, we can stop acting as victims and begin acting with intention.

In addition, we can look at the root of the problem. We live in an incredibly competitive society, with comparisons and judgment running rampant. Heck, we can’t even drive fifteen minutes without seeing examples of people who are smarter, better looking, more successful, more happy than ourselves. That takes a toll. It compels us to find reasons why we are not like that; instead of being proud of who we are, we are proud of who we could have been.

Dr. Brene Brown, in her book The Gifts of Imperfection argues that the only way to beat these feelings of inadequacy is to embrace our faults. After interviewing thousands of successful people she has found that, in order to gain love, belonging, and success, people have to feel they are worthy of love, belonging, and success. She quotes: “They were able to let go of who they thought they should be in order to be who they were.” Able to let go of who they thought they should be to embrace who they really were; when we no longer need an excuse for being who we are, we can propel the cycle of success that is only present by the self-confidence and contentment yielded through its presence. We will lead happier, more wholesome, less victimized lives.

I think you’ve probably figured out that I’m pretty good at complaining. Particularly about this activity. We get up too early, have too many rounds, and are always waiting. Despite these petty aggravations, however, a number things remain to be appreciated, and it is in this spirit that I would simply like to say thanks. I feel incredibly grateful for this activity. I have the privilege to travel the country, meet new people, and learn new things that otherwise would pass me by.

Who knows what today will bring? I could get a six this round, the lights could go out, Starbucks could close. Whatever happens, our choice to react to the bad constructively or with frustration, in other words to be happy or to be sad, is ultimately up to us. I choose to be happy.
The Natural Regression

Humanity’s future is sedated;
The fruit of our malpractice is veiled.
We’ll watch till the end of time,
(a generation will fail in the end)
the tables will turn,
a bloodless death,
the atrophy of
the human brain.

I am a listener;
(eyes without sight save the young from color)
I am a speaker
(ears that don’t hear save the young from music)
among the damned.

A blindfold made of blindfolds secures insecurity;
An insecurity made of security secures our blindfolds;
The endless cycle—
The endless aberration.
The natural regression.

F(r)riend

Your lips fester,
a habitat for worms,
and project the plague;
they mutilate my eyes;
(they fill with clouds
that bear fire and lightning).
Get Out.
“Just another day.”
I step to the rhythm of her dissonant song;
I steal from her blackened canvas;
“It’s better this way.”
I have learned to find beauty in the dissonance.

I resent her, myself.
As we walk hand in hand, she whispers,
“You’re mine,”
and I concede
as the day dies.
“So, you know you have to go, right?”
“Yeah, but I don’t feel like it.”

From an early age, everyone I knew had always done the same routine every day. Nobody ever decided what to do because it was already planned out for them. Lately I had come to realize that nothing ever changed in anyone’s life. We would all wake up at six in the morning and either travel to school or work. Everyone arrived home at three and finished their assignments from the day. Meals were at five thirty no matter the occasion. Church was always right after dinner, and there weren’t any variations to this routine unless someone became injured. If so, they immediately went to the hospital. That’s how life works. We had just eaten dinner, so the next scheduled activity was church.

“I don’t know. I’ve just had these weird thoughts ever since I fell out of that tree.”
“Jason, you aren’t making any sense. You need to go to the hospital and have your head examined.”
“I’ve been doing the same routine my entire life, and I’m just sick of it.”
“I’ll tell your parents, and you know they won’t approve of you avoiding medical attention. Everyone does it, so why wouldn’t you?”
“That’s exactly how I’ve been feeling lately, Carter. Everyone does everything the same, every day. No one’s actions are ever radical or out of the ordinary.”
“You need to stop asking questions. If the Legionaries hear about this they will take you off to some place, and you won’t ever come back.”

The Legionaries, the mysterious police force. I’ve heard about them my entire life, but I don’t remember actually seeing them. Now that I think about it, I’m unsure if I know anyone who has. Maybe they aren’t even real. Maybe none of this is real. Or maybe I’m just crazy. This could just be because I hit my head. All I know is that I needed to find out.

I returned home to find my parents hadn’t left for church yet. They were in the process of getting ready, and they had to look good because it was always a big occasion.

“Jason, you’re home late. You better start getting ready for church,” my father boomed from his room on the main floor.

“I don’t know if I want to go today, Dad,” I replied guiltily.

It took a few seconds before the large man replied. He was a quiet man for the most part, and he only said what needed to be. He had some obscure government job and kept to himself most of the time, even though being as big as he was, it seemed difficult to not be around other people.

“What’s wrong with you? You know we always go to church and there aren’t any exceptions.”
“Dad, I’m fine. I guess I did hit my head the other day, and I haven’t been feeling the greatest lately, but I really just want to stay home.”

“You need to go to the hospital right away,” my dad grumbled.

“Come on, you always say that. We go there for everything, and I’ve never even broken a bone or anything big like that. It’s always little things. I feel fine anyway.”

“Well the hospital usually has the answer. Even if you are fine, it’s better to have you checked out than have something be wrong with you. Let’s get you sent on your way. I don’t want to be late. I’ll walk you there, and then your mother and I are going to church.”

The trip to the hospital seemed short because my dad’s pace remained set as if getting there was a life or death situation. When we arrived I noticed the same building I had seen many times before. The fences looked as strong as ever, and the stone exterior looked sharp and clean. There were guards stationed around the perimeter and on the rooftop like always. I suppose I had never thought to question why a place that helped people would need a fence. In fact, the entire institution looked like a military installation or a prison.

“Dad, why are there guards and fences around a hospital?” I asked cautiously.

“Well, for the safety of the patients and medical staff. You should feel safe when you see them. It’s not important anyway.”
But why would patients need protection? And why does my father seem to think that guards outside of a hospital aren't a big deal? It almost seemed like he tried to change the subject when I brought it up. These questions would have to be left unanswered because we had reached the gatehouse in front of the fence.

"State the nature of your business," the soldier droned out automatically.

"We're here to see Dr. Gonds."

"Identification, please sir," The soldier continued on.

My father flashed his ID badge.

"Oh, Mr. Lance, go right ahead, sir. I'm sorry I didn't recognize you."

"That's quite alright, soldier," my dad said softly.

I couldn't figure out how this man knew my father or why he was important enough to be recognized. I had no time to ask questions, because my dad hurried me along inside the hospital after the gate opened.

My father waved me on as I entered the door. He started on his way back home and left me to find the doctor I needed by myself. The hospital was a gloomy place full of tired looking caregivers wandering from patient to patient helping anyone they could. They wore shirts stained with oil and dirty blue pants. But why did they have oil? Two guards approached and said what they were trained to say.

"Where do you intend to go, civilian?"

"Why are there mechanics in a hospital? What's going on?" I blurted out.

One of the guards turned to the other one.

"He must be malfunctioning. Let's take him to Dr. Gonds."

They tried to grab me aggressively, but I managed to slip from their grasp and take off down the hallway.

What did they mean? How can I malfunction? All I knew was that I had to get out of this dirty place full of machines and grease. I ran by mechanic after mechanic, all stained with oil and other car-like fluids. The guards were right behind me, so I went faster than I ever had before. I saw people in each room who didn't look like mechanics. Why weren't they surprised about the condition of the hospital? I never remembered it being anything like this! What were they doing here? This place obviously wasn't meant for humans to be medically treated. I took a quick left down a hallway and another sharp right turn after that. I ducked into what looked like someone's office. I didn't catch the name, but I needed to be away from these guards who wanted to take me somewhere that I might never come back from. As I caught my breath I slowly turned around to see a startled mechanic with Gonds on his name tag. As I scanned the room further I saw a man sitting in a chair with his head at a peculiar angle. This man could not be comfortable. It looked almost as if his neck was broken. He didn't move when I came in the door.

"You're not supposed to be here," Dr. Gonds stated bluntly.

"Where am I? I thought you were a doctor," I said between breaths.

"Well, you see, I am the overseer for the most traumatic of injuries, and yours is considered one of those. It says here that you experienced a head injury two days ago. Is that correct?"

"How would you know? The only people I told were my dad just twenty minutes ago and Carter around an hour ago."

"Well, it's reported automatically anytime anyone is injured. All of you are hooked up to this central terminal where I am given your statuses, and if you don't show up within three days, the Legionaries find you and bring you in."

I glanced at the man in the chair. He still hadn't moved since I arrived.

"Who is this? Why hasn't he moved or said anything? And what do you mean, hooked up?"

"Ah well this is Mr. James. His hard drive was damaged so I'm working on him, and as for your last question, your internal router sends signals to our computers. It's simple."

"I don't have a router inside of me, and why would this man have a hard drive? What are you talking about?"

"I think I've said enough. Even though you won't remember this after I'm done; better safe than sorry."

At that moment Dr. Gonds started walking towards me with what looked like a cattle prod. I didn't intend to stick around to find out what it was intended for. I had a feeling I would end up like the man sitting in Dr. Gond's
chair. I grabbed a scalpel on a tray before I slipped out of the exit. As the doctor tried to lunge at me, I slammed the door behind me. I had no idea where I intended to go, but I ran. I wanted to get out of this place, whatever the cost. I needed to know what Dr. Gonds was talking about, but he wasn’t the person I should ask. *Maybe my dad has some answers*, I thought to myself as I ran.

I could see a big room ahead of me, and when I entered it I discovered it was a loading bay for some kind of supplies that were shipped to the hospital. There were boxes being placed on the opposite wall from where the truck backed in. When they were taken down, a man would open them, inspect their contents, and place them on a conveyor belt destined for locations throughout the hospital. These machines were odd shapes, and they didn’t make much sense. A mechanical hand passed by me along with a circuit board. Someone must have had their arm amputated. That’s the only logical explanation I could come up with. It doesn’t make sense though. There were too many parts going to different wings of the hospital. I didn’t want to see any more of this.

An alarm started to sound throughout the building, and everyone in the warehouse stopped what they were doing and looked towards the door I stood in. I was the only one who didn’t look like them. They began to advance towards me, and I knew their intentions were to capture me. I ran towards the closest open loading dock door that I could see and saw a truck about to leave the compound. I jumped on the back and held on while it rumbled through the very fence that was supposed to keep me contained. I hopped off as soon as I couldn’t see the hospital anymore and darted into an alleyway. Another truck rolled down the street, *Legionaries* on the side of it. They were real and definitely weren’t here to help me. Men started piling out of the truck, all carrying automatic rifles. They must be looking for me. I ran through the backstreets as long as I could and tried to make it to my house. I was almost home and had darted around a corner when I ran into a burly man.

“Whoa there, little guy, watch where you are going.”

“Dad? You haven’t gone to church yet?”

“Jason? How are you already out of the hospital? I saw a Legionary in the street a minute ago. Are they chasing you?”

“Yes. I escaped the hospital. There is something seriously wrong with that place, Dad. I saw a warehouse where they were receiving mechanical parts! What would that be for?!“ I began to shout.

“No son, you don’t understand. That place is there to help you. We need to take you back.”

Then it dawned on me. Maybe the man in the seat did have a hard drive inside of him. Those parts in the warehouse must be for robots. Are some people actually machines in our community?

“Dad I just had a crazy idea. What if not everyone in the town is actually human? The government could be placing robots to sway our opinions and change what we do! I think I saw one of them in the hospital today. Dr. Gonds mentioned how he had a hard drive inside of him. How could that be if he wasn’t a robot?”

“You know too much. Let’s get back to the hospital.”

My dad tried to grab my shoulders and force me the other way. He tried to turn me around, but I knew the Legionaries were somewhere behind me. I couldn’t go back.

“Dad stop!”

The scalpel I was holding slipped into his abdomen.

“…Dad…”

I hadn’t meant to stab him; it happened because I refused to go the other way. After the blade was half an inch inside of my father it suddenly stopped. He didn’t have anything soft underneath his skin. How could this be? I knew that there were supposed to be organs underneath the abdomen area. Why was there something hard inside of him? I tried pushing a little harder, but this definitely wasn’t normal. I forced the blade as hard as I could, and the firm material finally gave in. My father looked down but he didn’t seem to be surprised. Oil leaked out of whatever precious mechanical part I had just slightly punctured. Just then a Legionary soldier came bursting around the corner and raised his rifle at me.

“Stop! Put down your knife and put your hands in the air!” he shouted.

I dropped the scalpel where it clanged against the cement. My father was an android of some kind. How had I not known this before? I turned around and raised my hands. I could never go back and live a normal life after this. I would always know. My dad sighed and began to speak.

“He’s malfunctioning too much. Take him out, soldier.”

“What? No wait!” I managed to shout before a deafening sound filled the air.
A shot was fired, but I did not feel it. I looked down at my chest and saw a gaping hole. Wires protruded from my chest, and oil leaked out at an alarming rate. Where was the blood? I thought to myself as my mind became tangled and cloudy. I fell to my knees.

“I’m a...robot?” I managed to spurt.

“Yes, son, you are. We all are.”

My father pulled out his government issued pistol and pointed it at the back of my head. I could feel the cold steel pressing against me. I contemplated that it was kind of ironic that I would die from a machine when I myself am a machine. Nothing was ever what I thought it was – the world and me, made of metal.
The dictionary describes perfect as “being entirely without fault or defect.” But what do we really consider perfect? Is it the skinny blond with the wonderful boyfriend and lots of friends who adore her? The ripped football player who gets a laugh out of pushing “nerds” into their place and treating women like yesterday’s garbage? Why though? Why do we put these people on pedestals and scramble for the small dregs of like they throw down upon us? Why should one simple fact about me keep said light from ever touching me? And what do you really have to strive for if perfection is unattainable?

Love, “a strong affection for another arising from kinship or personal ties.” Such a simple meaning for something so complicated. Every definition in the book says something along those lines, but no one ever believes the book. Everyone has his or her own definitions.

During the summer of 2012 I was selected to attend a camp due to my SAT scores at Western Kentucky University. It was a prospect that excited me greatly, and I looked forward to that trip for weeks. If I had known the events that would transpire within the next two weeks, I never would have gone.

I brush up against someone in the hall, and they immediately jump way. “Ooooh you’re gonna catch it!” His friends laugh before leaving me to slink away and try not to show my face. I had to hide a lot lately because of what a coward I was. No one had outright come up to me and insulted my “affliction,” but they didn’t have to. I heard what they said about me, every last whispered word. When walking to class or when asleep in my bunk, it didn’t matter. I would always hear the hurtful comments. I could do nothing about it. Nothing I could do would change who I was, so it would continue.

“Fucking Dyke,” one whispered to her friend. “Abomination,” The next one murmured. All eyes were on me, judging my every move. I should have been surrounded by kids that were like me. After all, this was a camp for special kids, and up until this point I had put myself into that category, but I guess that’s what I get for going to a southern “nerd camp.” These kids had been picked on all of their lives for being “different,” but now I was their black sheep. Even now when I should have been accepted, I was being shunned. Not because of the color of my skin but because of who I am. And was always meant to be.

It may be rude to say, but there were kids at this camp that had far better things to be made fun of for. However, it was like the misfits had bound together to form one large homophobic force. “What are you eating? Practicing for your girlfriend?” One guy said as he passed by, high fiving the girl hanging from his arm like a parasite. Leaching off of the popularity he had that would be gone once we left camp. I held my head down and looked at my still full plate of food. It was lunch, my first meal of the day, but it suddenly seemed unappetizing. I didn’t want my sandwich to grow eyes and judge me too. Could a sandwich hold the same sort of hate for me that the people here did? I got up and threw my food away before leaving the mess hall. I sat down on some steps down the campus from the building and closed my eyes, breathing in and out slowly to try to achieve calm.

“What are you fantasizing about you sick little fag!” the first group of girls yelled on their way to the next class. I opened my eyes to give them a deadpan stare, but I immediately regretted the choice. As soon as they were open, every single one of the girls covered themselves with their hands like I was seeing them indecently. The group then gave a collective shriek and ran away laughing, leaving me alone on the steps.

I received a plethora of new nicknames. “Homo, Dyke, fag,” all of them hurt and cut into me like a knife. The expression “Words can never hurt you” is complete B.S. At least physical wounds will heal eventually, but nothing can fix what was never broken in the first place.

I should have stayed in the closet. I should have hidden back as far as I could with coats hanging in my face and mothballs making me sneeze. Heck, if I had known how bad it was going to get I would be in the farthest reaches of Narnia, away from the wardrobe and Kentucky. Being in the closet takes a toll on you, though, and at times when you need to keep it a secret, it almost hurts. Having friends ask you what guys you like and giggling at the latest gay joke would always hurt a bit on the inside when they didn’t know. It’s something that eats you up from the inside and would always rear its ugly head within you like a monster. No one wants to be stuck back in the closet. It doesn’t matter who put you back there, or why you are in that wretched place in the first place. It would never be a place suitable for any human being.
I thought back to how this all had begun and frowned. Coming out to these people did not happen how I expected it to. Heck, if I’m being honest, I never really intended on coming out to them in the first place. It all started when I complimented Laren Jasper on our first full day at camp. She had stunning green eyes, and I had always thought that the best way to get people to like you and to make a good first impression was to compliment them and make them feel good about themselves. I did this with several other girls that I had noticed and had wanted to befriend. I guess me complimenting these girls was enough to spark the rumor. “She’s a faggot.” At first I didn’t hear the rumors because I wasn’t attuned to them. I was too busy smiling along with my new friends to really pay any attention to it.

I love the feel of complimenting people and in this new environment I felt like it was the right thing to do, so I gave out praise and kind words liberally. I should have been listening to the gossip. I should have known what people had been saying about me so I could tune down the female friendly that I was giving out. I was so used to my very accepting town in Missouri that I had completely forgotten how others viewed people like me. I guess that’s why, when a mousy brown-haired girl with glasses and a small personality asked me, I was completely honest with her. “Are you really gay?” she asked, eyes wide like she had never seen someone interested in the same gender.

“Yeah,” I said smiling like it was the most natural thing in the world to answer that question. I wasn't exactly out at home, but I was by no means in the closet. Most everyone knew, but it wasn't like I went running down the halls yelling it.

“You are going to rot in hell just like everyone else like you. People like you are the only mistakes that god ever made, but he will be sure to punish you alongside the devil.” I was taken aback by such words being spoken by such a little girl, and it took a moment for what she said to sink in. I realized my mistake. I had just come out in Western Kentucky to a bunch of rich kids who went to Catholic school and were so sheltered by their parents that this was probably their first time apart for more than a day.

The rumor spread like wildfire, and soon enough everyone knew to avoid me—even the “friends” who I had made before. They didn’t hide their disgust to having been friends with me and openly sneered: “I knew you were weird. You complimenting us was just to get into our pants.” “Tonight I’m going to scrub everywhere to try to get myself clean of you.” “I need to change my eye color now because it turns on the Dykes so much.” Out of everything that people had been saying, their comments hurt the most.

I had been friends with these, but that one small thing about me made them hate my guts because that was how they had been raised to act. No baby is born hating anything. We teach our children to hate. These girls had grown up thinking that it was alright to treat someone like that.

I couldn't bring myself to really be mad at anyone for what they said. Their words saddened me, yes, but they had learned that people like me were the devil and that I was someone who could be bullied without consequence.

I looked out the plane’s window as we passed over Kentucky, back to my little town in Missouri. Sure, I had been in my own personal hell for two weeks, but I was just about to come back to my very own safe haven. I am one of the luckiest people to have been born where I was—in a place that accepted me for who I was as a person. I wasn't just flying away from a place. I was flying away from a state of mind: the constant questioning of if staying true to myself was worth the torment.

The rest of that summer I did question whether or not it was worth being gay. I could find a nice boy that I could deal with and go through having to hold rough hands and a testosterone induced personality. I could make myself be happy with someone who really didn't spark my interest to be the same as everyone around me.

But what’s the fun in that? Where is my happiness there?

I looked out of a different window now, a dingier one with a completely different view. I sighed as the bus kept going on the misting grey day. The days had been getting colder and the air had a certain nip to it. Everything was coated with a light layer of cold water, and everything was slippery and freezing. Including me. I felt a shiver run up my spine as I tried to warm myself before I felt something soft and warm brush up against my cheek. I looked away from the window and saw my lovely girlfriend of four months who had just given me a kiss on the cheek. She knew that I was thinking about something sad; she always knew how to read me, but it didn't really matter. She knew not to ask intrusive questions and instead chose to just interlock her hand with mine.

I had not told her what I went through over the summer. I didn't need to. There was no longer a single doubt in my mind who I was or who I was going to be. Telling her would only upset her, and that was the last thing I
wanted. I was happy with her, and she didn't need to know about my questioning. I was here in my oddly accepting Missouri town. No one cared who I dated as long as I was still the same person.

A head popped up from the seat in front of us, and I looked up to see a guy smiling down at us. “You know one night with me would cure you right up.” I couldn't do anything but smile.
The smell of rotting fish suffocates her. It swirls around the dry pot and engulfs the kitchen. The choking odor of sea salt still lingers to the pot, forcing a heavy gulp of ocean water down the throat of anyone who approaches it. The little girl reaches for the strawberry jam bottle, half empty, the gooey red gel staining the inside. She stuffs her other hand in her mouth, trying to keep from vomiting at the stench of the pot her head must traverse over in order to reach the jam.

At a sound outside, she jumps and looks back, ready to run and hide. Only the family dog stands outside the small room they call a kitchen, equipped with his 4-year-old plastic toy bone, donning squinted eyes, as though he knows she's engaging in illegal behavior.

The little girl shoos him away and looks at the clock near the mini Indian flag her family has stationed on the wall. Half past five. Mummy will be up soon. She must finish making her cream cheese and jam sandwich, and gobble it down before the clock strikes six, before the parakeets outside start yapping incessantly, before the boys next door start tossing a cricket ball around, teasing each other about girls.

Mummy will be up, and she'll stroll into the kitchen, stretching her arms high above her petite figure, widening her mouth unattractively so that her yellowing teeth are visible. She'll go to the pot of rotting fish and whiff and sniff at it appreciatively, pleased with her handiwork from five nights ago.

The little girl will sit dutifully at the table, her tummy full with the cream cheese and jam sandwich and the guilt of her sneaky behavior from early morning. The dog will kneel awkwardly beside her, his eyes still suspicious.

Mummy will come out of the kitchen carrying the pot, and its stink, over her head. The girl will warn her that some fish pieces are about to spill from the rim of the pot onto her gleaming black hair, but Mummy will only smile. She'll set the pot down and greedily lick its edges with her fingers, wiping the oily residue onto her hair, asserting fish is good for the hair. She'll remind the girl that their ancestors ate fish all the time to make their hair beautiful.

Then she'll start scraping the fish carcasses out of the pot, dropping them into beaten up bowls, letting their putrid juices drip on top of them like gourmet sauce. She'll slide one of the bowls over to the girl, who, out of love, will fight her nose's sudden urge to scrunch up.

Mummy will begin to eat voraciously, the juices streaking across her cheeks. At some point in time her hands will pause near her mouth, the piece of fish she's holding still slick against her palm. Her head will come up. Then her chocolate brown eyes will seek the little girl's palms, realizing that they are as clean as the polished wood table they rest on; that the bowl placed in front of her daughter is still a virgin to six-year-old fingers.

She will frown and tilt her head to reach her daughter's level. "Monu, eat. You never eat anything. All of the other little girls eat their fish."

“But Mummy—" The girl's soprano voice will ring out.

Mummy's face will grow hard and cold. "I said, eat. Grandmama always told me that a good girl must eat fish."

The little girl's wide, pleading eyes will lower submissively at Mummy's face, and her hands will gingerly approach the bowl.

In silence, they will eat. The only sounds will be the hum of the newly installed AC system and the slow munching. Once Mummy is done, she will rise from the chair and suck the spiced stain off her fingers.

By this time, only a shallow lake of the burnt-colored juice will be left swishing in the girl's bowl, yet her chubby-cheeked face will be questionably unsoiled.
Mummy will squint at the scene, shifting her feet. Her thick black eyebrows will tightly braid across her forehead in doubt as she ponders the situation. Within seconds, she will give up. Her eyes will inflate back to normal size. Her feet will slow to a stand-still. Her eyebrows will un-twist.

She will be intensely aware that something has gone awry, that she is being deceived, yet her heart will not kneel and beg to know “what?” or “how?” Instead, she will shrug uninterestedly and exit the room, her loose muscles free of anxiety, her mind clear of the yearning to learn more.

Once Mummy is out of sight, the little girl will heave a sigh in relief. Her eyes will dart down to her cupped palms, underneath the washed-out, checkered tablecloth: the uneaten fish from her bowl. One by one, she will tug the squished fish bodies from her hand and drop them into the eager mouth of the dog stooping beside her chair. She will not have to tell him to slurp his food quietly; over the years of the little girl’s life, he has already learned to do this.

She will wonder if, when they were little girls, any of her female ancestors secretly fed their dogs their fish. She will wonder if, in doing so, she is defiling the revered canvas of tradition. She will wonder if, could they see her now, the women in her family would call her a good little girl. If she is an oddity. A disgrace. A traitor.

Here she will pause, shivering when the cool morning air tickles the small of her back. Dawn’s rosy sunlight will shimmer from the gleaming west window across the soot-filled kitchen, settling at last on the contemplative girl. Then, she will shrug unabashedly, yet she will offer only a shyly rebellious grin, stuck in slight hesitation.

Despite her misgivings, the little girl will continue to feed the dog her rotting fish.
the first days of this year
I could not crawl out of bed
you planted kisses like seeds
behind my knees which
grew into sprigs of
rosemary and your
fingers left trails of baby’s
breath along my spine
you inscribed centuries into
my shoulder blades and
grew roots around my
ribs
cage
flowers have since sprouted
beneath my collarbones and
though I pluck their petals
I have not yet ascertained
whether you love me
or not
It's like, I know when you wake up things will be different.

To start: say I am bleeding from my eye. A cloud of red like a sunset, but blooming—blinking from my eye and onto my shirt, which still smells like harsh soap and fresh coins.

How much does a staph infection cost? The smell of a Wes Anderson movie. The smell of a microscope. The taste of Apocalypse Now and the answer to the question.

Say my collar is pressed and ironed and crisp and thick like new money when you hold it in a fist: the crease is not the work of a stranger in a humid south side laundry. Millions of mushrooms sprout—at all angles—from the moist heat of your grip. My job is making money. My mouth is a mushroom, my eyes are mushrooms, and the only thing that lasts forever is? Diamonds. Fungus. Cockroaches.

Since the yes.
While the yes.
For the yes. And the red and white and blue—yes. Teeth abscessing from my mouth. Snails oozing out my nose. Blow my nose, get blood. And blue: blue is the color of blood minus oxygen.
I am ugly. I am old. But I am good at math.

As in a wizard of calculus. Let me calculate our sum:
sheets on mattresses and the radio thick with static
(Thick, as in foam on cappuccino.
Thick, as in underlines, anchovies, eyebrows.)
and two iced coffees, sweating piggishly on my nightstand—

Earlier: your story about Brooklyn and boys on the subway. The phrase "aggressive fingering." You. This person with thin digits and a thick dick. You. This person with. You fill your mouth with hot food and wave your hand like it's not important.

Pull celery strings from your teeth. Overkissed for a seventeen year old.

When: I was seventeen. Two girls had kissed me.

When you were at a writing workshop in Iowa for teenagers:
Kissing Paul Yumol. Paul goes to Oberlin.
http://paulyumolsfuckingwriting.tumblr.com. The amount of times you have visited that website since leaving writing camp in July.
You describe Paul as: "the most talented person alive."
That is probably not true, since Jeffery Eugenides
and me are both still alive. "Like kissing a weird autistic sea sponge."
You kissed him because he is talented.
"Like, possible future Nobel material." What a winner.

And you explore the possible future. You invest in the possible future.
Like kissing Paul Yumol.
"Isn't that good assonance?" and you fill your jaws with red meat.
Like it's free, or something.
What about my possible future, if I'm broke, because you ate too much of my red meat?

And:

Now:

You are seventeen. Two girls have kissed you
and four boys. You count them out on your fingers. It's five boys. Miscount.
Miss Arett: I am powerful, and you are not; this is a game we play.
The rules are: simple. The rules are: the popular girls win. The rules are: Heathers.
Christian Slater with a bomb strapped to his chest.
Impact: uncool. Tick. Tick. Tick. Lame. At seventeen
you are already tapped: husks. Peanut shells. Rice glued to other rice.
A NyQuil barf stain on the collar of your interview blazer. It's hard to pound pavement
or feel feelings with your intensity. The intensity of youth is dumb.

Anyways: what you should be doing is accounting
for all the ways that you could be killed at any given time.
(Like: space rocks hurdling from the sky
at a million miles a second, falling onto your head and grinding
you into the ground. Like: robots. Like: cholera.)
Postpone your certain death because nothing is certain,
except peppermint ice cream in the winter and weak ass similes from wannabees.
I teach freshmen. I think I teach them
everything they are supposed to know.

Like: never fall asleep somewhere strange.
Like: Alice. Like: Lolita. Like: allusions to things you don't know enough about.
When you lose control of the poem it starts
looking like half a Christmas tree. When you lose control of your fingers
and hands, then your toes, then your mind. When, not if.

I think you are probably gay. How many girls have smelled your snatch?
I condemn your smoking from an office in Ohio. At a minimum
you are hopelessly clueless. You are popular,
popular enough to diagnose your friends with autism.
Popular enough that you don't have to be skinny.
Or nice. What you say goes. New rule: you're a nobody. New rule: smoking is cool again.

It's like: falling asleep is easy. Writing a thesis statement is hard.
Proving Emily Dickinson was gay is hard. Braining my cat in the driveway was easy.
Teen drivers suck. Teen smoking sucks. Teens with pink lipstick
and a way with words suck.

When they finish draining, my eyes can't see anymore. I wipe them with Kleenex, but that just gathers huge strips of my skin. I blink onto a kitchen towel, but my eyeball is palpitating on cloth and blinks back at me like, what's wrong, what's wrong.

When you crawl out from under the headache. When you trace alphabets along my collarbone. When you stop blowing small hot breaths on my fingers. When you know things are too fucked to call them fucked; when the eyelash in your eye goes rotten or the water in your lungs goes stale. It's like, you know nothing will ever go right again.
The land of the free, and the home of the brave—America.

A green, putrid fog habitats the air, obstructing the view of Liberty's face. Her light can't guide us out.

My feet crush miscellaneous water bottles above tons of garbage, grime covered hands shoved in my pockets, and a used doctor's mask covering my face. I walk with my head hanging low, eyes squinted as the foul atmosphere makes them water. Or maybe they're my tears. It's became hard to tell lately.

Lying on the ground are very familiar faces to me, to America.

Lays Potato Chip Bags, McDonald's hamburger wrappers, crushed Pepsi cans; is this the face of the American dream? Everything our country was ever to stand for? A 14 year old girl lost in the hell of the aftermath.

Chipping paint, broken windows, and forsaken buildings are what make up this big, rotten apple.

I fear I am the last living human being in New York City.

Living. Liv-ing: (noun) alive; having life, not dead or nonexistent.

Nonexistent. Oh, how I wish the dead were nonexistent.

The ground rumbles and cracks beneath my feet as a being emerges from the filth, and I take that as my cue to run. These creatures chasing me aren't alive, nor are they dead. I'd hate to call this the zombie apocalypse because of course there's some intellectual person out there who probably has a better definition, but so far, this is the only conclusion I have come up with. Only these creatures aren't slow and mindless, limping around and crying out incoherent groans with every step. No, these creatures are fast. Faster than any human being I've read about in the books I find while I drift along meaningless. Outrunning them would never work; I know this.

I sprint hastily to my traditional hideaway, in a narrow alleyway between two brick buildings on the verge of collapsing to the ground. Nothing special in it but the necessities. My bed is there, made up of trash-bag pillows and tarnished blankets, and a small makeshift fire pit I use to cook whatever animal I may be lucky enough to kill. Food was naturally a rare thing for me, and I've eaten everything from street rat to wild dog, though over the months I've learned that I could never be too careful with the new mutant diseases that could've been produced. I'd sanitize the meat in all possible ways and cooked it to the point where it didn't even appear edible, the texture like stale jerky. Not that I minded. I knew I was fortunate to even have what kept me alive.

Under a large cardboard box lay my weapon, a small high-tech ray gun decorated a neon blue that I found discarded amongst the rubble. It once belonged to a worker of the company that used to flourish here, Improv, or “Improving the Living,” I recall. They used this city to grow their name and then moved across the country where they continued. To them, New York was untouched. They had wrapped their dirty little claws around everyone else in the country, but the NYC civilians were defiant. They stood their ground in a mature, professional manner. And, likewise, Improv resorted to the most rational solution.

They dropped radiation bombs, ridding New Yorkers with extreme sicknesses and injuries, killing nearly 85% of the population. Once that was done, they turned New York City into a trash dump, throwing their unneeded items somewhere they presumed to be vacant.

But I survive amongst the garbage; I thrive with the waste as I push myself for a better future and put my one and only life towards a better person. I will not settle for disaster. Maybe this is false hope, but I just don't care.

My hand grips the handle's worn, rubber surface. I waste no time in facing my predator, the corpse of a man, late 50's, maybe, wearing an orange construction fire vest that was now covered in brown sludge. The glowing red eyes stare into my soul; maggots pour from his nose, mixing with the blood escaping his mouth. One factor rarely changes with zombies: they eat humans. A gut wrenching scream echoes from the creature's windpipe, loud and scratchy and high pitched, like a teacher's manicured nails on a chalk board. It hurls itself for me.

My finger presses down on the trigger rapidly, flinging neon bullets through the air, knocking it temporarily to the ground. This acts like a distraction, a temporary injury while its body begins to rapidly repair itself. I run towards his convulsing body and yank my knife free from its pocket, squeezing my eyes shut as I make the cut.

I find myself looking at its green, rotted head, the bug larvae vacating the nose and the fresh wound at the base of the jaw. I grimace, putting the knife and gun away in the proper carriers and pulling my hoodie over my head. Stuffing my hands back in my pockets, I walking away. I take no time to think about the man's soul, or
maybe the past life he once lived when everything was a little bit easier. Maybe the lost wife or children he had, or the project he was working on as a constructor moments before breath was cut short.

I have no energy for that, though I have all the time in the world later on. Put it off. Save mourning for the next awakening. Forget.

Forgetfulness is the escape. I was born with a memory.
It’s not loud anymore. That’s what I miss the most: the roar of voices, the rumble of feet, the rings of cellphones, the constant rush to be somewhere else and do something different. As the sun sinks in the west, I step out onto my porch. I sidestep a large crack that runs down the middle. Grass grows up through the valley. I bend down and pick up a curved piece of glass, another broken porch light.

Across the empty street is a park that is no longer a place of imagination for children. A scattering of metal bars reach out of the ground like skeletons trying to escape death’s grip. I was sure that the deconstruction of this playground was caused by scavengers during those early weeks. In the middle of the lot stands the only complete structure left: a rocket ship made of steel, bolted to a concrete pad.

A staircase winds its way to the top window where the plexi-glass is missing out of the round opening. One side of the rocket is open to reveal a jungle gym within. A woman wanders in the smooth pebbles. Years ago, I used to pick shells out of the rocks, pretending that this whole area had once been an ocean and we were all secretly fish.

Gray is the color of her hair which twists away from her scalp in dirty tendrils. Her lips are moving around words lost in her head. She grips an old pipe and taps meticulously on the rocket ship playground as if the correct order of taps and bangs will bring the rocket to life and blast her away into a different world.

The tap-tapping stops, and she looks at me as if I’ve interrupted her. I see horror in her eyes. The total silence envelops us in an unnerving cloud of tension. I have to do something to break it: turn, go inside, or approach her. This is not safe. It’s too late to be out. The scavengers come out at sundown. Rumors are that they scavenge more than metal playgrounds. Perhaps the radiation has gotten to me, but I step off my porch and walk towards her.

I cross the abandoned street. The musky smell of dirt and the sour smell of rot drift in the air. I step over a dead rat and don’t fail to notice the pustules covering its skin or the deformity of its body. The woman leans on her pipe; her hands slowly stop shaking. She speaks when I’m near, her voice sandpaper.

“Boulders are strong, and they last many ages,” her sad eyes drill into mine, “but the winds of time and the waters of age will prove their strength to be greater.” She repositions her make-shift cane, breathing in and coughing haggardly. She takes her time before speaking again. “The boulder will crumble.”

So matter of fact, so final. What was she trying to tell me? Why did this conversation feel so weighted? Too cold, I shiver and look behind me, nervously. I looked into the setting sun, feeling time tick away.

“What do you mean?” I say, “Why are—” I looked back, and she is six inches from my face, pushing herself up taller with her metal pipe to look me in the eye. I jump back, my heart suddenly in my ears.

“Why do we lock our doors at night if that didn’t save us before?” She’s accusing now, and her voice is deeper than it was a moment ago. She seems frantic, her eyes flicking over my face as she searches for an answer that I don’t have. I’m not given the time to sputter a reply.

“Do you know why the caged bird sings?” Her voice is higher pitched now, more squeaky. “Hmm…?” This question seems to echo in the silence around us as my mind fumbles to grasp it, but the moment is lost as she touches her hair. Her eyes lose their sharp focus, and she begins to hum, low at first, and then a melody arises. The woman turns and wanders a few feet away, back towards her rocket.

“Wait,” I say. “Please, explain this to me.” She stops humming and turns to look at me, a smile on her lips.

“It’s getting late, Dearie.” She chuckles and closes her eyes. Her humming floats around the playground, and she lifts her pipe to resume her tapping, successfully filling the dead air around us. There’s a scuttling to my right, a metal trash can is knocked over. The sound is so much more abrasive than the soft, consistent humming and tapping. I see nothing in the shadows around the garbage can, though of course there is something there.

I look back at the woman, but it is obvious that her moment of lucidity has passed. She mutters to herself about pebbles and shells as I head back across the street. I shut my door and slip the lock into place, thinking about her haunting words. As I prepare for bed, I wonder if we are all just fish missing our sea.

The moon takes over as I go through my nightly routine. Every night it’s the same thing, but tonight, my thoughts are plagued by the woman’s words. I check the locks on the doors and question what exactly I’m locking out. The riot had died down months ago, but the destruction of that day pushed a lot of people over the edge—my neighbor, Delilah Greenwell, for instance. Miss Greenwell used to have a beautiful garden. She’d gown
wonderful flowers of every color and shade. She'd grown her own food and would sometimes share with me. Now, all those flowers are gone. In the weeks after, I noticed that they were being ruined and grazed by something. I saw Delilah one afternoon, wearing a blanket in the heat of August and munching away on the petals she so carefully kept up. Other stories, other people losing their minds. Some just thought there was a better way to survive than sitting around and waiting. Those people were a part of a black market scheme harvesting organs and other valuables. This, I supposed, was what I locked my door against at night. But the woman was referencing something bigger. People die every day from accidents and murders, but a whole nation isn't attacked without warning. Nothing is without warning anymore.

When things had first ended, there were people that expected life to move on. These people were the reporters and the media. They were the last to let go of hope. News posts were released with the breaking stories. Stories about how the U.S. knew that the attack was coming but did nothing. Supposedly there was nothing to do in the short time till the attack, so the government decided to keep panic down. Like telling the passengers of the Titanic to go back to bed and ignore the bells and whistles. Everything would be okay if you only close your eyes.

It was difficult to face this theory. To believe it was to believe that we were all very alone and fully abandoned. The newspapers shut down eventually, but word of mouth is human nature. The rumors circulating now speak of a similar situation. While some lost their minds, and some lost their souls, some never lost anything. Some were born to be thinkers. These people have spent this apocalypse figuring out not only what happened then, but what is happening now.

Creatures on the east coast, not destroyed instantly from the nuclear weapons, still felt the instinct to move on or perhaps away from the unbalanced coast. They moved west, towards mid-America. Like the rats carrying the Plague through Europe, these animals carried with them radiation, and people had to eat. I had first heard this theory from a traveler while I was eating a squirrel with its hair rotting off. But unlike the story of the government keeping the mass collapse of the United States of America hushed, people could do nothing about this attack.

There's nothing to do but lock the doors. I nod at this thought and tap reassuringly on my front door. My dresser has become a permanent fixture to the hallway, and I push it in front of the door. The broken washing machine is elbowed in front of the back door. I check all the windows; the boards that block them off are still secure. I turn off the small lamp in the middle of the hallway and wash my house in darkness. Benjamin, my big yellow Labrador retriever nudges me with his wet nose. The clicking of his nails on the hardwood floor comforts.

"Come on, boy." I pat my thigh, and he follows me into my bedroom. I shut and lock the door, climbing into my small bed against the wall. Benjamin jumps on the bed and shoves me against the wall to make room on the edge. He rests his big head under my face and huffs a warm breath. This is when I feel the safest and can sleep.

The flickering of lights is disorienting. The couch is too soft, or my muscles are too weak. I can't figure out how to get myself on my feet. The TV in front of me is filled with static, but I can't look away. The sky outside the slats in the boarded up windows is dark. Benjamin whines in a nearby room. I hear the clicking of his nails as he paws at the floor. Voices rise outside my window. It’s too loud, and my eardrums throb. I cover my ears, willing the noises to soften. This pain continues towards a crescendo while Benjamin's whines become sharper, more frantic. I scream from somewhere in my mind, and the voices and Benjamin stop, leaving me screaming and alone.

The TV flickers away from the static, and a middle-aged newscaster appears on screen. He has a balding head and glasses. I cover my ears again, this time because I'm unwilling to hear the words he has to say. He voice cuts through my fingers.

"Reports in now..." He cuts out every few words, the static overtakes the screen. "No contact yet...the east coast after the mass bombing at... We are still waiting on the status of those in the White House... Our advice to those is..." his voice breaks off. His glasses crack, and I notice blood trickling down from somewhere on top of his head.

Benjamin starts barking again, and I'm very cold. The TV turns off to a black screen. It begins to shrink away into the floor as the windows turn red. The redness overtakes the boards blocking the windows and then washes the wall into nothing but crimson. I'm swimming in red, gagging on it. Benjamin is still crying.

I wake up gasping for air. My chest is tight, and a fist of pressure holds my throat. My face is wet with tears. I hug Benjamin and look at my clock. Too early, but no way am I going back to sleep. I go to the living room, flipping on the TV and the radio. Every morning there's always dead air, but I hold my breath and hope for someone to be on the other side this time, someone to say that it will be alright.

Plumbing had stopped working long ago, so I grab my bag of essentials and motion for Benjamin to follow. I lock my house and head towards the edge of town where the forests had started to regrow and heal themselves.
after years of human abuse. Just outside town was a natural creek where I do my bathing and hunt a few animals for food as they come near the water. As I take the gentle slope downward out of town, I think about my dreams and what they mean. Obviously I was still very much affected by the events of that night.

It started with the Peace Talks of 2016. Peace, though, was the last topic on anyone’s mind that day, and tensions were high. The talk ended when someone pulled a gun and screamed, “Death to the West!”

I remember watching the news. I was in college. There’d been a future then, for me and the country. As the empty and dead village fades behind me, I stop by a tree with a plywood sign nailed to the bark. I stop here every time. The sign reads: “Here lies all those consumed by the tyranny and terror brought down on us. God rest their souls.” Someone has drawn a bald eagle in the corner with a white circle around it. The eagle’s majestic head is bowed, its strong wings folded in, and its piercing eyes closed.

The last line of the sign is a bit humorous. There isn’t a whole lot of faith, no pun intended, in religion these days. I think back on that day, though. Outside my dorm room was a fabulous view of a Catholic Cathedral. One of the many stained glass windows faced my room. It depicted Mary holding Jesus after he drops his cross. The windows all together held the beauty of the Holy Spirit. On cloudless mornings, sunlight would melt into the church and penetrate those windows. I’d smile at the simplicity of glass and the complexity of the moment.

On that day though, people fell into “mob mentality,” losing themselves in the riot that followed the attack. They did terrible things: burning that cathedral down. First the pews were dragged out, piled up, and burned. Then the altar was carried out and set ablaze. They took the crucifixes down off the walls and melted them down. They threw rocks and bricks and made sure that sunlight would never take host in those windows again. I stare at the sign and bow my head to whoever is out there looking down on us and to the fallen.

Mass graves were like this all over the country, some just place markers to honor and remember those that had no body to recover after the bombs. It was the last human thing people did before everyone just gave up.

We continue on. After several more minutes, I hear running water in the distance. I sit on a rock and nibble on some saltine crackers. I feed some to Benjamin who swallows them whole and then sprints off around the corner. I hear him crash into the creek and smile to myself.

Nausea hits me, and I lean back to let it pass. Not too many people came through these parts anymore, so I feel safe resting my eyes. Half the population had been wiped out in a very short amount of time. I can still remember when that number had been thrown, like it was nothing. No one could wrap their heads around the idea of over 150 million people just gone. It was too easy for the enemy to accomplish. They hit us with nukes on the east coast and infiltrated us out on the west coast at the same time; they, being a mystery. It happened too fast, and we were deaf, dumb, and blind in the end to really see all of the alliances surrounding us when the smoke cleared. Canada and Mexico turned a blind eye, and the UN had been disbanded a year ago. No one came to our rescue. We had no income, resources, or help.

America didn’t stand a chance. The capital was gone, and no one surfaced out of the White House bomb shelter to rescue us. The enemy backed out soon after the attack to let the entire planet sit and watch the greatest world power crumble and bleed to death.

I strip off my clothes and wade into the cold water. I ignore the lesions on my legs, closing my eyes so I don’t have to watch my thinning hair wash away with the water. Benjamin barks at something and runs off away from me, spraying water behind him. He disappears behind a tree, and his barks fade.

“Benjamin!” I scream, and my voice cracks. I gag and vomit on the bank. The cold water rushes up to catch me as I crumble. Humming and tapping ring in my head. The woman laughs somewhere far off, and I’m left with one final thought: we are all just fish trapped from our sea; this is why the cages bird sings.
Kate Boren
Instructions Not Included
Platte City Middle School

The lights flickered as I stared up at the padded white ceiling of my cell. I never thought I’d be in this position. What did I do wrong? I always did well in school, never complained about my chores, only talked to the voices occasionally. Just for the record, at the age of 10, I was enrolled in the Crockloe Mental Asylum for people too “special” to be with the rest of the world.

The doctors here think that, if they just tell us how we’re different and that the world isn’t ready to accept us, we’ll accept their diagnosis and be on our merry way. I think they don’t want me to escape this wretched dungeon. That fact alone gives me the burning desire in my heart for freedom, to prove them wrong.

I climbed onto my mattress and threw my pillow at the security camera in the corner of my cell. Miss. It was much too high; I could only throw a pillow so far. After all, I’d been in this hell-hole for several months, and my muscles had atrophied to the point where I couldn’t even toss a pillow correctly. I needed something heavier. If only they had let me keep the bed frame. “They want me to rot in this room. Why would you say that? I say that because they do, but I’m breaking out. Good luck with that.” I said aloud. You wouldn’t believe the looks I get for talking to myself, but it helps me think.

I needed to knock out this security camera, but how? Everything in here was either too soft or too light. I had a pillow, 2 sheets, and a paper cup filled with orange juice. They really weren’t making this easy on me, but I immediately set my hands to work. I stripped the sheets from the bed and tied them together. Next, I tied my makeshift rope around my pillow into some sort of grappling hook. “This better work.” I swung it towards the camera, missing the lens by an inch. I tried again. Miss. I grunted with the effort of my last throw. A perfect hit. The pillow collided with the base of the security camera, and I heard it crack. The pillow went soaring once more. I thrust my fist in the air and let out a wail that would wake up the whole block if my walls weren’t soundproof.

Phase Two: The Door. I just needed to get through the lock. This lock was a TI-42 Lockmaster Lafonse, the highest quality lock security could get from France, specially made for me, or so the technician said as I watched him replace the old one that I had mastered. Amusing, through all this they still underestimated me. I approached the keypad, placed my hand on it, and shut my eyes. The numbers sped through my brain. I removed my hand from the machine and started punching in the 16 digit code. Seconds later, a quiet beep. I touched the door handle and jerked my hand back. I took a deep breath and placed my hand on the doorknob gently as if it would snap if I touched it too roughly. I twisted the knob and pulled back.

I thought the main corridor would smell like anesthetic and sickness, like normal hospitals. This one was different, smelling like death and decay. There wasn’t a single nurse in sight. Even worse, there wasn’t a noise to be heard over the pounding of my heart. I started walking down the hallway which looked exactly the same as when I tried to escape three months ago. The walls and floors were dull. The scientists here believed that bright colors would set off the patients.

The scientists acted strange on my last escape. They spoke of something called Prasophrinae. Apparently “it” was wiping out the population, but I think they were trying to scare me, thinking if I were afraid of the world then I wouldn’t try to leave. This was my decision, and I refused to let them rule my life anymore.

I still couldn’t get past the eerie silence of the asylum, so peculiar that I hadn’t seen anyone wandering the halls. I quickened my pace, hearing footsteps that were not mine. Taking off at a dead sprint down the hall, my foot slid across a puddle of crimson liquid, and I crashed on my left side. I held my arm out to break my fall, but it caught a jagged piece of metal jutting out of the wall. A hand caught my shoulder before I slipped back onto the tile.

“I knew someone would meet the devil with that piece of metal,” he spoke in a smooth voice. I wondered how he managed to stay so calm.

I moaned and clutched my arm that seemed to be split in half. Blood seeped through my clothing from a huge gash, and I thought I could see the bone. I felt sick at the sight of it.

“You may not want to thank me yet. I’m a patient here, too. Depression,” he said as he helped me stand up straight again. I felt dizzy, and I’m sure if I had enough blood it would be rushing to my head.

“Who are you?” I asked my voice was fading. Why was I wasting time with small talk? I needed to bandage this wound before I passed out.
“That’s not important right now. We need to get you fixed up. Do you think you could walk to the medical ward?” the strange boy asked me.

“I think so,” I said as I tried to shuffle my feet forwards. My left foot hit the ground, and my knee buckled under the weight. I screamed as What’s-his-name caught my arm.

“Sorry, I don’t,” he said. His arm slid under my legs, and I passed out with the swift movement. The last thing I remember seeing was his crooked smile as my eyes slid shut.

I woke up shaking on a table, covered in white bandages with stitches in my left arm. When I sat up, my head throbbed. I watched carefully as the boy napped in a swivel chair. Why did he help me?

“Excuse me, sir?” I asked in a sickly sweet voice, “Would you tell me what just happened?!”

“Trying to sleep, shh,” he said with a smirk. I frowned, took the pillow, and chucked it at his head.

“I would like to know who you are and what is going on in this place,” I told him.

“I’m Clint. I figured you of all people would know what is going on. The Prasophrinae has sent varied forms of humans and creatures to kill everyone in this asylum. I’m the one who’s been killing Prasophrinae’s mean-spirited toys.”

“Prasophrinae?” I asked. It sounded familiar, but I didn’t know why.

“The Prasophrinae is a monster that was created from all the evil spirits floating around in the world. When someone opened Pandora’s Box it took form and has been wreaking havoc on the weak links of our society. It will keep working until the human race ceases to exist. I thought I was the only one left in the asylum until I found you,” Clint explained.

“I’m Jesse. So, what are we supposed to do about this Prasophrinae?” I was getting a little nervous.

“We just have to wait it out.” Clint sighed.

“We’re just going to wait?” I asked. The idea terrified me.

“Yes, is there a problem?”

“What’s next, little girls in frilly dresses with machine guns?” I rambled.

“Quite possibly, yes. In fact, I believe I saw some down the hall not too far from here if you would like to be neighborly and say hello,” Clint laughed. I thought he was supposedly depressed, but he kept laughing and looked so happy. I soon found myself laughing with him.

Sitting in a mental asylum’s hospital ward laughing, a knock at the door froze us. Clint picked up a wooden pole and placed his hand on the doorknob. He put a finger to his lips and pushed it open. My heart pounded against my ribs painfully as we stared into the dull hallway.

There was a folded paper at the base of the door. Clint picked up the note and shut the door. He sat down next to me on the table to read it.

“Warning: Please do not take any drastic actions while reading this note. We are sending Carvanashias to the hospital ward to eliminate any weak links. They will not enter the room you are currently in. As soon as you exit the room the Carvanashias are ordered to attack any living creature.”

“So, do you still want to sit here and wait?” I asked him. I already knew what answer I wanted, and I wouldn’t settle for anything else.

“I’m not going to sit here while they try to kill us,” as Clint spoke his eyes lost the compassion and happiness they had earlier. He had turned from my new laughing friend into a soldier. I would have to do the same.

“What’s first?” I asked. I don’t understand how I managed it, but if I could keep him calm we would have a higher chance of survival. Dying was not in my game plan.

He took a deep breath and stared at me. He started to say something but stopped himself and stared down at his gray sneakers.

“What?”

“Nothing, just forget it,” he mumbled. He still wouldn’t look at me.

“Tell me,” I said stubbornly.

“The Prasophrinae’s goal is to kill the weakest link. Only one of us can survive,” He mumbled.

I didn’t think it would actually hurt, but it did. I didn’t want anyone to sacrifice themselves for me.

“I won’t let you. I’ll distract Prasophrinae as long as I can. You will escape and you’re not going to argue with me about it. End of discussion.” I said crossing my arms. Pain gleamed in Clint’s eyes. I was missing something huge.

“You won’t make me melt under the pressure like you always do,” Clint spoke.

“What do you mean always?” I shouted. He was so frustrating. After all, we had just met.
“You don’t remember do you?” he asked.
“Remember what?” I cried angrily.
“I guess being in that cell really messed up your head,” he mumbled.
“Tell me what’s going on, or I’m walking out that door right now.” My eyes turned to stone. Clint took a deep breath and ran his fingers through his hair. Whatever he wasn’t telling me must’ve been important.
“We’re best friends, Jesse. I thought you were just stressed out earlier when you didn’t remember me. We’ve been in the asylum much longer than you think. We’ve been here nearly our entire lives. I was sent here to heal my depression when I was eight. That’s when I met you.” He looked up smiling.
I stared at him. He looked down and coughed.
“You were that girl that sat in the corner of the cafeteria talking to yourself. Everyone stared at you. I knew how you felt though and admired you. I would sit with you and listen. We became friends soon after that, and it didn’t take long before we were inseparable. My depression was at bay when I was with you. They locked you in that cell, and over the past three months the Prasophrinae has been slowly killing off everyone in the asylum. We are its last two victims,” Clint said as if he was running out of time.
It all came back to me in a rush: the injections, the memory loss, and the slow passing of time. I remembered the Prasophrinae. The Prasophrinae was the voices I had been talking to all these years.
I stared at Clint at I realize what was going to happen next. I knew exactly how this would play out. I had to sacrifice myself to the Prasophrinae, my brother.
“We’re both getting out of here alive,” I uttered without looking at him. I couldn’t let him see the tears rising in my eyes. He would know. “Just follow my lead.”
“Okay,” he sighed too tired to argue.
I opened the door and checked the hallway. I thought there was going to be some maniac monster waiting to eat our flesh and bones, but there was only one creature. He grinned from ear to ear when he saw me. He had short black hair and brilliant blue eyes. The sight of him melted my heart.
“Isn’t he cute?” Prasophrinae spoke in my mind.
“Adorable.” I said aloud. Clint stared at me with a puzzled look. I approached him with quick steps. I bent down on my knees and held him in my arms. I knew it was a stupid move, but if your brother had died in front of your eyes when you were nine you would’ve too.
“I missed you, Martonae,” I said as I buried my face into my little brother’s shirt.
“Jesamanora, let go,” Martonae growled stiffly. Nobody had called me Jesamanora since the day he died. My throat tightened.
“Martonae?” He was staring at me in a way he used to when Prasophrinae had stolen his teddy bear. Clint was staring at both of us with wide eyes.
“You could’ve saved me, but you didn’t,” Martonae said in a hard voice.
“I know, Martonae. Just please let Clint leave.” I begged praying he had a bit of compassion left in him.
“Fine,” Martonae sighed, Prasophrinae said I only had to kill those who stood in my way. If your friend Clint is willing to let you spend eternity writhing in pain in the Underworld, we shouldn’t have any problems.”
Clint stepped forward. There was nothing he could do.
“I guess we’re going to have a problem then. I refuse to let you take her. Take me instead.” Clint stood between us, crossing his arms. I pushed him aside.
“You’re not leaving me,” he spoke with a stern voice.
“Will you two stop your bickering?!” Martonae screamed. “You never should’ve opened Pandora’s Box, and now you must face your punishment.”
Clint’s eyes grew wide.
“Okay I might have opened Pandora’s Box, doomed the human race, and killed Martonae...” I explained. Clint groaned and ran his fingers through his hair.
“If you guys are done here we’re leaving,” Martonae grumbled.
“Fine,” I said, “Don’t you dare follow us, or you are literally going to rot in hell.” I didn’t want him to suffer for me. I would never forgive myself.
“It’s not that easy,” Clint mumbled, staring at his shoes.
I felt Martonae tense. We would vanish soon.

“Fine, I’ll stay,” I spoke slowly feeling my blood rush through my veins. I knew it was too late, but everything was going according to plan.

“I’ll stay with you. I just have to work things out with Prasophrinae, and everything will be okay.” I grinned trying to get him to believe me. My feet were already mist.

“You’ll never come back,” Clint wasn’t giving up. His eyes were sad with a hint of determination. My ribcage was starting to vanish. Within the next minute I would be gone.

I stared at him, and a tear ran down my cheek. If only I could’ve contained myself. Clint dashed to my side and gripped my shoulder. We disappeared—together.
Another ground ball came bouncing my way, testing me in its zipping fury. I could see the play forming in my mind. I’d snatch it with my left, reach in, and toss the ball to second with my right for the force out. Before I even realized what’d happened, the play was over, the ball rolling past me into the outfield grass. I bit down hard on my glove, trying to tear out a chunk like it was beef jerky, poisonous anger rushing through my jaws into the leather. My fist hung shamefully, clenched in frustration.

It was the American Legion Baseball District 10 semifinals: the archrival, Ballwin, versus us, Creve Coeur. I’d committed three errors already, placing Ballwin up six runs. From my position at shortstop, the one hundred or so feet to first felt like a million. I was lost in the blackness of a late July midnight. The darkness swallowed me up, made me feel extremely alone, while at the same time, the bright lights, shining down hot and bright, exposed me in embarrassment.

“That’s my bad, Keith,” I offered to our pitcher.

“You think?” I avoided looking directly into his eyes.

“You’ve got to charge it! We can’t make errors!” yelled Coach, as if I’d been trying to do so. “Focus!”

“What do you say, Keith! Keep throwing strikes, kid!” I encouraged.

It was all a load of crap that just poured out of my mouth like puke. That’s what we were taught to do. The coaches always want us chattering. By now, all these phrases had been said a million times and lost their meaning. The babble blended into a painful silence.

My love for baseball was founded at an early age in my driveway. Summer days consisted of my glove, the Mac350 aluminum bat, and a tennis ball. With familiarity my top hand tossed the ball off the brick side of the house, while the bottom one clutched the bat. The ball hit the wall, my top hand slid onto the bat, the ball bounced once on the driveway. I swung. Single, ground out, double. I judged the trajectory of the ball off the bat to where it hit the wall. I stood farther back with my glove on, wound up, and fired into a brick catcher’s mitt. I had drawn a chalk batter’s box onto the wall.

I concocted new players and teams, simulating games as I went. The driveway became a garden in which I planted each play and watered every pitch. Jonathan Brand flashed across the jumbotron at Busch Stadium. My favorite part was the numbers. They ran constantly across my head as I pretended. Three-fifteen average, thirty-four homers, ninety-six RBI’s.

What I love about baseball is the never-ending twisting relationship between the statistics and the tales. Players are converted into a string of probabilities that are analyzed by fans and statisticians. Then someone comes along and does something no sportscaster ever predicted, knocking these stats right out of their stirrups and delighting the entire baseball community.

Standing on my island of shame out at shortstop, I was disgusted thinking about those dreams of the majors. That stretch of driveway seemed so perfect, so Edenic, that I felt duped. I wanted to take a jackhammer to that black pavement and brick wall.

The night was closing in on me. My gaze locked onto the hitter. I was too afraid to look anywhere else, but I could feel the eyeballs of over-wound coaches and eager teammates and aggressive dads pulsating all around me. All those tryouts, the elite “select” teams, the long tournaments of two, three, even four games a day, the batting coaches, the pitching coaches, the techniques, the drills, and a district tournament that meant everything in the world all swarmed into my cluttered thoughts.

Why do I keep making errors? I was as helpless as Sisyphus. That little kid who’d for hours on end field grounders off of a brick wall had been misled into seeking perfection in a game of failure.

Later that October, the TV screen blinked back to life, after I had turned it off in disgust. It was game six of the World Series, and the St. Louis Cardinals were down to their last strike, facing elimination in a terribly played game. I had to watch the last out. They deserved that. David Freese came to bat. The Texas Rangers’ Neftali Feliz wound up and delivered the pitch. Freese swung. Crack...

The left fielder slammed into the wall as the ball snuck over his glove. Two runs scored to tie the game. Freese slid into third base and smacked his hands together, streaks of red-rust dirt stained on his chest and an unwavering faith etched on his face.
David Freese, who after high school declined a Division I baseball scholarship and quit the game entirely to just be a normal “college kid,” a year later decided he missed baseball and found a spot on a junior college team. He, eventually, found his way into the MLB World Series, tying game six in the ninth and batting again in the eleventh inning. He fought to a full count. He took a breath. The scene calmed. In one smooth, liberating swing he sent the pitch onto the grass hill beyond the centerfield wall, winning the game. The hometown hero rounded the bases. The hair pricked up along my arms. The boy I’d been missing was right there on the screen, tossing his helmet playfully between his legs, a twinkle of joy in his eyes.

I found myself the following summer standing, yet again, at shortstop. Same opponent, but it was the District 10 championship game. A ball skipped to my right. I stepped, reached, dove, and stopped the ball. From my knees I spun and slung it to second. Out!

“Two outs, what do you say now!” one of my teammates chatters.

“Two outs, what do you say now!” I jokingly mimic. He noticed, looked at me, and we laughed. Light on my feet, I skipped across the dirt and relayed the outs to the outfield.

Top of the ninth. Two outs. We were winning. A District 10 title on the line. Once again a ground ball skipped across the grass, swelling in size, challenging me. The air that I breathed in was sweet, the grass lush and cool. The night breeze carried a relief from the hot day. Last year’s nightmare taught me a mental fortitude vital to surviving this game. I forget about past errors, and I don’t think about future ones.

Rainstorms have undoubtedly washed away the chalk batter’s box from the brick wall, but I still see it. I always will.
Qitong Cao  
Ode to Poetry  
St. Louis University High School

Four crisp clear cut  
Chinese characters  
constitute a  
Line of Classic,  
contouring a  
comely courtship  
on an islet  
in a current.

Calmly halcyon  
yet courageous,  
he plucks a zither  
to cheer her up.  
“Clean conceptions.”  
Confucius counts.

Li Po once praises  
waterfalls grand as  
falling Milky Ways;  
Basho quiescently  
hears a frog jump  
into an old pond;  
Tagore perceives  
a cloud’s wish to  
be a flying bird;  
Chuang Tzu dreamed of  
becoming a butterfly  
flitting around.  
With stanzas merges  
philosophy.

Rural rest removed,  
rising Romance  
rouses Rapture  
to Renaissance  
terza rima.

Dante travels  
from Inferno,  
negotiates  
Purgatorio,  
ascends into  
Paradiso,  
redeeming self:  
realizing sins,  
restoring love.

Deus caritas,
Love soothes human.
With Shakespeare’s pen
a sonnet takes place,
“you” eclipsing
“a summer’s day.”

Pentameter
of weak and strong
syllables tell
sweet, staccato
sensations from
a soul of hope.

As word’s to speak,
Love shall been seen.

So shall sadness
that’s thought-provoking.
Su Shih lamented
Moon Waxes, Moon Wanes:
despite miles apart,
shared moon-view could
alleviate
shared nostalgia.

Longfellow sighs
Tide Rises, Tide Falls:
Nature is eternal,
we are fleeting.

The time and tide
shall wait us not.

Civilized man
began hymning,
scattering seeds
of literary blooms.
Each piece of work
blossoms,
various kinds
depicted by

Eastern ink wash,
Western oil paints:
Distinct stroking,
coloration,
and imagery.
Each is unique.

Nevertheless,
Somehow these fair
flowers are all
collected in one
sublime garden
bearing the name
of empathy,  
the quintessence of our feelings.

Fruits harvested will be even more mellifluous than the sweetest red strawberry.

Such is Poetry.
1. The dynamics of this great blue fluid aren't the mystery they were when he was younger, but even nineteen years won't keep the boat from yawing as Jason squints into the sun. The ride's been billed a "sunset cruise," but it's four in the afternoon with the sun is nowhere near setting. As the boat has turned towards the open water, the yaw has changed into more of a roll, a choppy one. Jason stands unsteadily in pointy-tipped dress shoes. E is beside him, sick and heaving, waving a champagne fluke of lurid pink vomit that a waiter collects between primly pinched thumb and forefinger and buses to a trash bag. Flows are generally classified as either laminar or turbulent, though many laminar flows eventually become turbulent. The sea is quickly turning turbulent beyond belief. Jason's mother is scowling over the railing at a flock of noisy seagulls. Jason's brother is cleaning his fingernails with somebody's red cocktail umbrella. Jason pulls at his tie with both hands.

"This is ridiculous." Everyone around them is grinning in pastel vacation-wear, mouths beginning to curl up as they soften the edges of their sobriety.


"Well yes, but look. Nobody else is dressed up in the least."

Jason's mother has insisted that both he and brother Milo wear suit and tie; and Milo in particular, with his sunken face and three days' growth, needs only a pungent cigar to look like a regular Hungarian mobster. She is dressed in gray wools, damp and rough as burlap in the heat.

"So. Pretty sunset," Jason jokes to E, who is slumping and greening by degrees.

"...urghh," is E's inaudible reply. Jason can't really blame her— the salty air is unbreathable, hot and sticky and dense. A laminar flow is characterized by its viscosity. With this air, it's like being inside a toasting marshmallow.

As friends go, E is one of status uncertain. Jason has decided to eschew the term "girlfriend," at least until he finds out what the E actually stands for. Maybe for eschew, a subtle hint that he should keep it that way; maybe for else, the everybody that she clearly is not. Maybe for eddy, scary spinning places where the water's bottom just sort of falls out—which are supposed to be fairly common in the ocean, though in all honesty Jason tends to overthink things, and maybe this is some unusual turbulence, or really probably this is just how the ocean is. E is also one of those people whose outfit seems inapposite no matter what she's wearing, although the water shoes are a nice touch.

"Speaking of which," Jason says, "these shoes are genuine snake, and they're going to be ruined."

Meanwhile Milo has decided he'd like to sit down after all but is struggling with his folding seat. He's pouting.

Jason gently pushes him aside, rolling up a sleeve, and firmly whunks the seat into place.

"What can I say?" Jason laughs. "I'm a mechanical engineer."

There's something not wholly unsatisfying about looking flamboyantly out of place, Jason thinks, leaning slightly hipshot on the railing with one arm slung over. He accepts a glass of grapefruit juice off a nearby waiter's tray and puts on a face of pretending everything's A-OK.

2. Jason, the boy in French class with the Greek hero name, does not do his work. He falls asleep instead. He has streaked brindle hair that flops across his arms whenever he sleeps on his desk, which is often. Jason does not much care for Mr. Phlux, who teaches French.

He is asleep on his desk when he hears the opening notes of Für Elise and abruptly snaps to. He traces the sound back to the phone of the girl beside him, which Mr. Phlux moves to wordlessly take away. The girl prickles pink and shrugs.

Jason writes on a sheet of paper of his dislike for the French class of Mr. Phlux. He writes that Mr. Phlux looks like a walrus. He hands the girl the paper with great seriousness.

She gives him a loose smile and whispers back of her curiosity as to whether or not Mr. Phlux tweezes his finger hair. *Probablement."

Her name is E. That is what she wishes to be called, she tells every teacher on the first day. *Elle s'appelle E.* Mr. Phlux asks her a question, and she shrugs again and does not answer. She pours lemon sparkling water on the sleeping arm of Jason.
3. Jason sits in a chair next to the piano, rumpling and unrumping the rug with a toe, listening to Milo play Czernys and trying to pinpoint exactly what he’s feeling. Both protective and jealous come to mind. Brotherly, maybe. Bored for sure. He probably wouldn’t even really say dutiful, a necessary boredom. “Ennuyeux,” E will say when he tells her about it, “instead of pénible.” His brother plays severely hunched over, back concave, fingers long but claw-like and ungraceful, squeezing the keys like he’s holding them up.

“That was nice,” Jason says when Milo finishes.
Milo says nothing and goes on full-bore into the next piece.
It’s hard to put words to any of it. Words that are tossed around for Jason’s brother include autistic and savant, neither of which he feels are right – two basically opposite ends of a spectrum into which Milo really doesn’t fit.

Jason’s mother appears in the doorway, ginger ale sloshing in a glass and face creased. Milo bristles with unease. Jason’s mother’s eyebrows, when she is upset, do not go into a V in the middle of her forehead the way most do. Hers turn into two inverted black circumflexes over narrowed eyes. “Play slower!” she sputters, shaking her head.

Her life often feels like a mad dash between piano competitions, but practice can never happen slow enough. Speed and quality have an inverse relationship, she believes, and a practice of middling quality just won’t fly, with the International Bach Competition looming so close. Milo stops playing and grabs his head with both hands, making his hair tuft way out to the sides.

“Keep playing,” Jason’s mother says, “slower!”

4. The next day in French Jason does not sleep. The pattern of days on which he does not sleep resists all observation. The next day in French Jason slumps in his chair with a bottle of Coca-Cola three-quarters full and practices telling his life story.

“Hi, I’m Jason,” Jason practices saying to E.

Jason wants to be on a cooking competition show. They are casting right now, he says, for special episodes such as Amateur Chefs, Militarily-Widowed Chefs, Formerly Overweight Chefs Who Have Lost More Than Thirty Pounds, Formerly Overweight Chefs Who Have Lost Less Than Thirty Pounds, and Formerly Thin Chefs Who Are Now Fat. Jason practices making himself sound compelling for TV.

“Do you know how long I’ve loved cooking?” he asks with a rehearsed meaningful smile, tilting his head.

“Since I was two years old.”

Jason pauses. E feels like smirking.

“Really. When I was two, my mom had this sushi cookbook with big square full-color photograph pages of every sushi. It was my favorite book. I had it read to me every day, and you know how some little kids right from the beginning can recite parts of their favorite bedtime stories and stuff? I could recite sushi recipes.”

E does smirk. Jason turns to look at her and laughs. “Sounds hokey, doesn’t it? Just completely and totally hokey.”

E laughs too, a clinking, sudden, plangent sound like change in a washing machine. “Absolutely,” she says, “absolutely hokey.”

Jason slumps further in his chair. “They’ll have to come up with a new special episode for me. I’m not any of the special episode themes.”


The bell rings. Jason turns away.

5. E sits with a girl at lunch sometimes who never looks up. The girl draws faces in the sketchbook on her lap and does not eat. She does the drawings in soft hoary lines with a pale pencil; many of them are of E, but E doesn’t know this.
There are things E would like to ask the girl who does not look up as they sit together but does not, out of she
guesses a weird tentative respect for the girl and general awkwardness of circumstance. Over days it becomes
increasingly impossible to say anything, so E does not.

6. Swinging their legs over a concrete edge. Muffled roar, leonine, industrial. Beneath their feet all green edged
in red-purple, white lines straight and true as God’s own backbone. The dragging of torn shoe on DecoTurf. A


Jason drums his fingers on an air-conditioning unit’s side. “I don’t think I’m going to get on the show,” he says.

“I’m not interesting enough.”

“What? You are absolutely interesting.” E smiles. “Only interesting people would want to be on a cooking
show in the first place.”

There is a long silence. E draws circles in the air in front of the ledge with her foot.

Finally Jason says, “Name three reasons why I’m interesting.” E pauses.

Some of the kind of heartbreaking things that to E make Jason interesting: the story he told in French about
being two years old and the sushi cookbook; how he sleeps in class with his hair over his arms; how his favorite
place in the world is this ledge high up over the tennis courts at the U; the sad stories he tells about his mom and
his brother and being alone.

“What’s sad about the stories?” Jason asks.

Jason’s father is not around. Jason’s brother is a piano genius. Jason’s mother is always taking Jason’s brother
to piano competitions. Jason is often alone.

E’s hair blows into her face. “I don’t know, just when you told them I felt something,” E says. “They
were...stirring. I guess they’re not sad, it just seems to me that you’re always alone.”

“I think I’m very lucky in that regard. Most people don’t have enough time to be alone.”

“Is that why you like this ledge? Because you can be alone here.”

“Maybe partly. Partly also because it’s loud. Do you know what it’s like to live in a house with people getting
ready for an International Bach Competition? It’s completely dysfunctional. My brother just sits at the piano with
this eerily blank face playing his pieces over and over while my mom stands over him and shouts, ‘Ornamentation!
Ornamentation!’ until he stops playing and starts rocking on the bench and crying. I hear the music and the
shouting on loop all day in my head. Here the noise is louder than the stuff in my head.”

A ball from the courts sails over E’s head. “Sorry,” someone calls. Jason laughs and stands to retrieve the ball.

7. Jason’s mother’s hair is tufted way out to one side. She is taking quick angry nose-breaths, fists shaking by
her sides. “Where were you?”

“Sorry,” Jason says somberly, grinning, “I was with a friend.”

“Where were you?” she demands. Her fists are blue-knuckled, quaking, spasmodic, striped by shredded light
through the window blinds; a cartoon parody of hands.

“We were on a roof. If that helps.”

“What?” She shakes her head.

“Play slower!” she calls over her shoulder.

Jason shrugs.

8. The day before the competition, Jason and E both sit, flanking the piano on either side of Milo. They are both
toeing the rug, causing undulations beneath the bench – Milo looks like an island in a gentle ocean. “Every man is
an island,” Jason mumbles. E smiles vaguely.

Milo is repeating a passage again and again, with angrier and angrier fingers. Jason’s mother appears in the

E shifts in her chair. “Sorry,” Jason mouths.

“Slower! Slower! Start again, *play slower!*” Jason’s mother brings the metronome clattering down on the
bench. “Breathe! Counting! And slow! Listen! Count!” Jason quietly starts to stand behind her.

“Pretend you’re swimming,” Jason offers. “Breathe and count.”

He looks at E and motions toward the door.
E doesn’t get up. Milo is drowning in tearful snot. *Swimming*, E thinks, is remarkably apt. E sits with her eyes down, watching Milo’s feet on the pedals, barely breathing herself, measuring time against the metronome’s beat with effete little kicks to the rug.

9. Jason is at the post office, wavering, engineering school acceptances in hand. Return letters. The cooking show never sent him a return letter; he wonders now whether they were supposed to.
   There are puddles everywhere. It is not raining. There are no drinking fountains. Why are there puddles everywhere?
   As water goes, drinking fountains are pretty safe. There’s no drowning in a drinking fountain. Is there? With its thin stream, high and clean and pure like birdsong, insubstantial as tears.
   Tears. Are the puddles from tears? Jason thinks of Milo before the piano, clinging to it, like pepper to vine, flushed, silently sobbing – drowning.

10. Milo walks stiffly in full suit, picking at his cufflinks, silent and shaking clear from the subway to the audition room door, dragging dress shoes along the sidewalk under dull newsprint sky.
    The door is the heavy wooden sort that shuts slowly, with several separate tinny clicks, for minimal interruption. Inside, the room is a mustily draped auditorium with too many rows of identical chairs. A man with pimples on his neck is whumping up the aisle to meet Milo.
    Milo balks visibly, rearing up against the weight of his mother pushing him forward. Something snaps, and it’s like the crash of a wave, taking Milo’s feet entirely out from under him.

    Yellow crumbs beneath a seat whose underside is absolutely imbricated with chewing gum. Sticky stain inches to his left. Milo thinks this auditorium floor is not unpleasant, closing his eyes as a hand lowers over his face. “Please, he’s just nervous,” his mother’s voice desperate.
    A wash of something scratchy cold over Milo’s face. His mother pressing his folder of music into his hand with undue force, hissing “get up,” now kneeling herself and grasping his shoulder with both hands. Milo leaves his eyes closed. The piney Lysol aftertaste of wet paper towel. Cold water filling a nostril, sweat beading at the periphery of his face. Thrashing, now. Upon opening his eyes, Milo mistakes the row of lights far overhead as stars. Water in his face again, relief washing over his mother, and Milo suddenly can’t breathe too well. The floor seeming all of a sudden to undulate, like the rug when E and Jason kicked it. “Every man is an island,” Jason had said, “pretend you’re swimming.” Milo draws his arms up, pushing away his mother and the man with the paper towels. The silence, finally, after months. Finally staring at the stars for a while.
So there was the diving, the cameras, and the fear. Which cameras, they were old and had a funny fixed zoom where faces were fuzzy and everything was just off clear; the way they were positioned showed no boards or water or context, just diver and wall, so the footage always looked like someone taking a Brodie, a suicide jump. And the cameras could capture the entire dive up to entry, at which point the diver left the frame and went into the water, and if that was it and there was no splash lapping into the frame a moment later, then it was a rip, a good dive, and there would be clapping. So basically, the only things the cameras could never show were the faces, and the fear. Which fear, it was a base-type terror way beyond any ordinary fear, beyond anything that any number of encouraging shouts could assuage, a fear pretty nearly akin to fear of death. I learned at age ten that we are all closet acrophobes.

I suppose it’s around that age that you really start to feel all those different little discernible fears that you have coalesce into what a psychoanalyst might call a sort of existential dread, i.e. that particular torment of foreverness that occurs to you when you’re lying in bed late at night, the one that makes your whole reality seem so fragile and useless that you’re afraid to get up and find someone to turn on the light and tuck you back in. And for a while the fear dogs you and has you sleeping with a nightlight again, and you find yourself kneeling in bed sometimes, trying to pray to God even though no one in your family’s ever been religious. Until eventually the fear dissipates again, and you go back to having your ordinary fears, fear of the rattlesnakes that don’t exist in Kansas and terror about things you don’t understand like cancer and the thudding in your heart when you go up to the microphone to spell. It’s all fear, I guess, and in any case I never really got the existential kind again until I started diving. So there must have just been something about the diving.

A big thing about the diving, I think, was the platform, which at the particular place where I dived stood between the two 1m springboards, rising vertiginous and alone. Majestic in the right light, maybe. Its rungs were a cream-colored plastic, the metal rails covered in some kind of non-slip foam that was mostly fallen off: you ascended its ladder cheek by toenail in a quaking drippy mass of diver flesh, and at the top there were four folding chairs, and you sat. Nobody ever wanted to go first. Everything was quiet, no one spoke in the first moments on the platform, and there was always this sense of time distending while bodies quivered and dried – which drying was an intensely reflective and personal process, almost sort of spiritual, in which you flung water from your lean brown arms and hypertrophic calves with your chamois cloth, buffed the skin of your shoulders and chest, carefully avoided everyone’s eyes and maybe whistled a little if it wasn’t too early in the morning. Your chamois, up there, felt like your lifeline; you clutched it like a security blanket until you had to dive and then you slowly dropped it over the railing and watched it splat to the pool deck. You got the sense that a lot of the platform divers were someday going to be sent to the edge by this unending cycle. I used to have a recurring nightmare of climbing and sitting and drying and jumping, only when I jumped it was off the side and I could see the concrete coming up to meet me, and then the dream always ended with me suspended in mid-air.

And then there was the water, regulation 12 ft. and on dark mornings so blue it was almost indigo. The surface, pocked with water-splash, oddly kaleidoscopic in the sun, cool and deep and wonderful to swim in and float in but impossibly insubstantial-seeming from the platform; at that height the water looked greener, an admixture of yellow light and glaucous blue walls. Divers swimming out below tiny, formicatory, their movements smoothed by distance. The platform beneath your feet brown and wet, textured almost to the point of chafing; but you were glad for this, because even your curled-tight toes didn’t feel like enough to hold you in place. The chlorine smell, almost unnoticeable below, here overpowering. Car horns; chatter; Marco’s and Polo’s and walk-don’t-runs – muffled and replaced first by water sloshing and then by the drum of your own heart in your ears. And when you stepped, the steps were shivering ones, and droplets seeped from your hair down the edges of your face and neck like a cold sweat. It was several short rigid steps to the end of the platform. You didn’t dare peer over the edge. The water when it rippled was a cold blue infinity, and you didn’t want to get sucked in. Four long strides back. You shook your head, cleared your nose, bounced on your toes a bit. Your chamois cloth went over the railing. You stood for what was just forever, eyes straight ahead looking not quite at or through the opposing wall, fingers clenching and unclenching and flicking a fine mist around them. And then.
So really the thing about diving was, when you were in the air you didn't know anything. Did you have a heart and was it beating and was that blood or wind rushing in your ears, and where was the air and where was the water, where was up and where was down and where was you? And then air and you were no longer ontologically distinct and you weren't twisting shapes in the air but rather the air itself was twisting. It was maybe a little bit but no actually not at all like flying – you weren't going through the air; you were the air. You were the air and the air knew no time and anyway time could bend shapes better than you could, and so somehow into the space of seconds was compacted an eternity of thoughts and fears and steps and suns. Then you found the water; you rended apart the water's surface and it hemorrhaged all around you, you found your arms and knees and heart again, pushed the air from your lungs, and there were bubbles.

When I got out of the water I was not the air any longer, which is to say that all my limbs were strange and loose and the periphery of my mind was a foggy ache – all the fear that started in the core of me had spread like epinephrine wildfire and bludgeoned to the surface, same as I had. Which is not to say that it was on its way out. Probably a lot of it had to do with seeing myself on the screen: there was nothing, there was wall, then there was me, me and my shapes in the air, and on the screen I didn't look like air, I just looked like I was falling. Because you're only the air when you're falling forever, unseeing, with no time and no way to even try to do anything else; and the fear is in finding water, the dense cold blind, the end. In a way, when you can't see the end, the fear is forever. So.
Author's Statement: Sixty-Six

In February of 2012, my life became a game of numbers. Like a child first learning how, I counted everything—calories in a cup of chopped celery, miles it would take to run off my dinner, hours until I would give myself permission to eat again. Doctors blame society, and society blames my family, but to lay blame upon any entity at all would trivialize my disease. I am not the cliché of a high-achieving teenage girl with honey curls who craved perfection and swallowed secrets from magazines; I am not a failed attempt at beauty; I am not an ice-cold princess winking heavy-lidded eyes at jealous classmates. I am ill. I am disordered, and that disorder arose from within me. I do not remember how it began—but it did. I shrank. I smiled.

My heartbeat was a chanted mantra: how much, how much, how much.

April and May are murky water rushing through the gaps between the fingers of my cupped hands. With effort, I can recall shards of that time. Thinspo blogs, runner’s high, carpet fibers, egg whites, paper cuts, a constant shiver. The numbers were as hungry as I was, and they ate me alive. My alarm clock munched my memory. My GPA twirled my nerves around the tines of a fork, like spaghetti, and slurped as it swallowed them, blushing to cover its poor manners. And my weight—those flashing digits on the scale sank their teeth deep enough to hit bone. They dug my bones out from under my skin and showed them to the world.

My heartbeat slowed down.

That summer, I would look in the mirror, and there they were: bones. Bones like needles, bones reaching for the surface, pressing through liquid skin. I exercised more than I slept, and counted to numb my thoughts. By the time school began, the numbers had stopped pretending to be my friends. There was no need for them to trick me anymore, for they knew I couldn’t escape them if I tried. Someone would have to pry them from my shaky, blue-nailed hands.

Someone did, and here I am. Everything in this portfolio was written or revised within the past sixty-six days, which I have spent in a residential hospital, receiving treatment for anorexia nervosa and an exercise addiction. I never intended to dedicate my portfolio to the circumstances surrounding my unraveling… but, then again, I never intended to unravel. The hardest lesson I’ve had to learn in treatment is that nothing will happen exactly in the way that I plan it. I don’t know when I’ll return home, or what I will face in the “real world”. But of this much I am sure: I am a prisoner, and I intend to write my way out of my cell.

My heart’s still beating.

Craving

No one believes me when I talk about your eyelashes—an army of them, made of length and light. Orgasmic. Daisy breath. I want to harvest one, keep it in my pocket. Spend it like time, save it like a life. Just beyond the privacy of this moment (a privacy created by being surrounded), cars pass below the high windows of the bus we have used as a bed for the last three nights.

You bought the tickets. I
trust you chose the right destination.

(But I can't drink a glass of water unless I poured it myself.)

We're on fire; we're underground. You smell like wet crayons and my voice is a manic lullaby of I guess. Those eyelashes meet and tangle.

It's earthquaking here; wake up.
I dream you.
Marlee Cox  
11/11/11  
Mehlville High School

When Sadie’s mother was sick, sometimes I couldn’t stop thinking about the frogs. 
We pinned them down by their wrinkled and webbed feet, blue as a crying iris. Their pale bellies, bloated and distended, reflected the fluorescent lights of the classroom. My partner, a suicide blonde named Hailey Skaggs, popped her gum—citrus mint—and grinned conspiratorially. “Easy A, right?” she said, subtly pushing the lab worksheet in my direction. I swallowed the dregs of bile collecting at the back of my throat, and eyed the sharp, acute point of the scalpel. 

Our teacher, Ms. Cortez, was young enough to still have acne, and delusional enough to think that the lessened age barrier made her more accessible to her students. From the front of the room, she demonstrated the proper method for slicing our specimens; for dragging a scalpel through something that was once living and was now a shriveled ninth-grade biology lesson sitting before me. 

“Make a lateral incision on both lymph nodes of your frog,” Cortez said, her hand steady as a heartbeat as she did just that. My classmates copied her, but I didn’t move. A dull rushing of sound manifested in my ears. The scalpel collected sweat inside the vice of my fist. I felt slightly to the left of my own body; removed from the dimensions of it and floating semiconsciously in the reek of formaldehyde. 

Cortez didn’t notice that I hadn’t started; she was busy sorting out a situation with Nikki Drexel, our obligatory Goth Girl Sticking Up For Frog Rights. There’s always one. 

My eyes wandered from the frog tray to the chalkboard at the front of the room, where Cortez had written extensive instructions. *Cut through the muscle and bone... if your frog is female, remove the eggs that sit just below her abdomen... the lungs are hidden beneath many other organs...* 

I pictured myself, stiff and naked, beneath the whim of some other person’s scalpel. What would my board say? *Observe the bitten fingernails, the whites encroaching too far down on the pinks... a scar on her left elbow, a birthmark on her back... carve out the heart... just go ahead and carve it out...* 

Hailey fixed me with a look. “Are you going to do this or not?” she whined, indicating our frog with a flip of her hair. My scalpel hand flexed. 

I did it. 

With clammy, taciturn hands and a blank countenance, I scraped aside and sorted the various pieces of my frog (who did, indeed, reveal herself to be female). As Hailey and her cronies debated the assorted perks and pitfalls of glitter eyeliner, I sketched an outline for our frog and began to label its pieces. Nares, tympani, eyes, nictating membrane—scaps and slivers of a whole; drained and cold fragments. 

*Nikki is wrong,* I thought. *This is a frog—it is a frog, a frogfrogfrog, just a frog.* 

And when Sadie’s mother died—it would feel just the same as staring at the rubbery body of my lady frog and thinking, *I am the cutter, and you are the cut; I am the wounder, and you are the wound. We, together, are the heal and the hurt.*

* 

It started on the tenth of November. I had been sixteen for months, but was only just learning to drive. That afternoon, my task was to drive my mother home from work, in her hefty Dodge Caravan that I called Dolores del Rio because of my current obsession with Wally Lamb’s *She’s Come Undone.* Anxiety bit me; it made me shake and lose control of my thought. I shifted gears without applying the break, I ran stop signs, and I once stopped dead in the middle of the road, overwhelmed with tears drawn from my eyes by my mother’s shouting. 

She always shouted. It was what I knew about her. 

Usually, I pressed my tongue to the roof of my mouth to avoid fighting back, just absorbing the criticism and the guilt. But, by the time we reached home, I was screaming, too, nonsensical and panicked. We brandished curses and accusation—my little sister watched from the adjoining room. Our voice leapt through octaves, getting louder, until my mother grabbed me by my shoulders and shoved me against the wall. 

My sister started to cry. All emotions within me fled, with the exception of fear.
I wrenched myself free, running up to my room, locking the door. Instead of coming down for dinner that night, I texted Sadie until I fell asleep.

Sadie. My best friend since fourth grade, when we had both just moved to St. Louis and shown up as the only two new students in Mrs. Erikkson's class. My buddy, my partner in crime, the girl who knew that I liked the small of hairspray even though it made me sneeze, and that I collected words in a journal small enough to carry in my back pocket. My friend who might as well have been my sister. Fourteen months previously, her mother had been diagnosed with stage IV brain cancer. I'd watched them both—Sadie and her mother—change, my imagination of them billowing strangely like reflections in a disrupted puddle.

Through text, Sadie told me that her mother had had another seizure that day. I bit my lip and shook, thinking about the mother we both needed. The wide, bloody mother, the core of the Earth. Mother who did not stumble home at two in the morning with a man her daughter would never see again; mother who would not gossip about her daughter's sock-drawer secrets; mothers who didn't hit or blame or give up or die when their daughters only needed them to be still and present.

I texted back: When did everything get so fucked up, anyway?
Before she answered, I was asleep.

*

The eleventh of November, 2011. I ate breakfast alone, avoiding my mom, and went through my first few classes of the day with hunched shoulders and a pinched expression. My mind felt tangled, and I made simple mistakes—improperly conjugated my irregular Spanish verbs; mixed up connotation and denotation.

During my lunch period, my grade-level principal approached me. He looked out of place in the cafeteria... his tie clashed with the Lysol-and-grease smell; he stood with authority but did nothing to address the unofficial cafeteria anarchy. I had just taken a bite of my granola bar when he told me I needed to come upstairs to his office. My mother was there, waiting for me.

Chewing, I hesitated. "Do I have to?"

Something too close to sympathy rippled over his face, and when he said, "Yes," I knew this wasn't about me anymore. I don't even remember tossing the rest of my lunch or climbing the stairs. In my principal's office, my mother held my hands, rubbing my wrists with her thumbs, and we cried. We forgot about the clamor and pain of last night.

Sadie's mom died on the day all wishes were supposed to come true. It was fast, and inevitable, and I believe that her spirit is in a better place. But, in the moment, cold air flooded my throat as reality was thrown open. Shaking and coughing, I tried to open my eyes. Through a foggy lightheadedness, I could see my mother, vulnerable and gone to pieces, no trace of aggressiveness in the throaty words of consolation she spoke for the both of us. Overcome, I slipped into the mist that wanted to help it not hurt so much.
For Ty

*Some people come into our lives and leave footprints on our hearts and we are never, ever the same.* – Flavia Weedn

Senior Samie Fetzer has been sending out a quote of the day for over a year now. And it’s never been more meaningful. She knew the quote would be important on Monday. A lot of soccer guys got it. Close friends of Tyler. She wanted it to be absolutely perfect.

Fetzer didn’t know Tyler. She admired him from afar, thought he was cute and kind. But she never spoke to him. And yet, she still feels a connection to him. Maybe it’s because of the reality of his death at such a young age. Maybe it’s because of her grieving friends. Or maybe it’s because it makes her wonder what legacy she will leave.

“My heart is breaking for all of my friends that are in pain,” Fetzer said. “We’re much too young to have to go through so much.”

That’s why, on Sunday night at about 10:45 p.m., she posted on Facebook and Twitter saying that she was going to wear Lancer blue to school the following day in memory of Tyler. She didn’t know the idea that started small, with just over 300 Lancers on Monday, would turn into a rapid fire, a national movement. Now, pictures of students and alumni from all over the country are sending in pictures of themselves wearing East gear, holding signs that say “#RIPTR” or “WE LOVE TR.”

And when her friends tell her they feel bad for being sad because they didn’t know Tyler, she tells them it’s OK. She should know. She’s in the same boat.

“[It] doesn’t matter,” Fetzer said. “He was a part of our family. You didn’t need to know him to know he was a good person. It’s completely OK to be sad.”

She didn’t know Tyler, but now she does, in her own way. She knows who he was. She knows that he was a person worth remembering. And she does that every day, when she sends out her quote.

*“If there ever comes a day when we can’t be together, keep me in your heart, I’ll stay there forever.”* – Winnie the Pooh

Junior Jackson Granstaff won’t shake your hand. He’ll hug you. He’ll give you big bear hug that nearly suffocates you, a hug that makes you feel loved, makes you feel like he’s sincerely happy to see you.

Tyler was like his older brother. He always looked up to him. He always will. To Granstaff, Tyler was the kind of person who was nice to everyone. He could strike up a conversation with anyone he met, or make new friends easily. He can’t help but look around him and see all of the great things Ty has done.

He led the soccer team in a record-breaking season. He supported his friends when they felt alone. Tyler brought everyone together. The school. The community. Even beyond the school district — Lancers from around the nation have come together to honor his memory.

“We didn’t do this,” Granstaff said. “The memorial, everyone being out here all the time, we didn’t do it. Ty did.”

The best part of his day used to be Anatomy, and not because he looked forward to learning about the human body. It was because of Tyler. Granstaff would spend those class periods with Tyler and a few other guys, laughing, joking, talking. Ty would brighten his day, make him laugh, make him happy.

“He’s just a funny guy,” Granstaff said. “I can’t even explain his sense of humor.”

Granstaff’s mission is to be more like Tyler every day. To be kinder. Sweeter. Nicer. To be better. And he’ll do that day by day, hug by hug.

After senior Mitch Sauls got a DUI last August, nothing was easy. He was $3000 in debt and he had no car and he wouldn’t have the DUI off his permanent record until he is 27.
He was lost. He didn’t know what to do. He started slacking in school, moping, losing himself. Any chances he had with a job or college were tossed out the window. His DUI messed everything up. And he knew he had nobody to blame but himself.

But Tyler knew what he was going through. And every day, he’d text him, checking on him, making sure he was OK, making sure he was keeping his head up.

Hey man, how are you doing?

Sauls had known Tyler, had been acquaintances since freshman year, but it wasn’t until Ty reached out to him junior year that they became good friends. And without Ty, Sauls isn’t sure he would’ve gotten through it. Without Ty, Sauls would never have gotten out of that dark place. Without Ty, Sauls doesn’t know what would have happened.

Remembering the good times. That’s what he did on Monday, along with some of his friends in the corner of the senior lot. And that night, it came to him. The idea for the memorial.

So on Tuesday morning at 6 a.m., Sauls and a few of his friends started building it. They spent hours working on it. They covered the ground in mulch and used white rocks to spell out “14”, Tyler’s number in soccer. And on Wednesday, they decided to add two trees.

They didn’t ask for approval from the school. In fact, they didn’t even go to school that day. But it didn’t matter. It was all for Ty.

“He was always the warmest person,” Sauls said. “He would always try to do things for others and help them out in any way he could.”

And in that way, he’s connected to Tyler. Sauls will always remember how Ty helped him when he needed it the most, just like he helped so many others. He’ll always have Ty in his heart.

Harping for Excellence

Sophomore Sophie Fields’ fingers gracefully strum her harp as she finishes her first song, “Reverie.” The birds living on the third floor of Claridge Court Retirement Center cease their singing as the music comes to a stop. She looks up from her harp and sees her grandmother smiling at her. As usual, the man with the glass of wine yells for everyone to applaud when she’s finished with the song. She hears the woman who only knows how to say “Mama, Mia” chanting away in the back row. She sees an old couple, both of them in wheelchairs, holding hands.

Sophie has been playing at Claridge Court for three years now, and it still remains her favorite gig. She plays there twice a month and looks forward to seeing the same people every other week because she feels like she has formed a bond with them over the years. What Sophie likes best about playing the harp is her ability to connect with people through the music and the reactions she gets from it.

“I think it’s really relaxing for people,” Sophie said. “It’s good background music; it’s not harsh.”

Sophie puts a flier out each year advertising her talents among friends and family. She has played at hospice centers, the Showhouse, a wedding and various other parties. Sophie’s mom Beth Fields said that Sophie always comes home from gigs with funny stories. Once, she played at her younger sister Grace’s elementary school and when one of the kids saw the harp in the big, black case, she started crying in fear. Sophie was both surprised and humored by this reaction because usually the harp has a soothing and relaxing effect on people. When she plays at Claridge Court, there is a man and a woman who always get in a fight and have to be separated by the nurses that work there.

Her harp, which the family has dubbed Isabella the Great, sits by the window in the dining room and Sophie says that it’s like a “magnet” to guests. Her friends, family and even repairmen are immediately pulled toward it when they walk into the house. Her younger sister, Grace, often sits in the seat next to the harp, pretending to play it and act like her big sister.

Music has always come easily for Sophie. From her uncle who plays classical guitar, to her aunt who plays the organ, to her cousins who play the piano, she always had the influence of music in her life. Sophie started playing the harp when she was in the fifth grade. She had been taking piano lessons for six years and decided to follow in the footsteps of her sister, Allie, an East graduate, who had started playing the harp when her grandfather, Ron Reussner, suggested it several years earlier.
“My wife, Elaine, heard a harpist who was a musical therapist,” Reussner said. “She talked about the joy and pleasure people felt when they hear the harp music. This story encouraged me to suggest this as a possible instrument for my granddaughters.”

Mrs. Fields said they looked into it and decided to give it a try.

“It was just kind of a random chain of events,” Mrs. Fields said. “We had no idea what we were getting into. But they were sucked in.”

Although Sophie is passionate about playing the harp, she admits there are disadvantages, too. To transport it, they have to put all the seats down in the car and lay it on pillows and blankets so it doesn’t get ruined. Taking it anywhere is a struggle, as you have to plan ahead of time how they can get their six foot harp into the building. If there’s no elevator, it can’t happen. It takes at least fifteen minutes to tune it, and finding a harp teacher that lives close by is hard, so she drives to Blue Springs, 45 minutes away, for her harp lesson.

But Sophie and Allie stuck with it, and once their parents were confident that they were committed to playing the harp, they finally decided to buy one of their own. They had previously been renting one, and Sophie, along with her family and harp teacher, Debbie Clark, took a trip to the Lion and Healy Harp Factory in Chicago, IL to buy one.

“They have all these different colors and sizes and there’s different designs on the harp and different ways they are shaped,” Sophie said. “We just played a couple of different ones and we compared the sound and the way they looked and then we picked out the one that was the best for us.”

Sophie doesn’t know what she wants to do with her future; all she knows is she will continue playing the harp as long as she can. Although she doesn’t plan on majoring in it in college, she wants to play on the side and keep bringing music into people’s lives.

“Some people would say I was angelic because I play the harp,” Sophie said. “I think it’s just fun to watch them appreciate it.”

Brilliant Ballerina

Junior Maggie Andriani dances across the stage, clad in a white, bedazzled costume. As she jumps up and down, her tutu drifts with her body. She moves gracefully, beautifully.

It’s taken years of practice. Training since she was three. Doing month-long summer intensives away from her family and friends for the past 5 years. Spending over 20 hours in the studio every week.

It’s taken months of work. Months of long rehearsals, sore feet and an aching body. Months of watching YouTube videos, trying to mimic exact movements of Bolshoy Ballet’s choreography of “Sleeping Beauty.”

She is Aurora, the leading princess, after all.

It’s Maggie’s first big role. She’s been in shows before. She’s had her own solo, or variation before. But now, it’s her time to shine. She’s the star.

“When I was casting for [the show], I just felt like Maggie had this very soft, gentle quality about her and she’s very strong technically,” Kansas City Ballet (KCB) Director Kim Cowen said. “I thought she would be the perfect youthful, yet strong combination to pull off for Aurora. She has a beautiful line, which is something that we look for in dancers.”

Focus. That’s what Maggie calls it. Drive. Motivation. That’s what her parents and dance instructors say. She’s always been like this, even since she was little.

Maggie’s mom, Renee, has her hands full. She’s holding three-year-old Maggie with one arm and a ginormous bag with the other as she enters the theatre. It’s December of 2000 and Renee is taking Maggie to the Nutcracker for the first time. Renee doubts Maggie will even pay attention.

“I brought a big bag full of cookies and little diversions, little toys and things thinking that she was going to get squirmy and fussy during it,” Renee said.

But from the moment the curtain opens until the moment it closes, Maggie sits still in Renee’s lap, riveted. Meanwhile, Renee’s best friend, Phyllis, was in and out of the auditorium throughout the entire performance trying to keep her daughter entertained.
That was the first of many signs that Maggie was destined to be a dancer. She started taking dance classes at a studio in Corinth Square, moving up levels much faster than her peers. The only time she’s ever thought about quitting was when she was in the fourth grade because of the time commitment. But her mom encouraged her to stick with it, and since then, all of Maggie’s motivation and drive to dance has come from herself.

When she was in eighth grade, she auditioned and made it into the Kansas City Youth Ballet (KCYB), a year before most of her peers. KCYB is the performing ensemble to the KCB School. Not only do KCYB members have separate classes and their own performances, they also take regular classes at the school. Maggie’s instructors find her unique because of her ability to challenge herself.

“She’s kind of like a sponge,” Cowen said. “She takes criticism well and always tries to apply it. She doesn’t want to accept that she just did it. She wants to do it even better each time.”

Since Mission Valley didn’t get out of school until 3:45 p.m., she had to start leaving school early on a daily basis to get to rehearsal on time. She’d get there early and leave late, getting home between 9 p.m. and 10 p.m. every night. She plowed through middle school, but as she entered high school, life became even more complicated.

It became a game. A game that took more balance. Drill Team. Newspaper. Ballet. Academics. Freshman year was hard. Sophomore year was harder. More homework. More dance classes. More balance. She was up past midnight on most nights, trying to get all of her homework done.

Diet has always been a part of Maggie’s routine. She eats about four or five small portions each day. Usually, eggs or a health shake for breakfast. For lunch, she’ll avoid the school food and just have V8 and goldfish. She’ll snack before dance on celery or nuts, and then have something with carbs after rehearsal, like pasta.

She’s no stereotypical ballerina. In fact, to Maggie, the stereotypical, “anorexic” ballerina doesn’t even exist. There’s no way she can function without taking in enough calories.

“I tell her, she’s basically an athlete,” her dad, Vince said. “She needs to eat the right way, take care of herself, make sure she gets enough rest when she can and all these things.”

Sticking with ballet hasn’t been easy. Missing Drill Team’s Spring Show for a KCB rehearsal. Recovering from a stress fracture in her foot. Going away every summer to study with other companies.

Last summer, Maggie spent a month studying with Joffrey Ballet. From 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. every day, she was dancing. Practicing technique, rehearsing for upcoming performances and pushing herself beyond what she knew she was capable of.

And all the hard work has paid off -- she’s been chosen as KCB’s student apprentice during her senior year of high school, an honor for just one out of nearly 30 KCYB students.

This means that Maggie will only be at school for half days, and the rest of her time will be spent at KCB. She will be in their world-renowned company, performing with professional dancers as understudies or characters in upcoming ballets. And she will be paid for shows she is in.

“I know she would love to be working,” Renee said. “And there’s a lot of things that she has to pass on because she doesn’t have the disposable income that maybe some other people have. Her opportunities to do that are really, really limited.”

Where other girls at school are buying new clothes, Maggie is putting all of her money towards ballet. Buying $60 leotards. Replacing $70 dance shoes every other week because they become worn. Participating in classes and summer intensives, adding up to thousands of dollars by the end of the year. Every chance she gets, she applies for scholarships and financial aid. But sometimes that isn’t enough.

“We’re not Rockefellers and there are kids that are on a career track for this who can do a lot of extraordinary stuff because they have the financial means to do so,” Renee said. “We do what we can and somehow it all comes together. She’s done a good job getting financial aid. Every little bit helps.”

Maggie has college to think about. Her younger brother and sister. Her family. Making the extra money with her KCB apprenticeship next year will make a difference, even if it’s just a small one.

Maggie’s scared. For college. For her career. For the future.

She wants to go to Indiana, or maybe Juilliard. Most companies want their cast members to finish up their training and education anyway. She thinks she’ll double major, but she’s not sure yet. Maybe in journalism or arts management. She has time to figure it out.

Maggie’s used to people judging her for wanting to be a ballerina. She knows they don’t think it’s a real career. She knows it’s a one in a million chance for a dancer to make it. But it’s what she’s passionate about.
Maggie might be worried for her future, but her teachers aren't. They know that she'll make it. “I guarantee,” Ballet Master Hyuk Ku Quan said. “The most important thing is all dancers need to have patience. Without patience, it doesn’t work out. I think Maggie has a lot of patience and she also has great passion.”
“Not cool!!” Kole shouted, as I swept his skateboard out from underneath him. He wobbled and then fell over on his elbows. He grumbled at me. “Really? Was that necessary?” he said with a sharp look.

I chuckled, “Now we’re even.”

We continued down the road to our destination, probably the most horrific place in Excelsior Springs. It was the sight of a gruesome suicide, and we had been dared to go to the building by ourselves...at night. We had brought a flashlight and some spare batteries but still weren’t prepared. We both stopped simultaneously on the sidewalk, our wheels falling slowly into the scratchy old wheel marks from long ago. I looked down at the cracked, shrub encased asphalt once more before we walked up the hill, the sun setting behind it in a purple haze.

I heard Kole sigh shakily and mutter, “Just toss your board in that thorn bush over there,” then began hiking up the grassy hill. I trudged upwards as slowly as possible, partly from fear and partly from exhaustion. I wasn’t prepared for what was next. At the top of the hill stood the most dilapidated building I had ever seen, trees growing through the walls and vines all over Wyman.

Some may have heard of Wyman. Most call it creepy, and refer to it as, “That old school downtown where that girl hung herself in the theater.” Well, Kole’s brother Kyle had dared us to visit it at night by ourselves and look behind the curtain in the auditorium, rewarding us$20 each. Probably the stupidest decision in my life.

We trekked up the hill to the old school and waded through the weeds to the backside of the building. By now the sun was almost all the way down, and we had to turn on our flashlight to find that tiny little crack in the door to climb through. The ultimate goal was to get all the way to the theatre where the girl had supposedly hung herself. The legend said that if you went there at night you could see her ghost hang herself, then turn and attack you. We only decided to do the dare because they were going to demolish the building soon; this was our last chance to break in.

We slipped silently through the broken plank that had been angrily hacked apart by someone many years ago. We crawled through the crack, being careful not to cut ourselves on the fragments of the old door. When we were in the building and finally stood up, we brushed the mouse dung off of ourselves and looked around. The walls were torn to shreds by the weather of the last 50 or 50 years, and it looked as if there were creatures living in every corner of the room, which readily appeared to be either a science classroom or a meth lab. Beakers and test tubes littered the countertops around us and petri dishes lay half open as if frozen in time. Some mysterious liquid dripped out of an overturned beaker nearby as if recently knocked over. We moved quickly through the room, stepping over piles of dirt and trash and kicking down the door on the other side. The musty smell of mold and rat poop stung the air. The hall that we were standing in was utterly depressing, dimly lit under the light of my dying flashlight, but we could clearly see the horror of it. Some walls were caved in, and cigarette butts covered the floor. Apparently people had been in here since the school was out of business, maybe even some bums living amongst the raccoons and mice. I could smell the rain that was sitting somewhere in the walls and the occasional pool of brownish, stagnant water lying sleepily on the floor. Obnoxious fumes danced in the air like toxic sprites, wanting to take away every ounce of my breath. If I held out a match the oxygen would burst into flames.

We moved through the rooms quickly, only stopping to murmur at some interesting pieces of trash and oddities, even though the building itself was an oddity. Kyle had told us to take video of the ghost. We kept hearing strange bumps and whispers coming from the second floor but had trained ourselves to ignore them, because we knew it would just freak us out if we thought about it. We knew it was an old building, and it had its creaks. Just then, our flashlight flickered. Then it flickered again. Then it dimmed and went out. I heard Kole gasp in the pitch black. He took out his iPod, and I could see his shaky breath rising in puffs of vapor, realizing with a start how cold it had gotten for a June night.

“I can’t go any further,” he said in a shaky voice. “There’s something about his building, something that shouldn’t be here, and something that was never meant to be here. Ever. And I think it’s me. I’m getting out, here’s my jacket. Good luck, I’ll be waiting for you on the outside. I won’t leave, I promise.” And with that eerie comment, strange coming from my typically fearless friend, he fled. I stood alone, with nothing but my iPod, my phone, and a dead flashlight, wrapped in my friend’s jacket. So utterly alone. Even though I could hear the rattle
of Kole escaping the building hastily, scraping his back against the bottom of the broken door, the silence in the hall was immense. I glanced around quickly, setting off in the direction of the auditorium.

The building creaked and moaned in the whispering wind of the summer evening. Kole said he would be waiting outside, right? He was right: there was something not right about this building. Almost like I was expecting a guy with a chainsaw around each corner—or worse. As if something lurked in the building, not visible, maybe in another dimension. But that couldn’t be; ghosts weren’t real. There was, however, something new and surprising (somewhat anyway, it all depends on your perspective of old abandoned schools) in every room I passed. I found many things littering the ground; mostly newspapers and such, but at one point I found something peculiar…something almost out of place. I bent over and picked up a single red rose, a single…fresh…red rose. I stuffed it into my pocket without another thought and kept walking. My fear rapidly faded into curiosity as I combed the dark building in search of the entrance to my destination. I found a nest of stray cats, a gold necklace, and the floorboards became newspapers. I bent over and picked one up. It was an old Excelsior Springs Standard, and the title read “Local Teen Hangs Self in Auditorium, Town Mourns Loss.” So it was true, the old story of the suicide. My heart skipped a beat. Was that a whisper? No, I was being paranoid.

A while later, I came around a final corner and saw a sign signifying the auditorium. The huge iron doors sat crooked on the ancient doorframe. It had been painted a vibrant red long ago, but a chilling feeling in the back of my head said that the red splatter on the front of the iron door was something other than blood. Something more sinister.

I paused for a moment to think about where I was and what I was doing. I took a deep breath and side-kicked the door down. I reminded myself, I was a 2nd Degree Brown Belt, so I could handle myself if a person was in there…probably. The auditorium was an enormous room, littered with trash and random items. I mean really random items. I walked to the back row of chairs, reached down and pulled out an old Xbox controller and a tire from an old BigWheel. I gazed up; an eerie silverish glow filled the room, seemingly from nowhere. There were rows of seats missing, and the carpet was ruined, so I walked on 2x4s. I couldn’t bring myself to look at the stage for some reason, as if I was being watched by it. I figured this was what I was here for, so I began to lift up my head. I stopped for a moment. My eyes grew to the size of basketballs. Along with the musty, wet smell of the old dank auditorium was a different smell. A smell that shouldn’t be here 50 or so years later. The metallic odor of blood.

I shuddered, took a deep breath, and the smell was gone. Thinking that my mind was playing tricks on me, I put my hand on the rose in my pocket. It felt colder than ice, which was strange because Kole’s coat was wool. Finally, I stopped stalling, and with one shakily solemn breath, I lifted my head up to gaze at the stage.

The first thing I noticed was the green curtain, which was always rumored to have been a violent shade of dark blue. Then I noticed that the musty reek of the ancient building had diminished. I turned around slowly and the previously ragged auditorium seats had miraculously repaired themselves. I shook myself back into reality; I was looking at a different set of seats than I had before, I told myself. The musty smell is only over there, I thought. I looked back up to the stage and located the stairs to the far right. Hastily jogging, I leapt to the top of the stairs and dashed over to the corner of the curtain. I gripped the velvety cloth with icy, thin fingers that didn’t really even look like mine anymore. I didn’t care anymore; I was so close. Even though the fear gripping my heart was unbearable, I began to draw back the curtain. I opened it just enough to peer in, but I stopped myself. Was that…sobbing? I heard, almost succumbed by the wind, a faint heaving of a woman crying. By now I was in such a hurry to get this over with, I ignored it and ripped back the curtain and froze.

In the center of the stage, covered in spotlights that came from…seemingly nowhere, was a woman tying a knot. She was dressed in a silky white dress, probably rehearsal for the role of a princess or something. She had a scared, white face, with tears streaming down her fair cheeks. I noticed the knot she was tying and nearly jumped out of my skin. It was a 13 loop hangman’s noose. I wanted to run over to her and grab the noose from her, tell her that it was a permanent solution to a temporary problem and she needed to think about it, but my feet didn’t move. With a jolt I realized I was witnessing the events of 50 years before. This wasn’t some modern drug addict trying to end it all; it was a 1950s high schooler, and I was reliving the past.

I watched in terror and shock, half because I was witnessing a suicide and half because I was witnessing the past firsthand. She lifted herself up onto a chair, threw the rope around a high stage beam and folded her hands in prayer. Just then a man ran in. I really mean ran in. He walked straight through the curtain about 20 yards away from me and knelt in front of the woman. His mouth was moving, but all I heard was the wind, and his body trembled with his sobs. He was talking to the girl, and she gave him a long and sorrowful look. He quickly grabbed
another rope, attempting to tie a fast noose. The woman mouthed something silently, and he froze, turning his head slowly to look directly at me. The girl was looking at me too. They both scowled; he barked something and then broke down into tears once again. She swiftly kicked the chair out from under her, going limp, sorrowfully swaying from side to side. The man, still looking at me held out his hand. His chilling, nearly transparent eyes were still locked into mine. I knew what he wanted. I stuffed my hand into my pocket and gave him the rose. He went back to uncontrollable sobbing and placed the rose near her feet, shooting me one more sad look. A crack in the wall that I had not noticed before blew in some leaves. I blinked as one hit my eye, and they were gone.
The tiny ivory hand sat on the elevator button, tracing it over and over again. Floor four mesmerized him. His hand found the panel the button was attached to. He ran his frail, thin fingers over it, feeling the smooth steel, and then he changed his position again. It wasn’t enough; he wanted more. He pulled a flashlight out of his pocket—the large pockets that devoured his small fingers.

My eyes found their way to the woman he was with—a motherly figure with hunched shoulders. She had wavy hair—it was easy to tell she had just crawled out of bed and maybe pulled a brush through it—her eyes were focused on me for a moment and then flashed to her son and back to me.

I smiled, reassuring her that I was no judge. Her son was safe from my verdict, and I saw her lips curl, so slightly, as we both turned to the boy again.

He was flashing his light up the shaft, watching it carry us higher. The faraway look in his eyes reminded me of a sleepwalker. A dreamer.

“Do you see anything interesting?”

He turned his eyes toward me and looked at me with those same dreaming eyes. “It’s an Otis,” he said, and the elevator released a small beep, signaling that we had arrived at the floor. He smiled as the doors slowly pulled a part and grabbed his mother’s hand, leading her out of the elevator.

I watched them walk down the hallway—it was white and smelled sterile, just as expected at a hospital. I found myself following them.

“Excuse me!” running down the hall, I waved my hand—they couldn’t get away from me. “Ma’am!” I called. She stopped, and unsurely, turned around, felt in her pocket, and adjusted her purse. “Did we lose something?”

“No, no. I’m sorry. I was intrigued by your son,” I scrambled to get my words together, breathing heavily, thinking fast. “You see, I am a writer. Something about your son inspires me. Can I write about him?” I laughed, “Excuse me! Where are my manners! I am Alex Davis, writer, as you know, but also owner of a bookstore.” I did the polite thing—offering my hand to the woman, whom seemed so worried about my reappearance. I took her hand into mine and saw how different we were. Her long, soft hands were beautiful, graceful; mine were rough and calloused.

“I am Andrea Calling,” she then picked up the small boy’s hand, placing it in mine. She looked into his eyes, pleading him to behave. “Tell him your name,”

I felt the fragility and his cool bone fingers resting in my palm; I shook it gently.

His eyes looked past me—through me. He wasn’t a part of this conversation, yet he was. He rocked slightly and spoke, “Isaac.”

“Hello, Isaac, I was wondering; what is an Otis?”

“Elevator,” his eyes flitted to his mother, and he smiled—straight-grinned, lopsided.

We were sitting in my library—his mother had dropped him off and gone to work. We talked for an hour before she left, and she made sure he was comfortable. She told me how he thinks, what he likes, doesn’t like, how to take care of him. I felt overwhelmed. We sat in the chairs next to each other by the computer.

I watched him get on the internet, knowing his way around like it was his home. He typed in Elevators and started to surf the videos. He rocked back and forth, touching his ears, waving his arms, so slightly, but all the while he was smiling.

“What is it about elevators that you like?”

He didn’t answer, just kept rocking—I could almost feel him losing himself in the screen. His sleepwalker’s eyes faded into the videos; the placidity settled in.

“This is a Thyssen Krupp,”

Several days of several videos, and words not spoken between us made me almost jump out of my chair.

“Yes? What does that mean?”
“It’s the elevator,” His eyes were focused on me, yet they still had that lost look. He smiled. “Do you like it?”
I felt myself grinning. “Yes! Yes I do!”
“Me too,”
“What is your favorite?”
“Dover,”
“Let’s watch a video on a Dover.” His giggling increased and didn’t cease until he went home that evening.

Waiting. He was late. I started to worry.
He’s always on time.
I pulled out my phone and called his mother. “Hello, Andrea?”
Voicemail.
My stomach churned, and I stepped out of my store, looking up and down the street. His slow, shuffling steps were nowhere. I waited to see the straight grin come into my sight, but I didn’t. “Isaac!”
I ran down the street, blindly, hoping that maybe I would just find him.

“Alex!” I heard a small giggle.
My heart stopped. “Isaac! Where have you been? You know you are supposed to meet me in my store at three-thirty.” I could hear a surging sound in my ears, as the blood pumped fiercely through my body.
“There’s an elevator,” he pointed inside the store, and I felt my heart rate return.
“Okay, let’s go ride it. But listen to me, never do that again. Always come to my shop first,” I took his hand, desperate not to lose him again, and took him through the glass doors.

He squealed as the elevator came into sight, and he tugged on my hand. I encouraged his enthusiasm with a smile. His dreamer’s eyes looked into mine, silently asking if it was okay if he pressed the button. I nodded.
He touched it delicately, as if it would wilt away. His curiosity tangled his thoughts – he could only focus on the elevator as shadows fell on the rest of the world. We entered, and he pressed the button, giggling, “Alex! It’s a Dover,”
“It’s mirrored too,” I noticed and peered at myself in the mirror and then Isaac, who was touching the glass with interest. “What do you see in the mirror, Isaac?"
He didn’t respond for a while as he inspected the plate the buttons were on and then the shaft. "Me,” he said, through the thick shadows of his realm.
“You see yourself?” When he didn’t respond, I put my hand on his shoulder. “Isaac, what do you want to do as an adult?”
“Film elevators,” the dreaming look in his eyes swelled so greatly. I felt my thoughts being tugged at as I struggled to remain in his realm with him – the shadows were growing lighter.
“Why?”
He giggled, "They are..." he found the buttons again and traced the manufacturer name.
“What?”
“I like them.”

The next day we sat in my library, this time listening to some records. He hadn’t seen a record player before, so I thought it would be fun to experience. I put one on and told him to be careful.
He squealed while it turned, and I saw the dreaming look appear in his eyes, as he touched the ornate wood that the record player sat in.
I smiled. “I was thinking about what you said the other day in the elevator, Isaac.” I studied his movements. He seemed like an old man in a child’s body – he just wanted to do what made him happy. He slowed down the time he had – less fixed on getting things done and making money. It may be foolish, but I couldn’t help but wish that I was lost in time too.
I could see the placid look in his eyes as he swayed to the music, one hand in his pocket, the other tugging at his earlobe, wise, and serene. We listened to records all evening.

“How’s school?” I asked, as we started our afternoon snack. Yogurt for the both of us, sitting next to each other with my records playing again.
“Good,"
“What subject do you like?”
“History,” he said, taking another bite of his strawberry yogurt.
“I have some history books, you may like,”
“Do you have any about elevators?”
“I ordered one just for you,” I handed it to him, watching him open it and start reading with his senses: he felt the glossy pages and smelled the musky undertone of the cover. He ingested the words, as he did with his videos. I envied how beautiful everything was to him—the curiosity and thought he had. I could watch him admire something for hours. Something new was just another thing to discover—he did it so well—delving into whatever he loved.

The placid, dreaming look in his eyes felt so lost; however, he wasn’t empty. He was a sleepwalker—sometimes he just wasn’t in the same moment with us. He wanted someone to come with him sometimes; he liked to disappear into a new moment with someone he trusted. And now I could disappear with him, in his moment, and could understand how he could be so lost.

A moment so beautiful was in front of me right now; reading a book, listening to music, eating my yogurt—I was a sleepwalker too. Slowing down—losing myself in elevators and record players. I looked into the mirror and saw the placidity in my own eyes—my dreaming eyes were far away—and I was lost.
It was one of those long November afternoons which linger for hours in a dim twilight. Professor Linden had finished grading papers and sat in her office, chin in her hand, watching dusk fall outside. On evenings like this she felt rather old.

A ray of deep gold light, some misplaced relic of the summer, flashed through the diamond-paned windows as the sun began its final descent. Professor Linden heard the church bells toll five-thirty. She lingered. The light vanished, and Professor Linden, alone in her dark room, closed the blinds and headed for home.

Home was a tiny apartment down the street from campus. As she climbed the narrow stairs, she could hear glasses clinking and voices laughing. It seemed that people had started dinner early. She did not usually feel very hungry these days, but the smell of roasting turkey made her mouth water. She entered her kitchen at last and made her own supper and then sat down to eat it in the company of Thomas Hardy’s *Far From the Madding Crowd*. The steam from her soup was warm and fragrant, and it seemed to mix with Hardy’s metaphors and surround her in a soothing cloud. The meadows of the English countryside she knew so well opened out before her and she felt the thrumming of Dorset’s springtime glory in her own veins. Around her, flowers burst into bloom, and newborn calves sniffed at tender grass. She was the heroine, coyly examining her own beauty in a mirror; she was the hero, a shepherd caring for his beloved flock. Tragedy loomed: lost loves, destructive tempests, young women whose youth had been taken from them. Yet within the sorrow lay an abiding hope, and even the sorrow was couched in words of exquisite beauty.

“Books are more reliable than people,” Professor Linden said quietly to herself, like one repeating a well-learned prayer before giving herself up to the story.

It was late—perhaps ten o’clock—before she looked up from her book. The remains of her soup were cold. She covered the bowl with plastic wrap and cleaned her small kitchen. She glanced again at her book and felt the luxury of having at least two hundred pages left. The beloved characters would stay with her for several days yet. Humming a little to herself, Professor Linden decided to take a walk.

The air was really cold now, and the cobblestoned avenues were silent. The quiet steps of Professor Linden’s sensibly-clad feet echoed like thunder in the emptiness. She passed the quad, where wind rustled the dead foliage and the street lamps’ shadows danced under the trees. “A difficult time and place to be alone,” she thought as those who watch the snow from behind warm window panes think with a shiver that the cold must be unbearable. She was not feeling alone any more.

Habit directed her path toward the library, which was closed for the Thanksgiving holiday. It was a modern structure, all glass and metal, except for one much smaller wing, which was very old and never locked. There they kept books which had fallen into disrepair but were not old enough to be interesting: marked-up textbooks, ‘80s romance novels, obsolete tomes of finance or philosophy which had never been famous and were never going to be. Professor Linden seldom bothered entering here. Her favorite English novels and volumes of literary criticism resided in places of honor on one of the library’s major floors. Tonight, though, she was feeling such goodwill toward all books that she thought she would stop in and have a look at the poor discarded things. She crept around the side of the library and put her shoulder to the heavy door. She heard weeping.

It came from the other side of the door, high-pitched and desperate, with scarcely a breath between each choking sob. Tears started in Professor Linden’s eyes as she listened. She knew this grief. It was that of a young person in anguish, when the whole world seems hopeless and happiness a false dream.

With the sound Professor Linden was transported back thirty years, to a series of unhappy evenings she’d spent in the stacks of this very library while pursuing her PhD. Vividly she recalled the gnawing doubts that had surged into her heart as she stared at some great text, wondering what she could possibly say about it that hadn’t been said before. She had felt futile and lonely. As long as she could remember, she had buried herself in her books and shunned the outside world, but sometimes the outside world shunned her, friends moved on and forgot her, and still she sat there and interpreted passages that had already been analyzed a thousand times. The feeling that she was wasting her life and isolating herself for nothing had filled her with crippling misery. She had put her flushed cheeks against the pages and cried just like this.

She pushed open the door and went in.
On the bare cement floor, her back against one of the rickety bookshelves, sat a small, blond undergraduate with her knees drawn up to her forehead. She did not look up when Professor Linden entered.

“Oh, my dear,” Professor Linden said, and knelt beside her. “Is there anything I can do? Do you want to talk about it?”

“It’s nothing,” the girl stammered. Professor Linden waited.

“It’s stupid,” said the girl. “I feel like some silly high school kid crying over her best friend.”

“Have you lost your best friend?” Professor Linden asked gently.

The girl shrugged her trembling shoulders. “I don’t even know,” she replied. “I’ve just been studying a lot lately, and she’s got other people to hang out with. I was supposed to go to her house for Thanksgiving tonight because my parents are out of the country, but I think she just forgot about it, because we planned it so long ago. I couldn’t bring myself to call her and tell her—tell her she forgot about me.”

The sobs, which had subsided for a moment, overpowered the girl again. “I just don’t think I’m worth that much these days,” she choked out. “I don’t think I really matter to anyone.”

Professor Linden swallowed.

“What’s your major?” she inquired. The girl gulped. “Math.”

“Do you love it?” asked Professor Linden.

The girl nodded slowly, forehead still pressed against her knees.

“There,” Professor Linden said. “That means you’re worth something.”

“Why?” the girl whispered.

“Because you care about something beyond yourself,” the professor answered, wishing she could explain it better. The girl did not respond, so she continued: “What I mean is that I know it feels like everything has been done before. All the equations have been solved. All the natural phenomena have been explained. But if you work hard enough, someday you will think a thought about math that has never been thought before. You will have an idea that no one else has had. Even if it only happens once in your whole life, that idea will be part of human progress, part of the next great innovation. A tiny part, maybe, but no innovation happens without all the tiny parts. With that tiny idea, you will have changed the world.”

“Does that really happen for everyone, though?” the girl asked, turning up her tear-stained face. “Has it happened for you?”

Professor Linden pondered. “I don’t know if I’ve changed the world or not,” she said. “What ended up happening for me was that I came to love books and teaching so much that it didn’t matter. I loved it all too much to believe that I was worthless for pursuing it.”

The girl dried her eyes shakily. “I can understand that.”

“If you have doubts, my name is Professor Linden. I’ll be in the English Department. Do come and talk to me. I would love to get to know you better.”

“I will. My name is Sarah,” the girl replied eagerly. “Thank you—thank you so much.”

They sat for a moment in silence, then rose and walked out of the library together. Before they went on into the night Professor Linden turned to Sarah again.

“Just promise me one thing,” she said. “Call your friend. She is probably missing you.”

“I don’t think she is,” Sarah sighed. “But I’ll call.”

“Good,” Professor Linden said and turned towards her apartment. She paused to listen as Sarah’s voice wafted through the clear air, tearfully but happily laying bare her heart to her friend on the phone. Professor Linden smiled and went on her way, having no phone calls to make.
Life is an equation,
Adding and subtracting people from your life,
trying to find the solutions to the variables that make you make sense.
And sometimes the graph of your personality
is hard to read.
When what’s supposed to be a line
looks like a scatter plot –
you’re left without a calculator, and
life is sending you even problems
with no answers in the back of the book.
Take all of your inequalities to the second power:
an imaginary number;
you don’t belong under your own square roof.
When you look at yourself in the mirror,
you only notice all of the symmetry that isn’t there.
When what used to be parallel
starts to intersect,
creating the long division between him and I
at coordinates (-10, 10) (10, -10),
a story problem with no solution:

If boy and girl are in love but boy+girl<3^2/miscalculations x repeated
x<3=confusion+heartbreak then what is the value of boy+girl?

SHOW ALL WORK.

I write one number:
0.
Because most of the time x and y don’t belong together.
They start the equation as coefficients,
but one always ends up isolated.
The real love story
is between the number and the solution,
because even though they are on two different sides of the equal sign,
their values are the same.
Yes,
One’s a letter
and the other a number,
but Roman numerals say it’s possible
that, while one says I love you,
the other counts on his fingers how many times he’d say it back.
They decide to live in the table of contents
because that’s where the letters and the numbers stand beside each other
at the beginning of every
love story.
Don’t be afraid of
the difference.
Make your equation
an absolute value
and doodle a heart
when you have to
SHOW ALL WORK.
I pulled back and put all my weight into the cut as I powerfully slashed through the soft blanket of powder. I glided down the mountain and braced my body for another cut back. I leaned back and sliced through the snow, sending a spray of powder racing behind me. Again I braced my body, but this time I dug my heel into the back of my ski and jolted to a halt sending another spray of snow dashing behind me. I was in my favorite place: Breckenridge, Colorado.

The chilled touch of the winter breeze brushed up against my cheeks. I closed my eyes and took in the fresh scent of winter seeping into my nostrils. I opened my eyes and, with one last deep breath, stood in astonishment, gazing at the beauty of the mountain, looking up at the lightly grey shaded sky and picking out one of the flickering snowflakes. I focused my full attention on it, watching it flutter toward the Earth in a series of swirls and flips, twisting its way through the emptiness of space, landing on the cool earth as another thread added to the thick blanket of white that covered the ground.

Finally, I gazed out in awe at the surreal scenery surrounding me. The snow glistened an elegant yet peculiar hue of glimmering white, as the sunrays bounced off the gleaming mirror of snow, giving it an exquisite sparkle. I focused on the refreshing scent of the pine trees, which appeared as if they purposefully stabbed out of the mountain trail markers guiding the other skiers and snowboarders back to the base. A voice yelled at me over the whistling wind.

“You ready to go back to the base?” asked a large thirteen-year-old boy dressed in a dark black jacket with a single white stripe cutting across his chest. Jake, one of my best friends, was wearing a light red pair of skis, with piercing silver clips buckling his boots into place. He held faded sky blue poles in his grasp and wore thick black gloves on each of his hands.

“Yeah,” I noticed my reflection in his mirrored goggles which were outlined in a dark black color of plastic that hugged his face to shield him from the winter elements. “We need to wait for your…”

Before I could finish, a skier in a black and red coat came speeding down the mountain. At the last second, Ryan, Jake’s dad, he abruptly snapped his ski sideways and sent a wave of snow our way.

“There he is,” I muttered with a slight smile, glancing at the man that had just piled spine chilling powder onto us.

He wore a coal black helmet with auburn red skis. He grasped a pole in each hand that paired congruently in color with his skis.

“You guys ready to hit the bottom?” he asked with a friendly smirk on his face.

“Yeah, we were just waiting for you,” Jake replied. Then without another word, I softly careened forward and started down the mountain. I could feel the winter air penetrating the slits in my goggles, sending a shiver trickling down my spine.

I watched Jake and Ryan as they raced ahead of me. Being the more experienced skiers, they looked like a pair of bullets weaving in and out of other skiers and snowboarders, spraying up fragments of snow with their sharp cuts. I trailed behind them, reaching the base a few seconds after they did.

“How’d that run feel?” Ryan questioned while we stood in line for the chair lift.

“Awesome!” I answered, shuffling forward in the line.

“Great,” Jake replied.

“I think you’re ready for a bowl!” Ryan exclaimed. Jake and I shared a nervous glance at each other. The bowls were the steepest tallest parts of the mountain that towered far above anything we’d skied before.

“Is the weather okay up there?” I questioned, knowing that at the higher elevation the climate was more vulnerable to extreme conditions and could be dangerous.

“It looks clear, and the workers haven’t closed it down, so we should be fine,” replied Ryan, deflecting my excuse.

“I don’t see why we shouldn’t,” Jake joined in bravely.

“It’s a good day, and we might not get another chance to go up there before we have to go back to Kansas City.”
It was our turn to hop on the chair lift. Being closer to the mechanical monster, I could now hear the roar of the pulleys lugging the freezing metal seats up and down the mountain. The silver bars that were waist-high opened, signaling us to move forward. We then stopped at the yellow line that showed us where the chairs would come swinging in. Suddenly the lift chair swung around the corner, taking a quick dip that swept us off our feet, suspending our skis in the air.

"I guess if you guys are up for it, I'm in," I said finishing the conversation. Ryan pulled out a map and showed us the path we would take to reach the bowl.

"Right now, we are on the Independence lift chair. We'll have to get off this, ski down Lower Forget-Me-Not, take the T-bar up to the top, and then slowly make our way over to the Peak seven bowl." By the time he described our path, we were nearing the end of the lift chair. Again we could hear the loud motoring roar of the chair lift. It slowly brought us back down to earth which gave a sort of gliding sensation, until our skis lofted back onto the snow.

"We'll meet at the T-bar," Ryan reminded us one last time before he started on his way down Lower Forget-Me-Not.

Jake followed closely behind, and again I trailed both of them. Lower Forget-Me-Not was very easy to navigate but proved challenging. Berms that popped out of the mountain forced me to anchor myself up past them with my poles. I finally finished up Lower Forget-Me-Not and headed towards the T-Bar, which was very similar to a chair lift, but instead of sitting on a chair, two people lean back against each side of an upside down "T" shaped pulley that tows them uphill. I glared at the machine, remembering how much of a puzzle it had been the first time I had been towed up by its limp grip. Like a circus act, I had to somehow put enough weight on the "T" so it could pull me up but not too much or the bar would just come out from behind my legs. I also couldn't lean left or right too far, otherwise the bar would swing one way too much and I would fall off. I also had to make sure the bar wasn't too high on the back of my legs or too low, and on top of all of this I had to balance on it with another person!!! It was going to be quite a conundrum to reach the peak without falling off.

"Are you going with me?" Jake asked, edging forward while waiting in the line.

"Yeah," I replied, sliding across the snow. Ryan slid up to the gate and was paired with another single skier. The gates opened, and he used his poles as leverage to force himself forward. The T-bar swung around the corner, rammed into the back of their legs and started towing them uphill. You could tell at first they had some troubles balancing but eventually found a comfortable position they were able to hold while they weathered the long ride to the peak. On our turn to conquer the enigma, the worn silver gates opened, and we slid out onto the T-bar pickup area, watching as the bar screamed around the corner and thrust into the back of our legs. We started our circus act of balancing. At first we were good, ascending up the hill without any trouble, and then...

"WATCH OUT!" Jake yelled over the howling wind.

"LEFT, LEFT, LEFT!" I screamed. The two skiers in front of us had fallen off the T-bar and were in the pathway. We tried to swerve around them, but our mobility was cut off since we couldn't leave our T-bar. The skier on the right popped out of the way quickly, but the skier on the left was trapped in quicksand. We were about five feet away before he regained his footing, but it was too late. The T-bar knocked us right into the skier, causing us to momentarily lose control. The T-bar swung left knocking me off balance. My skis crossed over each other and caused me to lose control. Swiftly I rammed my ski out from under my other one.

Out of pure luck we were able to regain control of our skis and keep ascending the steep mountain.

At the top, we met back up with Ryan.

"You boys ready?" he asked.

"Yeah," Jake replied.

"Yep," I answered nervously.

We slowly started towards the bowl, having to use our poles to anchor ourselves through a flat path.

"Wow," I uttered in admiration, realizing I was in awe at the paradox that shined everywhere. I had this benevolent mountain with sparkles dancing across the cloudy powder. The sun's polished white fingertips reached out to touch every part of the mountain. The angelic call of nature urged me to put down my poles and lie in the snow. I closely inspected the snowflakes as they chased each other in the delicate breeze drifting towards the earth.

I looked at the great vastness of the enormous mountain compared to the little miniscule town of Breckenridge. I couldn't tell if the ski trail beckoned me to return to the safe haven of the cozy town or trick me into getting lost in the vicinity of this great brute of a mountain. After another quick analysis of the situation, the
bowl looked my only hope for survival. It was an incomprehensible feeling, as if I was on top of the world—or about to walk off it.

“This is incredible!” I exclaimed.

“I know. It’s awesome,” Jake replied, as his gazed scoped out the amazing scenic view.

“You guys go first, and I’ll follow behind in case you crash and can’t get back up,” Ryan told us.

I thrust my poles into the snow and forced myself to start down the mountain. I leaned forward, trying to go at a controlled speed, but I underestimated the steepness of the colossal beast. Gaining velocity, I couldn’t slow down. My skis started wobbling under the incredulous speed. I tried swerving sideways to reduce my speed, but my ski got trapped in a clump of powder. POP! My boots were ripped out of my ski clamps. My body was thrown like a ragdoll repeatedly slamming against the mountain. My limbs flared out, and I tumbled downward, ferociously slammed against the unforgiving mountain. Finally, I came to a bone-cracking stop.

I could feel the pain erupting throughout my body. Knives swam through my veins, reaching out to every inch of my body, stabbing at my tender skin. I could feel my heart slamming against the inside of my chest. My lungs sucked in air, trying to catch up with my racing heart.

“Are you ok?” Ryan yelled as he came blazing in to help me with one of my skis.

“Yeah, I think so,” I replied, scrambling up and grabbing my ski from Jake who had picked up the other one on his way down.

“Thanks,” I said.

“Yeah, you good?” Jake questioned.

“I’m fine, man. Thanks for getting my ski,” I answered him wearily.

“Should’ve gotten that one on video,” Ryan said jokingly after he knew I was ok.

“No kidding,” I said with a laugh.

“You guys ready to finish this bowl up and get to the bottom?” I noticed we still had half of the bowl and the rest of the mountain to ski down.

“Yeah,” they both replied after making sure I was OK last time.

“Race you to the bottom,” I told Jake jokingly.

“You’re on,” he replied kiddingly with a sly smile.

“Be a little more careful this time,” Ryan warned me.

“Got it,” I said, knowing I would still try to gain speed towards the bottom.

Again, I thrust my poles into the snow and started down the mountain. This time I was ready to cut quicker. I kept a bend in my knees and braced my body for the impact of the turn, snapping my skis sideways. I started to pick up some speed again and prepared my body for another turn. Gaining enough speed and lashing my skis around, I zig zagged back and forth, slashing and whipping my skis sideways to prevent picking up too much speed until the last hundred yards or so of the bowl. I bent my knees to ninety degrees and tucked my poles under my arms, preparing my body to withstand high speeds. I could feel my velocity increasing as the wind blasted past my face. My skis started to totter under my increasing speed. I was flying. It didn’t even feel like I was on the snow any more. I was lighter than air, soaring above the ground. Nearing the bottom of the bowl, I prepared my body to stop. I whip-lashed my ski sideways, jolting my body to a stop, sending a tsunami of snow slamming behind me.

“That bowl was awesome,” Ryan said coming off the bowl moments behind me.

“Yeah, that was amazing,” I agreed.

“Definitely,” Jake replied.

“I can’t wait to get home and hop in the hot tub. My legs are aching!” I exclaimed.

“Let’s hurry up and get down there then,” Ryan shouted as he started to edge towards the hill.

For the last time I thrust my poles into the now crispy snow and started my way down the the much less vigorous section of the mountain.

“That was an incredible day of skiing,” I said.

“Yeah,” both of them agreed.

“You guys ready to go back to the condo?” Ryan asked.

“You guys go ahead. I’ll catch up.”

“You sure?” Jake asked.

“Yeah. I’ll catch up.”

“Got it, man” Jake said.
“See you there.” I watched them start their journey back to the condo.

One last time I looked up at the mountain that towered over me in all of its malicious benevolence. I closed my eyes and took in one last breath of winter, letting the scent ease its way into my nose and rest there for a minute. I could feel the breeze tickle the back of my neck. With one last deep breath I opened my eyes and stood in astonishment, gazing at the beauty of the mountain. For the final time I gazed up at the lightly grey shaded sky and again I picked out one of the flickering snowflakes. I focused my full attention on it, watching it dance in the breeze as it spiraled its way through the emptiness of space, landing on the cool earth as another thread added to the thick blanket of white that covered the ground.
Abigail Jones
The Fence
Columbia-Hickman High School

Outside my village stands a fence so old and forgotten that no one remembers why it is there. Rusted and looming, it stands there a guardian or oppressor; I do not know. I often dream of it, climbing it, walking into the vast desert, walking away from all responsibilities, problems, burdens. Then I wake up. I always wake up. I must.

My oldest sister is one of the few who crossed the fence. Fleeing from duty. Fleeing from marriage. She left full of fiery passion with hope shining in her bright gray eyes as she told me, "Raashad, the world is so much bigger than this village. Bigger than Mother and Father. I can be anything I want beyond that fence." So she left our dusty village, turning toward the optimistic future.

Mother and Father never acted the same after Kimi left. Mother gazed blankly out past the hills, clutching her chest as the night grew old. Father sat, lost in thought, at Kimi's desk where she once wrote for hours on end, her hands a flurry of motion, scribing thoughts that would change the world. His hands cupping his face, Father waited for Kimi to come back.

The Fence waited with him.

Time went on. Father started coughing up blood in the night, his small frame shaking over a wash bin. I couldn't sleep those nights. Sneaking up to the door, peering through the cracks, I saw Mother's body trembling under the stress of holding up Father, as if she thought that by holding onto him, he would stay with us. If she could be his strength, he could stay. If only.

During the day, after the long nights, mother feverishly murmured a song of old, one that haunts me now. Her humming became fainter and fell from a sweet melody to the chant of a madwoman: "My love left me away...The sea took him to stay...My heart yearns for him...Love me does he...In the dark oceans grim...my love where are you...to return to me..."

The fence listened as her sad song echoed across the barren land.

Ten days after the summer equinox, my sister returned. Some village boys had found her just five miles outside the village, within the fence.

"Raashad, Kimi is back!"

But this girl was not my sister.

This girl lay there like a broken rag doll. Her eyes were dead. Her lips silent, in a permanent grimace. She wore a mask hiding the girl she used to be. As I led her home, I felt the fence's stare boring into my soul. It whispered to me, "Freedom comes with a price. What are you willing to pay?"

My sister's hand gripped mine like a child, afraid to let go. Glancing about like a wild creature, every person seemed a threat to her. She became my shadow, clinging to my back as we made our way home. When we at last arrived, she shrunk from Father as he approached. Whimpering, she backed into the corner, as if we were strangers to her. "Mala! Kimi is back," Father called to Mother, his voice cracking.

Mother rushed in, dropping the plates she held. "What has happened to my little girl?" she cried, scooping her tattered daughter into her arms. Kimi sagged, not returning Mother's embrace, and rested her head against Mother's shoulder staring out at empty space. "Oh my child," Mother rasped as she guided her out of the room.

With crinkled eyes, Father instructed me to go to bed as he rushed out the door. In my bed, I could hear him outside—shouting, screaming at the gods—until he coughed and hacked and finally fell silent.

The day after Kimi's return, I waited for some reminiscence of her former self: a story of the city, a poem she thought of while away, anything. But she stared into the hard grooves of the old desk. Her knuckles whitened as her fingers bit into the desk's splintered edge. This ghost of my sister was a haunting memory of who she used to be. We knew unspeakable things happened to her beyond the fence. but we could not bring ourselves to try to make her tell.

Sometimes I woke to sobs that wracked her body as she tried to curl in upon herself. On those nights, I held her because I didn't know what else to do, and I sung one of Mother's lullabies for comfort:

"Hush my child it will be alright.  
Little white lilies dance throughout the night.  
As your dreams take you away,  
I will be here to stay."
Sleep peacefully,
My little white lily
Dancing with the night."

She eventually quieted into a deep sleep, resembling death. When Father woke to see her tearful face, his feverish eyes squinted back loathsome tears of pain. His bitter tears triggered a fit of coughs, replacing her quieted sobs with a different sound. The sound of his slow death filled our house that would not remain silent. My younger siblings looked to me asking about father, their eyes wide and lips tight. I tried to comfort them, repeating over and over that he would be alright. But my voice became hollow even to me.

Kimi’s pain seemed the final blow. The night before he died, he beckoned me to his side. “When I die, Raashad, you must take care of this family, the role of eldest male falls to you.” My hands shook with fear. Father saw a scared child inside my wide eyes and gripped my hands. “I am so sorry, I am so sorry,” his last words to me.

We found his frail body in bed the next morning. Mother clutched his cold hands begging, “Please come back, come back, my love!” She remained for a whole night and day until the village men came for him. We had to pry her hands from his. The other children huddled together in a corner, eyes wide, clutching each other’s hands.

I felt the eyes of the fence watch with them, as our world changed forever.

Ever since that night, mother wanders about the house sweeping, uttering phrases under her breath that only she understands. My younger siblings tug on my arms, asking what is wrong with Sister and Mother, and where Father went. I know not how to answer them. The grief within this place is so great; I worry for the soundness of our minds. I go to work where I can find it. I cook, and I dress and clean the young ones. The role of Father and Mother has fallen to me at fifteen. The road ahead seems hopeless and burdened.

Sometimes, though, I dream of a fence—so old and forgotten, no one really remembers why it is there. I dream of climbing over that fence and walking into the vast desert, just walking. Leaving the fence and all my burdens behind.
Danielle Komo
One Side of a Collide
Columbia-Hickman High School

With barely 4 dreamless hours of sleep this morning I numbly hold the steering wheel as my eyelids are elephants and my head is emptier than a playground on a cold winter’s night. I can’t drive, I thought, I’m too tired; I need someone else to drive. I guide my eyes to the passenger seat and then pull them back to the road. Faith is sitting there with headphones blasting, making her oblivious to all while she stays in her paradise and leaves me alone in a cold car with only a quiet hum from her music to keep me awake.

“What day is today?” I ask myself when we crest over the hill before the light on College and Broadway. I forget my thoughts and look at the stop lights. Two intersections. One behind the other with the lights looking the same. Two green lights and three red lights. Is that green for me? I wonder, Yes, no? I can’t tell, but no one is passing through so it must be mine, right? I approach the light, and before I pass the line I realize it’s not my light, but it’s too late to slam on the breaks because no one said “Stop!” and no one slowed time and no one saved me or my sister from my mistake.

A loud thunder clashed in my left ear, but it seemed silent compared to the sound of a spinning car, a sister yelling, and a city in a mixer. When the jolt of running into a road drain runs through my body, I can’t see anything because my glasses are lost in the abyss. I hunt for my glasses; I can’t see without them, and I needed them for school which I’m running late for. I find them.

I hear the unclicking of my seat belt, and without thinking, I walk out of the smoking trash pile and make my way to the sidewalk where my sister is standing, shivering, stunned. I stare at the car. In eight meshed seconds my mom’s right-off-the-assembly-line 2012 Gallant went from a sexy sleek metallic red to a dull lipstick red with a tangle of mingling wires, metal, tin, oils, and juices that bled onto the ice-cold pavement, creating a mist that made the damage glow with embarrassment.

I try to find the other guy.

Old pickup truck. The man isn’t moving. Another man runs out to the intersection. The truck has a small wrinkle on the left of its hood, and some metal frames peek out. I force my eyes to assess the man. He’s holding his head. There’s blood. Lots of blood. Blood sprayed on the windshield, blood blotted on the steering wheel, and blood staining his face. His hands are covering his eyes and nose. From feet away I see him shaking which is bad; it means he’s in a lot of pain which means there was a lot of damage.

And it’s real.

This isn’t an action movie. There’s no escape and no one to come in a getaway car and no one to reverse this. If he dies, I’m the killer. I’m hardly out of high school; I can’t take his life.

“Call 911!” I finally hear my sister say. Apparently she had been shaking me for a minute or so.

Breathe.

Prepare for the questions. Get ready for Dad’s yelling. Brace for Mom’s worry.

Dial.

“911, what’s your emergency?”

Tell.
Bre Legan
Pansies
Conway High School

day xxxvii

“It wasn’t supposed to happen this way.”
I feel her eyes bear down on me; the stare is glacial. I try not to shudder as I turn from her icy gaze. She’s right, I tell myself. It wasn’t supposed to happen this way. And yet, it did. If only I could turn back time—back to before, back when everything was normal—an immaculate perfection, though we didn’t know any better. (You never do until it’s too late.)

Nothing you confess, could make me love you less

day i

He twirls a piece of red curly hair in his fingers, his eyes trained on his ratty sneakers. He bites his lip and furrows his brow, as if he’s debating on whether or not to tell us something. I sigh and cross my arms.
“Danny, what’s going on?”
“Yeah bro, come on—out with it,” I say, leaning forward, giving him an encouraging smile.
His eyes flicker with indecision. Taking a deep breath, he opens his mouth, his voice tiny and quiet—nothing like his usual dramatic air. “I—I’m...”
“Hey, whatever it is,” I say, “nothing could change the way we feel about you. We’re friends for life, right?” I nudge the light haired girl beside me.
His eyes glimmer with hope, and he offers a small smile. “I’m—I’m gay.”
Well, except for that.

I feel like I’m breaking inside
day xxxvii

It feels like she can see through me into my soul. Completely exposed under her relentless scrutiny, I’m under her mercy. It was me who couldn’t accept him for who he was, who constantly pressured him to change his ways, who wouldn’t leave him alone, wouldn’t let him be him. It’s because of me that he lies on that cold metal table. But maybe, just maybe, it’s not him—some other kid with curly red hair and emerald eyes and that one mole below his left eye shaped like a star. It’s hard to lie to myself, but I can’t think about it. I can’t think about how he had his whole life ahead of him. I can’t.
I tell myself that that is not the remnants of the living, breathing thing that was Daniel Williams, though there’s little succor in that. It is something, though—something to lessen the immense guilt consuming me, little by little, from the inside out. She still glares, and a part of me wants to know why she gives no mercy, why she continues the torture that’s worse than shouting or any physical pain. Only, I don’t deserve mercy. I deserve everything she gives me, maybe even more. So I let her stare—I let her remind me of what I did.

The soothing light at the end of your tunnel is just a freight train coming your way
day i

The smile on my face falters. “You’re what?”
The girl beside me seems similarly surprised. “You are?”
He lets the orange curl go and gives us a sheepish grin. “I’m gay, guys. I’m gay.”
I find myself shaking my head, my fists clenched. “Do you hear what you’re saying? I mean, you can’t just—
How can you—“
“Cal, I’m as straight as a circle; there’s no denying that.”
Silence grips the air for a moment, before the white haired girl breaks it. “Are—are you sure? I mean, this is big. Are you positive?” she asks timidly, twiddling her thumbs.
He nods. “Well then,” she reaches out and places a hand on his knee. “If you’re happy, then we’re happy, right Cal?” I don’t answer.

All we are is dust in the wind
day xxxvii

“You thought the same way I did,” I whisper, looking up from the white tiled floor. I meet her piercing gaze, returning the look with this new revelation. She stares, her crystalline eyes unblinking. “You didn’t like what he said. You didn’t believe him, either. The only difference between us is that I took action. I tried to save our best friend’s soul. I didn’t know that bouquet had a bee in—”

“But what are the odds?” she snaps, cutting in, and my bravado disappears. “Out of all the bouquets in the flower shop, you picked that one. And—”

“Shut it!” I yell. Her eyes narrow, but I continue. “It’s not like I bought them with killing him in mind!” It’s silent because I admitted what I wouldn’t say, even to myself—I killed him.

Maybe we just need love
day iii

“You still have time to change your mind,” I say, pulling my worn black Bible from my bag. He shakes his head. “Nah, there’s nothing to change. There’s nothing different about me—I’m the same old nerdy ginger you’ve known all your life. I just have a name for the way I’m different than everyone else.” He gives me a playful smile and bumps his shoulder with mine.

I start to open my Bible. “But the holy book specifically says that—”
He gently closes the book. “Look Cal, it doesn’t matter. I was made this way for a reason. I’ve been hiding my whole life. I deserve to be happy, now. Why should try to hide what I am?”

“But it—”
He shakes his head. “I’m comfortable with my morality. How could God make something he couldn’t love or accept?”
I can’t respond.

Let the rain come down
day xxxvii

She stares at me now, like a statue of pure white marble, cold and stoic. We’re the only two left, the only two who haven’t left this suffocating, sterile room. I can’t leave. I can’t even think about moving because I should stay with him—because yes, that is him, that stiff, unmoving body. There’s nothing more to him now but that, and I can’t leave this room.

“Maybe—I would have done the same thing,” she whispers, breaking the heavy silence. My head snaps up, but she’s not looking at me anymore—her gaze is focused on a random point in the room, almost like she’s talking to herself. “Maybe any of us would have.” Mikila’s eyes meet mine, and I can’t read her expression.

“The point isn’t what happened,” she says. “It’s the fact that he’s gone and that he was our friend. If anyone should make it to heaven…” she blinks back a tear, her façade breaking, “...then it should be Danny.” She leaves the room, shutting the door softly, abandoning me to my confusion. I don’t deserve to be consoled now.

Words can’t bring you down
day x

“Danny, please listen to me,” I grab his shoulder. “You’ve got to change your ways. You have to.” He shakes his corkscrew hair and smiles sorrowfully. “You can say whatever you want to say, Cal, but I’m not changing. I finally feel good inside. It’s something I’ve never felt before.”

“Danny, you can’t live this way. You can’t live your life in sin. You have to—"
“Stop telling me what I have to do, Cal. Quit saying that I can’t do things. I can do whatever I want; I can live my life however I please. Why can’t you just accept that?”

“I’m trying to save your soul!” I shout out as I tackle Danny. We both fall to the ground, and before I can think, I punch him in the face—the soft, vulnerable, freckled face. His emerald eyes bear no signs of hatred—no, they bear something different, pity. Somehow, that makes it worse.

How high can you fly with broken wings?

day xxxvii

I’m alone. There’s me and him; only there’s not him, because he’s dead. I stare at the body—I don’t want to, and with every fiber of my being I fight it, but my gaze is still drawn to it—and my mind goes blank. He could have done so much with his life. You killed him; you killed him; you killed him, a tiny voice whispers in my ear, and I know it’s right. You killed him; you killed him; you killed him...

It’s like his body stares at me, asking, pleading, begging to know—Why’d you do it? Why’d you do this to me? There’s no one to hear my hushed, "I didn’t mean to."

It seems to me, sorry seems to be the hardest word

day xxxvi

“What do you want?” he asks. It should be hard to hear him over the sound of cars rushing by on the freeway, but I hear his voice, stabbing me, the words rushing through my veins like venom.

I’m not sure what to say—it’s the first I’ve talked to Danny since I punched him. Since I punched my best friend.

“I uh—” I pull the bouquet of flowers from behind my back and offer a smile. As if the flowers will make everything okay. “I brought you these.”

He stares at the blue flowers in my hand, his brow creased. “Pansies?” he spits, the word hitting my skin like acid, stinging, burning, eating away my very being.

I nod. “I thought that since—”

“Since I’m gay, I’m a pansy, therefore pansies would be the most acceptable flower, right?” He crosses his arms, and I can’t quite meet his eyes.

“No, I just...”

He shakes his head and snatches the bouquet from my hand, then hops back into his car, tires squalling as he drives away, leaving me to mutter the rest of my sentence to the wind: “....wanted to say I’m sorry.”

No matter what you do, you’ll never run away from you

day xxxvii

It’s been four hours now, since he died since I killed him. Four hours that I’ve stared into his lifeless eyes because no one would close them. I could close them, but I can’t. I can’t.

Danny deserves—deserved—everything good in this life, and instead he got stuck with me. He stuck with me all these years, and he shouldn’t have. But I’m all he’s got, and that’s the sad thing. No parents, no family other than a psychotic great aunt. He has only me, his murderer, to speak the eulogy, but I know that I’m better than nothing. Mikila handed me a dozen sheets of loose-leaf paper and a couple of pens hours ago, lifetimes ago, but I left them blank.

The words are blurred and blotchy, and every sheet is covered in smudges and tears I didn’t even know I was crying. When I’m done, I know I’ve covered it all. I glance at Danny as I grab a new sheet. From those distorted lines and notes scribbled in margins, I assemble a final copy, faultless. What he deserves.
It's funny how one small thing can cause something so big

day xxxvi

The sound of my ringing phone wakes me. Still half asleep, I slap it to my face.
“Cal,” a tiny, hoarse voice whispers.
“Mmm, Mikila? What’s wrong?” My hand finds my lamp, and I turn it on as I struggle to sit up in bed.
“It’s Danny,” she says. “He was in an accident.”

Every new beginning comes from some other beginning’s end

day xxxvii

It wasn’t the impact of the crash that killed him—or the crash in general. It was the sting of a bee. A tiny, insignificant bee. A bee that came from a bouquet of pansies he had sitting in the cup holder.
“Do you think it hurt?” Mikila asks, and I realize she’s back in the room, standing quietly by the door.
My eyes shift back to him, to his bruised, swollen body. Skin no longer pale and white, mostly greens and yellows and blues and purples and blacks. Hands and feet puffy. Tongue swelled up inside his mouth, blocking his airway. I nod slowly.
“I mean hitting the tree and flipping the car,” she whispers, eyes closed, trying to replay our friend’s final moments. I try to replay the moments, too. The bee flying out of the flowers, the panic as he tries to swat it away, it stinging him. Did he hit the tree before or after? Could he even feel himself being tossed around like a ragdoll with his body swollen like it was? Was he too busy trying to get oxygen into his lungs to notice flying through the air?
I hope so.

There is still a light that shines on me, shine until tomorrow, let it be

day xxxx

We hold the funeral silently at dusk, three days later, at his favorite place. Mikila and I dump his ashes into the lake, sending ripples across the once-calm waters. He always said he wanted to be free. He didn’t want to be buried, not confined in a box for one more second. That’s one wish we could keep.
I turn to face the small crowd; each person holds a candle, the only source of light we have in the fading sun.
Mikila looks at me expectantly but at the same time saying I don’t have to do this. I do—for Danny.
I take out the lone sheet of paper and stare at the miniscule words I penned so tediously. For a moment, all I can do is stare, and the silence grows longer. Then I read.
I tell them all about Danny, about how smart and kind he was, how he never had a bad thing to say about anyone, how he could be anyone’s friend. They know all this, most of them, but everyone listens, and no one points this out. I tell them everything, because they need to know. Some more than others, but in the end they all have to know. It’s better that they know the truth, that they hear it straight from me, rather than make up stories to explain what happened.
My throat becomes dry, and my voice is hoarse, but I finish.
Mikila takes my hand and squeezes tightly as she tosses a bouquet of pansies, deep blue and framed with pure white, into the water. I watch them sink, slowly, delicately, with purpose—free to be what they want. No one questioning them or trying to change them.
Everyone places their candles on top of the water, floating in little boats towards the dipping sun.
I gaze as the lights float away, gently, but never quite fading from existence. “You were right. You were perfect just the way you were. I should never have doubted you. I’m so sorry, Danny,” I whisper, tears falling freely down my face. “I’m so sorry.”
Maybe I imagined it. Maybe it was the wind. But I swear I hear a whisper in my ear.
“I know,” it breathes. “I know.”

Pray you, love, remember. And there is pansies, that's for thoughts
Dear Holden,

Hey, this is Jane. I sure hope you still remember me. I thought it would be nice to write you a letter, the old-fashioned way. It’s funny how writing is old-fashioned now. Anyway, this letter is about you. I know you’re going through some hard times, and I really hope that I can help you.

First off, I know you’re a very caring person. You donated money to nuns and you bought Phoebe the “Little Shirley Beans” record. But many times, you could afford to care more about yourself. When Phoebe asked you what you’d like to be when you grow up, you said, “What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff… I’d just be the catcher in the rye and all.” What you said shows that you care a lot about others and you want to save them from hurting themselves. But how are you going to catch them if you’re falling off the cliff yourself? Without even giving it a second thought, you hired a prostitute to come to your hotel room. You give “the old eye” to women old enough to be your mother. You went to the Wicker Bar and got drunk on scotch and sodas despite being underage. There’s a reason why underage drinking is illegal, for God’s sake! If you can’t care for yourself, how can you care for others? When Phoebe wanted to hitchhike out west with you, you immediately said no, probably because you didn’t want her to experience the hardships that were sure to come. But why did you almost allow yourself to go? You’re just as important as anyone else, and this world needs more caring people like you. I know you feel like you’re the only dumb one in your family, but your love for Phoebe and Allie is a sign of your emotional intelligence. I wish you would show the same love for yourself as you have for them. If you still can’t bring yourself to, just think of the people around you who need you. Do you want Phoebe or your parents to experience what you did when Allie left your life?

Also, from what I’ve seen, you have a pretty negative view on everything. You seem to see only flaws in everyone you meet. Like at Pencey Prep, you thought Ackley was a slob with his personal habits and Stradlater, a stupid moron. When you left the school, you yelled, “Sleep tight, ya morons!” In general, you always seem unhappy with the people you meet and the places you go. What were you like when Allie was alive? I bet you were a happier person. I can see why you changed. If my dog died, I would hate the whole world for a while. I would miss his soft ears, his loud bark, and everything else about him. You know how much I love my dog. The thought of losing him is unbearable, but I can’t even fathom the pain you feel from losing Allie. Eventually, though, you need to move on. You can do this by remembering the bright spots in your life. Think of the things about Phoebe that you say “kill” you, like how she changes her middle name every time she writes, how she saved the pieces of the broken record you bought for her, and how happy you feel when you open up to her.

Just like with Phoebe, you can open up to other people, too. You often talk to cab drivers and ask them about the ducks in Central Park, but that’s as deep as your conversations get. You don’t bond enough with the people around you to be able to have a meaningful conversation with them. Is this also because of Allie? It makes sense if it is; you’re probably angry at everyone for taking him away from you. You told me that when Allie died, you broke all the windows in the garage with your fist. Maybe that anger is still inside of you, trying to find a way out. I can see your anger when you call your aunt stupid and your cousins lousy. But the thing is, being angry your whole life won’t bring Allie back. On the other hand, if you open up to people, you’ll probably find that many have experienced the same losses as you. They may even help you carry the burden of Allie’s death. There’s an old saying: joy shared by two is doubled, but sorrow shared by two is halved. Have you heard of it?

I say all this not to criticize you but because I care about you. I miss the Holden who saw the brightness in life, and I know a part of you does, too. Ok, enough now. If you want to talk, give me a buzz. You have my number.

Jane
**Writer’s Statement**

I have been fascinated by the English language ever since my family moved to the United States when I was five. It took me several months to become fluent, but I am now more at ease with it than with German, my native language. I started writing creatively in second grade, when my teacher encouraged my class to draft daily journal entries in response to prompts. My entries rarely recounted actual events and instead included embellished accounts of imagined weekend adventures. I found that I love creating worlds from words, and writing has played an important role in my life ever since.

For me, writing is more than a casual hobby. It’s therapeutic, taking me to another world over which I have control and where I can forget about my problems. Writing is also a way for me to process my experiences, molding them into a narrative I can then share with others. In fact, its place in my life is so crucial that it has almost turned into an addiction, albeit a healthy one.

Of course, the ultimate goal of all serious writers is to share their work. The pieces I have included in my Writing Portfolio span my high school career, outlining my evolving interests. I have always been intrigued by Science Fiction, especially future dystopian societies. Many elements we take for granted in our daily lives have a sinister side, which have the potential to be exploited in fiction. Two of the short stories in the portfolio, “Soul Mates” and “The Inking,” revolve around common social themes, such as love and belonging, which I distorted in the dystopian settings in order to better examine them through the actions of their respective protagonist.

Within the past year, I have become increasingly interested in exploring everyday life through my writing. “Cotinis nitida,” the third short story I included, portrays western society’s treatment of animals through the experiences of a child. Last summer, a job as a part-time writer for a local newspaper, the Nodaway News Leader, gave me the chance to try out a style of non-fiction with which I had previously been unfamiliar. I wrote and published several historical features about the town in which I live. This experience not only taught me more about writing, but also made me realize that an area’s past is just as important as its present and future. In “Maryville Post Office, Public Library share a past, future,” I tied these elements together by focusing on the dwindling uses of both institutions—a topic that reaches further than the rural Midwest. The other journalistic piece I included, “Northwest’s Roberta Hall believed to be haunted,” helped me realize that daily life has the potential to be far more intriguing than one may think. Finally, I turned to another, more personal aspect of realistic writing: my own life. “My Mirror of Erised,” the personal essay I included, was a way for me to analyze and share some of my experiences of being an immigrant.

I hope my work elicits a significant response in the people who read it. All of my pieces are written with a message, an element I want to examine. It’s not necessary that the readers experience it the way I intended, as long as their experience is worthwhile. I believe that the best writing evokes strong feelings in its readers—and, most importantly, makes them think. The pieces I have included explore various themes, and I hope the people who read them are moved to apply these themes to their own world view, if only for the short time it takes to read them.

Being a non-native speaker has given me an interesting perspective on the English language. As it turned from unintelligible sounds to words I recognized, I developed a deep affinity to it. This bond has even shaped my professional future, as I plan to be an author and teach English and Creative Writing at a university. My writing has evolved significantly throughout my high school career and will continue to do so. Whether it concerns itself with the past, present, or future, it will always serve to help me understand the world around me—and someday maybe even help others do the same.

**Northwest’s Roberta Hall believed to be haunted**

Tragedies in Maryville have always had a profound effect on the community. Such events leave behind traces of many different varieties: physical, social, emotional—and sometimes even paranormal ones. Many believe this to be the case at Northwest Missouri State University’s Roberta Hall, where Roberta Steel’s ghost is said to wander the halls.
April 28, 1951. What should have been a normal Saturday night at the women’s dorm turned into a disaster that (quite literally) haunts the building. Shortly after midnight, the explosion of a gasoline storage tank located behind Roberta Hall, then known as the Residence Hall, broke the silence. The top floors in the building’s southeast corner were hit by a flying piece of the steel tank, which resulted in a fire. Evacuations began immediately, as people from the college and the community rushed to the women’s aid.

Kathryn McKee, Maryville, who was a night chaperone at Roberta Hall when the tragedy occurred, still remembers that night: “President Jones came over, and the two of us went from room to room to make sure that everyone was out.”

Four of the 30 women hurt in the fire sustained severe third degree burns. Roberta Steel, who had been too embarrassed to get out of the shower during the explosion, was among them.

“She was a very quiet, reserved person, and a very good student,” McKee recalled. When Roberta had recovered enough from the extensive surgeries to come back to school in the fall of the next year, however, “she was not the chipper person she had once been.” After 3 months, she had to return to the hospital, where she succumbed to her injuries on November 29, 1952.

Nine years later, the building’s name was changed in Roberta’s honor. But some people believe it retained more than her name.

Jason Offutt, Maryville, who teaches journalism at Northwest Missouri State University, has been fascinated by the supernatural since his first ghost-sighting at age 10. He shies away from the term “ghost hunter” but has written several books about the paranormal and regularly visits haunted places.

While Offutt hasn’t personally encountered Roberta’s ghost, many people have contacted him with their stories. He said that she is benevolent, and her activities are “mostly practical jokes” because “she had a great sense of humor.”

Over the years, Roberta’s tricks have been known to include knocking pictures off the walls, turning air-conditioners on by request, locking doors, and turning radios on and off. The account of the closest thing to a direct sighting came from a former Northwest student named Amanda Root, who spent 2 years living in the “haunted” dormitory.

As Offutt recalled, “She was woken up in the middle of the night by rustling (sounds) in her room. She looked up, and it was dark, so she couldn’t see features, but there was a shadow. She could see a person walking around in the room, opening drawers; she was sure it was her roommate, but then she looked over at the other bed and her roommate was asleep. She closed her eyes and went back to sleep.”

According to Offutt, the reaction to simply ignore a ghost until it goes away is fairly common. In any case, most residents of Roberta Hall seem to have gotten relatively used to Roberta’s presence. But, since she did not die at Roberta Hall, it is not unreasonable to wonder why she haunts it.

If the most recent speculations by people who study ghosts are correct, Roberta is not trapped at Roberta Hall. “The popular thought now is that they can travel anywhere more easily than you or I can,” Offutt said.

Roberta has not been sighted at any other locations, but her connection to Roberta Hall is significant. “She liked being there...she gave haircuts to girls there. So, even though her father wouldn’t let her join a sorority, she was part of the culture over there,” Offutt explained. “I mean, people go to places they enjoy—why not ghosts?”

Whether or not one believes in the paranormal, it is safe to say that, although Roberta Steel died because of the 1951 tragedy at Roberta Hall, her memory lives on.

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Julie Nguyen  
Running Lost  
Parkway Central High School

The sun was sleepily peeking above the treetops, sending reddish light streaming through the school windows, as I slipped through its doors. The early morning light fell heavily on the nearby furniture and cast everything in lurid tones. I furtively looked around, but the hallways were deserted; only the rattle of the air conditioning provided a distant rumble. My shadow fell ahead as if to warn me to turn back. The first few faltering footsteps I took carried me deeper into the school, my frayed nerves causing me to start at the slightest sound. Instead of meeting a teacher, I acted like I was going to my doom, which in a way I was.

I would be paying Mr. Northrup, the cross country coach, one final visit to tell him my decision to resign from the team. Originally, it was never my intention to join, but the prodding from many teachers and classmates quickly changed it. They said they believed in my capabilities as a runner and that I showed great promise. However, if I was being truthful with myself, it was the introduction into high school that had spurred me to join. Coming from the sheltered and often coddling world of middle school, I was unprepared for the flurry of class meetings and speeches the high school imparted. Exchanging the baby bottle for a megaphone, high school welcomed its new freshman with pep rallies.

Attending my first rally, I felt my unimpressive life was under scrutiny. From loud speakers dotting the gym, concussions of sound vibrated the air and made the names of various school clubs, activities, and sports rattle even harder in my head. Through all the colorful bits of paper, sloppily painted banners, and smiling class presidents, the school’s underlying message was breathlessly stated again and again: get involved. I was not part of any activity, and the realization brought forth tears and quiet stabs of pain that tore at my heart.

Amid my internal turmoil, the urging of classmates and teachers for me to join cross country grew louder. Their soothing voices cut through me. The admiration and attention filled the gaping void inside me and stroked secret vanities. I wanted desperately to please these new voices in my life, and my resolve crumbled. I was the newest member of the cross country team.

Little did I know that I was only exchanging my present problems for another set.

I knew now what a mistake I had made as my stomach roiled a dangerous mix of personal discontent and the words of others. The unpleasant sloshing of acid finally forced me to acknowledge that my membership in the team was not the answer to my problems. I was physically exhausted and emotionally spent, but, most of all, I was tired of feeling consumed by the churning sea of high school. I had to do something to ease my suffering and, thus, my meeting with Mr. Northrup.

Unbidden, my troubled thoughts wandered back to the previous cross country practice.

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The woods behind school loomed before me, an impenetrable leafy expanse. I dry swallowed many times as I ran across the clearing—this was my first time through the cross country trail, and I did not know the way. The day had been hot, and by afternoon, heat was shimmering off the scorched ground in undulating waves.

The others were already way ahead of me, ghosting through the trees like wood nymphs. Skirting a ditch, I tripped over a fallen tree branch and fell, sending up a plume of dust while hissing as the dried wood cut through my skin. I fervently hoped I had chosen the correct trail. My head became more and more clouded as the miles slowly slipped by, and my footsteps sounded dull and far away to me. Clenching my teeth I heard the voices again—the same ones which had pressed me to join cross country in the first place.

“You’re perfect for long distance running, and your gait matches one.”

“You’re so good at running! You’ll love cross country!”

“Get involved in a school sport! Cross country needs you!”

So many people and so much pressing, yet the dirt trail I ran along was deserted except for myself. Their words provided little consolation now that I was part of the team. I bitterly reflected that their clothes weren’t weighed down with dirt and sweat; their throats weren’t cracked and longing for water; their legs weren’t shaking uncontrollably from fatigue and pain. My teachers and classmates were fine while I was alone in the woods.

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Suddenly I was standing before Mr. Northrup’s doorway. Blinking, I hesitated at the threshold, remembering my aching muscles and the unhappy swirl of acid within me, threatening to overturn my stomach. Steeling my nerves, I stepped inside.

“Anne!” Mr. Northrup’s voice boomed forth as he looked up from his desk in greeting. “Good morning. What can I do for you?”

He was a big man who liked to lord over his students and runners from the insulated confines of his room. As a result, he was used to getting his way. Except for his twinkling eyes, the rest of him had gone to seed. The bald spot on the top of his head and the paunch for his stomach reminded me of a walrus. His proud and stubborn manner mirrored one as well.

I opened my mouth, and speech tumbled out of me. All the carefully rehearsed statements I had practiced in the car ride to school were forgotten as words splashed and spilled onto a canvas, painting a picture Mr. Northrup did not like.

The news took a while for him to process. He exhaled and reclined in his chair, absentmindedly stroking his whiskers while a puzzled frown puckered his brow. Finally his eyes drifted back to me. A single question burned within them: Why?

While I fumbled for a decent excuse that wouldn’t upset him too much, Mr. Northrup prepared his own offensive in an attempt to persuade me to remain in cross country.

After my voice died down he spoke, “You know, you’re a very talented runner who hasn’t had much coaching. You should consider all of your options before you decide to quit.”

And then he was off, like a runner down a trail, but this time the trail was composed of words. Those words carried him far—back to past cross country awards and state champions. His feet began climbing footholds in the air that did not exist.

However, I was done running. I was done with suffering inside over things I did because others told me to do it. A surge of newfound confidence straightened my stance and steadied my stomach. I had already been down the trail Mr. Northrup described, and it was not for me.

Smiling tightly, I shook my head, “Just because I can do something doesn’t mean I have to. Good bye, Mr. Northrup.”

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Nothing changed right away—although Mr. Northrup did send other members of the cross country team after me. They tagged me in a manner similar to a pack of hungry hyenas chasing a scrap of meat they almost got to taste. My answer for them never changed.

Gradually, my head cleared from the cacophony of voices and the dry rattle of school activities. For the first time in a long while, my thoughts were my own. I smiled at the silence.

Now, I am content with my own life path, and no amount of wheedling and pushing from strangers will change it. Running lost among the trees taught me one thing: we should not fill our lives with someone else’s dreams. Dreams should be of our own creation.
Jessica Pfost  
The World in My Hands  
Maryville High School

As Eli tore into his Christmas presents one by one, he shrieked with joy at each new heroic action figure, gleaming toy, and crisp coloring book. His mother, Helen, who had been raising him solo for the past year and a half, looked on with pride as her three year old pranced around extending an excited, “Tank ooh!” to everyone in the cozily lit living room. All of Eli’s cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents watched with amusement as the toddler sat in the middle of the carpeted floor, picked up each new toy, played with it for a few seconds, then promptly put it down and moved on to the next gift.

After a few days, only one object held Eli’s attention, a teensy tiny green and blue ball patterned in likeness to the Earth. For the life of them, his mom couldn’t remember who had given the gift to her son, but there was no other outwardly unique trait about this present. Sure, it was colorful, and it bounced up all the way past his ears when he clumsily flung it at the ground; however, it was nothing out of the ordinary, so Helen decided to let it slide.

Fifteen years is an extraordinarily long time to go without any natural disasters: no fires, no inundated island countries, not a single twister through Oklahoma. This phenomenon is the topic of discussion in eighteen year old Eli’s last class of the day, history. While taking notes on the separation of Pangaea and watching the snow fall gracefully outside, Eli slowly tunes out Mr. Reed.

His ancient teacher has started off on a rant about just how bizarre the non-disasters of the last decade and a half have been. He reminisces about his younger years and the way catastrophes struck in one part of the world or another several times a season. He goes on about a hurricane that struck somewhere in the southern part of the United States in 2005. Maybe in Alabama? Texas? Or was it Louisiana? Eli doesn’t know; he isn’t listening. He has other things on his mind—the district basketball game against Mansfield coming up or how good Jenny looks in that skirt top the list.

The bell rings and hungry hormonal teenagers hurry to their cars, anxious to get home and put off the night’s schoolwork until the absolute last minute. Eli is no different; he drives himself home in no particular hurry. He unbuttons his coat, throws his bag down just inside the doorway, and heads straight for the kitchen, where he finds his mom waiting.

“How was school, honey?” she asked with a routinely– and to Eli, annoyingly – upbeat smile.
“Fine,” he answered.
“Did you learn anything?”
Eli liked to push her buttons, and nothing did the trick more than calling her by her first name.
“No Helen, just like yesterday.”

The routine never varied. She would ask the same questions, and Eli would give her the same answers. After that delightful conversation, Eli grabbed a bowl of Lucky Charms and a glass of water and headed to his room. On his way up the stairs he heard Helen call out, “Eli! Have you cleaned your room yet like I asked you?” From the landing he called back, “Yeah, yeah. What? Do you have no faith in me or something?”
He knew just as well as she that he hadn’t touched the massive pile of clothes laying in the center of his floor. He hadn’t even thought about throwing away the two week old pizza box slowly turning into a petri dish. Maybe that would be his project for the evening; he knew he would rather do that than read over the assigned chapters for Human Anatomy.

After efficiently procrastinating for an hour, flipping between Twitter and Facebook, Eli decided it was time to attempt something productive. Slackishly walking back and forth from Mt. Clothesamanjaro, he half-hanged, half-piled t-shirts in his closet. Through with this task, he decided to start in on what hid under his bed. He dragged out boxes and boxes of things from his childhood, including NSYNC Hitclips, Yu-Gi-Oh cards, and a Star Wars Lego set. Eli sifted through mounds of forgotten books and playthings until he came to one in particular that struck a specific cord: a green and blue, earthly looking, oversized bouncy ball.

Roughly the shape of a tangerine, the toy brought memories flooding back to Eli faster than the dodge balls he was throwing earlier that day in gym class. He remembered sitting with the ball in the park; he even snuck it over to his babysitter’s one day. This miniature earth was from when life was easy. There were no boring history lessons to learn, Helen never asked him pointless questions, and he definitely didn’t have to worry about cleaning...
his own room. Eli hadn't seen the toy in years and felt a sudden rush of emotions well up inside him the moment his fingers graze the rubbery surface of the globe.

He threw the ball at the freshly cleaned wooden floor of his room. It ricocheted off of an abandoned rollerblade and knocked his glass of water onto the carpet, where the green and blue ball landed on what would have been the tip of California without an ounce of grace. Eli knelt to pick it up and tossed it into his school bag, just in case he grew bored in history the next day.

Eli woke up to a loud knock on his door the following morning. His mom had an announcement: “Eli, wake up! There’s been a disaster. Los Angeles flooded last night.”

What? Eli thought. There’s no way.

As Eli sat at the kitchen table eating breakfast, he watched the news with fascination. CNN was reporting nearly two thousand people dead and another fifteen hundred missing. “There was no storm, no warning at all really. It just kind of happened,” the newscasters related. Eli finished his waffles and headed for the door on his way to school. The hallways were buzzing with the news. These kids, like Eli, had never experienced this kind of national crisis and didn’t have any idea how to cope with it. Students with family members living in Los Angeles were noticeably missing from classes. The day dragged and after what seems like years, Eli trudged to the parking lot, climbing into the driver’s seat of his Dodge truck.

On the way home, he stopped at Sonic for a half priced Route 44 limeade slush. After explaining at least three times to the GED educated employee that he wanted an extra cherry, Eli sat impatiently with the heat on full blast to ward off the chill of the November afternoon. A thought flashes through his mind: had he brought home his calculus homework? He unzipped his book bag and looked inside for the hated blue and orange textbook. Tossing open the pouch, his little model Earth bounced out, landing against the heating vents. A bleach blonde tatted up carhop knocked on his window with his slushie in hand. Tired of waiting, he hastily grabbed the drink from her and shoved a few bills into her hands. She’s probably used to guys throwing dollars at her, he thought as he watched her walk away in her oh-so-tight and probably not regulation black booty shorts. She must be freezing.

Eli whipped his truck into the garage attached to the side of his house when he saw that he had forgotten to pick up the bouncy ball from next to the vent. When he reached down to it, he pulled back his hand immediately. It’s flaming hot! He tried again, more timidly this time, to pick up the tiny earth. He ran his thumb over the surface of what would have been Canada, surprised that section of rubber hadn’t completely melted from the heat. Without another thought, Eli traipsed inside the house. Helen sat on the couch watching the news.

“Was there anything new at school today, sweetie?”

“No, Helen, just like every other day.”

As Eli was about to bound up the stairs, he suddenly heard the screeching echo of the emergency alert sounding from CNN.

“Lily Zumwalt here, reporting your world news now. A breaking story tonight from London, Ontario, where a raging forest fire has destroyed half of the province and already nearly 500,000 are left homeless tonight. With absolutely no warning, homes and buildings everywhere erupted into flames. The cause of these fires remains unknown to officials.”

As these words bounced in his mind, something clicked in his thoughts. Last night was the first time in fifteen years that there had been a natural disaster and the day that Eli found his model earth after he had forgotten it for the same period. The city of Los Angeles flooded last night when the miniature version of California landed in a puddle of water, and Canada burned to the ground just minutes after North America was scorched by a heating vent in Eli’s truck.

No way, he thought. It had to be one big coincidence, right? Eli knew he wouldn’t be able to rest until he knew for sure that his theory was simply a byproduct of stress and teenaged hormones. Flying up the stairs with the ball in hand he slammed the door shut behind him. How to test his radical idea without harming anyone on the off chance that he’s right? Abruptly, it came to him: the ocean. He grabbed a pen off his desk. Without thinking, Eli chose a spot in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean and stabbed the tip into the surface.

What have I done? he thought. I had no idea what was in that part of the ocean. I probably impaled a dolphin, sunk a cruise ship, or started a massive tidal wave!

With the possibilities hurdling through his mind, he trucked back downstairs to where his mom still watched the news report on CNN. Maybe it didn’t do anything, he silently hoped. They haven’t reported a sinking ocean liner or anything; I was probably just paranoid.
The reporter was going on about plans for evacuation in Canada, but Eli let his mind wander elsewhere. For the most part he felt relief, but a nagging feeling lingered that something was not quite right with his small rubber globe. Just as he started to relax, thinking about dinner and less about how he was potentially ruining the world, the piercing breaking news alert sounded again.

*No, please Lord no,* he pleaded silently.

"We have just received word of a colossal whirlpool taking shape just off the Cape Verde Islands. The cause of this most recent catastrophe remains unknown. We will keep you up to date as we learn more. This is CNN with your world news now."

Eli looked down at a perfectly ordinary toy Earth. Thinking back to that Christmas day, he couldn’t place who gave it to him. They couldn’t possibly have known its power, could they?

“Helen, where did we get this?” holding up the baseball-sized orb.

“Um, not sure, but you sure did love that silly thing. I couldn’t even get it out of your hands when I put you down to sleep. Why do you ask?”

“No reason, just wondering.” He tries to hide the quiver in his voice, a product of this newly discovered dark secret. Sauntering around the back of the couch and down the hall, out of hearing range of Helen, he sprung up the stairs to his room, slamming the door behind him and melting onto the floor, not even bothering to use the desk chair nearby.

*It has to be just a coincidence. No, that’s way too weird. There’ve been no disasters for fifteen years and then, BAM, three in twenty-four hours? It’s not possible. Maybe this is all just a dream. I’m just stressed about the basketball tournament this weekend, nothing else. I’ll wake soon and be back in my normal, non-fate-of-the-world controlling life.*

Eli slumped on the floor in a kind of haze for half an hour before rousing himself to come to terms with events. He controlled what happened to the world. Heck, for all intents and purposes, he had become Mother Nature.

He knew he couldn’t handle this kind of pressure; he couldn’t even get through the SAT last spring without blanking out on the derivative of cosine. He had to get rid of this ball pronto.

*How can I make this problem disappear without ending the entire world?* He won’t be able to burn it unless he wanted the planet to go up in smoke. Throwing it into a lake was out of the question because that would make every person a resident of Atlantis. He thought back to how he received the mysterious thing years ago when a solution hit him: hide the ball amongst the Christmas presents of a toddler! Rules of the ball must prohibit the actions of three-year-olds from ending the world in catastrophe. If not, everybody would have died thousands of times when Eli was younger. With the Yuletide season just around the corner, it was perfect.

He descended the stairs to search for the perfect place to drop the cursed little toy. Driving down Main Street, he spotted a huge blinking sign hanging over a Conoco gas station which read: TOY DRIVE INSIDE. He swung his truck into a spot near the front of the building and mustered up the courage to open the smudge-covered glass door. Inside, the large attendant loudly yammered on the phone, something about how she can’t believe the little skank would even look at him. She held up a finger to let him know she will be with him in a minute, but she could take all the time in the world because Eli had already spotted the half-full bin of Barbies, slinkies, and coloring books.

He slipped the green and blue ball out of the pocket of his jacket and tossed it into the jumbled mess of playthings. He paused for a moment, looking down over the edge of the cardboard box. Seeing the ball atop the pile brought a wave of nostalgia.

*Well, hopefully someone else has better luck with it than I’ve had.* He turned on his heel and walked quietly past the counter, barely acknowledging the half wave from the preoccupied clerk.
Villains are the characters that we love to hate. They represent evil, corruption, and all other destructive powers in our universe. The audience recognizes them as the characters we should despise with every fiber of our being, yet we still keep coming back to read about their exploits. Villains, be they characters or representations of the darker aspects of the universe, are the motion of change and opposition in any story. They set the stage, fill it with challenges, and make the heroes look good through fighting them. Stories are only as good as their villains. Strong enemies force the heroes to rise to the challenge (Campbell, *Hero* 81-90). We can't have good heroes without good villains, but we won't have any story without some kind of antagonistic force, and because of this, villains are needed to ensure that any story becomes a more enjoyable narrative.

The driving force in stories and mythology, moving and shaping the overall tone and mood with their actions, creating conflict that heroes have to face and confront is the job of the Shadow Archetype (Vogler 65-69). There is no plot without conflict. Without conflict, a story is bland and tasteless, about as entertaining as getting a bill and as exciting as brick racing. Without conflict, the hero not a hero. Villains create the much needed challenges for the characters to face, making them into heroes and separating them from the average Joe.

The mask of the villain is shifty and changeable. The idea of the perfect villain has been challenged and tested by writers for years. For many, the idea of a mustache-twirling deviant doesn't cut it; writers strive to make the perfect opposition to their heroes. The mask of the villain relies completely on the story's need for conflict. For example, Fagin from *Oliver Twist* wears the mask of the False Mentor, leading young Oliver into a life of crime. Or Frankenstein's monster wears the mask of the Victim, all his anger and evil stemming from everyone's fear and repulsion, or Dr. Jekyll puts on the mask of the Villain as Self whenever he transforms into Edward Hyde. Not all villains are tangible characters, though. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, we recognize society as the villain, condemning an innocent man because of his color. The raw force of nature dons the mask as it becomes the main antagonistic force in *The Old Man and the Sea*. Anything that creates conflict can, to some degree, wear the mask of the villain.

In some mythological stories, and some modern ones, the hero is the villain. This doubled-edged character is known in mythology as the Trickster, most memorably recognized as Raven from the tales from the Pacific Northwest tribes or Loki from the legends of the Norse (Campbell, *Hero* 81-90). These heroes-as-villains play clever tricks on their neighbors and mislead them for a laugh, but when their tricks become problematic and threaten the lives of their friends, they always personally resolve the conflict. Their motivation, however, is entirely selfish. Tricksters rarely do anything for nothing in return.

The more modern representations of heroes-as-villains are not always structured as benign pranksters. Many times, much like in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, the heroes have a darker aspect that becomes villainous. The story becomes the heroes' struggle to fight their personal demons and resolve their own internal conflict with the darker, more villainous, side. In these stories, it can be a toss-up for either side. The corrupt side may dominate over the good, or perhaps maybe the good will overcome the evil.

There are very few good stories in which the hero can waltz past the villain and get the reward without putting forth much effort to deserve it. Villains need to have the same or greater power as the hero to be the perfect opposition. A good mind also creates a challenge for the hero, because it poses the threat that the hero can't outsmart the villain in a single heartbeat. To be a villain, the character has to be given room to really soar with his or her personality and be written with enough power that the hero is actually faced with a serious conflict. Villains need to be challenging, otherwise they are just another antagonist with different views (Vogler 65-69).

Antagonists and villains actually differ quite a bit, mostly in their relationships to heroes. Antagonists and heroes are like two horses pulling in opposite directions, while villains and heroes are like trains on a head-on collision (Vogler 65-69). Antagonists don't want to destroy the heroes, they just want to have some little victory over them, but villains purposefully seek to endanger the heroes' lives and possibly end them. Antagonists are the opposing forces that test the heroes' strength of character, preparing them for the direct conflict with the villains.

Villains are often the heroes of their own stories, and because of this, they make a greater threat to a hero. It's one thing for heroes to face villains who know what they are doing is evil and terrible, but it's a completely different problem when the villains think that the evil they are doing is actually good. This makes them even more defensive of their cause, and they will do anything they can to keep the heroes from stopping them. Almost like
the Spanish Inquisitors or the Crusaders, the villains are blind to the harm they are causing, and only see the good that they think they are doing (Campbell, Power 177-179). Heroes are seen by the villains as evil personified, and zealous villains will sacrifice all they have to stop them, making the conflicts that much more challenging and that much harder to overcome.

Villains give us a face to put on the things in real life we hate, be they intangible things like cruelty, injustice, and prejudice, or real people like bullies, jerks, or snobs. It gives us pleasure to watch villains fall, because it is like watching those we can't abide fall too. In reading, or in real life, villains satisfy the need to watch the bad things in the world get defeated by the better, giving us the courage to stand up for the things that we believe in ourselves. Villains not only turn characters into heroes, they also turn us into heroes too.

We may hate and despise villains, but they are the crucial part to any story. It is because of these villains that stories are even told. It wouldn't have been interesting to read about how Dr. Jekyll drank a potion that made him realize the errors of his ways, making him lose all desire to do evil. It wouldn't have been very intriguing to read Frankenstein if the doctor accepted his monster as a living creature that needed love, support, and understanding. These are the endings that many wish would have happened, but the books wouldn't have become the classics they are today if the conflict didn't exist or was easily solved. Villains are needed. We need characters to create conflict. We need these characters to play the scapegoats. We need them to put on the mask of the Shadow and turn the characters, and the audience, into heroes.

Bibliography

Picture this: I’m sitting in class, taking notes, using all the self-control I’ve got to keep myself from eating the kid next to me to keep my stomach quiet, when there’s a knock at the door.

Everyone in the room looks at the girl walking in, a plate of homemade cookies in her hand. She gives it to the football player in the back of the room and walks out. Everyone who is hungry eyes the plate as the player rips off the plastic wrap and digs in. Sometimes the more generous guys offer to share with friends and neighbors, but one’s out of luck if one is neither.

Every Friday with a home game this happens to me, and it is not fun. I’m all for free food. Food is awesome. It’s not eating in class that I object to because I know by third hour students are starving and lunch is really far away. I don’t even have a problem with the not sharing. That’s their prerogative. It’s the program I can’t stand.

Why is it a requirement for the varsity cheerleaders to give food to the varsity football players every Friday with a home game? I’m told the cheerleaders don’t mind cooking or bringing in food because it motivates the players and gets them pumped for the game. But as our football players, shouldn’t they already be pumped, no bribes required? I would love to see the program more balanced and fair, and I have three ideas to do just that.

Make the food healthy. Instead of a bunch of sugar that they’ll burn off before the day ends; make the guys rice cakes or granola bars. Perhaps throw in some vegetables or V8—the original cold tomato soup flavor, none of this new Fusion stuff. Make it so healthy and good for them that the students who have to watch them eat it don’t envy them in the least.

Expand it by extending it to other programs. The dance team prepares food for the cheerleaders, and vice versa. The basketball team could make food for soccer, then switch for the seasons. Girls’ volleyball has to nourish girls’ softball. Why keep it in athletics? Nerds get hungry, too. The football team could make food for the theater students (and not just the cast, techies too) on opening night. Choir, band and orchestra could hold a massive potluck the day before their contest. In March, several different clubs could pitch in to feed Student Council while they run around like crazy people getting ready to host state.

Shut it down. Saves everybody time and money.

As a hungry, non-involved nerd, I think this whole program is utter malarkey. I’m all for free food in class, and I certainly wouldn’t be complaining if food were given to me. But I think that requiring to hand food to an already over-rated group of students is the stuff of the 1950s. It’s time that the football players tied on their aprons and made their own cookies.
There’s something to be said of improbability. A certain allure permeates something that exists despite substantial odds against its favor. I’d always possessed an affinity for improbabilities; I suppose my interest in the unlikely stemmed from the reality that my life itself had been improbable.

My enthralment with unlikelihoods differed from the appeal an average person felt towards such things. While I enjoyed the principle behind anomalies, most found poor odds engrossing only within the context of a gamble. Studies have shown that an inverse correlation exists between the tendency of an event to occur and the enjoyment we garner from them—the less likely an outcome, the greater our desire for it. Contrary to expectation, the brain releases dopamine not when these events occur, but while one is anticipating their possibility. The human brain is the only one capable of infatuation with outcomes it is never likely to experience. Traits unique to the human race are another curiosity of mine, though the question of what exactly sets humanity apart from all other forms of life was one with which I still grappled.

Another uniquely human characteristic is the tendency to regard time in sections. We do this unanimously in our mathematical division of time. Eons are broken into millennia, millennia into centuries, centuries into decades; time further subdivides into increasingly infinitesimal units so that we as a species can more easily describe its passage. However, we as a people also segment time in less practical ways. We view our own pasts in relation to events that did the most to impact us on a personal level. For example, most parents view their lives as divided into two categories: the years before children and the years since their birth. Sometimes our transitions between periods are subtle—not recognized as a shift until after their passing. Others are quite stark—an apparent beginning to a new proverbial “life chapter.”

I experienced one of the latter type the evening of June 10, a day brimming with improbabilities.

Improbability #1: The morning had carried me 150 miles from my home to the University of Missouri. Improbability #2: My parents had left me on campus to spend three weeks at the Missouri Scholars Academy, the longest I had ever been away from home. Improbability #3: Despite the fact that I was currently in a city located well within the Great Plains region of North America, my dorm room appeared to be nestled in the midst of a mountain range.

In Johnston Hall, the walls of the residential floors were covered entirely by landscape murals. My room happened to be among a cluster of snow-capped mountains. I was studying a small cabin situated in a lush valley basin when I heard the raised voice of my Resident Assistant, Abby, informing the girls of my house that it was time to leave for the evening activity. As my housemates began to emerge, I locked the door to Room 246, knowing it would be several hours before I’d return to my alpine residence.

The wall-paintings continued to captivate my attention as I departed. In the journey from my room to the stairwell, I observed the snowy peaks of the mountains descend rapidly into grassy foothills, which in turn sank in elevation until I was walking along a pristine beach resting tangent to a glittering, calm-watered ocean. The settings depicted in the murals possessed an ambient beauty. I couldn’t help but hope that the painted renderings of paradise foreshadowed the 21 days before me.

The Missouri Scholars Academy is a 3 week summer program for the state’s best and brightest rising juniors. After a series of tests, essays, and teacher recommendations, 330 students are admitted to the program each year. While at MSA, scholars take classes while also attending various activities and speakers outside of class. One of the most notable activities was the famed exordium of the program: Playfair. Held on the first night, it gathered all scholars on the Quad in an attempt to forge friends out of foreigners. It was there that I first met him.

As I soon discovered, Playfair was a multi-hour attempt to conduct an icebreaker session with 300 people at once. Needless to say, the night quickly developed into the benevolent disarray inevitably accompanying the first union of several hundred enthusiastic nerds. Enveloped by the amalgamation of bodies, I spent the ensuing hours matching strange names with strange faces. We were guided from activity to activity by an exuberant woman who organized us into groups based on varying commonalities we shared.

As dusk encroached, we were instructed to hop on one leg until we found a partner with the same chosen foot. Not thinking much of it, I arbitrarily chose my left and began to hop around.

For being at a Scholar’s Academy, I feel really stupid right now.
Pairs formed quickly, and I watched as my options rapidly dwindled. Scanning the crowd, my eyes fell on a guy hopping in my general direction.

He was dark and leanly muscular; his tan skin making my already pale complexion seem even lighter. As if to contrast the polarity of our skin, our hair was much closer in color—a dark shade of brown. The fabric of his blue Academy shirt fit tightly over well-defined shoulders.

I’ll say it: he was really attractive.

As I looked at him, he turned his gaze on me. I must say, it was the first time the phrase locking eyes didn’t seem so figurative. Glancing downwards at his feet, I saw he was hopping on his right leg.

Damn, we don’t match.

I switched feet, quickly shifting from left to right. Not so quickly as to escape his notice, though. He raised his eyebrows, amused, yet questioning. All the same, he approached, a smile tugging open the corners of his mouth.

We’d been instructed to sit once we’d found a partner, so we settled on the grass of the Quad. He was still smiling when I looked back. I saw his lips move, but over the din of 165 other pairs introducing themselves, I didn’t hear the words they formed.

“What?” Such an eloquent first word.

He leaned in closer, and I followed suit, collectively halving the distance between us.

“I said, ‘I see you have two last-names too.’”

“Oh, you have a hyphenated last-name?” How improbable.

We were required to wear nametags for the duration of our stay at MSA, and I stole a glance at the one pinned to his chest.

J.D. Love-Epp.

“Yeah. Where’d yours come from?” Over the speakers, we received the instruction to start playing Rock-Paper-Scissors.

“Lesbians. You?” We played as we talked.

“A stubborn mother.” I laughed, and J.D. laughed with me. I’d liked that he seemed unfazed by my having gay parents. So often people made a big deal out of it: either conveying disdain or going out of their way to show me their support. Neither reaction was called for, and I was glad he recognized that. He threw scissors, and I threw rock. Score one for me.

“Where do you go to school?” I asked, his infectious smile spreading to my face.

“Rockhurst; it’s in Kansas City,” he replied.

“Yeah, I know! I live near Kansas City,” my smile widened.

“Really? Where?”

“Platte City.” At his blank look, “It’s by the airport.” Nodding, he grinned.

“What are the odds of that?” Very improbable.


Our time together received a short extension after we mutually ignored the instruction to find new partners for the next activity. Unfortunately, our luck ran out when the subsequent command required us to gather in large groups based on birth-month. As I congregated with the other April-born scholars, I only hoped that I would see more of J.D. Love-Epp.

Playfair and the improbable guy I’d met there weighed on my mind the next day as I sat in my major class. My main focus of study while at MSA was mammalian reproduction, specifically regarding humans and domesticated animals. It quickly earned the monikers Sex Major and Sperm Class among the scholars, regarded with an air of amused interest by those in other majors. The fact that his class was an entertaining enigma didn’t seem to faze my teacher, Kyle. On the first day of his class, I could tell he was a better teacher than I’d ever had the privilege of learning from in high school. He said he taught us just as he did his college students at UCM, but certain events made me question that claim’s truth.

Namely, the fact that after spending the first two hours lecturing and discussing hormonal feedback loops in our classroom in Stewart Hall, Kyle had taken us on a field-trip. Defying expectation, he didn’t take us anywhere sex-related. In fact, our destination wasn’t academic at all. Quite improbably, Kyle had taken us to an on-campus Starbucks to spend the last hour of class lounged informally in a rough circle of armchairs as we drank coffee and learned about sex.
The topic of discussion was Artificial Reproductive Technologies, a subject much more personal to me than any of my classmates. My existence was improbable because my conception had been improbable; I was the daughter of two lesbians, an anonymous sperm donor, and scientific ingenuity. Over the years, I'd done a host of independent research on artificial insemination and its counterparts.

That part of my identity was never something I had hidden, and while it was largely just accepted at face-value, I had received some overwhelmingly negative feedback over the years. I'd been dubbed everything from a science experiment to an abomination, but I think the words that struck me the most had come from a very vapid girl upon her discovery of my artificial origins: “You’re like, not even human.”

While my DNA could easily be analyzed to show that I was of the same species as the girl (though I held my suspicions that her genes contained a heavier dose of Neanderthal than the standard 2.5%), her implication that my humanity was diminished—even to the point of nonexistence—because I was the result of selective breeding was one that greatly interested me. Her hasty assertion prompted me to question what made a human out of H.Sapiens.

Despite the fact that we possessed no overlap between our classes, I saw quite a bit more of J.D. Two nights after we met, we’d spent the evening together, attending a discourse on the relationship between major world religions and the zombie apocalypse. Somehow the odd subject matter seemed very fitting, considering I’d met him hopping on one foot.

The night before, I’d spent an enjoyable period of time partnering J.D. at the 28th annual MSA Square Dance. As I locked Room 246, I wondered if I’d be able to say the same of tonight’s Street Dance.

In the end, I was never given the chance. The bank of storm clouds that had ominously loomed for hours released its formidable load only 15 minutes into the dance. As the rainstorm rapidly transformed into a torrential downpour, RA’s swarmed the scene, ushering everyone to Lowry Hall a short distance away. Scholars made a break for shelter, but I didn’t mind the rain and instead walked through the downpour. That’s when I saw him, the only other person who chose to amble through a deluge.

“Double-Last-Name-Girl,” he called, approaching. “Lovely weather we’re having, isn’t it?”

“A touch humid, in my opinion.” I responded drily.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” he responded as a stream of water ran into his eyes from the hair plastered to his head. “It’s a desert out here.” I laughed, and he smiled in return. As we walked, I couldn’t help but notice the way his wet shirt clung tantalizingly to his chest. Upon reaching Lowry, he held open the door for me, and we followed the tide of scholars converging in the auditorium. A group of my housemates beckoned, but I feigned ignorance of their presence and sat with J.D.

The RA’s rushed solution was to fill the time by playing a documentary. Life in a Day was a compilation of footage shot around the world, depicting the human existence on earth from midnight until nightfall on one day. It portrayed life as it truly was: neither entirely beautiful nor terrible. Ultimately, I preferred it to the dance.

J.D. and I talked throughout, commenting on various scenes. At one point, it conveyed the interaction between a couple in an unnamed Islamic culture. The wife bowed to her husband each time he entered the room.

“If we were married, would you bow to me like that?” he murmured as the woman kneeled reverently.

“Only if it was mutual,” I responded.

“Okay, what about the traditional Arab garb?”

“Nice try!” I said, laughingly.

“No non-mutual bowing. No Arab garb.” I heard the smile in the cadence of his voice. “What can you give me?”

“A honeymoon wherever that is?” I pointed at the screen. The camera was panning across a breathtaking mountain range, not unlike the one outside my room.

“I like your taste.” J.D. also seemed taken by the tableau. “And it appears to be in Romania in the midst of some goat-herders.”

“Well, I’m sure those shepherds wouldn’t mind a pair of newlyweds at all.” I continued to observe him as he watched the documentary; he partook in the joy and resonated with the suffering. Some of his reactions really struck me, and I realized that J.D. was truly no ordinary guy.

From that night forward, we began to spend an increasing amount of time together. After lunch or before evening activities, I would meet him in The Shack, a small pool hall in the Student Union. Oftentimes, this would lead us to an out-of-the-way corner on the second floor where we would find a couch and talk.
The evening of June 20th was one of those times. We had just crested the staircase, and J.D. was talking to me about my major.

“So today was your romantic rendezvous with the pig, right?” He was referring to the field-trip my class had taken to the farm in an attempt to collect a sample from one of the boars. “Did you at least buy him dinner first?”

J.D., of course, found this very funny.

“I was just observing. Kyle did all the work.” I responded. “Or at least, he attempted to.”

“Oh, didn’t go well?”

“You could say that.”

“You couldn’t even turn a pig on?” He laughed incredulously. “It’s his natural instinct! Were you even trying?”

“Oh yeah, but he wouldn’t budge. Not even a sensual back massage got that damn boar in the mood.” I joked.

“What hope do we have in you?” I rolled my eyes at him.

“You’re quite frustrating. Luckily for you, it’s actually endearing.” We reached a couch and sat down, slightly angled so that our bodies were facing one another. Unprompted, J.D. said, “You’re terrible at being a girl, you know that?”

“Is that so?”

Where is this going?

“Didn’t you get the memo? By now, you definitely should have made several trips to the clothes section of the bookstore, probably dragging me along at least once. And you’re supposed to make pointless noises.” I couldn’t help but laugh; he was right about girls. “During the documentary, whenever they flashed a picture of a baby, all you could hear was 150 girls ‘aww-ing’ in unison. I’m pretty sure the only time you ‘awwed’ was when they flashed the clip of that hideous, naked fledgling.” It was true. I’d never subscribed to the stereotypes of my gender.

“I take that as the highest compliment.”

Our conversations frequently began light, the way they did then; often we delved into deeper, more serious subjects. That day was no exception as we talked of our lives preceding MSA. I felt myself growing increasingly fond of him as he revealed to me a past too heavy in strife and too absent of joy. His life is not my story to tell, but during those afternoons spent unveiling ourselves to each other, I grew ever closer to him.

I glanced at the time during a lull in our conversation, only to realize that we had 10 minutes to get across campus to our evening activities. Ordinarily, this would have been adequate time, but considering we were surrounded by the type of scholar who normally arrives early to events, even punctuality appeared late. J.D. and I hurried to a somewhat obsolete staircase that would let out on the side of the building.

“Happiness is a choice,” J.D. spoke as we descended. “Yeah, there’ll be days where everything conspires against you, and you know that regardless of anything you do, it’ll be a bad day. But overwhelmingly, your mood is a decision you make every morning. Happiness was something I struggled with for a long time. Depression isn’t something that evaporates, disappearing from your life. My black cloud’s still with me every day. I’ve decided that I’m not going to allow that cloud to conquer me.”

He was truly incredible. The realm of romance was one I’d never before entered, but I had no doubt in the attraction I felt towards him. The way I felt thinking of J.D. was unprecedented yet something I was sure I wanted to continue.

“Happiness is a choice.” We had reached the foot of the stairs. “And I’ve chosen to focus on what makes me happy.”

The guy standing before me was a remarkable comingling of traits not often found to reside in one person. Stepping towards me, he eliminated all but a minute chasm of air separating us.

“The question is: What makes you happy?”

In that moment I could see a second, unspoken question on his face.

“I’ve never kissed anyone before.”

J.D. was an improbability.

“Would you like to now?”

An improbability I wanted.

“Yes.”

The chasm of air ceased to exist. My heart was pounding, and I could feel myself trembling, but that moment at the bottom staircase is one I’ll never forget.

A week and a half later, our three week stay expired; I found myself seated next to J.D. during the closing ceremony of our final night. The lights were off so a video could be played, and I took J.D.’s hand in my own as we
were enveloped by darkness. The light from the screen was enough for me to make out our intertwined fingers—
his dark ones overlapping my pale ones. The contrast of our skin called to mind one of the paintings from my
dorm. The mural portrayed two horses, a dark one and a pale one, running down the shore of a tropical beach into
the sunset.

On the cusp of my return to ordinary life I discovered that which makes us human. We comprehend our own
mortality; from this understanding, we bestow whatever meaning we choose on our flashes in the expanse of
time.

I know other words such as blink or point would serve just as well to portray life’s brevity, but my preference
lies with flash, a word I hope will characterize my life. On a universal scale, my existence is inalterably short-lived,
but I also want it to be bright—like a flash. I want to leave an after-image impressed upon the minds of those who
were present to witness my flash in time. I’m aware that afterimages fade, but I have no illusion of permanency
when it comes to my memory. Over the course of my years, I have come to realize that I would die two deaths: the
first when my life vanishes from my body and the second when my memory vanishes from the minds of the living.
I do not wish to escape oblivion. Nor would I mind if my journey were interspersed with ambling periods to
appreciate the path I traversed.

The entirety of MSA’s lifeblood moved outdoors for the Candle-Lighting Ceremony. We formed a massive
circle, all 330 scholars moving silently into place. The faculty and RA’s navigated our inner circumference, lighting
the candles we held before receding into the circle themselves. After the final wick was lit, the only movement
came from the flickering of candles.

Soon the stillness would be broken. Soon, the time would come for final-farewells. But in that moment we
hung in the balance between unity and departure, between the end of one chapter and the beginning of another.
The moment ended, as all moments do. However, some eternities outlast others.

Before coming outside, we had been given two beads apiece. One was to keep for ourselves—the other to
give to the person who’d impacted us the most during the past 21 days. The circle dismantled as people sought
out their friends, the string of lights consolidating into smaller clusters.

That morning, J.D. and I had met in the Student Union while most of the scholars still slept. We’d had little
time left, and we weren’t keen on wasting it. It was to this early meeting that he now referred.

“Holding you this morning while you were on the edge of tears really made me realize just how much I care
about you,” he said. Needless to say, my emotions had run high all day. Despite the improbable nature of meeting
someone at MSA, I had really come to care for the Double-Last-Name-Guy I’d first met on the same Quad where
we now stood. This morning we decided that tomorrow’s graduation wouldn’t spell the end of us. As he’d said,
happiness is a choice, and I didn’t want to abandon the choice I’d made in that staircase purely because we were
returning home.
Green grass grows in Dachau.
Green grass grows in Dachau, and I do not understand.
Beyond the twisted fences and the haunted biting wire, beyond the moaning Arbeit Macht Frei and the stone and dirt and gravel ashes...around wasp-nest halls and permanent earth-scars, green grass grows.
Yellow dandelions. Wildflowers.
Grass grows, and butterflies tumble, through the air where medical torture facilities loomed, passed the gaunt phantom faces of men who starved and toiled, inside the humidity which still reeks of tears. Weapons were built at Dachau during the war. Weapons were built, but before, it was an artist’s village. Pigments were ground at the city’s river mill, and budding painters flocked from all across Germany to try and capture the glowing scenery. Dachau was known for its beauty. Weapons could only be built in such a place.
Green and yellow and blue, I saw; splatters of a planet’s soul shone through the barbed wire shadows. I had not expected colours. Black and white, maybe—or sepia, like photographs from history books. Not green. Green, I did not know how to handle.
I have stood in the courtyard of Dachau—the crunching gravel silent now, though once it howled with a people’s oppressed horror. I have padded by the naked barracks, stepping unharmed through poison gas showers and touching the ovens in which corpses burned. Humans beings built those ovens, black ovens—human beings starved and burned each other.
Green grass grows in Dachau.
It was an artist’s village, before.
I stood, of my own will, in a concentration camp—I watched children play in its ditches.
And I do not understand.
I don’t understand the wickedness.
I don’t understand Sandy Hook, a madman who carried guns into a school and destroyed the bodies of the innocent, the weak. I don’t understand Uganda, its dictator who burns villages, who forces children to shoot, kill, molest, forget. I don’t understand America with all its guns, its robots which shoot, its predator drones, its toxic gasses. I don’t understand crime. Rape. Murder.
Hate.
The songs of my childhood, crashing glass and crumbling buildings, men and women screaming through the smoke, and the frightened police—get off the streets! I was in first grade when the twin towers fell. First grade, and no one could explain what had happened.
How could it be explained?
Young man in an auditorium, screaming: don’t taze me, bro!
The cameras stood by.
Angry men with clubs and mace, beating the students who protested them. Occupy Wall Street. Occupy the world. Just following orders—the orders of whom?
I heard drive-bys on my street when I was young—good ol’ St. Louis, with all its shootings. All its muggings. Robberies. Deaths. I’ve seen pain on my television screen: Virginia Tech, Colorado Tech, Aurora Colorado and so much smoke. A lost generation in a world where war boils—I cannot remember a day without dead soldiers. Casualties, we say. Casualties of war.
War against whom?
And everyone is flammable, aggressive, destructive, afraid.
Gradually, we drown in chaos.
An artists’ village, once.
Human beings built ovens to burn. Now mud is slung like grenades, and we mock homelessness; we ignore the people in the streets, cold and starving. Grey brick buildings loom—but where did the colours go? When did the pigments morph into bombs?

*Casualties of war.*

An artists' village.

I hovered at the side of a mass grave, in Dachau—I bowed my head and prayed, but I don't know who I prayed to.

*Arbeit Macht Frei.*

Guns and knives. *Get off the streets.*

Dandelions bobbing, butterscotch gold.

Butterflies.

That day the sun shone brightly, incongruously, over Dachau. Children played in the ditches where aspiring escapees were previously apprehended and shot. I don't know what game the children played. I don't know how they could play, swathed in the scent of tears and shadows of black ovens. But I do know this: when the adults bowed their heads and shut their mouths and cried, the children laughed and raced about, singing. Maybe the blue sky inspired them. Maybe it was the soft grass beneath their feet.

I cannot understand.

I can't understand—but maybe children do. Maybe they comprehend how an artists' village can breathe, can become more than a munitions factory and prison.

*I was in first grade when the twin towers fell.*

Seeds were planted at ground zero, I'm told—such things are slow to grow, especially under heavy smoky soil. Some plants are dead at birth. Others will never reach the surface. But those that do touch the sunlight will bloom.

Have bloomed.

Are blooming still.

I have never been to New York. Maybe children play at ground zero, too.

At school, we cut construction-paper snowflakes and mailed them off to the students of Sandy Hook Elementary. Snowflakes to paint the place a little brighter, now that the world has grown so dark. Flowers do not grow in winter, I know, but in schools across the nation, paper has sprouted—the grieving students, after break, will return to a new building fluttering with colours.

I place great faith in colours.

I place faith in colours and pigments, and I place faith in people. Kind people. People who see—my English teacher who gives a ride to every hitchhiker; my friend, a college student, who cooks soup for the homeless. An entire student body who spend hours cutting snowflakes.

People who plant flowers.

I don't believe in flag waving, but I do believe in flowers—and my mind will never understand how two such things can coexist. How can children play in a torture camp? How can the sun shine through gunpowder and smoke?

How can a “desensitized” generation make snowflakes?

How do the flowers grow?

I'm seventeen, and I'm not wise. I don't know much about this world, this *humanity*—about killing and shooting and stabbing and love. Maybe I'm naive. Maybe I'm cynical.

But it was an artist's village once. And buildings fall. And dandelions bloom.

Green grass grows in Dachau.

And I will never understand.
The crimson blur

Battered, beaten, bruised,
a trail of crimson flows
trickles elegantly
into the surrounding water.
The tattered corpse floats
and continues downstream

“I’m not this a beautiful camping spot, honey?”

The bag,
its green innards spilling severed heads,
sits on the rocks—
this empire in the midst of us,
needn’t be devastated.

“Have Barbera grab me a coffee while she’s out.”

Does it matter?
This blood is on all our hands,

“Everybody’s got a water buffalo!”

Smile son.
See that fat stack of cash?
You’ve earned it.

“Ok, so should I get the pink ones, or the red ones?”

The red ones;
They’ll match the blood on your shirt.

Dark ages

They call me story drum;
I sit by the mortal fire,
to dip my hands
and taste of knowledge.

I wear the crown of my predecessors
(all blue and steeped with jewels)
and wave the torch for all to see.

I dig for gold in the wake of pigs
and transmute mud into silver.
I am the spirit of rebirth;
I learn through my hands, eyes, and ears.

This desire brings to the forefront
My prowess and potential,
My ladder, my steeple.

Noise is scavenged by us, the microphones that derive and translate and send to the radio tower that transmits waves that flow through the air like doves and land upon receivers that shoot a message to speakers that blast vibrations and music and sound that fall upon deaf ears.

Our beautiful web,
Worthless if not used to catch a fly.
When I was six years old my family was over at my grandparent’s house. They were all in the living room, and I was sitting in the dark, cold kitchen with my arms crossed, staring off into space. I was upset, angry with my older brother, Garrett, and looking around with narrowed eyes as the ghosts of people from hours ago bustled around. They laughed and worked, scrubbing dishes and enjoying the small things in life. I was listening to them now in the living room, chuckling and hollering like nothing was wrong.

I know now that the reason I was upset was a small thing; Garrett and I had fought over our favorite colors. It is tiny and incredibly insignificant, but to a six year old, every little thing is a seismic shift.

My dad had yelled at me for throwing the fierce tantrum over something so small and useless, and I got overwhelmed, causing me to stomp away. I lingered in the kitchen, simmering on the old floral-print couch that my grandma, Memaw as I called her, had shoved in there so everyone could sit and visit. I looked down at it in anger and shame, tears pricking at my eyes and feeling the scratchy but friendly and familiar surface. I brought my Band-Aid covered knees (it seemed that every time I walked outside I scraped them) to my chest and let out a flustered sigh. I picked at the bandages and thought my actually happy and simple life was terrible.

I didn't know that anybody even faintly remembered I was moping, so it was no surprise I was startled when I heard the clinking metallic sound of a cane hitting the pale tile floor.

I looked over to my right and saw my grandfather, sick with esophageal cancer, leaning on his cane, the shadows of the lonely kitchen and the light of the whooping living room playing on his face. It was a simple war of light and dark that I soon came to know as the war of life and death.

I tensed a bit, preparing myself for a lecture and thinking something along the lines of, "Great. Here it comes again.

All he did was smile, limp over to me slowly, and speak. I knew talking was hard for him—he barely had the breath to get up from his recliner—but then I was even more selfish and uncaring.

“Now, what was that fight about?” he asked in his patient but raspy voice, once clear and deep now damaged by the growing sickness in his esophagus. But while his body was weaker and weaker, his eyes were strong, and when I talked to him, they would always bore straight into mine. They were a pale blue hue, the color of the sky with a thin sheet of wispy cloud drawn over. I looked into those eyes, searching for the answer. What answer, I don't know. I always knew that they held the answer, and I think he knew that my eyes, a darker, murkier blue, held the question.

I scoffed at him, crossing my arms and thumping back on the couch. I had hit the back of my head on the wall, but I didn't want to show any weakness. I wanted to appear strong.

“Garrett thinks that green is a better color than pink,” I growled and looked away from him. Every time that I was rude to him, I didn't think anything of it. I thought I could make it up to him later.

I was wrong.

Though many people call their grandfather ‘Grandpa’ or ‘Papa’ or ‘Pop,’ I called mine Pawpaw. And my Pawpaw was probably one of the most caring and thoughtful men. Though most people in his situation would roll their eyes behind my back or do sigh in exasperation, thinking about how dramatic this little girl, that was not Pawpaw. Instead, he sat down next to me, slowly sinking into the worn out couch and holding onto his cane for support. I looked at him, my feet swinging back and forth, hitting the couch and brushing against each other on the way. I studied the wrinkles on his face and got distracted by those old, wise eyes. He said five words that I will always remember: “Pink’s my favorite color, too.” His pale blue eyes sparkled.

To most people, this sentence is just a statement. To them, it’s nothing emotional and definitely not something to remember. But I do remember. I also remember that he asked me to sit on his lap in the living room. Garrett and I usually fought tooth and claw for this spot, and because of that I was honored and slightly smug that I could stake my claim in front of him.

I got up, and we trudged back to the living room where I faced the rest of my family, face burning with embarrassment. Despite hearing my brother's complaints, the rest of the night was a lot of fun, especially since I knew that, with Pawpaw, I belonged.
For a few months, we went to Memaw and Pawpaw’s house every night, and every time we saw my sickly grandfather, he wanted to play Trouble, a game where players have six pegs and try to get them around the board. Players hit a little plastic half sphere in the middle of the board which caused two dice to jumble, determining the number of spaces the players would move. If an opponent landed on the same space as a player’s pegs were, the player would have to pick it up and move it back to the start.

Though I grew so tired of that game, I would always comply, complaining until we started playing. I began to have fun. I would laugh when he had to move his peg back to start because he would always make a baby voice and yell, “Waah, waah! I’m in trouble!”

I can still remember hearing the pop of the dice-roller as my hand let up on it and seeing Pawpaw’s pale eyes peeking over his bifocals and above his bottle of lemon-lime Gatorade. He always said that the drink was for brave people because real gators swam around in it. Every time he took the first sip, I would ask him how he knew. Were there really gators in that drink? His knowing blue eyes would look over at me, a smile playing on his lips and lighting up his whole face. I loved seeing the wrinkles on the sides of his eyes crinkle up when he would smile.

“Well,” he would answer slyly, “It’s called ‘Gatorade’ for a reason.”

Pawpaw steadily got worse. He moved from his recliner to his bed, where he was permanently stationed for weeks until he was forced into the hospital. Our games of Trouble ended, and I realized how sick he was. I knew that he had cancer, but I never thought that it was that bad.

One of the last times I saw him, we were in the hospital at night. It was dim in the room, and everyone had anguish expressions plastered onto their usually cheery faces. I stood solemnly with my parents, and though everyone usually talked, the room was silent. A mysterious looking yellow liquid was pumped into my grandfather, and I wanted to run out of the room and find the nearest bathroom to be alone and scream.

I don’t think that I had ever seen him look so helpless and weak. His pale eyes weren’t so knowledgeable anymore and were empty except for one question; it was my turn to have the answer now. Though I was young, I knew what the question was: was he going to live.

I didn’t know what to do.

After that, I avoided going to see him, saying I felt sick or that I was too tired. Whenever I was forced, I went with a scowl on my face and never talked. I would zone out and go to my own little world.

Not even a month later he died.

It pains me to think that a hateful child was how Pawpaw saw me for the last time, but the truth doesn’t lie.

We were sitting on the couch, the night of October 23, 2005. Pawpaw had been moved back to his house, and I was almost convinced that he was better. I was puzzled when my mom’s face became a ghostly white while she listened on the phone, but the tinny speaker was loud enough to hear my uncle’s voice on the other line. I picked up the words ‘Dad’ because he was my father’s younger brother and ‘died.’

Everything was a blur after that.

The visitation was a few days later. I was ushered into the old Methodist church that my grandparents attended and took a look down the church aisle from the lobby to a casket. I couldn’t tear my eyes away as I saw a crooked nose and a pair of bifocals peeking over the rim of the casket.

My parents asked me, very gently, if I wanted to see him.

I had always attempted to be strong, trying to be the one who everyone thought could last through anything. This was true until that short period of time when I faded, and the people who finally needed me to be strong emotionally broke down.

I said no, but my brother, the one who I thought was the weakest of the weak, said yes.

He marched down the aisle, holding the hands of my parents, while I was whisked to the playroom by a close family friend named Sandy, a dark haired and rough looking lady who was very kind and gentle on the inside.

I tried to find the regular joy that I always had found when playing with the set of giant LEGOes, but I could not. Number one, I just saw something that made me have to swallow bile that rose in my throat. Two, I wasn’t brave enough to face my fears, and three the usually music-filled room was silent except for the echoes of Sandy, as she cried near the doorway while sitting on a little blue school chair.

The next day, I was glad to get to school and found tranquility as I went through that October day in my first grade class. The whole thing was a haze, but I recall my mom showing up at the door. My teacher, Mrs. Luedde, possibly one of the best role models I will ever have, stopped me before I could leave and scribbled something down on a frog sticky note before handing it to me and giving me a big hug.

‘Good luck, Hollynn,’ it read. ‘And be the strong girl that you are.’
She signed the bottom.
I still have that sticky note, and when people ask me about it, I say it would be the first thing I would ever grab if my house were on fire. They laugh, and I laugh along with them to mask the almost overwhelming emotions that rise up and the tears that prick at my eyes.

At the funeral, my mom and Memaw were crying. They passed a blue polka dotted tissue box, and I just sat there furiously while listening to the pastor drone on when he hadn’t ‘found the time’ to visit a member of his own church family. My pastor, an aspiring Christian singer named Mark, visited.

We drove two hours to Canton, where my grandparents had grown up, where Pawpaw wanted to be buried, and where I go every once in a while when I need to find answers on my own. The chairs were covered in royal blue velvet, and I can’t remember anything else, except that it was incredibly cold. My family has a legacy of being buried on days with freezing temperatures.

After the ceremony, Garrett and I were hustled into our white 1999 Toyota Sienna, and I took little comfort in the worn and soft seats. My dad and mom got in the front and drove off, not letting us see the burial itself. But, I looked back, bouncing up and down as our minivan trembled on the gravel road, and caught a glimpse of the big stone block being lowered into the ground. I turned back around quickly, gazing with wide eyes at my father’s reflection as he suppressed tears, watching from his side mirror. At that moment I realized his eyes were the same color as Pawpaw’s. I tore off my hat, looked down, and stared hard with narrowed eyes at my blue mittens.

My grandfather had always wanted turkeys to come to his yard, which was one of the reasons that he had moved to the three acre home.

The day after the burial, my family was all gathered in that house. I was trying unsuccessffully to cheer people up by holding up a notepad and asking them to write Pawpaw letters that I could send to him in Heaven. I didn’t know how I was going to do it, I replied when they asked, but I was going to find a way.

Halfway through my running like a maniac around the house, two papers filled up with notes and crinkled with tearstains, someone let out a shout. Everyone came running to the broad kitchen window to see at least thirty turkeys taking off from the edge of the woods at the back of the yard and into the sky that was very slightly overcast.

Memaw, having finally been able to take a break from crying, started bawling again, and suddenly everyone was overrun with emotion, hugging each other and sobbing or fighting back tears.

Though some people don’t believe that the dead can speak to us, I know that on that day Pawpaw tapped on God’s shoulder and asked if he could tell us just one time that he loved us and was looking out for every one of our family. Many of my relatives took that sign from the turkeys, but I took a sign from the sky and the colors I had remembered from the past few days: different shades of blue, mostly sky blue. Looking as if a sheet of wispy clouds had blanketeted it, it felt placed there to protect us and keep us safe.

For years I hated October, but now it is my favorite month of the year. It’s the month where the skies are mostly this special color that I secretly call ‘Pawpaw blue.’ One day, I hope that my irises lighten and I have the answer eyes, too.
Summers in Miami 2006-2011

When I was seven and Eileen nine, we decided Salt’s addiction had gone too far and determined to stage an intervention. The first planning meeting was held in the back of my closet, sweating behind the rows of dresses, Eileen’s face red and slick with perspiration. She gripped a notebook and our mother’s iPad, glowing like a magic Rosetta Stone in her hands, and a pencil to take notes. “Search ‘how to hold an intervention,’” I directed, pointing at the keyboard. It took her a minute to find each key and peck at them with her pointer finger.

“This website says we need to think if she’ll react violently,” Eileen said. She put the iPad down. I squinted in thought, recalling Salt when she was thirteen and I first met her. She was crying about a cat she’d seen drowning in a sewer on her bus ride home. She wanted Mark to drive her back and pull the cat out so she could bury it properly. Mark said it would take them an hour, and anyway it was time to meet her future stepmother and her two future stepsisters. Instead of meeting us, she ran away sobbing and slammed the door to her bedroom so hard framed photos fell off the wall.

“I don’t think she’ll be violent,” I said.

“OK. I guess. Then we have to think of what to do if the intervention fails.” Eileen frowned and screwed her eyes up to read the screen clearer. “Like, make her move out or take our kids away from her, the website says.”

“I don’t have kids,” I said. Eileen snorted.

“Duh,” she said. “Duh, we don’t have kids. And we can’t make her leave. This is Mark’s house. We’re just living here until the end of summer.” She frowned. She kept tapping the screen with her knuckles to keep it awake because my mother used a password we didn’t know. “What could we take away from Salt? It has to break her down.”

“I dunno,” I said earnestly.

“Well, think of it, dummy,” Eileen said. “What does Salt love?”

“Pearl!” I said.

“We can’t take her dumb cat away. Mark would ground us if we took her cat away.”

I shrugged. My eyes had adjusted to the closet, and I could see Eileen’s face clearly, her thin nose, small chin, the smattering of freckles across her cheeks and forehead that looked like pimples.

“Wait…” Eileen said suddenly, jolting me from my thoughts and back to the intervention at hand. “Only we know where her stash is. We’ll tell her we’ll flush the pills away—all of them.”

“She’ll just move it. Wait! This is perfect. We’ll tell Mark and Mother,” I murmured. I grinned devilishly.

Eileen nodded and wrote it down in her notebook. “Good! OK. It says on this website we have to tell her how much we care about her. The problem is,” she said, “we don’t really love Salt or care about her. I’m not saying this to be mean.”

“Then why are we intervention-ing?” I asked.

Eileen frowned at me. “Intervening. And because it’s getting out of hand,” she said, using a phrase Mark said when I got a third helping of rice or pretended I’d forgotten to practice piano.

I remembered Salt in the bathroom with a bottle of Xanax, hefting it as if to find its weight. We were watching from the hallway. She eventually shook one into her palm, cut it with a knife, and swallowed it dry. We wanted to tell Mark and Mother but we knew Salt would only make our lives miserable. Thus, the intervention plan.

Eileen groaned suddenly and slammed down her notebook. “I was thinking too hard and forgot to keep Mother’s iPad awake. Do you know hard it was for me to get the iPad away from her before she let it fall asleep?”

She crawled out between two dresses. “Let’s finish this tomorrow morning while Salt is still in bed.”

I shimmied out behind her, panting at the cool air from my lazy fan. Eileen left my room, and I lay on my bed, listening to the music filtering from Salt’s room across the hall. It was slow, nothing like what her friends turned up when they came over. Through the window I watched Eileen riding her scooter, one leg poked straight behind her like a ballerina. I felt my heart pull at that moment, thinking of my father, missing him, his new wife Rebecca, and their baby who got to be with my father all the time. All my friends were in Portland, and I was stuck in Miami.
Eileen was my only friend in Miami, and we relied on each other, sneaking cigarettes behind the shed to feel reckless, riding our bikes to the sound.

I heard Salt stand from her bed and go to the bathroom. I slipped into the hallway and watched her go to her stash, a plastic bucket stuck halfway down an old laundry chute and pulled up with a coil of rope. She was sweating, too. I wondered if Mark or Mother had remembered to check the fuse that morning before they went to work.

She plucked out a bottle of Xanax, halved one pill with her knife, and attempted to swallow it dry, but it stuck in her throat. She heaved twice and spit it into the sink. I ran to the kitchen, leaving her alone to sputter for air.

Mother and Mark started seeing each other when I was four. Only a few memories stick out to me now, like stripes of color: having lunch alone with Mark for 'bonding;' when he lit a cigarette in the cup of his palm, the flame flickering on the surfaces of my eyes; swimming with Mark, Mother, and Eileen one hot day, and Mother taking off her top and sinking under water so he could see; when I fell in the driveway in a spray of gravel and blood and Mark carried me home.

They became engaged two weeks after I first heard them having sex. I called my father and begged him to pay for my flight home early, but he tried to explain to me, as patiently as one can to a five-year-old, that the courts and the laws kept me from leaving, that something terrible would have to happen before I could go. He sent me ear plugs in the mail. I started resenting Mark, his shabby little beard, the way his eyes squinted when he tried to watch movies in the dark, how he left his Christmas lights up year-round.

I met Salt when I was five and she thirteen. She had glossy black hair in a waterfall, blue fingernails, and a tie-dyed backpack. She cried about the drowning cat, and Mark argued with her, telling her to enjoy the company of Mother, Eileen, and I. She'd met Mother, but we had just arrived from Portland and driven two hours to Salt’s house from where my mother then lived.

After emerging from her room an hour later, puffy-faced and exhausted, Salt had dinner with us. Mother had a margarita and kept laughing at things that weren’t funny.

I hated Miami and tolerated Mark. I only came for my mother. I needed her, being a girl of seven. I knew about sex and was primarily curious about the woman who'd carried me in her womb for nine months before pushing me into the world. More than that, I could tell my mother needed me. I saw it in her eyes when she picked us up and bought us cream sodas. I heard it in her voice when she said goodbye.

At dinner Mother wore her running clothes and her hair in a ponytail. She said she was cold because the sweat was making her wet and shivery, and Mark said it was called clammy and told her to go find her sweater if it was so important. Eileen and I ate our rolls and beans and salad. Out the window, the sun, blood orange and as alive as a heart, sunk beneath a row of houses. I saw Salt slip an Adderall into her mouth and wash it down with diet Pepsi when Mother and Mark weren’t watching.

“We need to practice,” Eileen whispered. She was straddling me. I pushed her off and sat up, wincing at her voice.

“What are you doing?” I hissed.

“We need to practice the intervention,” she whispered sharply. “Everyone is sleeping. Mother and Mark went to bed two hours ago. I hear them both snoring. Salt is sleeping too. Her door’s locked from the inside.” She shook my shoulders like she shook our puppy when it died. “Get up. I checked the website on the computer. We have to rehearse,” she said. “We have to...”

Footsteps in the hallway, my heart raced as Mark shuffled into the bathroom.

“Mark’s just pissing,” she murmured and dragged me off my mattress. I hit the floor. She shoved pillows under the comforter and crawled to my closet.

I remembered last year when we played spies. We were back in Portland and felt freer than big cats on the Savanna and ran around with spyglasses made of toilet paper rolls and tape, watching Dad cook green beans in butter and Rebecca sorting our laundry into lights, darks, and reds. Eileen loved the spy game. She loved crouching down, wearing black clothes, dragging her body by the elbows and speaking in code; her name was Catfish.

In the closet, she opened her notebook to where she’d left off.

“First we have her come to a place, but she doesn’t know what’s coming,” she murmured. “Let’s have her go to the beach with us.”

The door shut to Mark and Mother's bedroom as Mark went back to sleep.

“Why not home?”
“Portland?” Eileen asked. “Oh. Here. No, the beach I think.” She wrote something down. “Then we both have to ‘express our concerns and feelings.’ I’ll say I want a big sister in my life, and I want her to stop using pills because they make her crazy.”

“That’ll make her mad,” I said. “And mean.”

“It’s true,” she said. “You.”

“What?”

“What’re you saying?”

“Um, I’ll tell her I liked her right when I saw her the first time; she was crying about the cat, and I knew—I knew she was empathic.”

“Empathetic?”

“Oh. Yeah.”

Eileen wrote it down. “Work on it,” she said. “Then we say the changes we’ll make if she won’t agree to quit on the spot—which is to tell Mark and Mother.”

“Yep.”

She rolled her eyes at me, finished writing, and put down her pencil. “Good. This is good,” she said.

I leapt off the counter the next morning, cinnamon still dusting my face. It was pouring rain. Mother and Mark were working, and Salt was in her bedroom listening to music. Eileen was sick.

“Eileen, what about the intervention?” I asked.

“Another day,” she said. She drank her Sprite, but the cup was empty, and the straw made a loud gurgling sound. She lay on the couch like a languid cat, watching old episodes of Freaks and Geeks and slowly tearing a cigarette box into cardboard strips. “I’m exhausted. And ill.”

Mother said ill, not sick. Normally I didn’t mind how Eileen picked up Mother’s speaking habits when we were in Miami, but it grated on me that morning. I left her and went back to the kitchen, got myself my own soda, and went to my room.

An hour later I had to pee. I ran to the bathroom and locked the door, my panties already at my ankles.

Someone knocked. “Hey,” Salt said. She banged with her whole fist. “I have to pee.”

I was angry. I was angry because Mark told Mother to get a sweater instead of turning down the air conditioning, because Eileen told me I had to stop sneaking cigarettes for fun, because I heard Mother making love to Mark, because now Salt was banging on the bathroom door while I was trying to pee. Because of the pills in the chute.

“No,” I said to her and stomped across the bathroom, my steps muffled slightly by the fuzzy black carpet. I opened the chute. She heard it, the creak of the door.

“Let me in, Marge,” she said. “Marge.”

I banged the lid against the opposite wall, just once, to rub it in her face. I grabbed the rope and jerked it; the bucket scraped the sides of the chute as it ascended. She started banging at the door.

“Marge! Marge! Marge, open the door!”

“No!” I screamed. I took out the bottles. They had child locks. My hands were small. I squinted so I could read the instructions to open them and worked the caps off, one by one, emptying the pills into the toilet on top of my pee and wet toilet paper: pale blue Adderall, tiny orange tabs of Adderall, white-and-orange Adderall, and Xanax the color and shape of a robin’s egg or white rectangular Xanax. They floated and sunk like candies.

Salt was pounding on the door. “Marge! Margaret Wilson, I will kill you if you don’t stop what you’re doing and let me in!”

I flushed the toilet, and the pounding stopped. The door quit rattling on its frames. She was silent. Then, “Marge. Fuck. Did you just do what I think you did?”

I let the toilet lid clatter down, put the bucket back in the chute, pushed it down, and cut the rope with her hidden knife.

“You’re seven. What the hell. Let me in now, or I’ll kill you.”

It was the way she said that, even-toned but shaking, as if unsure what she was saying even as she said it. For the first time I was terrified, of the pills, of what I’d done, of her. I crawled into the bathtub and prayed to a God I barely knew to please let the lock hold.

She tried to get in for another ten minutes before abandoning the cause and stalking away.
Mother found me when she got home from work. I’d spent all day in the tub; I was afraid Salt would be waiting outside the door with a knife. I remembered seeing something like it on Mark’s crime show, the brother hunched outside his twin’s office, gripping a cold pistol, waiting. I was petrified.

Mother took the knob off the door, slipped inside, and found me curled up in fetal position. She knelt over me, her face confused and afraid.

“Marge,” she said, “what happened?”

I started crying. “I thought Salt was going to hurt me. She was really mad,” I said.

“Why was she mad?” Mother said.

I sobbed, snot on my face and tears running down my cheeks and into my hair. “I got mad at her for playing her music too loud, and she got mad at me for getting mad at her,” I said. “I thought she’d get a knife.”

Mother face seemed to melt into concern. She pulled me out and brought me clean clothes. She turned on the water and tested it with her wrist, then held my elbows while I climbed in. She brought me pajamas. I asked to go to bed, and she looked worried. But she let me.

I went to Salt’s room on the way; I don’t why, though I’ve thought of it for years. I knocked twice. She opened the door. She didn’t look angry anymore. She looked defeated, like she’d lost the only match that mattered.

“What do you want?” Her voice was flat. She wouldn’t hurt me.

“I’m really sorry, Salt,” I said quietly.

She shut the door in my face.

That night, I called my father and told him everything. An hour later my mother drove me to the airport. I would fly back to Portland.

That night was the last time I ever saw Salt.

I have, however, seen my mother. We meet in Louisiana each summer. Beers make my mother weepy and honest, and she drinks them often there; I end up with her curly head on my shoulder and my hands in hers, squeezed and pulled at. One night when I was fifteen, her makeup ran. She’d already had four beers. “Margie,” she said, her voice shaky, “I’m really sorry about everything in Miami. I really am. I didn’t mean to hurt you, Margie...” She hiccupped, lost her thought, and stared out over the Gulf, as if trying to collect her thinking in the waves. I felt her kneading my fingers, and I realized, the way Salt cried, the way she so desperately wanted to save some shred of dignity for the drowning animal in the sewer, how she never tried to hurt me, but did—it was all too much like my mother.

I remembered when she dropped me off at the airport, her face wet, gripping her purse. She stood there facing me, her eyes squinting as if to read a small and cryptic message. I suppose to her I was one. “Mommy,” I said. I hadn’t called her that in years.

“Margaret,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

On the plane, as it sat idle on the runway, I remembered the slosh of water down the drain, her flower bud smell. I suppose I could have asked to get off, but I didn’t. And she was already gone, had already left me.

At the beach in the Gulf, I slid my drunken mother off my shoulder and stood. The ocean was like a dream, the red fist of sun dropping below the surf to be extinguished. Mother sensed my movement and stirred, whispered come back. But I only moved closer to the sea.

Something Like Knowing

You take Brice to the beach because if you don’t, you’d be sitting in the hospital room, and you can’t do that anymore.

It’s a small hospital room with a mottled purple curtain and two beds, thin white rails and blue cotton sheets. Whenever you see the sheets you remember your aunt with a razor, kneeling over the roommate’s bed and shaving away the pills while the family took their daughter Helen for a walk in the garden. Helen came back smelling like lilies and sunk onto the pillow, and you remember the look of her face, the crumbling of her features, her nose wrinkling, her eyes small and smooth as two gray stones beneath a wide white forehead.

On your cousin’s side of the hospital room there is the bathroom, and on the other side, the window. Helen needs it dark for her headaches, and often the only light on your cousin’s side comes from a small lamp shaped like a globe. There’s a bulb somewhere within the chunky painted glass, and your aunt sits vigil by it, her hands gripping whatever is there to hold onto—her diary, an ice pack—and flips the switch whenever your cousin asks. The bathroom, dark with green tiles and a shower with a drain and a plastic bench to sit on. Whenever your cousin
bathes he wears his swimming suit, and it takes under five minutes for his mother to squat and use the special
vanilla soap to clean him.

You watched one time, because you were curious, but the ritual felt private; you felt like you were intruding.
She wiped his crown first, with gentle soapy circles, then his face. He closed his eyes, made wider by his
missing brows and lashes. To clean his cheeks and behind his pale white ears, she hid her fingertips behind a wet
rag. She then took his hands, one at a time, and cradled them in her palm like baby birds; she spread his fingers
and washed each one slowly, with warm water. Carefully she lowered herself to her knees in the swirling water;
she soaped his ankles, his calves, his toes. He held his eyes closed, and you, you left suddenly, overcome in a sort
of deep, oceanic knowledge of death you’d never experienced before.

You take Brice to the beach without asking anyone. Your aunt was kneeling over your cousin, cupping his chin
in her hand and feeding him his lunch, a soup. Helen slept against her pillow with her mother next to her,
watching her daughter’s quiet face. The strangeness of the contrast, even from across the room: Helen’s head, as
still and smooth as an egg while her mother’s black hair spread out like a Chinese fan. It strikes you, the stillness of
mothers; in the face of death they are powerless yet still stand, shuddering.

Brice is wearing his favorite jeans and old t-shirt. He is five and vivid, and many days you have carried him on
your back to the hospital cafeteria, buying him all the treats he could dream of: chocolate pudding and chocolate
milk, little brownies stuffed with chocolate chips. Once you shared an entire pizza and then ambled outside to
stretch your leg by the fountain, and he dipped both hands in the spray and smiled. This was funny to you, to see
him smile like that; when upstairs he only smiles occasionally, at a line in a cartoon, or when, to get a meek laugh,
your cousin blows bubbles into his water and shoots it out across his gowned lap.

The ocean is wild today, the waves thick and growing fierce, then bursting into foam and white surf against
the shore. This day is colored soft, as if drawn with colored pencils wetted in water. You see the sea oats dipping
gracefully, regally nodding, and a white crab inching out of his hole then slitting back in, leaving tiny chop-sticked
footprints in the sand. Brice grins and clutches your hand, almost as tightly as he grips your cousin’s.

“Do you want to play in the water?” you ask. Brice nods and throws off his shirt. It will get covered in sand, but
it can be washed. Brice has been quarantined for nearly a month now to avoid collecting germs and spilling them
back in the hospital room. Besides, the ocean has been calling to him. You imagine it now, Brice squishing a swirly
shell to his ear and hearing the waves whisper, coaxing him out and under their tongues.

In last year’s Christmas card, your aunt held her two boys. One is hairless and thin. The other, bright and
ruddy, healthy, leaning against her shoulder. The way she gripped them in the photograph, one palm in the land
of the sick, the other clutching wildly for the healthy.

You invited her to stay with you when you heard about the better hospital. Your apartment is small, two ferns
framing the door, a fake bamboo trifold separating your bed from the living room. You were diligent in your
insistence and bought new sheets for the fold-out couch your aunt could sleep on and some toys for Brice and
crunchy cereals with enough sugar to dust the moon. But she never came. There is a cot in your cousin’s hospital
room, compact enough to fit behind the dividing curtain, even though Helen’s mother snores. She sleeps there,
curled into fetal position, like a seed, her spine wrapped tight and protruding from her skin, her body contracting
as if trying to suck itself in.

Brice, despite the hospital’s protests, sleeps in his brother’s bed, one arm around his thin shoulder.
You come every day, bringing new treats, a packet of stickers, and your university homework. You sit in the
corner and highlight a few random lines to look studious. Maybe you sing a little song to Helen, about pigs
squealing off to market, but Helen got her cancer before she could go to market, and you have to explain it to her:
the watermelon stands and crafty people selling cured meats or wooden birdhouses.
You never took the sheets off your couch or threw out the cereal. They sit calmly in your apartment, waiting.
Brice giggles a laugh that bubbles out of him. It’s calm and gentle, almost nimble, flying from another time.
He dashes to you and flings his arms around your legs, getting them wet, showering sand down onto your calves.
He kisses you quickly and dances at your feet, kicking up seashell shards.

“Why aren’t they whole?” he asks, holding out a palm-full of bits, but you don’t look down at his hand,
trembling slightly in the air.
“What?” You think maybe he means the waves, how they break into pieces when they fall.
“These!” he explains and thrusts his hands up. Brice is short for his age and reaches only your waist.
“Oh, they broke in the surf,” you say slowly and turn over his hand so the crunched-up shells fall around your
toes. He frowns and turns to stare out at the ocean.
You begin walking, but you don’t know where. Brice grasps your hand and swings it slightly in his own and begins to sing about birds taking flight. When you ask where he learned it, he says his brother taught him.

In the distance a boardwalk juts out to sea. Brice gazes up at you and questions with his eyes, the brows curving up near the middle. When your cousin first lost his eyebrows, it was difficult to read his expressions. You always knelt before him and asked, waiting for him to tell you. You realize, with sudden guilt, that everything leads back to the cancer.

You cell phone rings. It’s your aunt, frantic. You know she’s leaning into the mouth piece because it sounds grainy.

“Where are you? Where’s Brice? Are you in the food court? Can you bring up something for him to eat here? Lunch is late.”

You take a long breath and blow it out. Over the water, someone is surfing. He is alone, and the wave chops him down. Brice points, and you nod eagerly, to humor him.

“We’re not at the hospital. I took Brice to the beach. He hasn’t been, and I needed a break.”

She sighs. You hear your cousin in the background ask what’s going on.

“Go back to sleep, honey,” she says softly. Then mashes her lips up against the phone. “You need to tell me when you take Brice somewhere.”

You look down at Brice. His hair is brown but has strands of gold in it from the sun. He has stopped walking to stare at the surfer, gliding in on a new wave, his board almost a part of it. The sun is slicing through and you think of the hospital room, small, dark, cramped. You imagine yourself squeezed into the corner, watching the sadness as if in a movie. Your aunt meditating on her cot. Brice coloring. And your cousin, fading in his bed.

“Brice and I are fine,” you say. You don’t know if you meant to sting so much.

Your aunt doesn’t know how to respond, but she tries. “I’m sorry.”

“Brice is a beautiful boy,” you say.

She is silent for a long time, until you think she’s hung up.

“I am just a mother, doing my best,” she says finally. You hear the defeat. “Go to sleep now, honey. Everything is OK.”

You and Brice find somewhere to buy lunch.

“Do you remember what’s not hospital food?” you ask him.

He shakes his head.

“It’s been way too long since you got out of there,” you say. You suddenly feel horrible. You come every day, bag heavy with books and little gifts for the boys, maybe some powdery juice packets to stir into their drinks. But every night you have a luxury your aunt doesn’t have, nor do your cousins or Helen and her parents. You can take the elevator down to the main level, climb onto the bus, ride seven stops, and slip into your apartment. Everything is calmer there. You can make pasta and lay on the couch. You have the blessing of escape.

“What’s the one thing off this menu you want to eat?” you ask. Brice can read. Before the cancer, your aunt taught them both in a fit of motherly pride, sitting them in front of Easy Reader books about frogs on logs. He would call you on the phone and read to you.

“I don’t care about the cost,” you say.

He frowns out to the sea and shrugs. His shoulders are small, thin.

“What are you pointing at?” you ask.

“The fish tacos,” he says. “I like mahi-mahi.”

You take note of this and try to remember so you can pick up a mahi-mahi, grill it at home, and carry it to the hospital to treat him. But you will later forget.

You order your meals—fish tacos for two—and eat them in the sand. The food dribbles down Brice’s chest, diced fish, shreds of lettuce, some cold bits of cheese and small watery tomato cubes. They aren’t very good. The shell is floppy and soggy, and the fish is overcooked. But Brice eats raptured, greasing his face. He pauses only to smile up at you.

“Are you happy?” you ask him.

He frowns out to the sea and shrugs. His shoulders are small, thin.

“Want to race back to my car?” you suggest.

He laughs with such joy that his head falls back. It’s a pure sort of happiness you haven’t seen before. He laughs until he belches. You both run to the car, your stomachs full. You feel queasy, but you keep going, pumping your legs and laughing, your hair whipping in great brown ribbons behind you.
Brice’s small legs can only carry him at half your pace, but you go slow enough to let him win.

“Hey,” you say.

“Hi. I have to be quiet, I have to whisper,” your aunt says. “He’s sleeping; Helen’s sleeping.”

“It’s the afternoon,” you say.

“They get tired easily. You know that.”

“Brice loves the beach,” you say after a moment of consideration.

“If I could take him, I would.”

“Don’t be pissed at me.”

Silence.

“I’m in a lot of stress. You’ve been a great help,” your aunt says nervously.

Pause.

“I’m not bringing Brice home tonight,” you say carefully. “I’m going to let him sleep in my apartment. He needs a break. A longer break than this. He’s only five.”

You hear your aunt breathing.

“Cancer isn’t something we hung onto him. I know he isn’t a coat rack,” she whispers. “I know how the cancer affects him. Please. But right now my job is my other son.”

“I’ll bring him back on the ten-o’clock bus tomorrow.”

“Would you do me another favor?” she asks you.

“Sure.”

“Let him know I’ve shaving my head for support. So it won’t shock him.”

“Yes, I will.”

But you will forget.

Your apartment is small. The pipes leak, and the windows, wide with thick glass, are all stuck slightly open.

“This is your bed,” you explain to Brice with a sweeping motion. The couch is still folded out, but the sheets are dirty. You notice your hairs, long strands, woven around and through them. You rip off the covers, shove them down into the laundry bag, and produce another set from their spot in the pantry, near a sack of potatoes.

“In the morning I’ll make you a treat. Do you want to play a game now? Do you want to watch a movie?”

It has been seven months since your cousin left his hometown, and your aunt and Brice followed. But it has been four years since your cousin’s battle began. He is only nine. His eyes, wide and brimming, fudgy in the right light, are shiny and wet. They are guileless. The kind of eyes you thought God would love.

Brice is at the age his brother fell ill. You remember your aunt panicking, phoning your mother. You were in twelfth grade and were studying for an exam, and you heard your mother saying the bruises, clamoring up his spinal chord like deep purple jewels, could be anything.

He must have fallen, sister, it can’t be leukemia.

But it was.

You find Brice a banana, but he won’t eat. He wanders the apartment, marveling at its size. He touches the arm of the couch and then floats to the television, fussing with the buttons. In the kitchen he slips his hand along the counter, and he darts to your bed and tosses himself onto it. It’s only a double bed, iron, and just a frame, but it’s as if he’s resting on a cloud in heaven. He throws his head into the pillow and smiles up at the ceiling.

You watch from a distance. This is like when your aunt bathed your cousin as if the washing was a prayer to God, please heal my love. You watch him play. You had offered games, even opened the tiny closet to reveal all the toys you purchased for him, Candy Land, a transformer still swaddled in plastic. But for two hours he simply clutches the blankets, punches your pillows to fluff them, and then perches on the edge when you bring him chocolate milk.

“My brother says add a pinch of salt and make it sweeter,” he says. So you go to the counter and add a shake of salt.

Slowly Brice drifts off to sleep. He is curled up like his mother, small and compact, like a teardrop. You shift his head onto a pillow and pull the blanket up over him. He breathes delicately into the covers.

Over his head dangle a few photographs you have pinned. The Christmas card from last year. A picture of you with your boyfriend, who is now your ex, which you meant to remove. The picture of your cousin that your aunt sent out to everyone, beaming with a thumbs-up, from when he went into remission for the first time. And one of your cousins from only a few weeks ago, pressed together on the bed. Brice has his arms wrapped protectively
around his brother’s neck. Both boys are smiling, but your cousin’s is pinched, strained. His head shines, but his eyes seem drained.

You slowly unclip the photograph and put it in a drawer.

One will never kiss a girl, never go to college, never marry, never taste coffee or hold his baby.

Brice breathes evenly. You are struck by the life pulsing warmly within this child. He will not die before he has a chance to grow. When he sleeps, his eyebrows flutter slightly. He fists the blankets up to his chest. He has not had his own bed in nearly seven months. You tuck him deeper into the sheets.

You don’t know what will happen until it crashes into you. You will never know in which direction your thoughts will scatter, like dropped marbles. You will never be able to save everyone, no matter your methods of attack. Life will plow on and perhaps leave you behind.

You lift yourself off the bed and kiss his forehead, which is warm and fringed with hair, so unlike his brother’s. For all this puzzle solving, this pulling your hair out in prayer, you are suddenly hit with truth. Your cousin will die. Your other will not.

It is all so simple, and for that, your heart breaks.
Fireflies

I caught a lightning-bug in a jar last night. They were shining in the dark air like pieces of gold confetti shaken from a bag somewhere in heaven, slowly falling towards the grass.

I bet my brother that I could catch five. I bet my sister that I could catch ten. But I bet Grandpa that I could catch twenty and have them all sparkling in the jar at once.

“They're restless fellows,” Grandpa told me, as I waited for Grandma to find a mason jar in her jelly cupboard. “They like to get away when you're not looking. You know.” Laughing, he fixed his glasses on his clean-shaven face. “I used to be the champ of catching 'em come nights in my neighborhood.”

“Could you catch twenty?”

Following me down the steps, he deftly clasped his hands around a flicker and slowly opened his palm to let it crawl up his fingers.

“Oh, thirty, forty – maybe.”

I dropped my jaw, remembering the story about the 20-pound bass that never existed.

“Are you serious?”

“Sure.”

“Really?”

He unscrewed the lid of my jar and dropped in three fiery-bottomed bugs. “Of course. And I could do it again.”

My little brother proudly held up a dixie-cup. He had caught five, and as he was smiling at me, they slyly climbed to the rim and took flight.

Before running off with my sister, he whispered in his six-year old way.

“They like to be free.”

Grandpa and I stretched our legs, and he comically swung his arms to loosen them, as if we were prepping at the beginning of a 100-meter dash.

“I bet thirty,” I said.

Grandpa bet thirty-five. I agreed, and fetching a second jar through the kitchen window, we dashed out in the twilight.

I think that as Grandpa was running around in circles, following flickers, he was a little boy again, like my brother, but in his own neighborhood, his boyhood friends shouting up and down the street instead of my little sister squealing.

That was last night, when the confetti was still falling, before the sun set.

I won the bet.

Mom quietly dried two mason jars and set them to drip-dry beside the sink. Tonight rain pelted the window, and there were no lightning-bugs flirting with the darkness, the unrecorded contest in action of who could stay brightest the longest.

“The fireflies always win that bet,” Grandpa had once commented.

We sat, staring out the old window of my grandparent's home and through the raindrops streaking the glass. We waited for the telephone to ring.

I looked at the pictures on Grandma's mantle, mostly in black and white. One from her wedding day, and one of my Grandpa in 6th grade, proudly wearing his Boy Scout uniform. Another held my mother the day she was born.

I'd seen them all a thousand times, just like I'd seen the sun set every evening.

The phone rang in the silence, and I jumped nervously as Mom answered it.

“We'll be right over, Mother,” Mom said. “Don't worry. Shh, shh. We're coming.”

The rain was letting up as we drove, and by the time we reached the hospital the fireflies were daring to dance in the humidity. Walking toward the doors, clutching the hand of my sister, I reached up and deftly caught a lightning-bug in my palm.
I closed my hand, and when the bug peeked its head out between my clenched fingers, I gently pushed it back in.

We walked into Grandpa's room just before they rolled him back from surgery. The walls were cold and white, and the air stale in comparison to the outdoors.

"I'm so sorry," a nurse stated at the doorway to the ward. "You need to be thirteen or older to enter the ICU."

Mom led my siblings out, saying I could trade places with her in a few minutes. Grandma wrapped her arms around me as we gazed at Grandpa's sleeping form which had quietly been brought in.

"He was always a restless fellow. He never wanted to sit still," Grandma whispered. "Who would've thought it'd come to this to watch him sleep?" She sighed and squeezed my shoulders. "He looks young again."

It was true. His face was gentle and calm, seemingly less wrinkled where it lay on the white pillow. His breathing was almost silent, but we could see his chest rise and fall slowly. I imagined him sleeping sixty years before, the moon shining down on him from the skylight his father had made in his childhood bedroom. He wanted to be able to see the stars.

There weren't any skylights in the hospital.

I touched Grandpa's still arm with my open hand and tried not to let my eyes overflow. Though no one said a word, I could hear Grandma and my thoughts, But I couldn't voice them. I wouldn't voice them.

Something inside me began to whisper, "He's not waking up. He's going home."

I opened my palm and looked at the firefly that was waiting calmly to be set at liberty. He eagerly began to crawl up my finger. I didn't hold him back.

"He just wants to be free." I said.

And tonight I let a firefly go. One single piece of heavenly confetti, floating gently towards the tile floor.

The Lantern

With sweating palms, I ran my fingers along the wooden railing of the look-out tower. A strong breeze blew, and feeling the tower yield slightly to the force of the wind, I looked up past my bare feet, up past the wooden railings.

As one grain of sand lies with a million other grains and becomes a beach, so the blades of grass transformed from singleness to a solid wave of color. The field stretched on for acres until it reached the distant border of trees and town. Here and there on the hills groups of wildflowers were welcome patches of color in the landscape. On the horizon, wooded hills became blue slopes against the sky. Far off, I could see the roofs of the buildings on Main Street.

I wiped back the hair sticking to my face and felt the sweat dripping down my cheeks, but the heat was more bearable than it had been before climbing the tower. Standing 60 feet above the ground, the air was cooler, the sky closer.

Maddie mindlessly hit the bottom of the tower with a stick, his little feet kicking up the dirt in the bare spot by the stairs.

With a sigh, I started down the steps, watching the landscape become less expansive until I finally reached the bottom and the field, which, though it had swelled like the water in the ocean, was now just single blades of grass again. The grains of sand were no longer a beach, and I was staring at the pine tree which grew behind the lookout and blocked the view of the field from the ground.

Grandma's house sat at the bottom of the hill, nestled in a valley of magnolia trees. I rumpled Maddie's curly brown hair and saw Grandpa rocking on the front porch, the song of his chair creaking in the twilight.

"Can I light it tonight?" Maddie started running up the stairs before I grabbed his arm and led him back down.

"Oh please, Mary?"

"You have to go in and take your bath."

"But I want to light it!"

I grinned. "And don't give Grandma too much trouble about scrubbing behind your ears."

Maddie looked grimly down the hill, and we both waved at Grandpa. "After my bath?"
We started towards the house. "Only if Grandpa will carry you back up here, but you know we shouldn't light it until it gets dark. It wastes oil." I turned back around, and Maddie was crouched in the grass, picking weeds which he had mistaken for flowers.

I knew they'd be happily sitting in a jar on the windowsill until they withered and died, but there would be more after that. They'd grow back in the endless field, silently working though the soil when the world was quiet in the early dawn or in the hush of twilight, and the only light which shone was the lantern hanging from our lookout tower.

Last year, I had the hope that my older brother Timmy would follow the light of the lantern home, finding his way through the waving grass in our beloved field. But I knew, now, that he wasn't coming home, just like my uncle wasn't coming home. I was old enough to understand that the tower was much more than a look-out.

Our light was hope for the entire city that, now that the war was over, the men would come home. Maddie had barely been coaxed into the lukewarm bath before he jumped out and raced around the kitchen, begging to stay dirty rather than suffer the torture of scrubbing. Grandpa looked over his glasses, quietly ordering Maddie back into the dreaded water, and penitently, Maddie returned.

Hearing him hurry through his bath, I pulled on my boots and waited. The tower seemed so small through the window, standing up on the hill the way it had for thirteen years. Without the lantern lit, the tower faded in with the trees around it. No one would know it was there in the dark without the light hanging from it.

But with the light, it could be seen for miles.

It was used in town as a guide, a signpost in the evening to cars traveling on the dusty road which passed Grandma's farm. It had become a part of the landscape, just like the oak tree by the post office which had been growing for nearly a century.

"I'm done."

I turned around and saw Maddie dripping by the bathroom door, a towel wrapped haphazardly around his skinny 6-year-old frame.

"I see that. Are you going to get dressed?"

Maddie shook his head, his brown curls towel-dried in a frenzy. "I don't have to get dressed since Grandpa's carrying me up there."

Grandpa raised his eyebrows and set down his newspaper. "And what makes you think I'm carrying you up there?"

"Because I want to light it," Maddie said weakly.

"Why are you lighting it?"

"Because I am."

"Maddie..."

Maddie shuffled his bare feet and looked to me for help. "Because..." he whispered, "because I want Timmy to come home, too."

Grandpa sighed quietly and looked at Maddie, standing in the pool of light coming from the bathroom, the towel trailing on the floor. "Get your clothes on. Hurry up."

We trudged up the hill, Grandma carrying the matches, and Maddie nestled comfortably in Grandpa's strong arms. Maddie was tugging at his curls and talking to the family dog, who was yapping along beside us.

"Can't I climb the steps alone this time?"

Grandma shined the electric torch in the coming dark and shook her head. "You didn't bring any shoes, young man."

"But I can go barefoot."

"Not after your bath."

Grandpa was breathing heavily, and nearing the tower, I knew it would be hard for him to climb all the way to the top with Maddie in his arms. Reaching the base, I pulled off my boots and pushed them on Maddie's feet.

"I want to go alone," Maddie said, Grandpa putting him down. "I want to do it all alone."

Grandma put out a restraining hand, as if she were sure that he would burn the tower down, but Grandpa nodded assuredly and, hugging her shoulders, whispered in her ear:

"Timmy was no older than that when he lit it for the first time, and he did just fine."

There was a suspicious mist in both of my grandparent's eyes as Maddie grinned, showing off the gaps between his teeth, and put his foot excitedly on the bottom step.
We stood at the bottom of the tower, watching him climb the stairs with the match box carefully clutched in his fist. When he reached the top, he stuck his head over the railing and hollered that all was well. Grandma shined the light up towards him in the coming dark, and we watched as he made sure the lantern was hung safely on the hook in the roof.

“I’m lighting the match, now.” A moment passed. “Do I turn the wick up or down?”

Grandpa coached him through, and we soon heard him strike another match because the first had burned down to his fingers. He madly blew it out and threw it carelessly over the side.

A minute later, the light shone out over the field, and all was at peace. The grocer, watching in the darkness on the porch of his store, could finally close shop, and Mrs. Mulligan turned in for the night. The Smith boys said their prayers and were tucked in bed, and Mrs. Johnson put down her stitching to kiss the picture of the young sailor sitting on her dusty mantel. Our lantern was like a clock, so familiar and longed for.

Maddie chattered in the darkness, holding my hand as he walked back towards the house.

“Do you think he’ll see it? I don’t think I turned up the wick enough. I think it’s not shining bright enough.” He peered over his shoulder making it very difficult to hold onto his hand. “It’s brighter when you light it, Mary.”

“No it’s not, silly. You did fine.”

I remembered watching Timmy, when I was six years old, igniting the lantern for the first time. He had hoped as a little boy that his uncle would come home. He couldn’t understand that the First World War had been over for years. Our uncle would never come home.

But Timmy had hoped, and he had been persistent and faithful with lighting the lantern until he, too, marched off in his uniform, and Maddie and I were left behind.

And now the Second World War was over, and my older brother would never come home.

“You’re sure I did fine?”

“Of course, Maddie.” I sighed, mentally telling him to stop squirming around, but knowing that saying it would do no good. He wanted to watch the tower. We all wanted to watch the tower.

“Will Timmy see it?”

Someday Maddie would know that Timmy wasn’t coming home, and like the mothers, wives, and sisters in town, like Grandpa and Grandma, and like me, he would realize that the tower wasn’t only for Timmy.

It was for any soldier trying to find his way back to his family when the night was dark and the only light came from a silver lantern, slowly rocking back and forth in the evening breeze, hanging from the tower on the hill of our farm. It was for every family, waiting anxiously. It was for every little boy who longed to see his older brother.

“Yes, Maddie.” I said, grabbing his hand tighter and calming his fears. “They’ll see it.”
Joshua Thomas
A Gift Across Time and Space
Blue Valley High School

“One must not try to trick misfortune, but resign oneself to it with good grace.”
---Aristophanes

The rattling Kansas cold on Christmas morning could not penetrate the warm family gathering. We, my mother, my sister, my girlfriend and my stepdad, were all in our holiday high spirits. We listened to carols, opened presents and admired the tree. But, something was missing. Not the scarcity of snow. Not the rapidly disappearing cookies. My dad.

This was the second Christmas I celebrated, or rather endured, since his passing. I had recurring memories of my father; memories and guilt I couldn’t shake: My head hit something hard when I flopped onto the couch. I lifted the pillow and found a glass bottle with a distinct label. I remember seeing my father furtively sip out of a similar bottle. I deduced that the clear liquid was called vodka. From that point forward, it became my sworn enemy.

“Should I tell my mom that I found vodka? Should I tell my dad that he lost his vodka?” I covered up the bottle and hid my thoughts. I avoided my parents’ conflicts, avoided recalling the incident. I was afraid the two were related. My mother asked me if I had seen “anything.” This was my chance to confess, to relieve my burden. I did not respond to her cross-examination that day.

This particular avoidance set an elusive pattern that still haunts me. There would be more "incidents,” more confrontations, and more opportunities for me to hide. I was not equipped to understand the choice at age seven; I’m not sure I am equipped to handle it now: protect my father or confess to my mother.

My parents divorced. What if I told my mother what I saw? Could I have saved my father? I have been reassured that nothing was my fault, that I was not responsible. I know it was unhealthy, but I was trapped in a perpetual cycle of wondering. Retrospection is a peculiar thing.

My father was the epitome of holiday spirit; jolliness in its purest essence. I never met another adult who so unashamedly embraced the holidays. Since his death, I felt detached from him. I missed his voice, his chuckle, the way he sat with his ankle crossed over his knee, the way he had that vacant, faraway look when he calculated difficult math problems in his head. A gift under the tree held a surprise.

I unwrapped the crimson paper and saw a leather-bound book with gold lettering, the kind decorators use to convey a literary lifestyle. The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. Huckleberry who? My mother explained to me that the book was in fact a literary classic, a treasure cherished by generations of readers.

My dad purchased the book for me when I was a toddler. When my parents divorced, my father asked my mother to give the book to me when I was sixteen, his age when he first read it. I felt blindsided, overwhelmed, honored.

I read the book, of course. It had a powerful effect on me, not because of the content. In fact, I was offended by some of the terms it used to describe people. Instead, I was moved because of my connection to my father, knowing he read the book at the same time in his life. Was he offended by the same references? Did he want to provoke me? What did he want me to know? Maybe he was prescient of his early death and wanted to leave me a legacy of literary appreciation.

What he left me, however, was more than that. I reflected on my father’s reading and his chosen gift. Why was he so attached to books? I played through memory after memory until I came to a realization. He read to understand. He had an insatiable desire for knowledge. Whenever I would assert that I knew something, he gently scolded me with Einstein: “Any fool can know. The point is to understand.”

Reading has become a new journey for me; non-fiction is my genre of choice. The more I read, the more comfortable I become with my lack of knowledge. I want to learn and understand. The book has helped me to remember the best things about my father and to forgive his weaknesses. His message helped me to forgive myself. He wants me to move on and do the best I can, just as he tried to do his best.

A simple book enabled my father to reach across space and time to set me back on course and to help me through my grief.
Seven score and seven years ago—that’s 147 years since schools don’t teach “scores” anymore—I was shot in Ford’s Theatre. I regret many things: not reuniting the country, not picking a better vice president, not watching the ending of Our American Cousin. I had hoped, while watching from the White House attic (where all presidents go when they die), that the groundwork I had laid as president would lead all these dreams to fruition, or at least the first one. Instead, my vice president and successor was impeached (though I can’t say I’m surprised) and things went downhill from there.

It took you guys a hundred years to give civil rights to African-Americans. I knew it would take a few years after the Emancipation Proclamation to get everyone to accept it, but a hundred years? And just think, that was back when the government actually did things. How long would it take other minorities to get their rights today?

I understand. Americans are stubborn. They were stubborn back in my day; they still are now. If there’s one thing that exceeds American stubbornness, it’s the pride they have in their country.

Look, I know I did some nice things. I signed the Emancipation Proclamation and freed the slaves, but almost anyone would’ve done that in my situation. I just got lucky (or dumb) enough to be elected president as the nation tore itself apart into civil war. I saved the country? Maybe, but it was still divided when I died. Really, you guys are going to far too much trouble to honor me. Take that author who wrote a book about me being a vampire hunter. That wasn’t necessary. Actually, that book was really cool. All of the other presidential ghosts were so jealous when it came out. Besides the book, though, there’s the money thing. The $5 bill was a nice gesture, although there are better pictures out there you could have used. The penny is the real issue. Do you guys realize it now costs more to produce a penny than a penny is actually worth? Why does the penny still exist? It’s just a lousy cent. I don’t mind if you get rid of it; I don’t look good in copper anyway. Maybe, if you just did away with pennies, you wouldn’t be trillions of dollars in debt. Just a thought.

Then there’s the Lincoln Memorial. Washington has a giant obelisk. Jefferson has... Jefferson has... does anyone visit the Jefferson Memorial? Either way, why is there a gigantic stone statue of me? I’m not that great. I don’t deserve it, and the others know it. They make death miserable for me. They consider me a parvenu of sorts, not good enough to join their exclusive club. “What did you do besides being president? Oh, not much, just a failed business and two short years as a Representative from Illinois. Tsk, Illinois. It didn’t even exist when we were around!”

And speaking of Illinois, this new guy in the White House, Obama, I can only imagine what death will be like when he passes away. He’ll try to connect himself to me as much as possible. “You represented Illinois for just one term before becoming president? What a coincidence! That’s all I did too!” I’ll never be able to get rid of him.

Since I was assassinated, you Americans have done a terrible job selecting presidents. Now, I’ll take the blame for Andrew Johnson; all he does is sit around up here and mope because he got impeached. He just can’t wait for Clinton to pass away so he’ll have company. But some of the rest of the presidents are just awful. Ronald Reagan? All he does is watch his old movies over and over. I’m surprised; I expected more from him. And then there’s Teddy Roosevelt. That ghost is insane. The rest of us have to break up duels between him and Andrew Jackson nearly every night. I know a lot of people you elect have good political histories, but have you ever looked at who they are? Do you even look at who you elect? Or do you just vote for whoever your party nominates? When I was elected, four people received electoral votes. Now, it’s always two people from the same two parties. Always. And you don’t see the problem with this?

Times have sure changed since I was president. But please, I urge you: listen to what I’ve said here today. I’m begging you; don’t make death worse for me up here.
Figments of the Future

In first grade, back when I was a bright and happy kid, figments of my future finally became the present. My six year old self didn't care what people thought. I was oblivious to the two faced taunts or barely contained sniggers of contempt. After school I sat alone at the cold white table. I faced the wall and spent my time thinking, caught in a world of my own imagining that I never wanted to leave rather than sit with the people who were cold, who would get me talking just to mock my erratic ideas.

I didn't think I needed friends back then, and all the girls giggling behind me didn't seem to have much substance. People told me I was quiet or antisocial but the truth is I have never felt really here. While the girls in my class were discussing nail polish like it was the only thing that mattered, I was struggling with religion and questioning if there was a god. In first grade. I was always that way. I found a way to discover things that eat away at this world early and ask the questions as a child that most kids ask as teenagers.

That was the main reason why I was facing the cold stone wall, locked in my head. It has always been an escape for me, to leave the troubles of tomorrow and fly away to a place where I was happy, soaring on top of a renewed world with the things I loved and civilization driven to the ground. I could be in a place alone, no sky scrapers or traffic, a place with only the whisper of the wind through the thatch of thick green branches and melody of birds harmonizing and improvising with a beauty and such a meditative air that it brought tears to my eyes. Or the dreams of my future finally granted: going through high school and college then finally becoming an adult. Imagining a world where I could finally be free of people and all the pressures of my life, a bittersweet pleasure. Jolted back into reality was like a stab, an opening to the sadness and cruelty. Turning my life back into the black and pessimistic dreariness that always seems to cloud my vision.

I sat there, surrounded by the dwindling pile of backpacks as everyone else left happily, ready to go home. Not me, though; my Dad always worked late, so my sister and I would be the last ones, huddling in the nearly deserted school with the frustrated receptionist impatiently tapping her fake, perfectly round fingernails on the desk. As the people vanished in blurs of motion, I sat oblivious to the bustle around me, in a trance looking out over my own stunning world. The chatter enveloping me was vague and distant. Very far away from me, like whispers on the wind, soothing. A constant dread has always consumed me, flooding my skin with blind and utter panic, a unique type of terror. It told me that eventually some nosy person would break me out of the haze and take me unwillingly back to reality, back to a noisy room full to bursting with the unwanted in my mind.

The unworthy consisted of me and a group of large and intimidating eight graders. Those like me who were unworthy of the exhilaration of being picked up early in carpool and getting home to dinner already made. Two people battled inside me: one who was frightened and meek around my superiors and the other who wanted anyone's approval desperately like it was a rite of passage, an invitation to become one of them. Right then I was half in and half out of my nearly comatose state.

I became aware of a presence looming on my right about to head out the door, clad in iron grey slacks with a cheap olive green polo and a belt that enclosed a layer of flab which concealed a muscular torso. My eyes traveled upward toward the voice that was booming down upon me, a tone raised slightly to be heard over the constant clamor. Back then it was the loudest thing I had ever heard, an avalanche of a million screams or the clang of one thousand gongs crushing me in a heavy British accent. I saw huge muscly arms clenched around books to take home for the night and an almost bald head with the remaining hair speckled around his scalp the same color grey as his slacks.

I was absolutely frozen as the strong voice came at me again, shaking my chubby first grade self out of the seat. I could feel my cheeks and the pit of my stomach burning as I looked up unimaginable lengths into his face. Like in a movie reel, you know when you accidentally hit the play button on the remote twice and everything slows way down. I couldn't hear anything but the tenor of his voice and sharpness of the accent. I couldn't even process the worlds until later, finally sitting in the car unobserved and small in the back seat as I stared out the window, absorbed into my own world.
All I noticed then was his penetrating eyes glaring down at my pudgy self. I nodded as reflex to get his gaze away from my face. It contained a warning of things to come in later years: exhaustion, pressure, and expectancy. I don't know how I was able to move my head, leaden with the weight of a much older person. All the feelings that I had been containing and desperately trying not to think about swamped in. The worries, fears, and cares of an adult cascaded over the self-constructed barriers under that gaze. I could feel my soul crack and wrinkle, become wizened and old. People had always told me I had an old soul, but at that moment with the weight of responsibility and panic I had always tried to hold back dragging me down into the black, I finally accepted who I was.

He turned and sauntered out the door with a frustratingly relaxed and unbothered walk. It wasn't fair that he could step so lightly while I was being dragged to the ground with the weight of being who I was. As he left a shiver expelled the last of the nervous and anxious heat from my body. He was the future teacher I had only heard stories of, told in a half frightened, half admiring tone over our dinner table. The ways he taught math were unforgettable, his temper legendary. In one reprimand something so profound happened. I pieced the words together later still trying to puzzle out their effect on me.

"Make sure you wear white socks," he had told me. That was it. My childlike desire to rebel, to wear navy socks rather than white, had been extinguished, replaced with a responsibility to do what I was told. Those words created an odd sequence of thoughts. He was the famous British math teacher. When I was talked to in that fashion, I felt like I belonged. The tone wasn't talking to a small first grader; it addressed to a person—an adult talking to me like I was one. It made me feel like I could live with the oddities of being me, even if that person was a little girl, aged beyond her years who filled every responsibility with an intensity and drive towards perfection that would sometimes drive me to the ground. The pieces of that day, from the perfect world I had been living in my head to the mismatched socks and loud room, materialized from my dream realms into tangible things and opportunities that I could see and weren't shrouded in so much black haze. Finally in my grasp.

**Shivering Grey**

She drifts like a feather  
Through a graveyard world  
Through the heavy gray fog  
The misty haze  
Down to meet the cast iron gate  
Surrounded by decapitated rubble,  
Signifying the final stand  
Kicking aside the bones of innocence  
With a disdainful growl  
No one to reprimand  
After this agonizing time has past  
Spreading her black cape over the gruesome remains  
Picking the lost dreams out of the bloody hunks of skin  
And throwing them away  
The one food you wished you had tried  
Or the one place you could have been  
All get thrown into the breeze  
As death gives the all-knowing grin  
And clutches the dreams in her pale skinny fingers  
As they wail and wail  
Crying out for the sightless eyes and unmoving corpses  
Their dead vessels  
With a quick decisive pinch  
They fall to the ground silent  
And sob into the cracked and broken tombstones
Oozing heartbroken gray into the green grass
Where the dreams mix with the blood red ground
Creating a black sludge
That spreads over the earth and the decimated bodies
Through the slight gap in the toppling fence
Till it soaks into the earth
And death cackles
With the desperate moans
Picks up a severed hand
And shakes its cold and clammy flesh
Like a person was still attached
Making a deal
Like there was still a hope
Or a sprig of any life
Was still in this convulsing world
She smiles at the limbs and heads strewn across the sludgy grey ground
The cast iron fence
And the faces frozen in the final terror
Unrecognizable in the face of the last breath
A true calamity to behold
As death steps over the broken graves
Not bothering to avoid the splotches of flesh trodden by her bare feet
Eventually stained with crimson
As she unlocks the dark gate
And gives one last maniacal giggle
Before stepping into the fog
And giving the startled corpses of trees and humans alike
One last kiss of forgiveness
Always present in her wake
With no pretense of apology
In her stance or cruel demeanor
She takes this stolen earth
And infuses it with her spit
Disdainfully cast
Upon all
No matter who they are
She takes one last look
At the shuddering grey
And dissolves just like this life
Making it worthless
Melded with injustice and waste
Lexie Winter
Sarah's Smile
Parkway Central High School

As the unwelcoming sliding doors jolted open, I could see the peculiar scene: doctors running to get their morning coffee, nurses chatting about their nights, and panicked parents pacing back and forth. Beyond these sliding doors was an overwhelming, unfamiliar world that most people are not aware of. I glanced at the non-uniformed people, all there for different reasons: a young woman chasing her untamed child, an elderly couple reminiscing with laughter, a teenage boy anxiously awaiting for some news about his father's surgery.

Sitting in a mechanical piece of junk known as a wheelchair and wondering how I got here, I looked at my sickly thin hand and noticed the thick, white hospital band defining my whereabouts. I peered up at my mother who nervously smiled at me. Being a regular visitor of this hospital—because of my brother's childhood illnesses—put her at ease. However, I knew seeing her baby girl, no more than 95 pounds and very fragile, was killing her on the inside.

A tall, thin, gangly woman with dried out, stringy hair appeared to help show me to my room.

"Hi! My name's Ann. I'll be your nurse for the night shift," she said a little too cheerfully.

*Show me to my room?* I thought, as if this was some five star hotel. She wheeled me to my floor, which happened to be the pediatrics floor. Walls and carpets burst with bright lights and colors. Pictures of animals hung on the wall as if they magically made people feel better.

As we strolled through the hallway, I saw many other rooms. Some were occupied while others were empty, only sorrowful memories of the previous patients remained. Almost to my room, I noticed the door next to mine was bowed with hundreds of cards with messages, such as "Feel better soon, Sarah!" or "We love you!" I continued on to my room, but the thought of someone so loved made my curiosity soar.

The next few days were much of a blur. I was sicker than ever, too weak to even raise a hand. Most of my days consisted of sleeping. I envied others who could leave, while I stayed chained up by thousands of IV's on the stiff cardboard disguised as a bed. I couldn't wait to leave. I missed gossiping with my friends and going to dance everyday as my escape from reality and school. I even missed school.

Later that night, I decided to go on a walk by myself around the hospital floor. The sterile, frigid atmosphere stung on my bare legs as I curiously wandered down the hall. Peering out the window, my perception encountered an unfamiliar sight: rusted, metal bars were clamped to the window, as if I were a prisoner in my own mind. I quickly shook the thought from my head and continued to stammer down the hallway. Struggling to keep the numerous IV’s in order, I saw a young girl sitting in one of the playrooms. She seemed sweet: big brown eyes, skin as white as snow, and not one piece of hair covering her naked scalp. I contemplated whether or not to talk to her. She seemed no different than me, besides only what you could see. At first glance, most people could only see the cold, shiny bareness of her head and feel sympathy.

Having been the fifth day in isolated hell, I quietly went in the door and plopped next to her. My heart raced wondering why I made the impulsive decision to talk to this complete stranger. As she turned to look at me, all I could see was the bright, glowing, comforting smile on her face.

"Hi! My name's Sarah. Want to watch this movie with me?"

Her warm and welcoming invitation caught me off guard, but I managed to form the word “yes.” We began talking for hours about our hobbies and lives. Our favorite TV shows, our friends, and our families allowed us to see how much we had in common. We both enjoyed school, reading, sports, and traveling as far away as possible. She explained to me how she was diagnosed with cancer two years ago and had been living in the hospital ever since. As we talked about her experience trapped in the hospital, all she continued to do was laugh about the mushy hospital food, unbearably cold floors, and extremely uncomfortable, "plastic" beds. Even while telling me her story, I was mesmerized by her smile. I could clearly see why so many colorful cards occupied her door. The way her lips slightly curved up, exposing her crooked yet perfect teeth, made me aware of the bit of joy in the world that she so easily could see. Behind that smile was a whole other world. She knew her condition was killing her, yet her smile masked her fear. Behind it I could see the camera they had to shove down her throat when she was first diagnosed and the numerous medications she had to take every day just to stay alive. I could see the joyful moment when she found out she was cancer free and the devastating day it came back. It had years of fighting, determination, hurt, and passion. I could see Sarah's simplicity and pure outlook on life. Even after so
much corruption, there was nothing to feel bad about. She was still alive which is all that mattered. Yet, I could see the hurt she had been through and her ability to channel it in any positive way possible.

That was the last time I ever saw or talked to Sarah. She did not die but was transferred to a more specialized hospital that could better help her.

Thinking about our conversation, I wondered what life would be like if I lived in her shoes. Sarah did not do anything to cause this disease to take over her body. I could wake up the next day and have to spend every other day waking up to mushy hospital food and hospital floors as cold as ice. Sarah and I were no different. However, I knew my condition was only temporary; I was going to leave a hospital before her. Yet, she was still able to spread that gleaming, sparkling smile.

I could now grasp the concept of being able to cherish every day and live with a smile on your face. Knowing how disappointed and mad I was about being a “prisoner” to the hospital made me wonder what was really the prison. It was not the hospital that would be keeping me locked up, but it was my naïve outlook on life. I was only there a short while compared to many others who are struggling to just to feel good and to even stay alive. Sometimes the small stuff seems so important to me at the moment, but the reality is that many encounters in life are very trivial compared to when a person has serious health issues.

As I left the hospital, I walked out the welcoming sliding doors with a new outlook. I glimpsed at the numerous people walking past me, each there for a different reason. This time these people all wore radiant smiles: the young man running with his dog, the little girl skipping with her melted ice cream cone dripping down her hand, the bright pink balloons on the back of a woman’s wheelchair as she cradled her new baby girl. Clearly now was no time to look for the negatives in life.

As I walked out of these doors, all I could do was smile.
The first tears ever to fall upon the Earth were borne from the Sky. Omnipresent yet seeming unfathomably distant from ourselves, she has observed mankind since its inception. Older than life as we know it, she has been a bringer of life as well as destruction. A fickle entity, what she delivers to us is entirely dependent on her mood, which changes with her perception of our lives. Should we live abiding by conscience and retaining consideration for others, she is likely to play with us, adorning her body with white airy figures that dance against the vast expanse of her bright blue canvas, daring us to guess what they are. Angering the Sky brings about her unmatched wrath. The crack of her lightning whip coupled with the rumble of her raucous roars are enough to produce vibrations that course through the Earth, shaking houses, reverberating within the skull. Her sobs can be described as the tumultuous winds and torrential downpours of rain as she is made melancholy by the many follies of man.

However, the Sky never sheds her tears for the same reason; she is not so simple. Highly excitable, tears threaten whenever she experiences extreme emotion. Hurricanes are her product when she is particularly vehement, composing her anger with gale winds, massive waves of water that crash to the ground, and sharp deluges of glass rain that tear through clothes, striking the skin painfully. Her immense sorrow is expressed through endless monsoons which flood the Earth as though she tries to wash away the source of her sadness and relieve herself from drowning in it by thrusting it upon us. The finest tears are those that are released in all-consuming, unadulterated joy. Overcome with elation, she brandishes the sun as her pendant, its radiance to which nothing can compare, as her happiness runs over and spills to the Earth in delightful splashes, winking in the sun’s brilliance and scattering its rays all about. It is from these purest of tears that the crystal was initially formed.

The Sky has always been a lonely body with only her accessories of the sun and the clouds and the moon and the stars to amuse her. Once, in her lonely frustration, she hurled a few of her stars to the earth, casting with them her desires for companionship. She thought nothing of the loss of a few stars and quickly forgot the incident. The Earth, who had received its every living organism from the Sky, felt the brunt of her emotion and made her the gift of birds from the fallen stars: eagles, hawks, robins, blue jays, cardinals, and wrens were only a small portion. These new creatures could soar through the air, reaching heights unbeknownst to any other animal, and would offer their voices in song. The Sky was so filled with joy, so delighted with her new companions, she began to cry.

The word “crystal” is derived from the combination of the word “cry” and the word “stall.” The Sky was enchanted by her own tears, the beauty of them and the joy that they represented. She wanted to suspend that feeling, stalling it in time before it escaped into chaos. Over the course of several months, she gathered all of her tears, plucked from them the clearest, and solidified them in a beautiful arrangement. They could not be called ice for the Sky made them strong enough to endure heat. What a shame it would have been if the joy she intended to preserve melted away at the slightest bit of exposure to warmth. Thus, the first “crystallization” occurred when the Sky repaid the Earth for her joy in the form of crystals.

The Sky, mother of all life, has since imparted her tears on every creature that walks upon the Earth. She ingrained in the nature of humans to cry when they’re happy or sad or angry. It is natural to us, as a gift from the Sky. As long as the Sky watches over the Earth and all of its residents, tears will be one of the most powerful modes of communication.
She fiddles with the match in her hand, the matchbox in her other. If she were to marry them together, she muses, they would be a lethal pair.

So she kisses the auburn match tip to the sandpaper surface of the matchbox. After a second’s hesitation, she yanks the virgin match over the surface, and their child, a flicker, pops up. Now she drops the matchbox, watching it give a helpless little thud against the carpeted floor.

The flicker grows to consume half the match’s length, burning black the delicate wooden stick as it scorches its way farther down, swaying in the slight wind. Her fingers cautiously pinch only the very bottommost tip of the match so as not to burn herself.

She’s all alone on the top floor of the house, hidden away in one very white room, the sooty window beside her pushed up all the way, the crumpled blue curtains, which usually shield the world from her sad grey eyes, now thrown back. A breeze eases its way through, hopping its coolness on her hands, her bare, unshaved legs. From here she can hear the angry clatter of pots downstairs, tossed and thrown from wall to wall. No voices humanize the place, only these violent sounds, that unconcerned westward draft.

Rebellious tears slip past her bottom eyelashes and onto scarred cheeks. They begin to sneak out faster and faster, turning into a river of recalcitrance that runs steadily into the hollow of her neck.

That man downstairs was right. He’s always right. He always will be right. “You are ugly,” she mutters, her jaw set in disgust, “so ugly.” The mirror that stares back at her from the opposite end of the room reveals her pinkish, wrinkled nose, her swollen, bloodshot eyes. Oily black hair is slicked back into a lanky ponytail. Muddy lips, devoid of any rosiness, are cracked and bleeding, sore with small cuts courtesy of her nervously chattering teeth.

And the match. Her escape route. The flicker waits there innocently, gently rocking back and forth, the innocuous baby stuck in the tree from that famous nursery rhyme, on the half-burnt matchstick. And yet she knows it is anything but harmless. She doesn’t care. She can’t care. The ring of air around the flicker is warm and inviting, the comforting arms of a mother, as though it is ready to put her to sleep—a sleep from which she would never awake.

A man’s menacing yell erupts from downstairs, attacking her ears, her heart, her mind. She is reminded of numerous name-callings, harassing voicemails, heartless comments. She is reminded of beatings and bruises, of black eyes and crying nights and countless “forgive-me-please.”

Even more salty beads squeeze through the sockets of her sore eyes. They heave a last sprint across her cheeks and die, too fatigued to make it to her jaw line.

All she has to do to end this is drop the match. Just drop it. This scratchy carpet, which she has already soaked with gasoline in preparation, will burst into untamable flame. Just drop it. Life will shrivel away in the heat and melt down to nothingness. Just drop it. All this will end.

Her eyelids flutter shut. Seconds pass, but when she peeks through her lashes, she still isn’t dead. The match dangles from her fingers, and the flicker mocks every cowardly cell in her body. Why the hesitation?

Suddenly her heart cracks apart, shattered by an earthquake, and the glass pieces lodge uncomfortably in her ribs. Why, you coward? You useless, ugly, weakling.

She clutches at her chest with her free hand, attempting to soothe the emotional inward breakage, but the stabbing pain prevails. The agonized shriek shrilly splits the silence. “Do it! Close your eyes, and do it!” Drop the goddamn match. All of this will be better.

As if to ridicule her scream of desperation, a sound wafts from downstairs. A maniacal laugh from the stovetop.
Within seconds, the man’s feet stomp angrily up the stairs. Her chest begins to grab and release in a spastic rhythm. If she does not drop the match, he will win. If she does not drop the match, she will never get out of here.

“Do it,” he edges up behind her, whispering his jeering words into her ear. She tries to gulp, but the saliva has turned solid in her mouth. Her eyes blur, but this time she’s determined to block tears from emigrating outside.

“Do it, coward. You filthy piece of nothing.” He throws his heavy head back, his flabby double chin bouncing with the toss. “Did you hear that? Not even a nothing. A filthy piece of nothing.”

One, inhale, two, exhale, six, inhale, seventeen, exhale. Her breathing follows no recorded rhythm now; science is left paralyzed in the quest to diagnose her condition: fear.

The man begins to grow antsy now. His thumbs curl around the width of her neck, and he intimidatingly tightens his grip. Her inhalation sharpens. She recalls so many similar times before. She swore she'd never let anything like that happen to her again.

“DO IT!” his gruff voice lined with vodka, his scent hints of sweat and whisky. Her greasy fingers begin to loosen their pinching hold on the match. The flicker sparkles in triumphant pre-celebration.

He chuckles behind her, the stubble tickling the nape of her neck. “Good. When you threaten to do something, do it.”

As abruptly as the fleeting peal of thunder, she realizes what exactly she is doing.

She is letting him win.

The blank walls around her spin in every direction. She feels like a young child again, being whirled around in a swivel chair by her father.

With this newfound insight, her choice is carved into the stone tablet of her mind, the 11th Commandment:

*Thou shalt not kill thyself; Thou shalt leave men bad for thee and start thy life over.*

She has been holding her breath for years. Finally, she now begins to let fresh oxygen fill her body, to let the stale carbon dioxide flee the chambers of her lungs.

She steps to the bathroom, the door already swung wide open, as if the room had predicted she would be stopping by later. A hint of former self-confidence rises to the surface as she tugs the sink tap open. Water rushes from the center, prepared and willing to administer life back to her withered soul.

Without a blink of indecision, her fingers slacken, leaving the match to plummet into the overflowing sink basin. She watches the homicidal flicker expire at first touch.

The man storms up to the bathroom door, “What the hell are you doing? I told you to—”

But his mouth freezes in motion when he spies her face. Something about it has been transformed. Somehow, she is less accommodating, more disobedient. A speck of stubborn determination infects her visage, something she’s never possessed.

Neither makes a sound. She catches his eye for only a second and then pushes past him through the bathroom door.

He knows it’s over.
Slept In

Last week I saw her in the street. Her hair looked slept in and perfect as ever, split ends and all.

In another age, when she was eight and I was nine, we wanted to be artists or movie stars. We dressed up as husband and wife, and she always made me be the man, because I looked better in a jacket. I never argued; she was so strong-willed even at eight that any argument was futile. We planned our futures together. She would become a famous movie actress and star in all the best horror films, and I would stay in our sunlit apartment with our two black cats and paint flowers and write all day, drinking tea simply because it was poetic. I invited her over to my house almost every day, just so we could stay up all night pretending to be witches and smear my mother's eye shadow on each other's faces.

"It makes you look more like yourself," she giggled at me, smudging an envy green line down my forehead.

A year and a half passed. She began wearing more black and started dyeing her hair, even though I told her it was fine the way it was. We entered sixth grade, and she raised her anchor, sails unfurled, and I lost her to the horizon; she was craving a whole new world and had decided that I wasn't a part of it.

You know when you replay the same scene over and over in your head until you're not sure if you've changed the script or not?

I asked why, and she said she just wanted to be normal, regular and boring like everyone else. I argued that no one was boring, that everyone was simply trying to make their own way. She smiled and shook her head at me, told me that I was too political to even consider normalcy. I sighed again.

Maybe it was when we laid in bed holding hands and I told her about how if the school year went badly, we could always build a Lego rocket ship and fly to Neptune, where we would found an entirely new colony of people where no one was sad, mainly because free music would be provided no matter what time of day it was, with all thanks to Brahms and Tchaikovsky. All policies would be completely egalitarian, and there would be no risk of falling off fiscal cliffs (except literally, of course).

Maybe it was when she wrote me a letter in elementary biology class, using her illegible block print that she was so fond of. She thought I didn't see the dog-eared letter hiding between the pages describing the mitochondria and the unnatural properties of certain animal cells. I knew what that letter said, but I never told her what I saw.

Maybe it was when I begged her to stay, just for a little longer, because things would get so much easier and much more beautiful, that she should stay with me because, who knew, we could become the first reporters to secure an exclusive tell-all with God. I drew her a diagram detailing how we could run away to Antarctica and start a family, breeding mammoths back into existence to be our pets.

Antarctica is cold, she said, but I'll stay.

We drifted, like jetsam. We split.

When I was fourteen, she was thirteen and a half and beautiful. She taught me to skateboard; we fell back together. She held onto my waist and laughed at me while I shrieked and gripped her shoulders, terrified of the ground. She held me close and whispered that it was okay, if I ever did fall she would catch me. She was always the only one I would ever let catch me.

Sometimes we'd go out. We walked around art museums, enjoying the musty smell and hidden corridors. She teased me about my skirts, and I poked fun at her worn-in Vans, even though I secretly loved them.

"Baby," she would smile at me. "Never leave me, okay?" And I never did. I never would; she understood my unconventional taste for classical music and the way I always took my coffee black. She knew when to yell at me and how to do my hair. She was the only one.

Sometimes she would bring me to parties her friends were having, where, ironically, she'd be the one feeling out of place. She'd get jealous if I talked to other people, especially if they were laughing, especially if they had short skirts and no split ends.

To me, her imperfections were what made her absolutely perfect. I'm not quite sure if she ever understood that.
Usually, though, she would just come to my house, like she had done so many times before. We’d cuddle in bed and talk about how stars that burnt out millions of years ago still felt real and how strange it was that pianos had strings. We’d turn on her favorite horror movies, and I would scream and throw overly buttered popcorn at the screen while she rolled her eyes.

“You’re such a dork,” she said, but she loved me all the same.

When she found out that I cried when I ate, she held me and told me that it was okay, that I would always be gorgeous to her. From then on she went out of her way to make me grilled cheese and to bring me french fries and Diet Coke. She called me every night and we would stay on the phone until two a.m. I listened for hours as her telephone wire breath fell into my ear; I clutched the phone to my heart in hopes that maybe it would teleport me to the only place on earth I wanted to be.

*The universe is expanding, and sometimes it all moves too fast.*

Meet me, she said. So I did. We sat on a park bench and watched people pass by like in a Woody Allen movie. I pretended I didn’t hear when she told me that she liked someone else, that maybe it wasn’t working out. She glanced down at her Vans and whispered that she would always love me and that, no matter what, I would always be her baby. A couple on a tandem bike rolled past on the sidewalk. She rose and looked back at me. I looked up at the sky.

“I’m sorry,” she offered, and she really did seem sorry. By then I was already gone, out of my head with tears in my eyes, questioning the chemical pathways of desire and the sanity of the synaptic language of love.

Sometimes hearts feel heavy, even though there’s nothing left to miss.

I felt lost in space. And time. And just plain old lost.

Sometimes no matter how many times you edit the screenplay or rewrite the notes, it will only be enough when it wants to be.

I felt like Vincent Van Gogh; because he was lonely, he buried his tears in a box deep underground with the earthworms for guardians until one day there were too many tears and the box simply burst.

*People say things happen for a reason. That doesn’t mean they’re right.*

Last week, I saw her in the street. She told me to meet her, so I climbed out of my bedroom window late one night and wandered for a while, eventually tumbling into a midnight neon diner. She was sitting at a booth alone when I got there, musing into the curling mud-flats floating in her hot chocolate mug.

Her hair looked slept in and more perfect than ever, split ends and all. I dropped down opposite her and gave my best Bogart impression:

*I was born when she kissed me. I died when she left me. I lived for a few weeks while she loved me.*

She cast her eyes down to the worn linoleum tabletop. The left over steam from her cup rose and warmed her cheeks. Or maybe she was blushing. She looked up and smiled.

I looked at her.

She looked at me.

“Never leave me, okay?”

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**How to Be Alone**

Contact NASA and inform their astronauts that they will never again have to cry their solitude to celestial bodies that cannot wrap nonexistent arms around them without being deadly. Tell them I have been preparing a class, How to Be Alone, for twenty years, and that the first support group meets next Monday. But first, pretend you are nineteen. No, no. Pretend you were not only a six year old dreaming of being an astronaut but that you still dream of pearly polished moons hanging across the Milky Way’s collarbones and planets that were still planets when you were six. Fall in love with the bruises of the cosmos and accept that they are bruises, ones that will never heal. Understand that you can admire them from a distance, shed tears at their gradient shades of purple and green, but know that you should not touch or dig into them and that they are not something you can fix. Now, imagine you are nineteen and the sibling you shared songs and books with your entire life now only has eyes and ears for a god you were never able to see through the stardust and that most of your friends are in other cities with brighter, newer friends, that Skype lags and breaks most of the time. Set out to build your own library, and read two, three, four books a week. Inscribe their aged centuries of wisdom into your shoulder blades.
Pretend you are someone you are not, but do not be ashamed of the person you have grown into. You will spend the rest of your life alone with them. Only fall in love with strangers and people you can desire for a few seconds in the grimy subway, deep within the heart of a city you will be leaving. Do not fall in love with the people whose middle names, birthdays, shameful regrets, and broken edges are close at hand, ones who can rip open your fingertips and your heart. Do not pick up your phone; do not answer texts. Give one word answers. Write a letter to Pluto, and tell him you understand. Pick a Saturday and tell your mother you are going to the movie theatre by yourself. Watch two movies, minimum. Buy popcorn and Coke and chocolate, and smile wide and proud when the person behind the cashier searches behind you to find your friend who is in another state entirely. Sit in the middle of an empty row; prop your feet up on the seat in front of you. Laugh out loud, and blow your nose when you cry at the slow motioned happy ending because this is your life. Walk home by a full moon, and feel word heavy, poetry seeping out of your pores, fueled by your solitude. Wake up Sunday morning, stare into in the mirror, and accept the half of you, the seventy five percent of you, the ninety percent of you that is unlovable. Whisper to it. Dear, unlovable self. I love you, even if no one else is willing to. Start your sixth book in November. Call your friends to concerts you know they will not be interested in; go anyway. Tell the grown forty-year-old man that makes fun of you for being there alone about solitude and how it’s sometimes different from loneliness. Do not point out the isolation brown that makes its home in his wife’s eyes. Dance because no one knows who you are and that you do not usually dance without alcohol in your system. Trip home, and open the window so the stars will learn the melody to your sorrow and not shake, breaking into a million silver lined pieces across the Earth’s surface when they hear it up close and personal. Decide you’ve had enough, and board a beast to the moon. Voice deep in radio static, tell everyone that vaguely loves you to not come when it launches in sparks and fireworks. Pack enough things to last you a lifetime. Books, mostly. Say goodbye to no one. Dive into the nothingness and entirety of the cosmos; cut all ties to Earth. When someone calls through the speakers, do not reply. Cry but only long enough to see the weightlessness of your tears in a place where all sources of light are natural. If you finally feel the rancor of the silence, find the nearest window, and laugh loud and soundlessly across galaxies when you realize the dusty insignificance of your loneliness.
If I could write a letter to you and know that one day maybe you’d be able to see the words written plainly on that paper, well, you know I’d have a lot to say.

I’d ask you, how did it feel? Were you scared? When that truck collided and your fragile life was hanging on by threads, did you think of us? Did you look at your mother as your soul faded out and smile, knowing you would never be alone?

I would want you to know your best friend still wears that necklace every day. And the football team, every helmet is marked with a K.

Because we remember.

The walk down that hallway the first day will always be burned into our minds, the softball team holding each other as they cried. You drove home from the game that night, not knowing it was the last game of your life. The chills we got as they told us that you were gone, I get them every time I hear your name. We all sat there, crying on the bleachers as he told us that you had met your end.

The day went on, and we held ourselves together, knowing that you were never coming home. Class that August day was quiet and empty, the sky outside dreary and gray. The first one said, “Now these things, they happen,” and soon the whole room joined in.

I heard about the day you started high school, the camping trip that summer with your friends, and the last time you saw them. We all sat, our desks in a circle, remembering a young familiar face. As the talk went on, the room felt cold and strange. You always used to light up this place.

As we laid you down, the August rain fell silent. As the preacher said, “She’s with familiar faces,” the sun shone through the greyness of the clouds. I felt you then, the sunshine like a lighthouse, guiding you into eternal peace. They sang for you, and our hearts, they ached. We laid yellow flowers on your grave.

We drove home, our hearts heavy. We all knew that this wasn’t fair. You’ll never walk at graduation, never get to go to your first prom, never get married. It hurts to think you hadn’t lived that long.

We still have your picture hanging in the hall, and that high school will never feel the same. We learned a lot about ourselves that August. Our class was never as close as that year.

If I could write a letter to you and know that my words would find you there, I’d tell you how our hearts have changed. I’d tell you it feels like you’re still here. Most of all, I’d tell you not to worry, we’re all doing okay. Yeah, we miss you more and more as time goes on, but I know: we’ll see you again someday.
Saturday afternoon and the Rozza clan is gathered to celebrate Nonna’s 80th birthday. The sun shines through the windows, caressing the children as they run around, squealing in the delight of playing with their cousins. Italian music lightens the atmosphere, giving everyone a chance to sing and dance along. The aroma of freshly baked lasagna fills the air. Uncle Timmy’s signature whistle catches our attention; we automatically know that it is time to say the “before-dinner prayer” and chow down on Nonna’s delicious, homemade Italian food.

When we are done eating, the children take off as fast as possible to resume their ping pong tournament. The adults linger, telling funny stories, while wondering if there is anything they can do to help. A big family gathering like this is tons of fun, but with lots of people comes lots of dishes. Teamwork is only one way to get them done in a reasonable amount of time.

At first, only Nonna is working on the towering pile of dishes, but Aunt Amy sees her struggling and asks if she can lend a hand. Determined to conquer the dishes by herself, Nonna refuses. Six more people ask if they can help, but she sticks to her original answer. With a smile she says, “No, no, no! I am not that old, you silly gooses. I can do the dishes all by myself.” A few minutes later, my mom decides to try a different approach, “Mom, it’s obvious you need help. You’ve only washed five dishes in ten minutes. We’re going got help you whether you like it or not.” She begins rinsing the dishes. The others follow my mom’s lead. Nonna doesn’t like it, but she knows there is no convincing her children/grandchildren to stop once they’ve started, so she accepts the help.

Pretty soon the dish washing has evolved into a whole new party itself. Amy tells some of her hilarious stories, and laughter fills the air. All of the adults and older kids are working on the dishes, and before we know it, the dishes have vanished. Nonna excitedly says, “Thank you for the help, everyone! It was not very smart of me to refuse your help in the first place. Doing that all together not only made the job quicker but more fun too!”
I usually write in my room. It’s silent, and I can think. I typically sit in my bean bag, snuggled in a blanket, my back to my bed and facing my shelf. This piece came about when I had nothing else to write about, when the forbidden writer’s block came upon me and all I could find for inspiration was what was in front of me: my shelf and the things on it. Each figurine, each little knick-knack, has a story.

Snow Globes
I collect snow globes. They’re all different. Some have snow, some have glitter, and some play music when I wind them. I like snow globes, but I love only two. One makes me wishful for fantasy and adventure while the other makes me joyous for the peace that was brought to me.

One is a Disney snow globe, Beauty and the Beast. It shows Belle and the Beast dancing and, when I wind it, plays the Beauty and the Beast song. When shaken, glitter falls around the couple like magic, and Cogsworth and Mrs. Pots sit on the base. It’s a happy snow globe. I look at it and wish it were real, that somewhere there really is a gentle beast and a beautiful princess, clocks that talk and a magic castle.

The other snow globe that I love is simple. An angel stands in the middle. Her name is Peace because it is written on her dress. Her wings and halo are a dark grey, and she holds a dove. The base tells a story of a Savior sent from above. Like the Disney snow globe, it evokes happiness. This one is different because I don’t wish it to be real. I don’t need to wish that somewhere there really is peace because peace is mine. I don’t have to wish that somewhere else there is a Savior because there is and I am his. His name is Jesus.

Music Box
The same shelf holding my snow globes also displays a music box. It's old and rusted. I can't fit a thing in it because the little gears take up most of the space inside. The lid is dirty, and the chain is broken. I don't even know what song it plays. I know it’s a cliché, but it’s true in this case: something seen as junk has become my treasure. My great grandmother gave me the music box. I do not have an extraordinary story to go with it, but she says that I used to play with it when I was younger, which meant enough to me as a childhood memory and, of course, as a token from my great grandparents. But the music box itself has meaning. It’s made so the sides are glass, and I can look straight through it from the outside. I can see the gears twist and the bars tick to make music. One peek from the outside reveals exactly how it works. I think the music box resembles how we should be as people: hiding nothing. We will never be simple things, as the gears in the music box aren’t simple either, but we can be honest with nothing to hide, no secrets to tell or keep.

Ballerina
Aside from collecting snow globes and listening to music boxes, I enjoy another thing: dance. In fact, I love to dance. Almost nothing compares to the few short moments I live on the stage. Even after it’s over and I’ve exited, I know my heart is still out there. I once went to see the nutcracker with my aunt—wonderful. I brought home a poster and something else too: my own pretty ballerina. She was made of porcelain, fairly small, and wore a lot of pink: pink tutu, pink crown, and pink ballet slippers. I pulled her out of the box (also pink) and stood her on the included stand. I marveled at her. Everything about her was perfect, from her sleek ballet bun to her nicely pointed toes. It almost made me upset to set her on my shelf because I knew I would never be that perfect. Nothing in real life is ever perfect with dance. There's good, there's great, there's exquisite, but rarely is there perfect. So this figure means two things to me. Perfectionism, of course, is one, that beautiful distant goal we'll never quite reach. Also, it gives me determination to never stop trying, reminding me each time I look at it that I'll never reach a point where I can't get any better.
What if instead of a darkened room, we lit the world? With a light of faith, of hope, of love?

The magical moments we so often forget: when a man asks the woman he loves for her hand, when a tiny baby laughs for the first time, when the person who has been battling cancer, wins. These moments that we love but so often overlook.

What if the bad things were forgotten? Hidden? Or put in a box, taped up, put in the closet of our minds on the highest shelf where we never look with old report cards we never look at, with Dad's old shoes, with Mom's high school yearbook?

What if those magical lights were put in a chandelier? What if it was hung from the highest star to light the world with faith and hope and love?

These magical moments, that we often forget to appreciate. The moments that shine so bright. We reach skyward, add them to the chandelier, that shining light that hangs from the Earth's ceiling.

When they fall, they burst open, releasing their joy over a small and lucky few. When we add them, the world gets that much brighter.

Will you help me add these moments to the sky? Will you help me create these moments to add to our light?
That light shines so bright
with faith
and hope
and love.
Sarah Bronson  
You Told Me Once  
St. Joseph Central High School

You told me once I could do anything I set my mind to.

I remember struggling and trying my hardest but never quite being able to touch my toes in gym class. I guess you could never stretch me out enough to get past the hurdle of my own two feet. Is it actually me or did God accidentally make my arms a bit too short in the blue prints? Maybe that's why architects never get plastic surgery. They understand that building takes time which isn't a luxury anyone has, unless they don't like clock watching. My tongue is tied so tight even a Boy Scout couldn't set it free, but I know you don't mind my silence. In that wordless moment it strikes me:

You told me once if looked hard enough I would see that rainbows are actually circles.

You remind me of Donkey in your oversized grey sweatpants. If you're Donkey, I must be Shrek because you are nothing less and everything more than the best friend I've ever had. You keep my heart from pumping too much love to my brain because I tend to over-think the little moments and you always remember that. And when my thoughts start clogging my arteries you stare, and it doesn't stop disturbing me, but I have to remember that without you I would be a little less green.

You told me once that “colorful” was your favorite word to listen to in silent movies. You remind me of kindergarten, while my mouth interrupts what my heart strains to hear over the lava of my lips. Sometimes I wish I could just say, “I love you,” but this noise is a little less colorful than what I’m really trying to say. I did myself in trying to write your smile into sound, and I know I let your front teeth rattle me too hard. If I draw wishes in the air, I hope one day you'll breathe deep enough and they'll come true.

You told me once that owls are the only birds that can see the color blue, so blue hoots at blue roots. They discover why they aren't wise. I acknowledge many things that I don't understand, so I'm not wise either because you make me feel so red-y for old fashioned love letters. Yet everything until now suggests that love, loved, loving doesn't really have a tense. That I will, do, have, won't quit, continue to, never stopped, used to, are, will love you.

I remember the way you smell when it's early in the morning.

You told me once that people can't cry in space, but if my tears stretch on for years, I'll send them up on the light of your smile and maybe you can make it rain awhile so we can dance for just a wish or two. You realize people are spelling my identity with different colors because they don't know I haven't found that rainbow yet. My black and black anatomy contrasts your white vibrance. You sleep like singing birds, and I'm a step away, clashing against your song. Please understand I'm only trying to make harmony.

I can only hope you have the heart to suffocate me.

You told me once that Dr. Pepper actually uses 24 flavors because that way when we split the can, we each get 12. I don't want to understand why you make sense, since I may find out I'm only worth cents. Although change is inevitable, it holds the value of its owner's intentions, but the world hasn't checked her pockets lately. Behind every wound there's a wink and a prayer, and in the event that I bump my head on the refrigerator door and forget who I am again, I hope you will sing it for me. It's easy; my life is simply the ebony reflection of the pupil behind the one you love most.

I wish I had told you once that I can touch my toes now. In that proud moment it strikes me: I don't remember how or where I met you, but I'm so glad that I did. Although I've never seen a rainbow come full circle, I know, I believe, one day it'll happen.
I couldn't believe how fast an amazingly good day could go so terribly wrong.

On a beautiful Saturday afternoon, the city was blanketed with white. We squinted in the sunlight as the sun rays reflected off the fresh snow, as if someone dumped a bag of sugar. We had just left the theatre because my brother, Jaquari, was dying to see the Dark Knight Rises, even though he hated to see people die. We were heading down to Larry's corner liquor store to get our step dad's daily dose of Marlboro. I use to hate going down to Larry's with the gangs hanging at the corners, watching our every move. However, I realized that getting him his cigs is the only thing keeping him from beating me or harassing momma. He can't beat Jaquari; I don't know anyone who could. J's too innocent and cute to ever get a beating, much less a scolding. Even if he tried all he could do is just remind him and smile down into those golden hazel eyes. Everybody loved J, the number one thing I admired about him. He loved everyone and was loved in return. Even the things that would have made any other lil' bro the most annoying being in the world only made him more adorable. Like the way he would face plant into the freshly laid snow and, when I asked what he was doing, said he was "making his mark on the world." Funny kid my lil' bro, but I gotta love him.

He started to skip down the frosted sidewalk; I told him to stop so that he doesn't slip. When we got to Larry's, I told him to stay at the front door while I got the cigs and milk for cereal and my momma's overdose on coffee. Larry, the owner, is used to me coming up here, asking for four packs of cigs. Any other store and the cops are here before I could even give him the money. Larry knows what's happening in my family. He knows all about my step dad's temper and how he can flare up before I even know what's happening. How my momma won't leave him because she's always trying to see the good in everybody, even those who don't have any left. He don't bother me like the kids at school; he knows what's going down.

"Hey, Amari, be careful when you leaving; the Devils searching' for Andre'. He messed with Zeke's girl." Any fool could hear the concern in his tone and see it in his near black eyes. This was nowhere near any kind of joke. Anyone and their momma who loved their lives knew to not get messed up with the Devils, the first gang to actually do something. Yeah, they hang on the street corners, but the Devils kept guns in their cars and blades on their backs. One day a teacher got in the way of some of the crew. When the police came the guy was doubled over at the wheel. Since then no one ever even tried to walk in front of the Devils going down the hallway, stressing they might blow them up without a second thought. Ever since that teacher got shot the Devils basically run this town. If they shot another crew's dude, they wouldn't even bother to put it in the news.

"Thanks, man," I said glancing over my shoulder at Jaquari looking at the skittles and Hershey's, "could you put that skittles down also?"

"Sure, dawg," he said, ringing up the skittles. I tossed the skittles over to Jaquari, and we headed out. A smile spread across my face when I saw that childish joy that only comes from a bag of skittles. We were only about a block away from our tiny house on a dead-end street when I faintly hard the sound of tires screeching across pavement. Of course J didn't hear it; he was too busy trying to catch the snow that added a fresh layer to the piles of snow, but fear coursed through my body like a fire. Suddenly, Andre' was dashing down the street, the blacked out Mercedes in tow. The blacked out window of the car slowly rolled down, and the face of a hand gun replaced the midnight glass.

BAMM! BAMM! BAMM! BAMM!

I ducked to the concrete sidewalk, hoping against hope that Jaquari did too. Silence rose into the air with the smoke from the gun as the Mercedes drove away. I hadn't noticed where Andre’ ran, let alone Jaquari. Suddenly I shot back to reality, frantically searching for J. I was in a daze, spinning around on my heels. As if a fog had lifted, I saw him, his yellow jacket lying in a lump as I slowly walked over to where my once energetic, full-of-life brother lay still.

"No! Not J, not Jaquari, no, no, no!" I cried to the skies, the sound of a siren neared. My heart in my throat, I looked down at his lifeless body. His face looked oddly peaceful, snowflakes collecting on his caramel-colored skin. I hugged his body, trying to keep the life inside of him, the blood seeping through my winter coat. The snow behind him was soaked with blood. I couldn't control the tears, shivering partly from the cold, partly because I
couldn't believe this could happen. I looked down at his cold, frozen face and I saw our similarities: two golden, hazel eyes; skin, colored like deep, rich caramel; two lips that reminding me of all the times Jaquari smiled and the whole world lit up.

The police and ambulance finally came to the scene. They let me cling to my brother until a sudden thought erupted in my mind.

*How am I supposed to tell my mom? Or my step dad?* The police lady answered my question.

“I know you’re probably devastated.” I nodded, unable to speak a word. “How about I take you home and explain the whole situation to your folks?” She didn’t mean to say it as a question but more of a statement. I didn't care. I couldn’t just leave J lying on the ground.

When the police officer took me to our house, my step dad was already on the front porch. I could tell he was cursing under his breath.

“What did the kid do now?” He said looking at me but talking to the officer.

“He hasn’t done anything. Could we come in?”

He was still looking at me when he reluctantly let me and the lady through the door. She explained all of what happened, occasionally looking at me. I’m glad she did because I couldn’t even form words if I tried with the mind power of Albert Einstein and Thomas Jefferson put together. Surprisingly, my step dad never uttered a word.

“I’m sorry I judged you, Amari,” he said, but the words were full of nothing.

“Is there someone who you think he could talk to? Someone you can trust?” the officer asked.

“I don’t know. Can I go up to my room?” I didn’t feel like answering any questions, let alone having my step dad burn holes in my face.

“Sure, go on up while I finish with this officer,” he said, even though he meant: *you better not come down here, or I’ll tear the crap outta you cause your momma ain’t home.* I didn’t know what to do or what to say. I was still in shock. I went upstairs to my room and cried. The next couple days were no better.

My momma forced me to go to school Monday. I couldn’t see why. I couldn’t concentrate. My mom was constantly reminding me where stuff was or which way was right or left or which shoe went on which foot. My teachers only ignored me since J’s death. The media, discussing J’s death every night, seemed like they were mocking my pain, making me believe that I was somehow the reason all of this happened. My momma understood all this and told me everything was going to be fine. The school counselor tried talking to me once or twice, but I wasn’t like I was going to kill myself one day. I was exempt from gym since I couldn’t put my shirt on the right way and ran into everything on my way up to the gym. That was the only good thing about life without Jaquari. Life without J was bland and lifeless, like the way his face cradled in my arm drained away, leaving a hole in my life.

My mind was full of all the happy times with J., like how earlier in the week we had built a snowman. When we couldn’t find a nose, we had laid in the snow laughing at our snow man with no nose. I always had to get a plate off the shelf because he couldn’t reach it. All these memories put into a gigantic smile on my face, knowing he had been happy and content.

My momma thought it was best if I spent some time with my grandpa, George. It was probably the best thing that could have happened to me. He seemed to understand everything I was going through.

“Grandpa, why do you know about everything I’m going through?”

He took his time to think about what I had asked and what his answer should be. “Amari, did you know that your grandma named you? When she passed, her voice used to ring in my ear. I thought I was crazy. I would look through old photo albums and smile whenever her face showed up. You remember how during that time I use to have you come over and have you draw thousands of pictures?”

“Yeah, I was about ten or so.”

“Could you pass me that box under the table over there? Yes, that one.” I struggled to carry the well-worn box over to grandpa’s chair that was almost as old as the box. I watched him open the box and saw hundreds of little pieces of paper with scribbles of every color.

“These are all of the pictures that you drew,” he said and picked up this single sheet that was of a lady or was supposed to be a lady. “This is the very first drawing I had you make. It’s supposed to be your grandmother. I cherished this and all of your drawings for many, many years,” he said. I saw the twinkle in his eyes.

“Why’d you keep them?” I asked.

“They kept me going on the days that I just wanted everything to end. I think you should find something to be your crutch too.”
The next couple of days I listened to music and wrote poetry. I guess I’m not your average African American teen, but it seemed to help. *Thanks, Grandpa, thanks for everything.* School got easier to deal with, so did the pain. Living was easier to deal with too. A couple of weeks later I walked into our house to find my mom spread out on the couch tears streaming down her face.

“What’s wrong, Mom? What happened?”

“Amari, your grandpa, he died this afternoon,” she spoke with a quiver in her voice.

I bolted to my room, cranked up my music, and pulled out my notebook. A couple days later, I found a box with a letter tapped to the top.

*Dear Amari,*

*I enjoyed our little chat. Even though it came to a close too quickly, I hope you took to mind my advice. I know how bad Jaquari’s death had on you, but I hope that you will come out of your grief stronger and wiser than ever. I hate to leave you so soon, but I know you will be able to keep your head up no matter what. I ask of you two things: first, no matter what is thrown at you, never give up; and second, never forget to keep your crutch close by you. You never know when you’ll need it.*

*Giving you the best wishes,*

*Grandpa George*

I had read the letter at least three times before I opened the box. Tears overflowed as I gently pulled the drawings out of Grandpa’s box, remembering what he told me. In the weeks that followed, I kept in my ear buds and stashed pen and paper in my pockets.
Driving Songs

we would listen to
sounds of silence
as the car rolled over green hills and
through the tongues of those dead and not yet living

we would stop at
nameless maze villages
and stone cathedral walls
where we would get lost
afraid we were alone

we would touch the
trunk of boughs stretched for
thousands of years and
the poles along the sidewalk and
jump over the cracks

we would take photographs
and that is why I know that
we were all together once

Sand in a Sieve

I didn't know how to spend
our last day,
so I spent it in thought of how.

I didn't know how to let go
of ghosts,
so I surrounded myself with
bones.

I didn't know how to look
to the morrow,
so I stayed up and clung to the
past.

But
if I cling to you now
or if I look closer
or if I listen,
if I hold tighter,
will you slip
just as easily
from my grasp?
Audrey Clark
Lessons from a Fly
Rock Bridge Senior High School

My head spun while the stench of burgers and dirty dishwater tortured my nostrils. A pounding headache caused by lack of sufficient sleep combined with an empty stomach crept its way across my sweaty forehead. My feet ached for rest and screamed even louder when I agreed to take a second shift, meaning I’d be here until eleven o’clock, instead of nine. The thought of the pile of homework sitting on my bed waiting for me at my apartment had me checking watch. Ten o’clock. One more hour.

I glanced down at the pile of half-eaten burgers and neglected French fries waiting to be cleaned up in the sink and noticed a fly stuck in the water. He was desperately trying to swim to the safety of dry land a few inches to the left. But he was a fly. He didn’t know how to swim. All he could do was flap his tiny wings hoping some waitress would be kind enough to pull him to safety. I was able to relate to this little fly. His dread of dying and the realization of his imminent death spurred my decision to help him to safety.

“Audrey! Tables two, four, and seven need to be cleared!”

Back to work.

A month ago I would have said that living on my own wouldn’t be a big deal. Managing my time and working hard had always come fairly easily for me, so when I left my parents’ house, I wasn’t worried. Luckily they had raised me to be self-sufficient, teaching me that, if I wanted something, hard work would eventually allow me to get it. What I hadn’t realized, however, was that there’s hard work and then there’s real hard work. There was either swimming, or there was drowning.

Hard work, so far, was studying for tests, keeping up on chores, cooking dinner for the family, doing laundry. Real hard work was going from school to my job at the grocery store to my job at Fuddruckers to my apartment to make dinner out of what little food I had and then do my homework. It meant not getting to bed until one or two in the morning when the day required real hard work. It meant having to work twice as hard as my peers to keep up in school. It meant no weekends because I was busy at the shop. No time for friends. Real hard work meant being able to afford my apartment each month on top of gas, car insurance, and food. It meant no longer being able to come home from school and just take a nap or watch television. Swimming was hard. Swimming left me exhausted, but I could never stop. If I stop, I drown. I had to fight my aching body. I had to fight my heavy eye-lids. I had to fight my tears. No feeling. Just swim.

As I stood near the sink of dirty dishes and uneaten food, the realization of all of this hit me like a wave of burning cold water. I quickly learned moping around, feeling sorry for myself wasn’t going to help. My habits of laziness and procrastination weren’t going to do me well in the real world because the real world required real hard work.

In that moment, I decided I didn’t want to be another helpless fly. A month ago I had left my parents’ house and been thrown into a sink of dirty dish water. I didn’t know how to swim, but instead of just aimlessly flapping my little wings, I decided to try to swim. For me, no waitress would come along and pull me out of the water. It was either swim or drown in filthy water. Decide to do real hard work, drop my childish habits, and be happy with what I have, or run out of money and not have a place to rest my head at night.

I put another empty smile on my face and headed out to clear those tables. I even refilled drinks and had friendly conversations with customers, leading to higher tips. Being sad wasn’t going to get me anywhere; it led to laziness and caused me to lose myself in the process. The only way to stay afloat in this dirty water was to swim, pretend to be okay, pretend to be strong. If I smile through the exhaustion and remain upbeat no matter what, I’d make it. I didn’t have to be a helpless fly. I could save myself. I did.
Cole Connors

I Believe
Blue Springs South High School

Sportsmanship is defined as “fairness, respect for one’s opponent, and graciousness in winning or losing.” All are displays of true character in which an individual expresses his opinion in a positive way, setting aside his honest feelings for the greater good.

The quarterback of a team is down, knocked out by the opposing team’s 350 pound linebacker. Cheers erupt from the crowd. Yes, he has been struggling. And yes, wins have been few and far between. But what has our society been reduced to? Cheering when someone is seriously hurt? Sportsmanship both on-field and off-field is at an all-time low. In today’s sports, the popularity of many teams is based on how good they are. Someone born in Missouri, raised in Missouri claims to die a Florida Gators fan?Impossible. Many will say that the fans these days are more into the game, and the amount of fans has increased through new technology. Others will say that every fan has his own opinion on matters involving the team he is associated with and any opponents that team may have. But if anyone honestly believes that it would be okay to encourage someone into the suffering of an injury, then I question that person’s morals as well as his true sportsmanship.

During the Kansas City Chiefs vs. Baltimore Ravens NFL football game on October 7, 2012, struggling Chiefs quarterback, Matt Cassel was seriously injured on the field. After suffering a massive blow to the helmet by an opposing player, Cassel fell to the ground in pain. You’d expect at this point to hear booing or silence; instead cheers erupted from the home crowd of the Chiefs. Known in the past to have very loyal and energetic fans, the Chiefs fans suffered many criticisms following their actions, including ESPN, the local newspaper, and even the team’s own Offensive Tackle, Eric Winston. In a statement to the press Winston claimed, “I’ve never been more embarrassed in my life to play football than at that moment right there. I get emotional about it because these guys, they work their butts off. Matt Cassel hasn’t done anything to you people.” Everything that he said is true. Fans have no physical association with an individual player, and the player shouldn’t be judged based on just his playing ability. The league didn’t used to consist of fans like this; good players used to be all-around liked even by their opponents. Today, though, fans care more about their fantasy league team than the team which they’ve always supported. If the team is winning by 5 and their opponent has one player, fans hope and pray that the player gets injured and cannot participate in a majority of the game. To wish an injury upon someone proves the degrading outlook of sports fans currently.

 Destruction of property is not only a violation of the law but a blatant disregard for those surrounding the perpetrator. It endangers lives. It costs money. This past fall the Blue Springs High School “superfans” have destroyed 9 bleachers in the process of cheering at their team’s football games—not only at their home stadium but at their opponents’ facilities as well. The disrespect shown by these fans has not been eliminated by the administrators either, leading the students to think it’s acceptable behavior. During one of these “riots,” I was participating in the football game on the field. Not only were their vivacious cheers distracting, they were also very opprobrious. To stoop so low as to steal your rivals cheers, really? By the end of the contest, it became more about the fans then what was occurring on field. Even afterwards, when our team had lost and was trying to get back to the locker room, we were unable to—due to the fans, once again. As we were walking up the tunnel back to the school, our team was bombarded by their fans waving flags and forming a blockade in front of us.

Many say that extreme displays of emotions by fans help to liven the game, but it is harmful to everyone involved—the players, the fans, and everyone who remains a part of the experience. Recently, I have realized that the state is trying to help out in encouraging good sportsmanship. On Friday nights, just before the opening kickoff of high school football games, the announcer states over the loudspeaker, “This game is an educational experience, and I ask all fans to refrain from the use of negative cheers for the duration of this contest.” Although this announcement doesn’t affect the fans in their thinking, it’s nice to see some effort put forth by someone.

Regardless of the event, each person plays his role in the audience. Through both good and bad times, some sort of encouragement is displayed—whether positive or negative—but fans must learn to be loyal to the team they have so long appreciated. And fans should respect their opponents. The display of good sportsmanship lately is minimal. New rules must be instituted that follow inappropriate actions with consequences—severe enough consequences to enable the resistor of these rules to realize his mistake and to help create a better and more positive sporting environment. This must be done before the world of sports becomes a bashing session.
Marisa Cropp
Eating Disorder Not Otherwise Specified
West Junior High School

I measure my self-worth in pounds;
My weight is below average, so I am better than most people, the fat ones.
I am not super-skinny, but I am unhealthy.
I know I am cocky, and I roll my eyes at it.
I count my soul in inches, even though I know it’s wrong;
I am my mediocre test scores minus twice my hip size.
I know I am a degenerate, and I bask in it, telling myself it’s a form of modern liberation.
I eat my fears instead of food;
I allow my insecurity to silence my stomach’s strangled protests.
I know I am self-destructive, and I enjoy it as I stand before a cracked mirror, preening.
I dance around in my own helplessness, calling it power;
My mind is twisted, so I call myself a genius.
I know I am mistaken, and I draw upon it in my melodramatic diaries.
Devolution of Dating

People don’t “go steady” anymore. They don’t get “pinned,” wear letter jackets, or “go stag” to dances. The word “date” is rarely even used among today’s young people.

Over the past 50 years, dating has revolutionized. What started as a formal practice has now become less intimate, less formal, and more communicative.

Dan and Shelle Jensen, high school sweethearts and parents of senior Kurt Jensen, have observed that at their high school, if a student was interested in another person, he would usually ask her out on a date to get to know her. But now, they find that teenagers go out more in groups. Dan finds this new group setting a setback because when spending time one-to-one, couples can get to know each other better.

“If it’s just you two, you’re not busy trying to impress someone else,” Dan said.

Because young people interact in these groups rather than one-to-one, dates are not as common as they once were. Whereas Dan and Shelle used to go out on dates, Kurt might simply invite his girlfriend over to watch a movie or occasionally go out to dinner.

With this decrease in actual dates, events like Homecoming and Prom have transformed. Instead of going with a boyfriend or girlfriend, like Dan and Shelle did when they went to East, junior Laura Metz has noticed that teenagers today go to these dances with good friends.

“I think it’s a lot of fun to do, and it’s just kind of the norm now to go as friends [to dances],” Metz said. “A majority of people who go aren’t actually dating.”

AP American History and Sociology teacher Vicki Arndt-Helgesen has noticed dating has become more informal as well. Going in a group, she believes, takes away the awkwardness and pressures of going out on a date.

“I just think it makes much more sense the way kids do it today, in terms of being with groups of male and female friends,” Arndt-Helgesen said. “Initially, for getting to know people, it’s far more comfortable getting to interact in a group.”

Arndt-Helgesen attributes new terms, such as “hook-up” or “friends with benefits,” to the new informality of dating that most adults are unaware of. Hook-ups today are also very casual and noncommittal and can mean anything from making out, to having sex.

“The fact that we have those terms, the idea of potentially sexual relationships without commitment, that’s a little bit different,” Arndt-Helgesen said.

Arndt-Helgesen thinks that the informality of dating is because there is less of a search for security, thus bringing about the idea of a steady. Women in the 50s were trying to find a spouse because most people got married right out of high school, but people today generally marry after college.

For Dan and Shelle, having a steady during their high school years in the 70s was just a part of high school. They met in their choir class when Shelle was in ninth grade and Dan was in eighth grade. He would turn around and squeeze her knees, and she would giggle. At the December mixer, he asked her to go steady, and they have been together ever since.

The Jensens think that more pressure is placed on couples today because of social media, like texting and Facebook. With this new technology, teenagers are staying in constant contact with each other, but when Dan and Shelle were in high school, communication was limited.

“Back then, it was a phone that was attached to the wall with a cord, so you didn’t have privacy,” Shelle said. “My parents knew how much we were talking whereas now-a-days, I would be completely clueless.”

Dan thinks that having the option of constant communication is “too much, too soon” and can have a negative effect on a relationship, going back to the old saying that “absence makes the heart grow fonder.” He believes having a break from each other is healthy. Though Kurt agrees, he also thinks that texting makes it simpler.

“It’s a lot easier to stay in touch with people but it also nearly isn’t as personal,” Kurt said. “Until you actually hang out with them, you aren’t going to really know them.”
Calculus teacher Rick Royer has been with his wife since they were in sixth grade and thinks that the increasing use of technology in relationships has a negative effect on teenagers. Even today, he and his wife only use cell phones during emergencies.

For couples now, being able to communicate by texting is considered an essential part of relationships. Seniors Maddie Sullivan and Andrew Herst met in middle school, where cell phones were a big part of their lives.

“We basically met by texting,” Sullivan said. “Now we don’t text all the time, we usually just talk on the phone.”

Arndt-Helgesen believes that kids today are being exposed to relationships much earlier than they were in past. Shows like Jersey Shore or magazines such as Seventeen show young people the dating culture. While kids used to be sheltered from that throughout their junior high years, middle school students today often are in stereotypical relationships in response to the media.

In high school, this aspect of a relationship becomes more serious and includes a process.

“First, you basically have a ‘thing,’ that’s just from talking a lot, and you’re really getting to know each other at first,” Kurt said. “Then once you start to feel more comfortable with each other, I guess you hang out more often and become [Facebook] official and start dating and going out together, just you two, more often.”

Among today’s high school students, being Facebook official has become an important part of dating; it defines today’s relationships and sets boundaries. Sullivan and Herst have been dating for four years and think it’s critical in the dating process.

“It makes the lines more clear,” Sullivan said. “It used to be that having a thing, dating and being a boyfriend and girlfriend, the lines were kind of blurry.”

In her time teaching at East, Arndt-Helgesen has noticed decreasing public displays of affection (PDA) in schools. Where hugging and kissing in public were the norm when she first started teaching, today’s teenagers rarely show this.

“It’s a little more subtle,” Arndt-Helgesen said. “The ones where there are more public displays of affection, there’s an awkwardness about that.”

For sophomore Emma Calvert and her boyfriend, sophomore Nick Medlin, PDA is a normal part of their school lives.

“We just hold hands and kiss sometimes,” Calvert said. “We are more affectionate because we don’t see each other very much outside of school.”

Break-ups were much more dramatic in the fifties; they involved giving back the class ring or the letter jacket a boyfriend may have given his girlfriend, whereas today break-ups are represented by the click of button on Facebook, and people find out much sooner.

Although she thinks dating has become less formal, Arndt-Helgesen still believes it is an important time in a person’s life.

“I think high school relationships are very serious,” Arndt-Helgesen said. “I think those first times that we commit to other people, where we’re sharing who we are, I think they’re significant learning experiences.”

Say A Little Prayer

“Do you have twelve moms?”
“Do you only eat on Tuesdays?”
“Do you bathe your children in lamb’s blood?”

Senior Katy Watkins has heard every offensive and stereotypical question a Mormon could be asked, but that doesn’t deter her from practicing her religion. Her faith has been something she can lean on in tough times, and facing obstacles along the way has only made it stronger. Katy describes last year as the worst year of her life, her faith was tested many times.

Her religion is a priority in her life. She goes to church every Sunday. She is an active member of the Church of Latter Day Saints (the Mormon Church) and attends a required class for high school students, known as seminary, at 6 a.m. every day before school. Next year, she plans to attend Virginia Commonwealth University, a small, liberal arts school. According to George Watkins, Katy’s dad, although the school is not directly affiliated with the church, it is still very strong on the campus.
Last year started with difficulty because when she was a sophomore, Katy signed up for the International Baccalaureate (IB) on a whim. As the year progressed, she began to feel pressure from her family and faith. Signing up for the IB program only made her year that much harder.

“I did not realize absolutely how much work it was,” George said. “When we were in high school, we were just trying to get by. [IB] was almost like being in the Marine Corps academically.”

But Katy kept praying.

Family is also a priority in Katy’s life. She has three brothers: Luke* is 14, Daniel is 21, and Gregory is 23. As a child, she had always idolized Daniel. He was her older brother, her definition of cool. She wanted to be just like him. According to Katy, he was getting all fives on his AP tests, getting all A’s, and was a debate star. His many debate trophies still sit on a bookshelf in his room.

“Daniel was the wonder kid,” Katy said. “He couldn’t do anything wrong.”

Daniel went to Brigham Young University, the main Mormon college in the United States, for two years before being called on his mission. Any Mormon man from 19-26 can be called on their mission; they are required to go somewhere in the world for two years to spread the gospel. Daniel was called to Arizona.

“He told my dad he wasn’t going to go,” Katy said. “And that was huge. On top of that, he told them he didn’t believe in God anymore.”

Because of his poor grades last year, Daniel was put on academic probation and moved back in with his family. With that, Katy felt a lot of pressure to be successful because of Daniel’s failures.

“One of my mom’s friends actually told me, ‘You’ve got to be the one Watkins to succeed now,’” Katy said. “I just felt a lot of responsibility fall on my shoulders.”

Some of the responsibility she felt was for her brothers. Gregory was 22 at the time, attending a class at Johnson County Community College once every two weeks and working part-time in the mail room at his mom’s office. Katy was used to being discriminated against as a Mormon, but when it came to Gregory, it was different. Gregory has autism, a disorder affecting the development of the brain’s social and communication skills. While Gregory was at East, two girls spread a rumor about him that almost got him expelled. Even now, Katy doesn’t feel comfortable talking about the incident; the rumor they spread is just another example of people misunderstanding autism.

After the girls went to the principal with the rumor, the school called George saying that he needed to come and pick up his son because he was expelled. After his parents discussed it with the principal, the girls who accused him admitted that they lied about what happened. Gregory’s parents took him home.

“[Those girls] probably didn’t think anything about it,” Katy said, “but when they brought Gregory home, my parents tried to tell him it wasn’t his fault, that he didn’t do anything wrong. And Gregory just said, ‘I will look at the floor.’ And he did. For two years he didn’t say anything.”

Katy kept praying.

Meanwhile, Luke had just started middle school at Indian Hills. Katy was worried about him because middle school was hard enough, and Luke was often the target of teasing.

Katy knows that Luke looks up to her and talks to her about things he couldn’t say to his parents. He started asking Katy questions about what kids do at parties and drinking, and Katy likes that he feels comfortable talking to her about these things. According to Katy, Luke is getting to the age where Gregory will start to bother him and his parents will easily frustrate him. Being able to talk to Daniel helped Katy get through that time in her life, so she wants to be there for him when he needs to talk.

Luke is transferring to Shawnee Mission South next year because, after what happened to Gregory, Katy doesn’t want Luke at East. There are a lot more Mormons at South that they know, so she thinks he will get along better there. When Katy leaves for college next year, she hopes that Luke will be okay in high school without her.

Then, halfway through the school year, everything changed. One Friday afternoon in January, Katy’s dad found something of Daniel’s that he shouldn’t have had; it was against the rules of his parents and against their religion.

“I told [Daniel] that there were some things that he was doing which were unacceptable,” said George. “I didn’t say ‘Pack up your stuff’ or throw him out of the house right there. I said, ‘This can’t happen.’”

After the argument everyone went their separate ways. Luke and George were camping for Boy Scouts. Gregory was at home. Katy and her mom went to see New Moon and spend some quality time together while the boys were away. When Katy and her mom Ann arrived home at about 9 p.m. that night, Gregory was the only one
home. Katy went to her room, not realizing that Daniel was nowhere to be found until she heard her mom answer the phone.

“I heard my mom’s phone ring, and then I heard her voice getting really shrill,” Katy said. “I heard her crying and knew it was Daniel. I don’t know how I knew, but I did. He called my mom to tell her he was leaving and wasn’t coming back.”

When her dad got home the next day, he was shocked to find that Daniel had left. George had not realized the fight had made such a large impact on Daniel. According to Katy, Daniel doesn’t like being told what to do, which is why he left; he didn’t want to listen to anyone.

“The reason he left was more of a surprise than what really caused the confrontation,” George said.

Katy remembers this as the worst day of her life. After that, her grades started dropping. She started being short with Luke and Gregory. She stopped smiling as much.

Katy was mad at God; it was hard for her to accept that he was letting these things happen to her when she was already having a trying year. She felt the furthest away from the Spirit then.

But Katy kept praying.

Katy continued to feel pressures from school and home, and eventually she began questioning her faith.

“Daniel would tell me all the time about how he hated the church,” Katy said. “Since I usually listen to Daniel about things, it was really hard for me. I didn’t know what to say to him about it. And I felt like I couldn’t talk to my mom about it because I felt really bad telling my mom I was questioning the church.”

In the hope of finding answers, Katy finally asked for a patriarchal blessing, which any Mormon can receive from the patriarch, a person chosen by church members who get a strong feeling from God of who should take the position. When someone receives the blessing, the patriarch will see what he is supposed to say, directly from God. Anyone of any age can ask for a blessing, and it is supposed to tell you of your strength and upcoming challenges.

During her blessing, her family was allowed to be with her. When she felt the Spirit come over her, she started crying after the first few words because she so strongly felt the Spirit.

“I am a lot closer to the church through [everything] that happened and all the praying I did and all the things I did to get through that,” Katy said. “I gained my own testimony of the church being true and now everything Daniel says bounces off of me. It doesn’t matter anymore, because I know what’s true and he doesn’t.”

Although she can share the blessing with her family, she is instructed to only share the blessing with anyone else if she feels inspired to do so. According to Katy, it was her mom who really helped her through that.

“Katy and I discussed the fact that she is not responsible for her brother’s choices, nor does she have to be perfect because he isn’t,” Ann said. “She was carrying too many burdens last year. She needed to lighten her load emotionally.”

After receiving the blessing, she reaffirmed her faith and dropped IB. Looking back, Katy was afraid to drop IB because she thought that the other students would think she was dumb. Now, she thinks she is smarter for having dropped. She is much happier and has more time to spend with her family.

Even if given the chance, Katy wouldn’t change a thing about last year. She feels she grew so much, both spiritually and in her studies. Now, when people try to make fun of her for being Mormon, she easily brushes it off.

“Actually, I have seven moms, one for each day of the week,” she now answers jokingly.

Her experiences have taught her to be patient and appreciate the little things, which is why she has decided to pursue a career in psychology. She has learned to be optimistic. Instead of driving her away from the church, the last year actually brought her closer.

“She’s had to find her own way in a lot of ways,” George said, “and she’s had to be tough and strong to [do that]. Who knows, she might be someone her older brother can look to. Katy’s got it straightened out, and maybe that will motivate him. She will be the example.”

And she will keep praying.
The Measure of Success

Two students graduated from North Plainsfield High School in 1968 and went their separate ways. One had a 1.76 GPA and went to Baker University while the other was the valedictorian and attended the University of Maryland.

Today, the former is East’s school principal while the latter is in prison for being convicted of an armed robbery.

In some cases, students who excel in high school may not be successful later in life; having a good GPA and grades may be inconsequential. Principal Karl Krawitz along with others believes that having a good work ethic after high school can be just as beneficial, or sometimes more beneficial, than performing well in high school.

In high school, Dr. Krawitz didn’t receive exemplary grades, but, he said, it wasn’t because he was dumb—he didn’t like school and had no desire for an education. Dr. Krawitz doesn’t base success merely on grades and uses himself as an example.

“If one wants to equate success based on things like test scores or grades or how many organizations that they were in while they were in school, the chances are that a person is involved in school and has relative grades, what I will call average or above average grades, they’re chances are pretty good,” Dr. Krawitz said. “They’re going to be successful, but it’s not guaranteed.”

Sophomore Hudson Peters thinks some kids have to put in more effort to learn while it comes naturally to others. He thinks that sometimes the system doesn’t work for certain people, but the students who get by doing the minimum amount of work develop laziness. Calculus teacher Rick Royer believes that these students are simply good at “playing the game of education.”

“Unfortunately, our system rewards people with good short term memory,” Royer said. “They can memorize [material] and spew it back without ever absorbing anything long term.”

Royer points out that these students don’t have to turn in assignments or do homework; their ability to easily memorize gets them good grades that are the same or better than the students who are trying to apply the concepts.

Senior Andy Collins agrees with this and also thinks that the ability to do busy work is an important part of being able to work the system. He knows people who are good at “playing the game;” they easily get good grades, but when it comes to problem solving they are defeated.

“The whole grade system is messed up, out of date and is made to be a cookie cutter popping out a large amount of laborers that we needed when the school system was made,” Collins said.

Peters believes that having a good short term memory can lead to good grades in some cases. He thinks that applying what he learns and doing his work is a big aspect of his 4.8 GPA, although having a good memory helps.

Rebecca Wing, an East graduate of 2004, was in the IB program while in high school and self-categorized above average student. Wing says that she knew about “the game,” but she tried to avoid playing it.

“I knew that IB would help me get into a good college, but what I got out of it was so much more than that,” Wing said. “It definitely contributed into my getting into a good college and particularly taught me the importance of community.”

Wing went to Macalester College as a bio-chemistry major, planning to become a doctor. Then one summer while in college she worked for Amigos de las Americas, an international non-profit organization that provides youth with the opportunity to live and work in Latin American countries during the summer.

She realized that she wanted to continue working with Amigos and decided against going to medical school. Today, she works as a waitress at First Watch, a tutor, and a volunteer for Amigos and considers herself successful because she loves what she is doing.

“I think that while high school is a formative and important part of anyone’s life, being a good student is a poor barometer for future success,” Wing said. “Unfortunately, my generation has been hit hard by the economic downturn. Many of my friends, myself included, almost all of whom were excellent students in high school and college, are finding it difficult to find jobs, especially in the fields we really want to be working in.”

Sophomore Samantha Fetzer, who has a 4.3 GPA, disagrees with Wing. Although she thinks that a student who does not do well in school can have a successful future, she thinks that most of the time the grades a student receives measure their intelligence and capability; some students can just memorize, but most good grades come...
from hard work. She says that most honors classes at East are difficult, and students have to be able to handle the challenge.

"Logically you’re going to take the class that you know you’re going to do the best in," Fetzer said. "For the kids that take those classes to be challenged I think that’s great that you want to try and do better because even if you take that class and you don’t do great I think you will learn from that failure."

Junior Maddie Pigeon, who generally gets A’s and B’s in her classes, thinks that students need to keep in mind that most colleges don’t add the extra weighting and some people are uninformed about this. She says that some people send their applications off to college with a certain GPA but really it is a lot less.

However, the students who are trying to apply the concepts and working hard outside of school have developed one skill that the other students don’t have: work ethic. Chemistry teacher Coleman Ogdon thinks that these students will be more successful.

“Hopefully they’ll figure out early on it’s not just about being bright, it’s being able to enter personal skills, your work ethic, your organizational skills,” Mr. Ogdon said. “In the long run, if I were to pick one of those students I want to work for me, I’m going to pick the one that works hard.”

It is commonly accepted that the characteristics of a good high school student is someone with a good GPA, ACT or SAT scores, and grades, which, according to Dr. Krawitz, do not portray work ethic or self-sufficiency.

Mr. Ogdon recalls that when he was in high school, there was no weighting for honors, AP or IB classes. He thinks this was for the best because the students took classes they genuinely wanted to be challenged in. Ogdon believes that this “inflation” in our grading system can be changed by taking away the extra weight.

“If you want to take an honors class, you want to take it because you want to learn about that particular subject matter,” Ogdon said. “That way, you’d have students in your class that are really interested in learning, and not just in there because they think they’re going to get an extra grade point for being in that class.”

Dr. Krawitz doesn’t like the idea of class rank. Although he is unable to change it, he thinks that students should not be competing against each other to get better grades. When Assistant Principal Heather Royce was in high school, she had a 3.85 GPA and was in the top 20 of her class. Now, a student with a 3.5 GPA doesn’t even crack the top 100 at East. According to Dr. Krawitz, for some students the school atmosphere doesn’t work; the reasons for which students do poorly in school are diverse and isn’t always that they don’t want to learn.

Counselor Laura Carter does her best to help students figure out their path. In her many years of counseling, she has seen students who have left high school with all A’s go to Ivy League schools and end up coming home early because they were irresponsible, while other students have left East with just okay grades and “have gone on to do great things.” Carter had a student who went to Kansas University and eventually started designing rovers for Mars with NASA.

Dr. Krawitz thinks that grades don’t define someone as a person nor mirror anyone’s future. Although colleges focus mainly on grades when going through admissions, they also look at the person’s extracurricular activities. Dr. Krawitz finds these to be important in students’ lives.

“If there is a student who is not doing well in school but still keeps himself active and involved in the school in some form, their chance of landing on their feet it far better,” Dr. Krawitz said. “Anybody can choose what they want to do. You’ve just got to be motivated and get past it despite all the barriers that are in front of you. You have to jump over those.”
Once upon an evening eerie, as I sat, exceedingly weary,  
Clutching the begrimed rifle that survival called for,  
With my brain babbling and bemoaning, suddenly, there came a groaning  
As of someone quietly moaning, moaning at my shelter door  
“‘Tis a zombie,” I stammered, “who is moaning at my door—  
only one and nothing more.”

Ah, distinctly I remember, it was a horribly blazing September  
And each and every humid zephyr brought to my brow sudor  
Hastily, I ran from the welter; Desperately, I searched for a shelter  
And found this place, an end of terror, terror of the things that I abhor  
That ghastly, rotting mass of creatures that I so very much abhor  
Hunting me down for evermore.

And that never ceasing sighing sent my own sanity to dying  
And my already fretful nerves were now more anxious than before  
So that now, to stop the reeling of my mind, I stood, nerves steeling  
“Let me kill this wretched demon who lays just outside my door—  
this beastly, loathsome creature who lays just outside my door—  
let him walk here nevermore.”

Walking forward, my fear grew stronger; wishing the distance to be longer  
But my rifle was poised and ready by the time I crossed the floor  
And my with my shaking hand unsteady, I turned the knob, though I was unready  
For I could never be at peace with that thing crying at my door  
“Let this moan be your last!” I cried, violently throwing wide the door  
“Let your presence be known here nevermore!”

But as I raised the gun to my shoulder, the thing plowed at me like a boulder  
And its filthy, festering form pushed me down unto the floor.  
And with its blackened mouth gaping and me with no hope of escaping  
The creature delivered a bite that rattled me to my core  
And without a thought, I grabbed the gun from beside me on the floor  
And decided he would bite me nevermore.

And as he came in for his next bite, a rage within me did ignite  
As I pulled the rifle back and struck its skull covered in gore  
One final moan as it fell, one final snap before his farewell  
Before finally, it lay dead in a heap by the door  
A sad, rotting heap lying lonesome by the door  
And now that thing is a threat nevermore

And now I tell you this tale crying as my poor soul lays here dying  
Next to the crumpled heap of rotting flesh here right before the door  
And now my wound I see is festering and many thoughts now are pestering  
My mind like what happened to the ones that I adore?  
What will become of them as I become a ghoul right here before this door?  
I pray that they shall see me nevermore.
Shhh. It's a secret. If people know, they will be mad. I don't like it when people are mad at me. Since I'm seven now, people don't get mad at me, but one time, when I was six, I accidentally bumped into mama's special vase from grandma, and it broke into a bazillion pieces. After that Mama was mad at me, and I couldn't see Charlie for a whole week! Charlie is my best friend. Even better than my big sissy, Rachel. But only because Rachel is big now, so she doesn't like me anymore. Rachel is best friends with Peter. But she told me once that she like-likes Peter. I said "Ewwww!!!!!!!!!!" And then I made a face.

Rachel made me pinky swear to never tell anyone about the secret. It's a big secret, and I'm dying to tell. Still Mama and Daddy would probably never talk to me again. Daddy would never do rocket again. Rocket's where Daddy picks me up and whooshes me around the living room. It makes Mama mad, so we can only do it when she's away from the house. If we stopped playing rocket, I think I would lock myself in my room forever, and I would only see Charlie. I also think if I don't tell anybody I will explode! So, I decided to write it here. I just learned how to write because Rachel taught me—and Peter taught her. It doesn't count as telling someone if I just write it down, right? Rachel stole this paper for me, so I could be a rebel. She says a rebel is someone who goes against the system. I don't know what the system is. Sometimes big sisys are confusing. Oh! Hold on; someone is knocking!

“Hey, hon,” says Daddy.
“Hi, Daddy,” I respond.
“So squirt, I never got to talk to you about your big trip to the MOUH. How'd it go?” Uh-oh. Daddy is good at asking questions I don't want to talk about. Then again, Daddy does know everything.
“Oh, well, you know it was okay. Charlie and I traded our pudding cups, so I ate the chocolate!”
“Kiddo! You know Mama doesn't like it when you have chocolate.” Daddy gave me a disapproving look.
“I know, Daddy, but it was just a one-timer. I pinky swear!”
“Haha, alright, but I'm trusting you, Agent S.” Daddy points his fat finger at me, and I point mine back.
“Sounds good, Agent D!” I say to him. I start giggling because there's no such thing as agents, and secrets—except for my big one. I try not to think about it.

“Did you guys see the big book?”
I gulp. “Well, yes, but Charlie and I were talking about his new puppy, so I didn't really hear what Mrs. Meyers was saying.”

“Yeah, well, what it you think about it?”
“Well, I-I uh, I don't know.”
“What do you mean, squirt?”
“Well it was just... kinda uh...” Then a high pitched beeeeeeep!
“Shoot! Hey, kiddo, I gotta run to work here, but we'll finish this later, ok?”
I let out a big breath. “Ok Daddy, sounds good!”
“Hey, looks like your mom will have to join me out there. Sounds like a big deal.” I guess the beep was pretty high, but still. Mama rarely has to go to work. This must be big.
“Ok, bye, Daddy!”
“See ya, kid.”

Phew! Daddy's gone now. Thank goodness. Daddy is a Finder for money. That means he has to go find people who do bad things and punish them. Mama's one too, but she only has to go for the really important stuff. That's why the secret is a super-secret. I can't stand keeping all these secrets to myself! I think I'll just write it down, so I'm not so antsy. Mama says antsy isn't very ladylike.

It started on Tuesday when my class went to the MOUH, the “Museum of our Unfortunate History.” Usually it's really creepy, because no one wants to hang around the bad things. The only reason we even have a museum of them, Mrs. Meyers said, is so that Littles like us can see everything bad and never be tempted to see, hear, or think they are good. One of the MOUH’s most prized possessions of shame is the “Book.” Everyone just calls it
“Book” now because anyone who used to be able to read is dead—except me, because Peter taught Rachel, who taught me, how to read and write.

When Charlie and I first saw the “Book” everyone acted like it was very evil, but it didn't look like a scary monster with gnashing teeth, which is how Betty, who is a third grader, described it. Charlie and I asked Mrs. Meyers why it was so bad. After that, we got a time out. As we left, I couldn't stop staring at it. It looked kind of pretty with dark leather and golden lettering at the tip top. I only told this to Charlie, though, because he is my very best friend. I whispered it to him on the bus, and his eyes got real big like sausages, but he didn't rat me out to Mrs. Meyers. Sometimes I think Charlie is the only person with any decencies. That's what Mama says is the best thing about him. When Charlie and I got off the bus we decided to go to my house because, unlike me, Charlie doesn't have a big sister to ask about big non-scary books. That's a difference between us, which Mama says is good, but I disagree. I wish Charlie and I were exactly the same because he's my very best friend. When we got into my house, we went up to Rachel's room. We had to knock on the door and wait for a response because Rachel is usually busy with big girl things. She's in the eighth grade, so she's super big.

Rachel answered the door, and I said “Sis, Charlie and I went to the MOUH today and saw the “Book,” but it wasn't that scary. Why is it so bad?” We asked Rachel because she knows nearly everything, next to Mama, who is next to Daddy.

Rachel blinked at me and asked me where Mama and Daddy were. I said, “Please Rachel, just tell me!”

“Ugh, here get in my room, quick. Now Sam, this is important; is mom and dad home?”

“No, Rachel!”

“Ok, what I'm about to tell you two is very different from what every single other person has told you.”

“Rachel, stop being such a doofus and just tell us.”

“Alright, but only if each of you pinky swears not tell anyone never, ever, ever what I am about to tell you.” Charlie let out a big sigh and rolled his green eyes but stuck out his pinky. Rachel looked him in the eye and shook it. Then she looked at me.

“C'mon Sam, let's just get this over with,” Charlie encouraged me.

“This better not be a joke, Rach,” I said in my most menacing voice, and then we shook pinkies.

“Ok. You guys know how you've always been taught that reading and writing are bad, that they cause people to do horrible things to one another?” Charlie and I shook our heads.

“Well, none of that is true.”

“Huh??” Charlie and I were pretty confused.

Rachel went on to tell us that books and writing were actually good tools which once helped humans to communicate with each other. She said that beautiful stories were told with magic and dragons and handsome princes saving pretty girls. She told us that books were not the bad things. People were. She said people had the capacity with books to love each other, help the world, and inspire people, but instead they hurt each other and made the world sad.

Charlie and I couldn't believe it. At first we thought she was lying, but then we started putting our thinking caps on. Mrs. Meyers says that thinking caps help us to think to our bestest.

I asked her, “Rachel, how do you know all this?”

She said, “You know Peter, my friend, right?”

“You mean Peter your boyfriend?” Then Charlie and I started with the giggles. Rachel got frustrated, so we had to stop.

“Peter and his family remember the old ways. They kept the secrets about books with them for a long time. One day Peter told me about the books, and I was just as confused as you are. Then Peter showed me something he wrote once.”

“What? Rachel, you know people can't write. It's legal...”

“You mean illegal.”

“Yeah. And if Peter showed you that then Daddy would have to punish him.”

“Plus, he would be kicked out of school for, like, ever!” Charlie chimed in.

“I know. And I know this is a lot to hear, but all those reasons are why you guys can never tell anybody.”

“But Rachel, Charlie and I don't lie,” Charlie nodded with me. “And if we get caught, we'll all be punished!”

“I know, I know, but it's time for the world to wake up, guys. People have forgotten what we're capable of. We've got to remind them.”
“But how can we do that? We’re not the town elders or important people. I like being not capable!” said Charlie, he wasn’t too happy at first.

“Here, let me read this to you…” Rachel brought out some paper, which at first was weird, because I had only ever seen it in movies. She read to us something Peter wrote. The markings on the page didn’t make sense at first, but the pictures she painted with her words were extraordinary, and afterwards, Charlie and I were speechless.

“Do you guys see why books and reading are so special now? We can’t let them disappear. People like Mom and Dad, they’ve forgotten how much they need this. Do you promise to keep my secret?” Charlie and I had to have a secret meeting before we made up our minds.

“Ok,” said Charlie, “but we want you to teach us.”

“Excuse me?” Rachel seemed shocked.

“We want to know how to read the magic words and write the pretty letters. If you teach us, Rach, we won’t tell a single living soul ever. Promise.” Rachel sort of got this little smile and a wetness in her eyes.

“Ok guys. I’ll teach you.”

Since then Rachel has been teaching Charlie and I how to do all the “bad” stuff. And she stole you for me, and now I’ve written down my big secret. Oooff, there's another knock on the door. Back under bed—fst!

“Sam, we need to get out of here,” Rachel exclaimed.

“What? Why?”

Someone tipped off Mom and Dad. They know the secret's out. They don't know it's us yet, but it won't take them long to figure it out.”

“Rachel that is ridiculous! Anyway, how do you know? You're just trying to scare me and boss me around like always!”

“Sam! This isn't a joke! I just came from Peter's house. His family has Finder scanners so that they're prepared in emergencies like this.” Finder scanners are like walkie-talkies, but for Finders only.

“But Rachel, I can’t just leave! What about Rocket and being antsy! Daddy was going to finish talking to me about my field trip, and Mama was going to take me shopping for brand new denims on Saturday! Can’t we just stay and try to figure it out here?”

“Sam. This is Mom and Dad’s job, to find people who find out the truth. You wanted to know Sam, you and Charlie. Now it’s time to leave.”

“No, I don't believe it. Agent D wouldn't just leave me!”

“He took an oath to punish those who may seek to “dilute the minds of masses” no matter if they are his wife, parents or children.

The wet things start to fall from my eyes. “But Ra-Rachel, w-what are w-we going to?”

“Peter and his family are getting a van together. We will run away with them, Sam. We'll stay free and with the beautiful stories forever.”

“No! What about Charlie? He’s my bestest friend ever! I can’t just leave him here all by himself!”

“Fine, we'll make a short stop by Charlie’s house, but he only has three minutes to get out and in the van, or we are gone.”

I’m wailing now. I love the town and Mama and Daddy. Rocket is my favoritest. And PB&J and daffodils and yummy chocolate. Rachel bends down and faces me.

“Shhhh…It will be okay,” she wipes my tears. “I will take care of you. I love you so much, Sam. We’re going to be just fine.” And a small wet escapes the corner of her eye.

“Quick, grab what you need. We leave in two minutes.” Then she's out the door. Out to Peter.

I grab my stuffed hippo, the bestest of my stuffed animals, and my pink purse that Daddy gave me. I pick up the jar of seashells that Mama gave me last year when she went on a big trip. The wets come faster than ever, but they don't make sounds anymore. I pack up my prettiest shirts and denims, even my fancy dress. Then I go to Mama and Daddy’s room and take one of their fluffiest pillows because it smells just like them.

Rachel comes back and grabs my hand. “It’s time to get Charlie now.”

“But I’m not done yet!”

“Now, Sam!” She picks me up around my middle and throws me over her shoulder.

“No! I can’t! I’m not ready!” She doesn’t respond and instead keeps walking until we’re out of the house. She throws me in the back of a blue van. There’s all sorts of weird stuff in it, that I can’t make out, but I do recognize Peter’s parents.
“Please don't make me go! What about Mama and Daddy?”
They don't answer, but Peter's mom grabs me and holds me too tight. I think she is trying to hug me, but it hurts. She starts crying but still doesn't say anything. I squirm and wiggle, but her grip is good. The van is going very fast, even though Charlie's house is just down the street. I hear the Finder sirens in the background.

“Go! Get in there and grab Charlie! There's no time for him to pack, just grab him and go!” Rachel yells when we're in the driveway. She's sitting in the front seat and sounds so far away.

I open the door slowly, because I can't think fast. My legs feel like heavy bricks. I try to run up the driveway, but I think I'm doing it wrong. Charlie comes out the door, running up and giving me a hug.

“Sam! I'm so sorry!” Why is he sorry? He's hugging me, and he won't let go. I'm trying to tell him we have to leave now, but my mouth won't move. My eyes aren't seeing correctly. The sirens are getting super loud now. Super-duper loud. I can't hear anything else. Out of the corner of my eye I see the blue van trying to drive away. Why are they leaving me?

However, another car has crashed into them, and they can't move.
Oh no.
It's the Finder squad.
I see Mama and Daddy. I can't help myself: I'm happy to see them, even though I know I'm supposed to run away now. Charlie still won't let go. A big Finder lifts me up, up, up, and away. Charlie is backing up. I see him mouth the word “sorry.”

The sirens are so loud.
Charlie's parents have come out, standing next to him. Why isn't Charlie running with me? Doesn't he know we have to go right now?
The Finders have pulled everyone out of the blue van. They're pulling us into the screaming cars. I open my mouth, but I can't tell if I'm screaming too.
I see Daddy a few feet away.
He turns around, facing away from me.
“Daddy! Please, help me!”
He doesn't answer me.

Walter walks down the Captive Facilities main hallway, pushing Rachel and Sam out of his mind. This was his job. He took an oath. He exits the building, climbing into his car, heading home for the day.

Once home, the house is unusually quiet. No Sam running to greet him, begging for Rocket. No Rachel playing her loud rock music. The house is a ghost without them. He refuses to cry but can't help wandering into each of their rooms.
Into Rachel's, he takes careful note of her pictures on the wall. Her bed, left unmade. It's too much for him, and he enters into Sam's room.
Her room is left even messier. Her enormous stuffed animal collection huddles in the corner, the electric pink and blue paint on the walls, clothes strewn all over the floor. He walks over to his daughter's dresser, picking up an old picture of him and Sam. They were playing Rocket. She was flying in the air, limbs flailing. He had a smile on his face. The kind only Sam seemed to be able to bring out.
He throws the picture into a nearby trashcan, shattering the glass everywhere. He starts to leave the room.
Mandy would be home soon to make them dinner—for two.
A small tear runs out the corner of his eye, leaving a trace along his face, until it drops onto the carpet.
Walter barely notices it.
Danielle Doolin  
Portfolio  
Lincoln College Preparatory

Writer's Note:

Maya Angelou once wrote, “There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.” I've always loved storytelling, whether it be writing my own or reading someone else's. I was always an unconventional child and read as a means to escape general isolation from my peers. From an early age, I'd held a fascination with words—their sounds, patterns, rhythms. Being able to get lost in a flurry of words beautifully strung together has always seemed a bit magical. Naturally, when I tried writing for myself the first time, it was more difficult than I'd imagined. None of my words seemed to fit, and I couldn't possibly understand why others' words seemed to flow seamlessly while mine came out chunky, rusted, and rough. The biggest problem to me, it seemed, was that I couldn't figure out how to transfer what I was thinking into coherent thoughts on paper. It frustrated me to no end, fueling me to try even harder. But, as Jack Kerouac wrote, “One day I will find the right words, and they will be simple.” And indeed they were; I wrote words into simple patterns painting my day or how I was feeling or how others affected me. Once I got the hang of it, I couldn't be stopped. Words flowed out of me, pretty little patterns, snippets of stories, skies and grasses, anything fair game. I wrote to capture my memories, my hopes, and my innermost dreams. I soon discovered that I could tell others' stories too. I could make up lands, monarchies, rebellions, dragons, anything I wanted. Through reading, I found writing, and through writing I've found a better understanding of myself.  

With my writing, I want others to be able to understand the moment that I've tried to portray. I've found that the things that seem to be the most important are always the hardest to put into words. I want readers to be able to understand the emotions behind my words, to follow the stories, to want to know my characters. I want to be able to take readers to the very darkest corners of my mind or share with them feelings of flying, of freedom, and of love. Writing is a very intimate sort of craft which makes it liberating. The works I chose showcase different dynamics in various relationships, therefore opening the floor for a wide range of emotions. I also wanted to share both the side of me that is a minimalist with her words and the side who loves to overuse them.

Storybook

I want to write a storybook about you so that readers everywhere can fall in love with you like I did. It will be filled with short stories about how you built entire mountain ranges because you thought water would look good running down them, about how you hung the moon and painted each little star so no one would ever get lost, about how when you sang, stars shined a little brighter, birds chirped a little sweeter, and rivers flowed a little gentler. Maybe one day they'll love you so much that Hollywood will decide to turn you into a movie, and more people will love you, will know you like I have. Everyone will have a piece of you, and they will love you far more than you'd ever imagined, and maybe it will be enough to make you stay until morning next time.

I'd start by giving you long flowing hair and impossibly bright blue eyes. Adding, of course, a smile that charms any grumpy, old troll from under a bridge and out to tea. I'd maybe throw in how Peter Pan came to you asking for a place where he'd never have to rest, and in turn you gave him Never Land, free of charge. Or maybe even how you taught the very first birds what it means to fly. I'd definitely include how you thought giving Zeus a lightning bolt sounded good at the time, but hey, everyone makes mistakes. I'd write about how you spent an entire autumn in a meadow trying to get the colors just right and how you finally got it down a day before the first snow storm, throwing in how you were so sad to see autumn go, you decided it should happen every year. I'd go on and on about how you were Cinderella's godmother and, though you thought she looked better in pinks, she wanted a blue gown, so you relented.

I want to write a storybook about you so I could write you into every page, every paragraph, and every sentence—stories so wondrous that people couldn't help but fall in love with you. You'd read about how you are the sun, about how even the greatest poet couldn't describe the wonderful color of your eyes, about how you make the world a better place just by breathing. Maybe, just maybe, it would be enough to make you remain until morning next time.
Way down in the heart of the Ozarks, cradled by the luscious, sun baked mountains and crawling with rattlesnakes and scorpions, far away from any kind of civilization, is a paradise. Camp H. Roe Bartle is a homely little site nestled near a little town named Iconium, none of which you have ever heard of. If you go back to campsite Kickapoo and wriggle through a storm drain then maneuver down a steep mountainside, you will come to a dry creek bed. You have to walk a blistering 3 miles through the heat, watching for snakes, and you will come to an extremely underwhelming desert, a result of that year’s 112 degree heat. Nearly two miles across, it is only accessible by hiking through the unbearable heat. And did I mention it was hot? Across the desert, lovingly nicknamed apocalyptic beach by campers, due to it being part of the lake at some point, is a cliff with an enormous boulder protruding from the side. We called the whole area “The Rock” and went there on a daily basis.

On one such day, my hydration pack swung loosely from side to side on my sweaty shoulders as we hiked the long, dry creek bed. Our faces were beet red with exhaustion, and we were soaked with sweat. We couldn’t give up now; no, we were too close to our destination. We spotted apocalyptic beach on the horizon and trudged onward. A doe leapt from the bracken nearby and froze when she saw us. Josh picked up a small, smooth stone and threw it in the direction of the doe which stumbled a little when the stone collided with her forehead, sending her dashing up the side of the mountain. We all kind of laughed; the doe wasn’t really injured, just a little dizzy. We could hear her uneven hoof beats hobbling through the forest above. Rather abruptly, we came to an enormous desert. The lake’s greenish surface shimmered in the sunlight far off the left, and the desert expanded a long ways off to the right. Our destination could be hazily seen in the distance. I slurped some water out of my hydration pack; we had to drink at least a liter per hour, or we would potentially die. One obstacle stood between us and the desert. We were standing atop a high cliff with only one way down. When the lake dried up, a tree that was nearly 50 feet tall had washed up, leaning precariously against the cliff. The only way to descend was to shimmy down the tree and hope that you didn’t fall. I was always a little worried when I reached this part of the journey because only yesterday a friend of mine had fallen and broken his arm really badly while descending from the tree. I held my breath and grabbed the branch of the tree, slowly—ever so slowly—stepping onto the next branch.

“THAT’S WHAT SHE SAID!” Ian bellowed as we neared the towering cliff, which was on the other side of the desert from the tree. Our booming laughter echoed and shook some pebbles loose from the boulder, looming above, held to the cliff by a few inches of rock and some dirt. I gazed upward and set my hydration pack slowly on the ground. It was lightweight, perhaps too lightweight. I didn’t really care at the moment; I just wanted to get to the top. The rock was about half of the way up the cliff, and a rope extended to climb the rest of the way. To hide the dust and filth from the camp councilors to keep them from asking where we had been, I took my shirt off and laid it over my hydration pack to keep it cool. A steady breeze drifted down the cliff, lovingly named apocalyptic beach by campers, due to it being part of the lake at some point, is a cliff with an enormous boulder protruding from the side. We called the whole area “The Rock” and went there on a daily basis.

The loose dirt tumbled out from underneath my feet as I slid downward. I tried again, scrabbling for the rock above, grabbing at the rock ledge until my hands bled. I finally got ahold of it, but I had a cut across my right hand that burned from the heat and dirt in the wound. I wiped the crimson liquid off on the chalky slate wall and continued my ascent, finally reaching the boulder and pausing only to find the best footholds up the side of it. To my horror, I reached my hand into a velvet wasp nest instead of the ledge on the boulder side I had hoped for. Three of the reddish-brown spider-like insects crept out onto my skin. I held perfectly still as I knew that the sting of a velvet wasp was like being shot with a white hot bullet. I would surely fall if I was stung. Sweat dripping down my bare stomach, I felt a tingle in my throat, and my mouth burned to let the sneeze out. My eyes squinted up, my mouth curved into a sneezing smile, and, thus, my allergies were inevitable. My eyes shut. **Crap!! “Choo!”** I braced myself for the sting. After what seemed like a lifetime, I opened one of my eyes. The velvet wasp was gone.

I heaved myself up onto The Rock; Dillon was already up there, beckoning me to the edge with a chocolate covered granola bar. I carefully stood and hobbled over to the edge of the boulder, sitting down with my feet hanging over the cliff. I took the granola bar from Dillon and gazed downward at the crystal clear pool of water. This is going to sound strange, but it was a tradition of ours. I broke off a small piece of my granola bar and tossed...
it into the pool, a small sacrifice to whomever, or whatever, had left this magnificent oasis. Whenever we came back, the food was always gone. Hanging delicately 5 feet above us was an old, ratty torn and filthy black rope. It was hanging loosely from a root. In order to get to it, you had to take a leap of faith across the cliff face and grab the rope. If you missed, you’d land on the sharp, desert rocks below. Dillon jumped first and grabbed the rope, swinging himself up to safety. A crash sounded behind me. I whirled around to see Kole and Ian clambering over the face of the boulder. “Hurry Up!! Jump already!!” Ian shouted. I stepped back with little room to get a running start. I stepped forward and jumped as high and far as I possibly could, gathering all my strength into my legs. I flailed my arms helplessly in the air, hoping to grasp the rope. It was too late; my feet scraped the cliff side.

I felt my knees begin to buckle under me, my legs scraping against the bare rock. My entire left side began to lean toward the ground. Just as I gave up hope and began to let myself roll down the cliff, that filthy rope hit me square in the face, so I grabbed on as hard as I could. My knuckles white with fear, I swung over to the other side of the cliff, letting my feet slide against it. I finally got a foothold and began running across the steep rock face. Right as flat ground came into view, I let go of the rope and landed on my face on the pine needles.

My head began to throb as I trudged as I trudged up the hillside to Snake Mouth Cave. Unfortunately, the cave was blocked, but we knew a way to climb up the rock and slip into the front part of the cave. To do this, however, we have to climb up above it and lower ourselves in, and t. The cave is infested with copperheads—hence the name Snake Mouth Cave. It was an ongoing dare, 20 dollars to the first person to go all the way in. I was going to be the first one in today, but right as I took the first step into the cave, I was shot in the head.

Well, not really, but it seemed like it. My head felt like it was split in half with an ax. My tongue became dryer than the desert we had crossed to get there. My vision went red and blurry, my body limp. My head crashed against the slate wall, and my legs fell against the floor. I blacked out.

When I woke up, I was being dragged through the pine forest. I felt a sharp, shooting pain in my leg, so I looked down with what little strength I had. Ian cursed. I felt the warm blood running down my dust coated leg. He mumbled a “Sorry,” and trudged on. I blacked out again.

When I came to, I was lying on the boulder, unable to move. My blood dripped down my forehead onto my chin in rivulets. My eyes were encrusted in dust, and my body was numb. I could feel the sun beating down on my injured skin. I slowly lifted up my hands, and rubbed the dirt out of my eyes. I gazed around. The cliff towered above me, the rope dangling nearby. I shook awake with a jolt when I realized that I could only hear the tweeting of the birds in the forest far away and not the cackling of the laughter of the troupe of people I had arrived with. I sat up, laying back down quickly; my head hurt too much. I realized what had happened. God, how could I have been so stupid. I was dehydrated, and if the others had really left me alone, I was going to die. There was no way anyone could get to me in time. They would find me tomorrow, lying on the Rock, dead.

As I waited for my death, I heard a noise. It’s just a deer or something; they come out here to drink from the pool all the time. But the noise seemed to be traveling up the side of the cliff. I looked over at the rope, seeing it shaking back and forth. I almost gasped, but I tasted copper when I opened my mouth, so I shut it again. In the background, behind the rope, the sky was painted a royal purple in sunset. I was probably missing dinner. I wondered who was climbing up the rope and then felt myself slipping into unconsciousness again. Right as my vision slipped into black, I saw Kole climb the side of the Rock with two backpacks on his back: mine and his.

I opened my eyes to find myself hanging limply on Kole’s shoulder, my blood dripping off my forehead onto his shirt, staining it a hazy red. I murmured, “Wh...Wh...Where we going?” he dropped me on a nearby stone, and I realized we were crossing apocalyptic beach. He sat down across from me.

“If you ever leave camp again without water, I will personally kill you before dehydration even gets a chance.” He picked me back up and continued walking.

What seemed like hours later, he set me down once again on a log, telling me that I had to walk this part. I had a mixture of blood, sweat, and vomit on my chin, mostly blood. My stomach was in knots, and my head still felt like it was being crushed by a steamroller. I slowly, lifted myself onto wobbly legs. Ok, left foot...right foot...ok, this might actually work. Left foot...Ok, now right again. I was walking across the rocks almost with ease. I waited until I was walking on soft, peaty ground to collapse in exhaustion.

I woke once more to find that my ratty old sneakers had fallen off, but I could care less; I gazed over to see that Kole was carrying them, to my relief. He carried me and two completely stuffed backpacks and my filthy sneakers up the side of a mountain. Man, this kid really is my friend.

When I woke again, I felt the dirty gray boards of our military grade tents under my bare feet and felt water slowly trickling into my mouth. My hydration pack had been filled and was set to a steady drip into my mouth. My
head was cleared of the pain and was wrapped in an Ace bandage. The blood still soaked my clothing, but it was dry. I turned my head to the side and saw Kole sitting on his cot parallel to mine whittling. Without looking up he said, “You’re lucky I didn’t haul your sorry, broken face to the health lodge. They would have thrown you out of camp. I bandaged you up myself, and I haven’t told any leaders—yet.”

The next day, Kole and I were hiking back through the forest to get to apocalyptic beach to get my shirt. My backpack was heavy on my back, swelling with water. My head was still wrapped in bandages. I turned to him when we got to the Rock and said solemnly, “Thanks for yesterday, you know. I would be dead now without you.”

“Shut up, don’t talk about it. I did what I had to do; no need to thank me for it.”
"I know tomorrow I'll go by your house, but you won't be there."

He choked out the last part as we stand, leaning against a stone wall on Panzer Barracks, one of the four bases that comprised the Stuttgart military community. I touched a bit of rock crumbling off from years of wear. The base was built by the Germans in 1936 for their army before World War II, when the French occupied it. The Americans then took it over in 1952, and it doesn't appear to have changed much since. Even if it does change in the future, I won't know; it'll be like this to me forever, in my memory.

It's best to just pick up and go so there's no painful, drawn-out goodbye that made it seem like you're never going to see each other ever again, which was usually how it turns out.

"I'll always be here for you, and if you ever need me to fly out and kick anyone's ass for you, you know I will," he let out, trying to sound like he was joking because he knew I hated the mushy stuff. Dylan was a 5'6" bodybuilder with puppy-dog eyes and abandonment issues. We'd been dating for eight months, which was the longest relationship I've had with anyone.

Dylan smiled at my hand while I fiddled with the necklace he gave me to remember him by. It was half of a heart, very appropriate.

"I'm about to say something really cheesy," he warned. I was squinting at him as he took my hand away from my necklace and held it. He paused before taking out his half of the necklace. Seeing me cringe at the oncoming Hallmark moment, he said, "Woman, let me say this. Look, you know I'll always have this, and I'll wait for you as long as it takes."

"I know," I replied. He never cared if he showed affection to me that I didn't return. He knew I was not a fan of displays of affection, but he also knew the affection was mutual.

I smiled at him and trailed my hand to my left wrist, where I wore my black bracelet. I arbitrarily twirled the strung wooden blocks around my wrist so that all the Turkish symbols on it blurred in my mind. The bracelet was given to me by two great friends, Lexi and Leah. Lexi had always been my gal pal and partner in crime since we met before freshman year. Somewhere, that ridiculous, hilarious buxom brunette was wearing the identical one, along with Leah, our loving, religious goofball.

The three of us became close through our Health and Personal Nutrition class taught by our favorite teacher, Mr. Little, the aptly named gym teacher that could be seen in the hallways, a couple heads under most students, passing through saying, "What's up, Michael? Hey there, Grace. How's it going, ladies? Oh, ew. Guys, let's keep the PDA out of the hallway, thank you." He was like the cool, chipper uncle I wish I had.

He taught Health and Personal Nutrition, as well as regular gym and Sports Medicine, the class that all the health buffs were in or, like me, aspiring to be in. He was also the leader and sponsor of the Hinterbrand team, which I was a part of. We missed school for a week and went up to Hinterbrand Lodge, once owned by Hitler himself as a summer cabin before it was bought and rented out by the U.S. military. At this lodge, the team hiked and skied and snow shoed up and down mountains, eating nothing with sugar or preservatives in it, and having only the chipper Mr. Little to entertain us. During our long hikes up the mountain, we could always see his bear hat bobbing along in front of us, leaving us in his dust to follow the snowshoe tracks.

These were the last few people I let myself get particularly attached to. I considered them the best friends and people I've ever met, and some of the most accepting people I've known.

Sirens pierced the air as a Krankenwagen (German ambulance) drove by on the other side of the fence, bringing me back from my cloud of memories. I tore my gaze away from it and glanced around us at the cobblestone streets and high green fences, trying to embed them in my memory.

I was leaving the next morning at "oh-four-hundred hours, on the dot!" as my dad, the soon-to-be-retired Lieutenant Colonel would too often remind me.

A tear ran down my cheek as I toyed with Dylan's hand and looked across the street to see the avid woman who cut my hair at the PX (Post Exchange) waving at me. Her face slipped into a soft smile before turning and running straight into a stocky Sergeant Major. She scuttled out of his way and fluttered on down the sidewalk.

I'm even going to miss that mouse of a woman, I thought to myself, then sent out a silent message, stopping myself before muttering it over my bracelet like one would do with a rosary. Lexi, you know I'm going to miss you
most of all. You’re my best friend and the closest thing I have to a sister. Please understand that it’s just too hard to say goodbye.

*I love you, best friend.*

I grew up in military communities, where people were used to their friends moving or having to pick up their own lives to start somewhere new every few years. Military people tended to be very accepting of each other and were used to meeting new people every few months. This made everyone more open to each other because, if you didn’t make friends fast, it was a very lonely lifestyle. Ironically, I never felt lonely until I was away from the military world. When I moved, the civilian treatment I received was not what I expected.

My heart nervously fluttered in my chest as I sat in the counselor’s office, waiting for Mrs. What’s-her-name to stop typing and tell me how many more things I won’t be able to do here.

“I see you have a cappella choir as one of the choices you wrote down,” she drawled as she surveyed my color-coded copy of the classes offered. “And on your transcripts it does say that you were in advanced choir at your last school. That’s really too bad. You can’t be in a capella without an audition,” she said, giving me a sympathetic look over her paper stack.

“Oh, well, that’s fine,” I said, masking my disappointment. “When are auditions?”

“At the end of the year.” She turned to her computer. “I’ll just go ahead and put you in regular women’s choir.”

“Thanks.” I hesitated. “You wouldn’t happen to know when cheerleading tryouts are, would you?” She turned back to me with a sad look and, in a smaller voice, said, “At the end of the year.”

“Right.” I looked over at my mom, who was looking very interestedly at a string on her sweater. “Does this school offer Sports Medicine class?” I asked, with my last ounce of hope.

Mrs. What’s-her-name’s shoulders dropped, and she slumped a bit in her chair. “I’m sorry, sweetheart. I don’t think we do.” She finished typing up my schedule and printed it out.

As soon as the counselor left, my mom looked up to see me fighting back tears and said, “Now don’t get upset, Ilsie,” which only made me feel worse.

The counselor came back and handed me the freshly printed papers, saying with all her previous bubbly energy restored, “Welcome to Park Hill South…and Missouri…and America!” I unintentionally let out a sharp laugh that sounded more like a sob.

She looked stricken and bewildered as to what to do as my dad rushed me out of that imposing, block-like structure and into the car. I resolve that I could never be happy here, in this prison-like place that holds no understanding for me.

I moved away from people who loved me, only to be received as an outsider in an unfamiliar place. I put myself out there and was received as a friend by a few people but not in the same full, abrupt, and unconditional way military brats received their new friends. I was on the outside of their cliques and a stranger to most but still regarded as an acquaintance.

There was even one girl that, off the bat, hated me, because her ex-boyfriend took an interest in me that I didn’t even return.

I felt more confused and lonely than I’d ever felt in my life and cried every night for three straight months. Not knowing what to do, I called my brother, Gunnar, who had to move the summer before his own senior year of high school.

“Everyone hates their second high school, Ils. Just distract yourself from how much it hurts, and it’ll go by faster than you thought.” He almost whispered. He knew the feelings I was having. “Only two more years…It’ll be okay.”

He repeated this speech like a prayer every time I talked to him.

I picked up that mantra of his and repeated it to myself, changing it to fit certain events as time went on. Three months after moving, my dad still couldn’t find work in Kansas City after his retirement, so he had to take a ten month contractor job in Abu Dhabi. My mantra then changed to, “It’s only a year without Dad. It’ll be okay.”

When I was one of the few juniors without a license because I had moved from out of the country and wasn’t able to drive, I got my permit as fast as I could and repeated, “It’s only five more months and 40 driving hours. It’ll be okay.”

My brother was right, though; slowly, it did get better, but I still believed that no one should ever have to feel like they were all alone, which was why I tried to give everyone I met respect and tried to give them the benefit of the doubt, personality-wise. They could be a complete moron who, before getting to know you, decided to dislike
you for some reason they concocted in their head. On the other hand, they could be an absolute doll, then turn out to be your new best friend in no time. The thing was, I never knew until I got to know them.

I was sitting in our cozy living room, bundled in a blanket and watching a movie with my brother. His six-foot length was splayed out on our cramped couch. Gunnar looked at me from across the room. He was visiting for the holidays while his university was on break. He looked at me for a while, then abruptly said, “You look...older, maybe tired?”

I nodded in response.
He paused a beat to take a big breath. “Are you...okay here? I mean, are you happy?”

That made me feel all clenched up on the inside, in my stomach, and my throat. I hated that choked up, sad feeling. I fixed my gaze on the screen, watching Sylvester Stallone get the snot kicked out of him by Dolph Lundgren.

I chose my words carefully. “I’m exhausted, but...” I gestured at the screen. “I could be worse.”

He frowned and nodded, turning back to the movie.

I was probably not going to ever be as jubilant as I used to be. I used to be ecstatic practically all the time, but right then...was I happy? I didn’t think so.

My subconscious piped up. Well, what am I going to do then: be sad all the time? How will I ever make friends?

No, I’m probably not going to be that blissfully elated for a long time, but that doesn’t mean I can’t be happy at all. I’ll just be a different kind of happy. I’ll be the kind of happy that’s kind of sad, but has better things to do than sit around and be sad.

Yeah, I would be a different kind of happy...

I’ve seen so many people come and go through my life, and they were different in ways I can’t always describe. The two things that they all had, or strived for at least, was acceptance from someone. People wanted acceptance from anyone, really, so that they could have someone to call a friend. Friends were always there, no matter how far away, to make you happy.

I texted Lexi, “Three months in advance is the best time to buy airfare. We’ll just have to look in late March at how much it costs.” We were planning a trip for me to go back to Germany during the summer and visit everyone. I was really looking forward to that.

“—Hey, Susan, how do I jump?” I asked, replacing my phone for the xbox controller on the big, fluffy couch in the basement of her sizable, almost cliché, suburban house.

“Ahhhh, bananas!” Susan growled as her video game car slid around after running over some yellow animated blobs. This fierce redhead was getting into her warzone. “You don’t jump, Ilsa, you’re already dead...and soon, Garrison will be, too,” she chuckled maniacally as the goofy, dark-haired Garrison half-heartedly protested.

I looked around at the gaggle of teenage boys strewn about Susan’s basement, showing each other music videos, playing video games, or texting their moms to see if they can stay out later. I saw people who looked like they could be my brother, a military brat like me, a girl who valued my opinion, and all of them, as friendly and happy as they could be. I saw that, in this mash-up of differences, I fit right in, and they seemed to think so, too.

Companionship was a necessary human asset that everyone deserved to have, and I had the utmost respect for people who take that little step to include others, such as inviting that new kid to sit with them at lunch or striking up a conversation with the person who hangs at the edge of the room. I’ve learned that, though everyone is different, each person had their ups and downs. All you can do was handle them however you could, put yourself out there, accept others, and find somebody who accepted you for you. In the words of George Orwell, “Happiness can exist only in acceptance.”

In congruence with these words, I believed I had found a place where I could feel happy again.
I clenched my fists with anger, which made them a fleshy purple color.

“If you won’t let me go, I guess I’ll just have to go myself! I plan to go off to college next year, and you can’t keep babying me like this!” I yelled with a loud stomp of the foot. A rhinestone clanked to the floor from my Coach flip flops.

My mom, Margret, replied as tears built up in her crystal blue eyes, “Jacki, if you leave the country, you could be put in danger, especially when you’re a teenage girl walking the streets alone.”

“Well, I guess you’ll find out how dangerous Venice really is in two months, when I come back home,” I slammed the front door behind me.

I drove into the cotton candy colored sky in my hot pink, Barbie Volkswagen Beatle. I smiled at the fact that the start of my luxurious trip to Venice, Italy, was only twenty-seven miles away. I had been planned this trip for over three months, without my mother knowing. We’ve had trouble getting along, so I often kept things from her.

I arrived at the terminal of the airport in Beverly Hills. I struggled to push along my Jessica Simpson suitcase; it must have weighed over seventy-five pounds! I placed my Guess sunglasses over the top of my perfect golden blonde hair to reveal a sign that read, Flight to Italy. “This is it!” I whispered to myself.

Two hours later a voice on the intercom said, “Flight to Venice, Italy, boarding. Flight to Venice, boarding.” I did a quick dance of excitement before I got on the plane; 24B was my seat number. Just my luck, I said to myself with an eye roll. A large sweaty man had taken the seat next to mine.

I slept the whole twelve to fourteen hours to Italy.

“Hey little lady,” a deep voice said as something sweaty nudged me. “Time to go.” I looked around and rubbed my eyes when reality caught up to me. Popping up, I ran to the door that released the passengers.

“Finally!” I shouted with fists of victory in the air.

Later, I checked into my hotel, got washed up, and headed to the tour center to get placed in groups for tours and stuff.

“Hello, my name is Lisa, and I will be your tour guide this week! Let’s get a quick head count, Ava Germany? Brittany Hamish? Charles Northbrook?” A few other names were called, but I didn’t pay much attention, “Jacki Crawford?”

“Oh yep, that’s me!” I called out.

“Alrighty folks, we better get on the move!” Our bubbly tour guide shouted with enthusiasm, “To the museum!”

My tour group trudged up to a majestic building that was set up on the tip top of a hill. Barging through the double doors, the large white and gold atmosphere of the museum greeted us. Large statues of famous beings sat on pedestals before we walked into a room with blinding lights and paintings plastered messily on the walls.

“This one is my favorite! It’s a masterpiece of the famous Vincent Van Gogh,” Lisa’s eyes twinkled at the sight. “Boring,” I snickered and walked the other direction. A small pink, splattered painting was set before my eyes.

I giggled slightly; I could totally see this in my room!

“Hey, Mister!” I said to a man in a black bow tie. “How much for the painting?”

“It is ah...not for sale,” he replied.

I glared at the man, which probably scared the daylights out of him. I dawdled for a little while, an hour at most when something snuck into my mind: where’s my group? I whipped my blonde hair almost give myself whiplash, desperate for Lisa the tour guide’s face. I froze for a second before sprinting out the door into the warm sun. I looked down on the city and played a game of I-Spy with the group. My eyes shifted from left to right when I finally spotted them,

“Ah ha! There they are!” I scrambled down the stairs in my red leather Prada pumps. They were getting on a lengthy, two story bus. I was only but one hundred meters away when the last passenger got on, “No! Wait for me! I’m with them!” My voice must have meant nothing because the bus pulled forward and was on its way.

A few hours later, I found a cozy hotel downtown by a few cute shops. I threw myself a pity party after I got settled. After a couple minutes of pouting, I wiped my tears and thought of a new plan. “When in doubt, shop,” is
the motto I go by in my life. So I grabbed my purse and headed to the so-called “mall” down the street. While I darted out the door, something small and white fluttered out of my purse.

“Eh I’ll get it later,” I thought.

Boutiques were lined up in a neat little row. Above the entrance of the stores were names of designers including, Louis Vuitton, Coco Chanel, and many more that were unfamiliar to me. Hours of shopping had relieved my stress, and it felt like weights were lifted from my shoulders.

When I got to my hotel, I set down my shopping bags and considered what I was going to do the next day.

“Alright, I can just find a tour guide.” I compromised with myself, “Yeah! That’ll work!”

That morning, I shuffled around my room preparing for a new day. I got myself ready in fifty minutes, which is a record for me. While crossing to the door, I tripped, sending myself flying forward. Grabbing a cup of coffee, I headed out the door towards town, this time with no delay. Glancing at my pink bedazzled watch that read 7:03 A.M., I searched for any sign of a tour guide. A tall skinny man with striking green eyes was dressed in the right attire for the job.

“Hello! I wondered if you could help me, I kinda lost my tour group.” I could already see “desperate” written on my forehead.

“Ciao, posso aiutarti con qualcosa?” I looked at him with confusion.

“Um… I don’t speak French, Italian or Spanish, or whatever language you’re speaking.” I used hand gestures to explain my words, assuming he didn’t know English.

“Oh, non parlano italiano?” The man asked.

Okay, italiano sounds a lot like Italian, so that must be what he’s talking about, but I don’t speak Italian.

“Okay I give up,” I threw my hands to my side and walked away as my teeth gritted with anger.

“Dove stai andando? Sono felice di aver potuto aiutare!” The man shouted with a smile and a simple wave. I replied with a roll of the eye.

I sat myself down on a worn out park bench along with my Louis Vuitton purse. Kleenex’s were scattered around the bench with blotches of little mascara stains. I was a hot mess. Sobbing became a routine as I sat there. Maybe Mom was right. Maybe I was too young to travel across the country all by myself. I dabbed my tear filled eyes once more before dusting myself off and moving on. I tried to hide my face when I journeyed back to the hotel; I didn’t want anybody to see me in this condition.

Opening the doors to the hotel, I felt empty inside or like I was missing something, but I just pushed the feeling aside.

As I lay bundled up in a ball on the warm bed, I determined whether I should call Mom or not. Guilt showered over me with the thought of the way I treated her before I left. I should probably call her and tell her how I’m doing, tell her that I’m sorry and love her. Or maybe, I should go home. I had an open-ended ticket anyways, so why not? First I had to find my purse that had my iPhone tucked in a small pocket so I could call my mom to apologize and tell her I’ll be there in a day or so.

“Where are you?” Frustrated, I threw everything I could find to the wall, in hope to find my bag. Then I froze, “O.M.G. I can’t believe I’m so dumb!” I shouted realizing what I had done. A flashback of an earlier time played through my mind. I didn’t even grab my bag before I dusted myself off from the park bench and went to the hotel!

Maybe it’s still there! I rolled out of bed and clumsily sprinted out to the lobby. The sky had turned a dark blue color, and I started to wonder if I should just leave the search to the morning. There could be muggers that wandered the streets at night! I had a feeling that taking this risk was worth that $400 purse.

As I drew nearer to the park bench, it became crystal clear that someone had either turned in my purse or stole it. Because I’m a glass half empty kind of person, my thoughts were targeted towards someone stealing my purse.

“Could this day get any worse? My phone is in that purse, my wallet is in that purse, and most importantly, my ticket is in that purse!” I screamed a little louder than necessary. All my plans were outdated by now, and I had no idea of what to do. “I might as well just stay here in Italy forever!”

I sat on that old rickety bench for a while, as I tried to plant new plans in my mind. Some included pretending to be a homeless person begging for money of the streets, but that wouldn’t work because I refused to wear those kinds of clothes. Another idea was to find a college to go to here, but I had no money. I searched for a store that maybe provided a phone I could use, but there was no hope. In the distance I saw a man with a thick Italian accent speaking into a payphone. This was the answer to my prayers! I ran over to him probably looking like an idiot.
He hung up the phone, “Sir, please could I use one of your quarters, I'm lost, alone, and don't have any money. I should probably call my mom,” I looked at him with puppy dog eyes I used on my dad to get my car. I hope he was a nice man and not a psychopath. He simply dropped a quarter in my hand and walked away. Easy enough, I dialed my home phone number into the dial pad. “Pick up, pick up!” I was known for being impatient. “I'm sorry the number you have dialed is no longer available, please try again,” a robotic voice said. My face fell. Venice was my new home I guess. Too shocked to cry, I drug my feet back to the hotel. When I reached my room, I collapsed on the ground and had an emotional break-down. “What-am I-gonna do?” I managed to get out between sobs. I threw my head to the floor when I felt something stick to my head. I peeled it off, to reveal a small white piece of paper. I couldn't believe my eyes. I let out a few tears but this time they were caused by happiness “Mama, I'm comin' home!” I shouted as I kissed the plane ticket.

The next morning, I gathered all of my belongings and stuffed them in my suitcase. I couldn't wait to get home and tell my mom how sorry I was and what a terrible trip I had. Click! My rental car's doors unlocked. The second I pulled into the parking lot of the airport, I was off. Nothing was going to stop me now. The next thing I knew, I was boarding the plane and back in my town of Beverly Hills.

I felt so relieved to see my Barbie car parked in the airport’s parking lot. I was just twenty-seven miles away from home! I tapped my fingers and sung to songs on my favorite radio station, 94.1, to pass the time. I pounced in my chair like a crazy child when the sign to my neighborhood greeted me. I never knew I could get so excited over seeing the entrance to my neighborhood.

“Hey Mom! I’m home!” I peeked through the door then jumped inside, “Mom? You there?” I opened the door to her bedroom and saw it was empty. I checked the whole house and found no clue of Mom. I bet she just went to the store or something, I thought, opening the door to the garage, but her red Toyota was sitting right there. I tried not to freak out. The answering machine was blinking, alerting me to check the messages.

I pressed the big red button on the machine to see who called and what they wanted, “Hey Margret, it’s Lena. I hope you are feeling better, and your therapy is going well.” What was this lady talking about? “I know cancer can be tough. Well if you need anything, just say the word, and I'm there. Hope you get well soon!” My stomach began to churn, and the room started to spin.

My mother has cancer? Just the thought of it made me want to puke. I should've seen this coming. She was going to the doctor constantly right before I left.

“No more time to think. I have to get to the hospital.” I drove like a maniac as I tried to fight tears from rolling down my face. The drive was the longest five minutes of my life. When I finally reached the tall building of a hospital, I ran to the assistant that was signing people in. “Um… I need to see Margret Crawford, like right now, I'm her daughter,” I said a million miles fast. “Oh darling, slow down, and you can go down this hallway, third door to your left,” The women said as she tapped her clipboard with a purple pen.

I didn't reply; I just ran towards it and then slowed down when I encountered the door, as I prepared myself on what to say to my mom. I gently opened the door handle and saw my mom. I choked up when I saw her, “Hey Mom.” I ran to her side and cried on her shoulder. “Look Mom, I am so sorry! You were 100% right, and I feel really bad about the way I treated you. I had such a terrible time on my trip, and I was thinking about you the whole time!”

“Honey, it's fine. I knew you would be back earlier as planned anyways because I knew you couldn’t stay away from your Mama for that long.” Mom and I exchanged smiles as she gave me a soft kiss on the forehead.

“I love you, Mom, and I have a feeling this relationship between us is going to change real soon from this day forward.”
Felix Evans
The Green Apple Jolly Rancher: A Personal Tragedy
Clayton High School

Kids like candy. It's a fact of life; it's part of nature. Some kids like it more than others. I am one of those. As a child, I couldn't resist some M&M's, Skittles, Reese's, lollipops; I would gladly devour anything remotely sugary. But, I rarely got candy at home because my mother was a stickler for healthy eating, so I enjoyed the forbidden luxury to the fullest when I could.

In first grade I discovered Jolly Ranchers. The delicious, fruity, sticky, hard candies were my favorite kind, and I didn't even mind the cuts they left on my tongue and the roof of my mouth when I ate too many. They were so fragrant, I could smell them being eaten from a mile away, which gave their possessor power.

One day, not long after I first discovered this wonderful candy, I went to the Science Center with my mom, my friend, and her mom. We had spent the day in the fun, albeit unsanitary, environment. As we were leaving, right before the exit, I noticed a sparkle of color on a vent, a glimmer of green. I squatted down, and in doing so activated the flashing colorful lights of my light-up Barbie Princess Reeboks. I tucked a strand of hair from my short brown bob behind my ear. Stuck to one of the bars of the vent, looking delicious and tantalizing, was a green apple Jolly Rancher, my favorite flavor! Dust and grime had collected on the vent, forming a film over the candy, but it still shone bright green. It was unwrapped, but it still looked pretty sizeable, probably only sucked on for a couple minutes before being rejected by the previous owner. The sugary, saliva-y syrup on the outside of the candy had melted off and formed a little puddle, and then hardened, gluing the candy to the vent and making it look even more delectable. With a bit of a struggle and leaving a little green circle on the vent, I popped it off and stuck it in my mouth. For a second, I tasted the linty, grimy exterior collected from the floor, but I still didn't want to spit it out because candy was still a rare treat, so I just ignored the gross bit, and soon the green apple flavor took over. My mother turned around, her shoulder-length black hair swishing across her back. Instinct told me that I'd better not let her know I had candy. Alas, I had forgotten how far the smell of a Jolly Rancher can travel, the scent stirred up mere seconds after I had started to suck on it.

"It smells like apples. Felix, do you have candy in your mouth?" my mother asked. She loomed over me. Her expression was neutral, but her eyes slightly narrowed. My friend and her mom turned to look at me.

"No," I said, but I knew my lie was futile. With one stern look from her, I reluctantly opened my mouth and showed the candy. I was caught!

"Where did you get that?" she demanded.

"I found it on the ground," I whined, defensive and embarrassed. A part of me still wanted to eat it, and I thought that there was little she could do to make me spit it out, other than reaching into my mouth and pulling it out. But she had other plans.

"That is disgusting, Felix Anna! Whoever was eating it before you could have picked their nose and touched it! Maybe they let their dog lick it! Maybe it was in their butt and then put it on the ground!" All three possibilities were reinforced by the memory of the initial gritty, dusty flavor, and I spat it out onto the sidewalk. My friend and her mom both found the whole situation hilarious. My mother shook her head in disgust and shame, smoothed out her nice blouse, and took me straight home.

I was sick for days following. In my mind, after what my mom had said, there was a link to my sickness and the candy, which taught me my lesson; the horrible post-vomit feeling of stomach-convulsing, exhausted, shaky weakness is enough for any child to change her behavior. In retrospect, it may have been the fact that I went the whole day without washing my hands in the cesspool of germs and bacteria that is the Science Center. Whatever the cause, to this day I can't eat a green apple Jolly Rancher without feeling queasy.
Steven stood in his classroom on the first day of the school year, sipping a cup of coffee. He liked this classroom. It was sunny, with a wall of windows opening onto a pretty courtyard. Steven had plans for this courtyard. On the grass by the climbing roses, he would read Tennyson to his freshmen; on the white benches, he would lecture on Fitzgerald. High school English classes did not ask you to immerse yourself in the works of a particular author or even a school of authors but rather led you zigzagging across centuries and continents, driven by the exuberant sensation of wanting to read everything at once. Steven couldn’t wait to start.

Behind him the door opened, and he turned eagerly, thinking his students arrived. But it was only his friend Charles, a grizzled history teacher whom he had met while working as a teaching assistant.

The two of them stood for a moment, sipping their coffee in silence. Then Charles spoke.

“You know,” he said, “I remember my first day as a teacher.”

“You?” Steven asked. “What was it like?”

Charles chuckled drily. “It was…interesting.” Steven waited. “I was so excited,” Charles went on. “I was going to give my students this sense of the whole sweep of humanity’s history and their place in its future. I thought that when we studied Waterloo or Elizabethan culture they were going to see the interactions of great cosmic forces, like I did. I thought they were going to love it.”

“What happened?”

Charles shrugged. “Real life happened, I guess. The kids slept in class. They were bored. They made fun of everything and didn’t listen, didn’t care. Then when I tried to fail them, I had to deal with their parents who were just older versions of them. It was tough that first year, but I grew used to it.”

Steven was playing uncomfortably with his tie. Charles observed this and put a hand on his shoulder.

“Look, I’m not trying to worry you,” he said. “Maybe this was a bad time to bring all this up. But watching you with this glow of hope on your face…well, I remember feeling like that. I didn’t want you to be too disappointed.”

“It’s a job,” Charles said. “It’s what I was trained to do, and I don’t mind it. Sometimes it’s even fun. But remember—it’s just a job. Don’t expect to change the world any more than you would from an office cubicle.” He glanced at his watch. “Well, we have ten minutes until the kids start to arrive. Guess I’d better head back to my room. See you at lunch.”

When Charles was gone Steven sat at one of the student desks and pressed his face into his hands. What his friend had said wasn’t a surprise—he had done his time as a teaching assistant and knew what high school classrooms were like. Still, he thought that he had a chance to change people.

Thirteen years before he’d been a freshman in high school, and everything seemed to be going wrong. His best friend from middle school had gotten popular and stopped talking to him. He had no idea what was going on in his math class. Swim practice consumed every afternoon, and he seemed barely able to make it through workouts that everyone else finished with ease. He would lie in bed at night, sore in every limb and still smelling of chlorine, and imagine his life as one endless series of tests he was doomed to fail. Why even try? Why bother, when I know I can’t do anything right?

The exception was English class. His teacher, Mrs. Benson, was an old lady who wore fuzzy sweaters and graded with purple ink. She liked to begin each class period by reading a poem aloud to her students. This was Steven’s first encounter with real poetry, and he was enthralled. He listened as her weak little voice strengthened with the words of Whitman and Frost and Tennyson. “Forward, the light brigade! Charge for the guns!” she had cried, and Steven felt as fearless as all six hundred noble horsemen surging forward in the face of death.

Better still, no tests were held in Mrs. Benson’s class; only essays. She taught Steven to channel his love of words into careful, reasoned argument. “In this class, you are always right—if you can prove it,” she would say. Under the guidance of her purple pens he had learned how to prove it, how to take literature apart and put it back together again, how to read each word in the context of grand themes. Once he raised his hand to ask about a poem: “Mrs. Benson, did they really choose every single word on purpose?”

Mrs. Benson smiled. “I think they did,” she said. “I think they handpicked every word.”
Steven would later describe this discovery as a thrilling affirmation of human creativity. At the time, though, he responded: “Cool.”

One afternoon Mrs. Benson asked him to stay after school to discuss his most recent essay. Steven was a little nervous. Could he have done something wrong? He had written about a short story, and he didn't think he was completely off the mark. He fidgeted at his desk.

Mrs. Benson sat down beside him. “Don't be nervous, Steven,” she said. “I just want to have a little chat.” He forced himself to stop fidgeting. “All I wanted to say was that you've got a gift for writing, and I can tell you love talking and thinking about books. I always look forward to hearing your ideas when you raise your hand in class. You have this unique perspective—it's really unusual. I was wondering if you had ever thought about being an English teacher someday.”

Steven shook his head. “No,” he said. “I could never do what you do. I'm not good enough.”

“I think you are,” she replied. “Just know that I would love to be the student of a teacher like you.”

Steven gazed at her in awe. The woman he respected more than anyone else on earth felt that she could learn from him. She thought he could bring light into students' lives. What did math tests and swim practices matter? He had a new purpose, a new hope.

Steven opened his eyes and remembered where he was. The sun was shining now—not into an empty classroom, but upon the faces of the freshmen who were filing in. Steven rose and surveyed them. Some looked tired, some happy, some giggled in groups, and some sat alone. They each had their own sorrows and their own hopes.

The bell rang, and Steven stepped forward with a smile.
The stars blink at me through dense, green leaves.

My feet are steady, and my body moves without conscious thought.

Sap runs over my fingers, cool, sticky.

The crickets chirp softly in the bushes far back behind me.

Silent as the night, I ascend, making sure to stay away from the nest and the small, blue eggs it contains.

I reach the top and perch there, a bird ready to take flight.

The moon reflects upon silent water, and mountains loom, tall and proud, behind me.

There is nowhere more peaceful. Nowhere more beautiful. No one happier than me.

At the top of my tree.
“Emma, we know you have feelings for her,” admits my best friend.

My heart stops in my chest, caught off guard by the comment. I stop breathing and my heart starts pounding again—this time faster, like I’m trying to run away and escape my secret. A secret that could be the cause of heartache and disownment in my life. A teardrop falls onto the bed, full of secrets and lies.

“Emma, are you lesbian?”

3 Months Earlier

She walks into the room. My heart skips a beat and starts pounding in my chest. My breath catches in my throat, and my body turns to stone. My eyes watch her every move, not caring about anything else in the world. Not if a deadly meteor came plummeting to earth, if the principal barged in and yelled that the world was going to explode in 5 seconds or if one of the boys in class suddenly gave birth to a cat. Nothing in the world mattered to me anymore except for this beautiful angel. My heart now beats for her.

“Emma?” questions the girl sitting next to me. Her eyes evaluate me, trying to see what’s going on.

Stunned I force myself to tear my eyes away from the angel. Looking to my right I notice that it was my friend.

“Sorry,” I mutter, “you were saying?” She continues her conversation, oblivious to the fact that my attention was somewhere else, on the beauty sitting in the corner.

The rest of the hour passes in a blur. I wish that I had more time to gaze at her. Just listening to her arouses a spark in me that had never been there before. With each passing second I fall more and more in love with this stranger.

The bell rings, and a rush of anger ignites in me. I wanted to see her again. I take my time leaving so I can spend more time with her. Our eyes meet, and she smiles at me, saying in her sweet voice “Hello.” I simply nod and half smile, cursing myself as I walk away for not starting a conversation when I had the chance.

At dinner my parents ask my brother and I how our first day was. Of course, I say it was great and talk about my teachers. The ones that I do and don’t like. I never mention her.

As I lie in bed that night, all I can think about is her. The way her eyes looked in the light as they shone, so deep and dark. How she walked as she strode into the room fully confident. The sound of her voice in my head, a song that never goes away. Thinking about her made my blood rush. I had never felt this way before about anybody, never dreaming it would be someone of the same gender.

A lesbian. Surely I couldn’t be? But maybe I was. Never once in my life had I been attracted or had feelings for a boy. I think about how my family and friends would feel if they knew that I was thinking. A shudder runs though me. I never want to know the outcome of that story. Closing my eyes I fall asleep thinking about her.

2 weeks later

Silently I take my seat, happy that my friend had left and I wouldn’t have to answer her questions as to why I was always looking at the corner. I could now watch her peacefully without any questions. She strode into the room like a queen, and I worried that my heart would leap out of my chest.

So far we had carried on two conversations in which we discussed school and what we did over the summer. I was feeling very proud of myself even though most of my classmates had talked to her more. Every morning I prayed that she noticed me, for every waking second of my life I was thinking about her.

1 month later

Bursting with excitement I hop off the bus, my heart doing summersaults, sending energy and excitement leaping through my body. I could fly to the moon. I dash into my house, press the power button on my stereo, and turn it up as high as it would go. Katy Perry’s “I Kissed a Girl” echoed throughout the house as I twirled around in circles. No, I didn’t kiss a girl, but it felt like I had.

She had told me that she loved my story. She loved the characters and how the two people fell in love. I almost died when she told me as we walked down the hallway together. We were kind of like friends except for the fact that I was totally in love with her. I was getting braver talking to her, but still every time I saw her happiness erupted from my heart like a volcano. I was so in love with her that I couldn’t think straight.
Noticing my strange behavior, my best friend had started watching me more closely and asking more questions about my day. Of course my parents didn't notice anything since they didn't spend all day with me. Yet as I spun around my room bursting with joy little did I know that this love would soon turn into a curse.

1 month later.

Staring at the shiny silver sharp blade a haunting idea comes creeping into my head. I want to see my blood. I want to see thick dark red blood run down my pale white wrist. To feel pain like never before. To be in control of at least one thing in my life. I had never asked or wanted to fall in love, yet I had. The word freak rang through my head like they were egging me on to make the cut. A teardrop splatters on the kitchen counter as the sound of a car engine roars up my driveway.

Frantically wiping away the tears, I slam my bedroom door behind me and climb into bed. Burrowing my face in my pillow, I let the tears come.

Why was this happening to me? Had I done something wrong, and now God was punishing me? Was there something wrong with me? There was no possible answer except that I was a freak.

“Emma?” calls my mom from downstairs. “Where are you? I'm home, sweetie!”

Quickly I wipe my face and pray that my mom doesn't see how watery, swollen, and red my eyes are.

“I'm in my room, Mom! Just taking a nap! I'll be out in a few minutes!” I croak, my voice hoarse.

The scuffling of my mom in the kitchen assures me that she won't be coming into my room anytime soon. She turns on the radio, and Katy Perry's “I Kissed a Girl” begins to play. My heart aches like it had been broken in two and would never heal. I love her, yet I hate myself for loving her. She doesn't suspect anything, probably never would, would never know that the shy, awkward girl sitting rows away from her was hopelessly in love with her.

2 weeks later.

Looking into the eyes of my two best friends, I'm speechless. I had a feeling that this confrontation was coming. I could keep secrets from my family but not my friends. To them I was a walking book. There's only one choice I can make, so while I sat on the bed in my best friend's house, I told my two best friends my deadliest secret.

Last day of school.

I had made it. I had survived the year, but I wasn't leaving without bruises and scars on my heart. Even my friends had a few scratches and scars. I had expected them to abandon me and never want to talk to me again, but they had been my saviors during the hardest part of my life.

As we stand at the end of the hallway, relief and excitement fill my heart at the thought of finally being free of her for three months. Scanning my eyes around the hallway it doesn't take me long to notice her. I could spot her face in any crowd. Slowly I start to make my way to her, a sudden urge telling me to say those three words.

I never make it. The last bell of the day blares from the speakers. My heart falls in my chest, and I walk away to my bus. Summer had officially started.

7 months later.

Laughing down the hallway, Brooke shoves me into Cody. Tears stream down our faces, and we can't breathe. Mr. Cogdill follows us. “Get to class ladies,” he says in his annoying nasal voice.

We suck in a breath of air and keep walking. Finally he turns the corner, and we're free, but before we're able to smile, I see her striding down the hallway. I stop in my tracks.

My heart which had been sewn back together over the worst summer of my life had torn itself back apart just by one look at her. A buzzing spark of sensation rushes throughout my body.

“Hey!” her sweet voice rings in my ears, chasing away all my sanity. Looking into her eyes my heart melts in my chest. I can't breathe or move my body.

As she walks away my best friend grabs me by the arm and leads me into the classroom. I never say anything, and we sit in silence for the rest of the hour. In my mind I repeat to myself the reason why we could never be.

She was my teacher.
And I thought...

I thought to myself, alone, in a vat of emptiness.
I thought to myself, as my presence hovered,
“What a dark nothingness is there.”
I thought to myself, alone, in a deep pit of hollowness.
I thought to myself, as my presence lingered,
“This space should not be bare.”
And I thought aloud,
“A painting, or portrait perhaps to fill such void?”
And I spoke, aloud,
“O! A living image with purpose to employ!”
And I thought to myself, this purpose, I shall call it life,
But life can’t exist here, in a void with no hope, or sight.
“Light, come forth, so I can see!”
And I thought to myself,
“This is good; I shall call light to be day!
So now that light is here, I shall call the dark and name it night,
And I will form a mass of land, call it earth!
Where there shall be a separation of waters and that shall be the seas.”
But the earth was very empty still, so I began to fill it
And told the earth, “Fret not, for I shall decorate you with trees,
And these trees shall produce fruit and flowers and savory sweet myrrh.”
To occupy the space, I made creatures to tread about the land
And formed these creatures with eyes, a mouth, and nostrils so they could breathe,
With legs to walk, and unique colors of eyes and skin and fur.
But, the perfect creation was yet to be made, the perfect reflection of me.
The perfect creation to have dominion and rule over the earth, along my side.
The perfect creation from my soul, my body, and spirit as a whole.
I traced myself; from the dust I gathered and kneaded diligently in my palms.
“He’s beautiful,” I said, as I took a piece of my heart and placed it in his chest.
To his nostrils, I breathed life, and his heart began to beat like a birds wings.
His eyes flew open, and my heart swelled, as his innocent eyes bounced around.
I spoke to him “You are my life, and I shall call you Adam!”
With this new creation of man, I was well-fulfilled, like a fine wine overflowing,
And I spoke to Adam,
“And you have been given dominion over the land and seas and all that abide there.”
Though Adam had just arrived, I grew tired, and on the seventh day I rested
With completion in my heart and a warm glow in my breast.
I rested knowing my world was in motion, with all creations at their best.
While I rested, I never left Adam but abided in the heavens not far from him.
I watched as he frolicked with the sheep, and sang with the birds in the meadow.
To my heart’s content, I loved my creations and love them to this day
And continue to watch and speak to all those who have ears turned.
**Molly Harris**  
Writing Portfolio  
Fort Zumwalt West High School

**Writer’s Note:**
I've always felt that a work should stand on its own. Deconstructionism and all that. I do write completely for myself, starting on a blank page and running with an idea. I write to please myself, to release what I've been feeling, to understand myself better. I write because it is as essential as the water that I'm composed of. I write to impress the people I care about like my English teachers and my writing workshop. However, once I'm finished, it ceases to be mine. I want people to feel moved by it, to relate to my work, to realize that they are not alone. I want them to understand themselves and others a little bit better, to experience something new. I want to incite a reaction. I write for myself, selfishly, but I give it away. These are the pieces that I'm giving away, the pieces that I feel best represent who I am and that incite the most emotion within the readers. Thank you for delving into the pages. I hope you enjoy what you may find.

don't listen

the skies  
don't listen to us  
the seas  
don't listen to us  
not anymore  
i'm not sure that they ever did,  
i think  
as i'm stirring the sugars into my tea,  
biting my lips to keep from having the heavy, black font (impact)  
come flying from my mouth,  
stirring with the sugars and the creamers and blurring  
the amber of my drink  
[I'm scared.

I want you to hear me.]  
we don't need the skies  
(i think)  
if we can grasp the words right

the woods

can i fall asleep and  
not wake in the morn?  
the birds can sing all they  
want, but i will not  
answer; the sun can shine for all i  
care, just don't let it  
shine on me

i'm a nocturnal, woodland creature  
caught up in the tangles of thorns (when all  
i really want is to be tangled up  
in your legs)

a bear will get me by morning
People often ask me why I run cross country in the first place, why I bother to torture myself with hot days and early mornings, when all I do is complain about it. Without an easy answer, I usually jokingly explain myself, “When the zombie apocalypse comes, I’ll be ready.” Cross country was borderline unbearable the first year, so why did I still bear sleepless nights and early mornings to labor out in the sun?

I kicked open the door outside the locker room, unknowingly setting off a new elemental battle. With the final barrier eliminated, the forces of nature could once again attack the exposed indoors, with me caught in the middle. A blast of blinding light and a tornado of humid air clashed against the chill of the dim hallway, burning everything in its way. Tears rushed to extinguish the fire in my eyes as the thick air clung to the front of my face. I quickly saluted the ground and escaped the battlefield, leaving the refreshing indoor air to duel on its own but also leaving me unprotected from the wrath of the sun. The only desire that remained was to run back to my air conditioned benefactor and call it a day. With reluctance, I shuffled my way over towards the track.

The team huddled around the black trash as usual, deeming that the shade from the towering oak tree was well worth the stench of the week-old burgers. The buzz of the flies was masked by the friendly chatter as we waited for the rest of the stragglers still in the locker room to hurry up. As I scanned the crowd of familiar faces, I noticed Minki with his usual sarcastic grin on his face.

“Hey, guess what?” he asks me, still smiling, “I heard we have repeat miles for practice today!”

“Repeat miles?” I reply, shocked, “For real? It’s only the second week of practice!”

“Yeah, it’s gonna suck so bad,” he responded, along with classic ‘kill me now’ gesture that emphasized his point.

A wave of dread washed over me. I did not want the day to continue. I wanted to be back in class, learning about the confusing history of China or even the tedious applications of the subjunctive in Spanish, anything in place of this torture! Beads of sweat formed all over my body, although I wasn’t sure whether it was from the clammy heat or the daunting task ahead of me. Soon enough, Coach looked at his watch and gave the go ahead command to start the warm up. Abandoning those still in the locker room and without any hesitation, the team started to run. And so it began.

My feet attached themselves to the ground, resisting every motion I made and dragging me down with every step. Instead of running with Minki as usual, I ran with a friend who was much slower than I was and watched as the distance between my familiar position in front of the pack and me grow and grow, until the pack disappeared over the crest of the grassy hill. With every moment in the beating heat, the sun sapped my youthful energy. Each step I took seemed to age me years at a time. The forest trail offered a false hope, as beams of light pierced through the gaps in the foliage, and the trees served to obstruct the little breeze. The heavy curtains of air made my head spin, and tiny bugs found their way into my mouth, creating the perfect one-two punch of misery. My animosity towards the ball of fire in the sky grew as I rounded the corner out of the woods down a grassy hill and made my way back to the track.

With an inward sigh of relief, I slowed to halt a couple of feet from the water cooler. I sorted through the mishmash of backpacks and shirts to find my displaced water bottle and took a much needed sip. The crisp, cool water revived my shriveled tongue and washed away my cranky mood. However, my holiday did not last long. Coach informed us of our workout for the day, which was promptly answered with a choir of groans from the whole team. Minki was right. The day was just destined to be terrible. A flash of irritation appeared on Coach’s face, but he just paused for the groans to end.

I positioned myself in my usual place near the front of the group and pushed off of the starting line at Coach’s yell. The team drifted apart as the faster runners pulled ahead, leaving me with my usual pack with Minki and Eric near the front. Eric set the pace for the first lap. With every breath came a new outburst of sweat that seemed to make a beeline straight for my eyes. We rounded the final curve on the lap, and I squinted down to see Coach scowl at his stopwatch as if it offended him. With a deafening howl, he commanded us to pick up the pace. I silently cursed at Coach. We were already running insanely fast; how could he want us to run faster? My pack immediately extended their strides down the straightaway like their lives depended on it, but I struggled to keep up with their acceleration. The biting pain that developed under my bottom rib convinced me the effort wasn’t
worth it, and I allowed myself to fall two steps behind my pack. As long as I was within 25 meters of my pack I would be fine. Coach would understand, it's an extremely hot day and the workout is really difficult. With that thought in mind, I allowed the gap between me and my pack grow until I could no longer hear Eric's heavy breathing or the light pat of Minki's shoe on the rubber track. Even though Coach saw my lack of effort, he didn't say a word.

The week went by, and the sun kept trying to turn the ground into a barren desert. As the days got increasingly unbearable, my motivation drowned in my sweat. Finally, after the warm up before the first cross country meet, Coach called my name. I turned away from the water cooler to see him stand away from the team on a small incline of dirt with a strangely disappointed look on his face, motioning for me to come towards his direction. This couldn't be good. What did he want? Was I in trouble? I walked over to Coach, water bottle still in hand.

"Stephen..." he started slowly, as if searching for the right words to say. "What are your goals for this season?"

Goals? I was confused. Shouldn't it be obvious? But then again, I had never considered what I personally wanted from cross country. What did I want? With no definitive answer, I was tempted to let silence be my response, but seeing that Coach wanted to hear what I strived for, I went with a safe answer.

"I want to be a good runner. I want to be fast, a lot better than last season. I really want to get under five minutes for my mile."

"Okay, so how are you going to get there?"

Again, I was confused. Don't I come to practice every day? What else is there to do?

"What do you mean?"

"Lately, I've been seeing a lack of effort from you. You're taking it easy during the warm ups, and you're not pushing yourself as hard as I know you can."

At first, I cringed. I didn't try during practice? Some of the team sat out with minor injuries, and I hadn't missed a single day! But then I began to understand what Coach meant, and my anger quickly gave way to guilt. Coach was right, I hardly ever put forth my best effort, and the regret stabbed me in the heart.

"Oh..." I trailed off, unable to communicate my shame.

"This team is young. We don't have many seniors or juniors, but what we do have is a great foundation for the future. With your times, you are easily one of the fastest runners on our team. You are extremely talented, but you're wasting it. Those goals you just mentioned? They are completely within reach if you apply yourself. We, as a team, need you to put forth the effort. We need you to run faster. And I know you can."

Coach's confidence in me sparked my pride. It replaced my shame with determination. I was necessary for the team, and if Coach believed that I could be a great runner, who was I to stop myself from doing the best I could? What was I doing wasting my ability? I should be pushing myself to the fullest extent because I want to be great but, more importantly, because I can be great. That's why I love cross country. Anyone can succeed, and it's only based on how hard the individual tries.
Sneaking out of the house late at night
They found a hidden grove, just for them.
When they met it was love at first sight;
No one could keep them apart.

Reading my life away
For love, for freedom, and for life.
Fights pump your adrenaline;
Endings make you want to cry.

Battles you want to fight;
Sides make you choose, him or her.
The confrontation between them
Keeps you on the edge of your seat.

Parents despise the love
Shared by the young lovers
Who do not belong together,
But they do not choose their fate.

Forced to live without him,
Extra work so he can't see her,
The mother and father are pleased,
But the boy and girl are broken.

Sneaking out of the house late at night,
They find their hidden grove.
When they met the pain was gone;
No one could keep them apart.

Stolen kisses in the moonlight,
Defiance over true love,
Lives lost for forbidden love—
Even if it cost them their own.

Their love was strong and just,
Not enough for Death's lust,
So Death was on a search for their souls,
His quest finally over.

Sneaking out of the house late at night,
They found a hidden grove, just for them.
When they met it was love at first sight;
No one could keep them apart
My eyes snapped open to the beeping of my faithful Ultraman alarm clock. For several minutes, I lay still, admiring the multicolored ceiling that my grandfather and I had painted with my favorite colors. As my eyes traced the outlines of the blue, green, violet, and yellow clouds, I remembered how much fun my we had on this project. I remembered standing on a small ladder, randomly swiping and splotching colors that we had haphazardly mixed together. Every time I jabbed the brushes into the paint, slopping paint onto the brush handle, my grandfather did the same. Every time I dripped paint onto the floor and my toys, my grandfather imitated me. Every time I splattered paint onto the ceiling, a la Jackson Pollack, my grandfather did likewise. All the time he painted, his sesame-shaped eyes smiled at me through the bulky horn-rimmed glasses that always seemed misplaced on his thin face. Painting the ceiling was just one of many whimsical ideas that my grandfather had wholeheartedly supported. No matter how outrageous the project nor how vehement my grandmother's objections, my grandfather was my zingy, ever enthusiastic accomplice in all of my escapades.

After we finished decorating the ceiling, my grandfather hung a makeshift shelf on my wall so I would have a place to display my beloved toys. I excitedly arranged my precious Ultraman action figures on it. For the last year, those thirty, silver-colored, plastic Ultraman figures had stood shoulder-to-shoulder, their bright yellow eyes staring at me each morning when I awoke. A week before, I had removed fifteen Ultraman figures and replaced them with a chorus line of smiling, pink- and purple-haired troll dolls, monitored by Scooby-Doo at the end.

I had rearranged the dolls on my shelf, shortly after my parents returned from America, bringing bulging suitcases filled with presents for my grandparents and toys for me. Despite my life-long love for the Chinese Ultraman figures, I was fascinated with the foreign dolls.

Being with my parents was also a fascinating and new experience. Since my parents had left China when I was only two, I did not remember them. Instead, my grandparents had been my childhood world. In the week since my parents had been in China, we were getting to know one another and getting ready to leave my grandparents for, what seemed to me then, forever. I wondered, will America be as different from China as the American dolls are from the Ultraman figures? Although the American toys made me smile and feel like laughing, the Chinese toys evoked memories of the many hours my grandfather had spent using the Ultraman toys to teach me ancient Chinese allegories and lessons.

The last week had gone quickly, and as I lay in bed looking at my ceiling and toys, I felt very sad that this would be my last morning to wake up in China in my grandparents' apartment.

I snapped out of my reverie when I heard my grandmother's call, "Zizi, you're late. You have to get up!"

Rubbing my tired eyes, I slipped into the foreign-feeling pants that my parents had brought from America. Unlike my Chinese clothes, these pants had nylon-covered pockets, strange stitching, and even stranger designs. Just like the troll dolls, the pants made me wonder what America would be like. "You'll love it in America" had been my mother's mantra to me all week. Even if she were right, I wasn't totally sure I wanted to go. More troll dolls and fancy clothes would not replace my grandparents with whom I had spent my whole life. Yet, despite all of my doubts about America, I wanted to prove to my parents that I was a "big girl." To do that, I had to be brave and not cry.

Purging my mind of last minute hesitations, I stuffed my feet into my worn blue slippers, decorated with grape juice stains accidentally dripped à la mode on the Ultraman designs over my toes. Next, my toes stretched and did their daily acrobatics to get accustomed to the enclosed environment. Then I walked, shoulders drooping, stiff, tired legs moving mechanically, guided only by the ceiling fan's irregular rhythm as it repeatedly hit the yellow-stained ceiling. "Come here quickly. You don't have much time. You'll be leaving for America soon," my grandmother called. Already aware that I would be leaving in a few hours, I didn't need to be reminded. Saying nothing, I nodded and sat down on my wooden chair in front of the table, awaiting the sliced eggs with dou shi zi that I cherished so much. As I waited, I watched my grandmother crack open the egg shell and peel back the hard covering to reveal the soft, warm egg. My mouth watered as she carefully sliced the egg with her large cooking knife before placing the egg slices on a plate and sprinkling some dou shi zi onto each slice.

I ate, knowing that after today there would be no more eggs with dou shi zi and no grandparents. Fighting back tears, I couldn't help but recall some of the wonderful times that I'd spent with my grandparents.
I remembered sitting expectantly on my Ultraman rug every night before bedtime, awaiting my fun-loving grandfather. Despite his arthritic knees, he knelt down on the rug beside me, making me feel that I was his equal. Usually, he would then take down several Ultraman figures from my shelf and set them on the rug. Once he had positioned the figures, he would tell me a Chinese fable, using the figures to represent characters in the story. The fable I thought about as I finished the last breakfast in my grandparents' apartment was one of my favorites, as well as the one that seemed most comforting.

Whenever my grandfather told me this story, he would put four Ultraman figures on the rug, bending one figure so it looked like a stooped elderly man. Next he would balance two figures on their hands and knees and tell me to imagine they were horses. The forth figure was to represent the townspeople. When my grandfather finished “introducing” the actors, he reached for the toy with the bent back. Imitating the crackly voice of a pre-Imperial Chinese man, he began the story.

“Now a long time ago in ancient China, there was an old man who had lost his horse,” he croaked. Tickled by his changed voice, I laughed. Once my giggles had subsided, he continued. Mimicking the accusatory tone of the townspeople, he said, “The old man should have kept his horses locked up better.”

Then with the skill of a great stage actor, my grandfather continued, “One day, the old man's horse came back, and, my dear granddaughter, you would not believe what came along with the horse.”

“What came back with it?” I demanded, my eyes wide with excitement.

Gazing affectionately at me, he replied, “The horse brought back another horse!” I clapped with joy, delighted at the story’s happy ending. “Neigh, neigh, heehaw, heehaw,” my grandfather guffawed in agreement, imitating the whinnying of a horse. “And that, ZiZi, is the end of the story called A Loss May Turn into a Gain. Many times in your life this story will remind you that no matter how many difficulties you encounter, eventually something wonderful will happen.”

As I hurried to finish packing and leave with my parents for America, I hoped that his predictions would come true. I hoped that moving to America would be more “gain” than “loss.” Now ten years later, I know how wise my grandfather was, and I have come to realize that I did not have to “lose” in order to “gain.” Although I did lose many hours reading stories, painting ceilings, and laughing with my grandfather, I gained new friends, a new language, and an American education. Rather than losing my Chinese cultural heritage, my cultural background has expanded, including both Chinese and American traditions. For example, I never forgot the Chinese tales that my grandfather used to recite to me, even narrating stories to him whenever he visits. I tell my grandfather about American stories, such as Beauty and the Beast and Little House on the Prairie, something I would have never gotten to do if I had never come to America. I’ve gained an understanding and appreciation for America, while my appreciation for China has deepened. One will never replace the other, but I cannot live without both. Although I did lose a part of my Chinese identity when I left China, the melding of China and America in me makes me more insightful and empathetic. My dual heritage gives me a forever broadened world view. I am like the dolls I left on the shelf in my grandparents’ apartment, half American and half Chinese. Just as the two groups of dolls balanced one another on the shelf, so do my Chinese and American experiences balance me.
The horns sound. That’s all I hear before I’m walking to my block, so perfectly rested upon the wet concrete. My feet capture the block below, and I fall to my knees, closing my eyes and talking to the one I’m relying on the most right now. Lord, be with me. I need you now. That’s all I get to say before the speakers spill the words I’ve dreaded throughout the whole competition: “On your marks.” My knuckles clench the edge of the platform I’m resting on, my whole body trembling with each second that passes. My eyes glare at the sea of glass before me, the tranquil pool staring at me. It seems unfair how calm it is, worry free, while I’m here watching goosebumps rise on my body. I’m nervous. I’ve never been this nervous before. It’s funny how scared I am of doing something I love with a burning passion.

“Get set.”
No.

Before I know it, my body kisses the warm water, and I zone out every single voice in the crowd. This is my time. Focus. The swimmer next to me, China, is at my tail. I’m a couple places back, and I need to catch up if I want this gold. My arms start to tire, but that doesn’t stop me from pushing harder. I touch the wall, one lap done. One more to go.

I pass one swimmer, two swimmers. Second place. China is in front of me, kicking her legs and splashing the water everywhere. Her arms flow consistently, making her appear invincible no matter the force she puts into her stroke. It’s not that easy. I remind myself. She’s as tired as I am. Keep going and pass her.

My eyes open. Although they’ve been open this whole time, I feel they’ve gone beyond the goggles, the water splashing, the stadium. They’ve opened to a world I’ve never experienced before. I see clearly what I’m capable of and what I need to do. Push. Go. I touch the wall. All I need to do is head back to the starting wall, press the button, and settle for silver. A sharp pain pierces my side, and I almost consider stopping. What is my body telling me? What am I telling myself? Don’t settle for silver. Do what you’re working for. Go for it. Get the gold.

I’ve caught up with China, a few inches away from the wall. My legs ache, my goggles are loose, and my arms could fall off. A voice in my head drowns out my pain: Don’t think how hard it is now, think about how easy it will be when you’re finished. I can see the end of this nerve-wrecking, painful journey I’ve been pushing through. I am in line with China. Only seconds from now will decide my fate.

I take my focus off my opponent. I stare forward and drown everything out. Feet, inches, centimeters, hopes away from finishing this race. I extend my arm towards the wall, waiting for the button to brush my fingertips, to pierce me with satisfaction and a rewarding sensation. My hand collided with the button, and I knew I had fulfilled my longing for victory. I made it.

White. Everything goes white. I fall into another state of mind, and all I’m focused on is myself and my incredible achievement. I award myself with a slight grin, then my grin turns into a full-out smile, teeth showing. Yes. I made it. I lure myself back to reality, and my eyes are blinded by the cameras flashing, crowd screaming, and lights glowing everywhere. I look for the scoreboard, and my soul falls to the bottom of the pool when my eyes meet my name at the top. 1st place. Gold. Gold. “GOLD!!”
Sarah Yee Ji Kim
Growing Tuition, Growing Frustration
Parkway Central High School

My cousin was a well-rounded student who was accepted into several Ivy League colleges. However, her family was hard hit by the crumbling economy and could not afford to pay for expensive college tuition. Therefore, she had to give up her dream of going to one of the big schools. In frustration, she decided to go to a community college at her town instead with a belief that the tuition would be cheaper there. Without luck, she found out that even the community college tuition has increased significantly more than the time her older sister had entered. Her only solution then was to get financial aid from the college, but the aid system was so complicated that it was nearly impossible to receive any benefits. Therefore, she had no choice but to take out a student loan and carry a heavy burden in her first step into adulthood.

Relentless increase in college and university tuition has outpaced inflation for the past two decades. Tuition increases exponentially as Sandy Baum, an independent policy analyst at the College Board, expresses, "Prices are continuing to rise more rapidly than the rate of inflation" (Glater). From the year 1995 to 2005, average tuition and fees rose thirty-six percent at private four year colleges, fifty-one percent at public four year colleges, and thirty percent at community colleges. Recently in the 2012 to 2013 academic year, public university tuition and fees alone rose 4.8% which is equivalent to $8,655 (Clark). It is undeniable that tuition just keeps on growing—no wonder my cousin was so troubled.

In addition, cost per student is increasing faster than the family income. The economic downturn has thrown many parents out of work or has lowered their income, leaving students like my cousin more reliant on aid (Schevitz). This contributes to making affordability an ever-growing worry for many middle class students and their families. Thus, their last hope is on need-based financial aid. However, their last resort often turns them down also. Although colleges say they offer financial aid, the entire finance system— including federal, state, institutional, and private programs—is so confusing, complex, inefficient, duplicative, and frequently does not provide direct aid to students who truly need it that it does not serve its purpose (Luzer). Need-based financial aid is certainly not keeping pace with rising tuition. Some even say that the aid process is even longer and more complicated than the federal tax return. Furthermore, the “aid” system lacks transparency in financing, uses too difficult language for even experts to understand, and does not provide definitive information about freshmen year aid until the spring of senior year in high school, making it difficult for families to plan (Luzer). The problem arouses lack of public confidence in higher education and sets a barrier for students from less well-off backgrounds. For the middle-class families especially, tuition is like another tax.

Because of the rising cost of tuition, many students, including my cousin, are discouraged from attending the college of their preference because they fear being burdened by high debt. If they really want to attend a certain college but cannot afford to do so, they would have to take out a massive student loan. However, they would have to start off their adulthood with heavy debt, spending the golden time of their life trying to repay them. In fear of debt, some students even decide not to attend college at all. Although it may seem to reduce the financial situation at the time, such a decision would be a disadvantage later. According to a study conducted by Rutgers University staff, three out of four recent high school graduates not attending college do not have a full-time job (Kavoussi). The study suggests that high school graduate students will not have enough skills to qualify for high paying jobs and that most jobs prefer college graduates over non college graduates. Therefore, it is very challenging for the non-college graduates to get a decent paying job in their competition against college graduates, for the society today looks at what college one graduated from rather than looking at his true talent. Therefore, encouraging college attendance by reducing the financial burden of the student is vital for the advancement of students.

Money should not be an obstacle in receiving higher education. To make college affordability possible for everyone, the government, policymakers, and education leaders need to take new actions. First, the student financial aid system should be restructured so that more students can benefit from it. Public providers of student financial aid should commit to meeting the needs of students from low-income families. They should also make the application form much more precise and concise to make the process efficient. Furthermore, since the government or the state cannot fund as well as they could in the past due to instability of the economy, policymakers and college education leaders should develop new and innovative means to control costs, improve
productivity, and increase the supply and resource of college education. For instance, they could spend less on the things that are unnecessary rather than collecting more money from the students by raising the tuition. They could promote less energy usage on campus by preventing access use of air-conditioning or mass printing because when these savings accumulate, they could save a tremendous amount of money. However, that does not mean that the state and federal policymakers cannot do anything to help the problem. They can take their part by supporting the spread of technology that can lower costs, encouraging more high school-based provision of college courses, and working to relieve the regulatory burden on colleges and universities.

It is important to have a serious debate about the future of our nation’s education system. If the current trend continues, the situation could worsen to the point where students would inevitably have to either drop the idea of attaining higher education or be a working student, without sufficient time to study. My cousin, in order to continue her studies, had to work every night and weekend on top of schoolwork and extracurricular activities. Instead of enjoying her college life, she was mentally and physically worn out.

Even a little effort from the college education leaders and state and federal government officials can alleviate the burden on the students like my cousin. Education should be a desirable choice rather than that of a burden. Bear in mind that any decisions made today will have a far-reaching effect on not just current students but also on the future generation as well.
Tick, tick, tick, tick... I sat staring at the clock, counting down the seconds until she got here. My grandma, my favorite person in the world, was about to come for a visit. As I scanned the counter, I noticed the flour, eggs, sugar, baking soda, butter, salt, vanilla, and M&M's. One thing however, wasn't there, the most important piece of the whole project, the cookie cutters! Sprinting to the drawer I found some of my favorites and quickly slipped them on my thin, four year old wrist.

There, I thought, now if she would just... At a knock at the door, my heart skipped a beat. I was practically jumping with joy as I heard the door squeak open, the creaking of footsteps in the hallway, and the shadow and the face of... my dad? My heart sank as I glanced at the clock again. More time crept by and then, another knock on the door. Grandma. Finally.

I thought back to that day as I sat in the front row of the cold church staring at the closed coffin. How could time escape so fast? I thought to myself. It seemed like only yesterday I was sitting next to my grandma on the couch, watching a movie or cooking with her. Listening intently as she told story after story while the house filled up with the smells of home cooked meatloaf and macaroni. I tried to choke down the tears as people shuffled into the empty church occasionally stopping to share their grief. I yanked out my iPod and stuffed the headphones into my ears, desperate to escape into my own perfect world, away from reality. “It was almost Christmas time. There I stood in another line/ Tryin’ to buy that last gift or two, not really in the Christmas mood...” The familiar words of the song “Christmas Shoes” flooded my ears. Then, the memories came rushing back.

“Would you like some popcorn, Grandma?“ I asked climbing out of her home hospital bed.

“I would love some!” she exclaimed in a voice I will never forget. I raced into the kitchen looking around for the bags of popcorn I knew she always kept in the cupboard. After finally locating the bags, I slid across the tile in my socks to the microwave, popped the bag in, and started the timer.

“5, 4, 3, 2, 1!” we yelled together. BEEP, BEEP, BEEP. I threw open the door and poured the steaming popcorn into a bowl. I grabbed two Dr. Peppers and rushed back into the bedroom.

“Ready to start it?” I questioned.

“Ready!” she whispered. I pushed play. “It was almost Christmas time. There I stood in another line/ Tryin’ to buy that last gift or two, not really in the Christmas mood...” the music filled the small room as the movie started. I could hardly contain my excitement as I scrambled back into the bed next to her, laying my head on her shoulder; this was our favorite song, book, and now movie.

A stiff hand on my shoulder startled me back to reality. It took me a few seconds to remember where I was and what I was doing there, but then reality sunk in. I turned around to see who was there: my uncle. He had a serious look on his face as he questioned me, asking if I was okay and how I was doing. I mumbled the routine, “I’m okay, and doing fine,” that I gave everyone. I have never been one to show a lot of emotion or share feelings, and it wasn’t something I was going to start now on one of the hardest days of my life. More people were filing in, and I figured it was time to put the music away. Carefully wrapping the ear buds around my iPod I kept glancing around at the people coming in. I only knew about half of them, but in some way or another grandma had made an impact on each of their lives.

The service started, and the first half went by in a blur. I kept thinking about my upcoming saxophone solo, replaying the song over and over in my mind. One of her wishes was for me to play her favorite song, “Amazing Grace,” at her funeral. She loved hearing me play; as I look back now I wish I would have played it for her more. The words to the song kept replaying in my mind: “Amazing Grace, how sweet, the sound...” And then I heard her voice, singing the song to me like she always did before I fell asleep. I opened my eyes, watching her, saving this moment in my heart forever.

“...That saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I’m found, was blind but now I see...” she sang. I was lying in the bed, intently listening to her sing the words to me like she always did before I fell asleep. I opened my eyes, watching her, saving this moment in my heart forever. The song finished, and she kissed me goodnight.

“Grandma,” I whispered in her ear, “Will you sing it one more time?”

“I’ve already sung it two times!” she exclaimed.

“I know, but I love hearing you sing that song almost as much as I love you!” I responded in a sleepy 12 year old voice.
"Okay, one more time, but only because it’s my favorite song and I love you all the way to the moon and back," she whispered in my ear. She began to sing the song again, but we both fell asleep before the second verse.

The rest of the service went by quickly. I felt as if I was trapped in a bad dream, hoping we would all wake up and go back to the farm house with Grandma waiting for us with supper in the oven, ready for a fun weekend with family. This was not a bad dream, however. There was no waking up, no Grandma waiting when we got back, no more movie nights, singing, or baking cookies together. We would never again hear her voice. We would never again put our arms around her and tell her how much we loved her. I knew in my heart that she was in heaven dancing around with Jesus, perfectly healthy and healed. That thought didn’t mask the pain and sadness, or make me miss her less.

We stumbled into the car and slowly started down the old country road, following the hearse to the burial site. Once we pulled out of the parking lot and onto the open road I turned to look at all the cars that followed. I was shocked at the sight: a line of cars so long I couldn’t even make out the end. They stretched out for what seemed like miles and miles, every car holding people that come to pay their respects and say one last goodbye to a woman that had made such an impact on their lives.

TWO YEARS LATER

As I look up, squinting against the bright sun, all I can see is a beautiful baby blue sky stretching out for miles. There is not a cloud in sight. Looking back down, I glanced at the faces of everyone around me: my grandpa, dad, mom, aunt, and many more family and. All attended the walk to defeat ALS, a nasty disease that claimed the life of the woman we all loved so much. With beads of sweat already on our foreheads we started the walk. It wasn’t long, or difficult, but it was for a reason that was important to all of us. Joking around with my dad as we walked, trying to keep the mood light was the best way to keep everyone positive.

"Stop," my dad said as we slowly turned the corner. The sight took my breath away. Lining the street in front of us were hundreds of signs staked in the ground, each one with a picture and name. Mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, sons, daughters of all ages whose lives had also been changed forever by ALS. The sight seemed familiar to me, reminding me of that emotional day over two years ago, when I looked back at the long line of cars traveling down the country road for my grandma’s funeral. We looked for the familiar picture of the woman we all loved so much. Finally someone sighted it, and we rushed over to see. For a split second, it felt like she was there with us, smiling and laughing just like she always did. She was not there, however, merely a picture staked in the ground. But in my heart I knew that she would always be there with us in some way or another, smiling and laughing. The memories would always be there of Grandma.
"Get 'em home boys," were the last words I heard through my headset as I let my wings take me to the air.

I was leaving home base to bring home my lost brothers and sisters who gave everything they had for our country. Nothing hits as hard as seeing the faces of the families of the fallen soldiers who put their lives on the line for their country.

My grandpa was a brave soldier who fought in World War II. I fly the Angel Flight, just like my grandpa did, and bring home wounded or fallen soldiers who fought for America. On one normal July night, or as normal a night can be when you are an airman, I took the AC-130 into the night sky, with a gut feeling that that it wouldn't be a normal mission. I wonder if my grandpa had had this same feeling so long ago.

I landed the Angel Flight at our base in Afghanistan, putting my hand over my heart, holding the picture of my grandpa. A special picture, it was taken as he was honored with the Silver Star, earned for exemplary service.

I still remember when Grandpa gave me that picture on my 13th birthday. While we were all outside, a huge plane flew very low to the house, with an American flag painted on the tail end of it. I didn't realize at the time this squadron was known as the Angel Flight, a specialized group of elite pilots who flew into the worst conditions to retrieve the wounded and the dead.

My grandpa began to tear up when I told him, "I want to fly one of those one day." I had no clue why he was crying, but I figured he knew something about that plane that I didn't.

Since that day, I wanted to follow in my grandpa’s footsteps and serve my country in a way that no other man could. My grandpa was the bravest soldier on this earth. He was injured on July 3rd in a plane crash when his plane was attacked. It went down about a mile away from the Afghanistan base. He managed to walk to base on foot, but he died the next day due to injuries that he sustained from the plane when it blew up.

The inspiration of my life was gone. The thing that made it even worse was when I saw his stone cold body in a wooden crate with an American flag draped over his chest. His dog tags were missing. The one and only thing I would have ever wanted of his were gone.

The next month my life took even a bigger turn. A man in a black Cadillac with tinted windows pulled up and handed me an envelope and walked away. The man didn't say a word, just handed me the envelope and rode away.

The envelope had a letter inside that read:

"Mr. Kohler, You have been drafted by the US Air Force Academy to be deployed at Fort Afghanistan in replacement of your Grandfather, Kohler, J. John."

I always have wanted to follow in his footsteps. That is exactly what I am doing. I knew grandpa would be with me.

When I arrived in Afghanistan, it was totally different than what I thought it was going to be. It was horrifying knowing that this is what my grandpa saw every day of his life while he was over here.

"Line up men!" the drill Sergeant announced. "We're going into combat tomorrow; go get some sleep and be ready, out here at 0500."

I barely got any sleep that night. What will I encounter tomorrow? What will it be like? Will I die? Will I survive? What's going to happen? Will I be as good as soldier as Grandpa?

After about 15 minutes of sleep I awoke to screaming alarms, pools of red, and bullets covering the room. "We're under attack!"

I stumble out of bed and found a gun laying in the pool of red liquid. I ran outside to find the entire base on fire and the sky lit up by bullets. Fallen soldiers were everywhere. The whole time I was getting shot at and running for my life I kept thinking, What would Grandpa do in this situation? I was scared out of my mind. I am only 42 years old, and I've killed grown men who loving families. Why did I have to come over to this country? Why do I have to kill to help my country?

My grandpa told me exactly what to do: Derek, get in your plane and roll her out. So, I did. I am not sure how I managed to dodge the gunfire all around me, but when I hit the cockpit, it was like I was suddenly deaf. I heard nothing but the soothing tone of my grandfather's voice. Even as my plane was gaining speed on what I thought was the runway, I heard nothing but my grandfather and felt no fear. Right before my eyes, the brightest ball of
fire I had ever seen exploded on the nose of my plane. I was hit. Like I was coming out of a trance, I couldn't hear my grandfather's voice any longer.

The next thing I remember was seeing red snow. My head pounded. I made a shape out as a plane. **Plane. My Plane.** My thoughts were confused but I thought: **Afghanistan base, only person. This is the same thing that happened to him.**

I saw a soldier with a canteen on him, so I used all my might to crawl to the man and drink some of his water. I could barely see straight due to the crash, but I knew I had to get out of here because the plane was burning like crazy and it would blow. This is how my grandfather died. He survived the crash, but the injuries he got from the explosion of his plane were what killed him. I stood up, shaking in the red snow. I thought about flying. **"I go up some days and never want to go down."**

As I bent down to pick up a weapon to defend myself, the picture of my grandpa fell out of my pocket, and from then on, I promised him if I died, I would die for him and my country. I knew my grandpa was watching from above, so through all the smoke and ash, I found the brightest star and followed it, knowing Grandpa would lead me in the right direction.

After two days of walking, sprinting, killing, and suffering, I reached a base that was flying the American flag high in the sky. I knew I was saved; I knew my grandpa and my country would be proud of me.

When I walked on the base, hundreds of brave soldiers stood around AC-130's just like the one that I had been in so many times. They were clapping for me. They went crazy when I walked on the runway where I was instantly attended to by a medical staff.

I woke up on a cot after what seemed like only a few minutes' rest. Apparently I had been in a coma for about a week, or so they tell me. They told me how I was reported missing for two weeks, which I thought was only two days. I was asked hundreds of questions of my journey.

I was later approached by the Colonel. "You'll be taking the Angel Flight tomorrow, son," The Colonel told me.

**The Angel Flight? Who will be taking me back to my country where I can live the rest of my life?**

That night I took a shower and let the warm water soothe my aching muscles. I ate very little because I wasn't feeling 100 percent yet. Before I went to bed, the Colonel came in the room with a box and set it on the crate in my room. I asked what it was, but he just set down the box and walked away without saying a word, just like the man in the black Cadillac. When I opened the box, I ended up finding my grandpa's dog tags. I took off my own tags and placed his on the chain next to my own.

I woke up the next morning after a rough night's sleep to the most familiar sound on Earth. I knew that the Angel Flight was outside and ready to leave. I got up, threw on my newly cleaned uniform, and walked out to see the AC-130 sparkling in the sun. As I shook the Colonel's hand and looked up in the cockpit of my flight to my home country, I saw a face that I knew my whole life.

My own son was sitting in the cockpit. I didn't even have to say a word before he began to tear up and give me a hug. I thought I had seen everything when I was overseas, but I guess not. That day I flew the Angel Flight home, with my son guiding me the whole way.
As I stepped out of the car, a strong breeze hit my face. It was another dreary, cold, winter day, and another day on which I would volunteer for St. Luke's Hospital. I trudged past the sliding doors into the empty, well lighted lobby. I stopped to sloppily sign my name on the volunteer clipboard before slowly continuing on. I clipped my light blue ID badge onto the collar of my vibrant red polo shirt, like I was going through the motions. My job was to transport patients from the different divisions of the hospital, which was somewhat interesting but never particularly exciting. It seemed like another Saturday that would come and go without any significance.

My white tennis shoes squeaked against the polished tile floor as I walked past the lobby into a carpeted hallway. I turned right and eventually came to a door with a sign: Nursing Office. I knocked twice on the light wooden door and remained, pondering a painting of a sailboat out at sea that was hanging on the wall. The man in the painting seemed so calm amidst the roaring waters around him. The door creaked open, and a middle aged woman with dark brown hair appeared.

"Hi, how are you?" she said with a smile.
"I'm doing good," I replied with fake exuberance.
"Well, let me get your pager for you," she said as she walked into the other room to retrieve the device.
She returned a minute later holding a black Motorola pager, which she then handed to me.
"Okay, thanks!" I replied as I walked away, pressing the soft rubber buttons in order to configure the electronic device that served as the foundation of my volunteering work; when nurses needed to transport a patient somewhere, they paged me. I was quite exhausted from staying up the previous night, and I wondered how much longer I would be able to put on the illusion that I was awake and alert. I stretched my arms and yawned as I made my way to the elevators.

"I can do this," I told myself. It was just another normal day of volunteering.

A loud beeping noise reverberated throughout my ears as I saw two brown elevator doors slide open for my entry. I stepped inside, pressed the number nine, and leaned against the side wall. The man in the elevator with me was quite old, perhaps in his seventies or eighties, and he wore a white plaid shirt tucked into dark brown dress pants. Upon his wrinkled, wise face, he donned a small black hat and a pair of large-framed glasses. He held a bouquet of assorted flowers, bright red, yellow, and pink.

"Good mornin'," he said to me.
"Good morning, how are you?" I replied.
"Not too bad; I'm doin' okay," he said with a slight sense of dismay.

The same beep sounded as the elevator doors opened to floor seven; the man got off. As he slowly walked away, he waved to me and nodded his head. I waved back; I couldn't help but wonder about who the flowers were for and why the man had seemed somewhat sad. It was also surprising that someone was here in the hospital so early.

Again a strong beeping noise pierced the quiet air as the elevator doors opened for the ninth floor. I stepped out and sat down on a coffee colored leather chair situated at a cream colored circular table. In order to transport patients, the nursing divisions all needed my specific pager number, which could vary from day to day. For this reason, I had to write my name and pager number on multiple sticky notes, which I would then hand out to the different divisions.

I took out a blue pen and began to perform this tedious deed as I wrote on the neon colored paper: Akhil Kumar, Patient Transport, 510-5722. After finishing, I slid the pen and notepad back into the right pocket of my khaki pants and reluctantly got up to continue my work. I walked slowly to the first division, section 9600. As I shuffled to the nursing desk, a concerned doctor hurried past me; he was breathing heavily and walking at a fast pace, causing the tails of his white coat to flare up and down. A stroke of curiosity crossed my mind yet again as I wondered what the reason could be for such panic.

As I reached the desk, messy with patient charts and forms, I handed the bright yellow sticky note to the nurse; she smiled and nodded. At this point, the nurses were familiar with my job and knew the drill. No explanation was necessary. I continued to the five other divisions. I was tired, and this day seemed anything but exciting so far.
As I passed out my final sticky note, I felt a vibration on the side of my waist. I unclipped the pager from my belt and noticed I had received a page to transport a patient from division 7700. I was on floor six, and the wheelchairs were located back in the main lobby on the third floor. I got the wheelchair and eventually arrived back at the seventh. I slowly walked to the nursing desk to ask about the room number as well as the location where the patient needed to go.

“She’s in room 7710, and she’s going to CT/MRI,” a nurse dressed in light blue scrubs said.

“Okay, thanks,” I replied.

This was typical; CT/MRI was an extremely common destination for patients to go. I continued on into the color-coded medical supply room to retrieve a white sheet to place on the wheelchair. As I unfolded the crisp cloth and spread it onto the leathery black seat of the wheelchair, something caught my eye. The same man I had met earlier in the elevator was standing outside room 7710. I strolled to the room with the wheelchair rolling in front of me. The old man noticed me and smiled.

“We meet again,” he said with a chuckle.

“Yes, we do,” I replied with a smile.

As I walked further into the room, I noticed two middle aged women, one with blonde hair and one with brown hair. In the hospital bed lay an elderly woman, presumably around the same age as the old man. Her facial expressions seemed confused and disoriented, yet her body was surprisingly calm. She had curly white hair which seemed to signify wisdom and experience as well as tragedy and hardship. She took a sip of water from a white Styrofoam cup and sighed.

At that moment, something perplexing occurred. When the two younger women attempted to talk to their mother, the elderly woman, she was unable to recall who they were.

“Who are you two? Why are you in my room?” she questioned.

“We’re your daughters,” they replied.

“No you’re not,” the old woman proclaimed. Her face wrinkled in bewilderment.

“It’s no use; she can’t remember who we are,” the blonde haired woman said in a solemn tone.

It was silent for a moment. She then turned away, and a single small tear slid down the woman’s face, marking her despair. I turned around and saw the old man looking at the ground; he was becoming emotional as well. I too lowered my head as empathy seemed to swell up inside of me.

Soon a nurse entered the room in order to remove the IV from the woman’s arm so she could travel in a wheelchair. During this process, the two women sat down and began talking to me.

“You know, when we were kids, she did so much for us. She cared so much about our well-being, much more than her own. She’d do so much during the good and during the bad. It’s almost as if she cared too much,” the blonde haired daughter said with a somber expression on her face.

“Now it seems as if the roles are reversed. We have to take care of her,” the other daughter said.

The two held hands, then got up to hug their father, the old man whom I had first encountered in the elevator.

“It’ll be okay,” the man said with a crackling, yet reassuring voice.

“Okay, all set,” the nurse said, interrupting the sense of melancholy in the room.

The nurse and I slowly helped the frail woman into the chair; her skinny body was noticeably weak, but her rough hands felt strong and persistent. After she was in the chair, I undid the rubber brakes and slowly wheeled her out of the room.

“We’ll be heading to the second floor,” I told the family.

They nodded and waved goodbye to the woman they had known all their life, the woman who seemed, at one point, to have endless compassion. She didn’t wave back, and I saw that their faces were pale with grief. As I quietly transported the woman to the CT/MRI division, I couldn’t help but feel depressed at what I had just witnessed. When I finally arrived at the destination, I handed the dark blue patient chart to a man sitting at a desk and wheeled the woman into the patient area.

As I walked away, the woman said nothing. I was expecting a “thank you” or even a “goodbye,” but the woman remained silent, staring straight ahead. There was no moment of compassion or grace. I could tell whatever disease or injury that was ailing the woman had changed her significantly.

For the rest of the day, I could think about nothing else but that elderly woman and her family. The things her daughter told me had stuck in my mind, refusing to be forgotten. As I pondered this experience, I was reminded of my own parents, and how much they have done for me. Since I was born premature, my family had to take extra
care and precaution when I was a baby. Even as a child, I remember my dad quitting his job and starting his own business so that he'd have more time to take care of me.

However, this instance in the hospital didn't stick out in my memory for simply reminding me of the sympathetic nature of family. Rather, it showed how quickly circumstances can change in life; it demonstrated how tragedy can strike at any time and how someone you once knew and loved can become a totally different person. For this reason, we should always cherish what we have and appreciate the good things in life, especially something as special as family. Because ultimately, we never know what's going to happen next. Life is unpredictable.
The door creaked as I hesitantly entered the studio. The waiting area and the small adjoining office were vacant. I gradually stretched my neck to see if anyone was in the main room. The door slammed shut behind me. I jumped a little at the sudden noise. When my heart stopped pounding, I heard signs of inhabitants.

“Hi-ya! He! Ah! Ho!” the building chanted.

As I took a seat in the waiting area, a short but well-built man emerged from the main room.

“Mia?”

“Uh, yes, hi,” I stuttered.

“I’m Brian, I’ll be your Karate instructor,” he proclaimed as he led me back into the main room, where the twelve o’clock class had just begun. He introduced me to the class. About six kids around my same age, thirteen, smiled genuinely but quickly returned to a horse, or neutral, stance.

Brian instructed me to follow by example, claiming I would catch on easily.

“Fighting stance! Hammerfists as fast and hard as you can!” Brian commanded.

I mimicked the fighting stance, tightly clenched my nervous hand into a fist, and took a deep breath in. The timer began. My first fist flew toward the bag.

For four long months, two of my senseless classmates continued to find ways to top the previous day’s harassment. Though I desperately tried to remain in my turtle shell, my shy demeanor morphed me into a target that each gladly took aim at.

Earlier that week my self-esteem had been socked in the stomach and pushed to the ground, as the teasing and taunting had reached a new height.

The girl, tall and muscular, built like a gymnast, followed me into math class. I failed to notice she was behind me until I heard my name in her whiny tone and felt a hard slap on my rear end. My face exploded in a fiery red, my freckles popping off my cheeks. I tried to keep walking, to ignore the sharp physical and mental pain.

However, as I took my seat feeling the sting, she took her seat as well…right behind me.

As the bell rang, her partner-in-crime, buff and adorned with a football jersey, took his seat next to me and chanted my name as if it were some sort of joke. But it was not a joke. It was my name, my identity.

“Mia! Mia! Meeee-yahhh! Are you ignoring me Mia?” they pressured me. Giggles erupted throughout the class.

The elderly teacher passed back our test from the previous class and immediately turned to face the board, her back to the class and the harassment. I desperately tried to shove my test face down into the folder as I heard boasting from behind me of an “F,” but the partner-in-crime grabbed it and read the score out loud.

“Holy crap! Look at you, such an overachiever!” he shouted.

“Oh my god! Mia! You got a one-hundred percent, you freak!” she chimed in as she saw the test. “Why are you so smart?”

Smart became the insult of the day. Whether it was jealousy or just cruelty, I’ll never know, but I had never been so ashamed to do well in school.

I struggled to get the test back, but it was too late. I had already become the center of derogatory attention, the place I dreaded falling into each day.

For the rest of the class, I felt pokes on my back, listened as people mocked my test score, and heard slues of words my innocent self could not even fathom the meaning of. Words I could naively classify as “inappropriate.”

Staring at the clock, I tried to block out my surroundings, but it proved impossible. All I wanted was to be home, in my safe-haven, where my parents could hold me and tell me it would be okay, where my puppy would wag his tail at my presence, where even my brother would try to rebuild my courage as tears rolled down my cheeks.

But the harassment followed me home.

That night I logged onto Facebook to find a comment on one of my pictures. “Do I scare you?” it questioned. My first fist slammed the bag with all the angry power I had stored up.

“Hard and fast as you can!” Brian encouraged the class.
I started a pace, left, right, left, right. My anger, my embarrassment, my hatred, seemed to soak into the bag with each hit. I pictured the faces of my foes, heard the taunting, felt the slaps, and hit harder. Sweat beaded at my scalp and dripped down my face mixing with a few salty tears, but I just kept punching. The burden suffocating my confidence rose from my body.

Brian called out new commands and each one made me work harder. Block left, block right, block left, block right, punch, punch, kick, kick, elbow.

My body drained physically, but the mental courage I developed surged through every inch overcoming even my bloody knuckles. When the clock struck half past one, I struck the bag with every bit of my newfound power. That afternoon I walked out of the studio shoulders back, head high, and confidence recovering.

On my first day of high school, his gruff voice yelled my name as I entered my first hour classroom. My stomach churned, and my heartbeat quickened as the nightmare scenario became reality. With a deep breath in, I pulled my shoulders back and held my head high. I genuinely smiled, said hello, and continued toward the opposite side of the classroom. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him caught off guard. He turned to face the teacher with a puzzled look. I turned to face the teacher with a confident grin.

“Mia?” the teacher called out during attendance.

I proudly raised my hand and responded, “I’m Mia!” There were no smirks, giggles, or echoes that followed my name. There was only the beam of my smile.

I’ve returned to that same karate studio at twelve o’clock almost every Saturday since then. Today, I am one belt away from the final step in my road to complete confidence, the black belt.

Although I maintain a soft-spoken demeanor, Karate continues to improve my self-esteem in drastic ways. While my peers detect subtle growth in my confidence, I feel the immense internal changes.

I often think back to the day “Do I scare you?” appeared on my Facebook. At the time I hesitantly answered, “Yes,” but to this day, I regret having given her that satisfaction.

The picture of a weak and plump me, her haunting comment, and my timid response still lingers in the cyber world. But a snapshot of my brown eyes each Saturday at noon as I strike the bag is a tell-all of the confident answer I feel today, “Absolutely not.”
“String them up, my love,” you whisper as you have hundreds of times before, handing me the dingy twine. You hold my shaking hand in yours for a moment, mine visible through your translucent skin. Your eyes, dark and hallow, gaze at me hungrily. “Create a masterpiece, my resurrectionist.”

I try to smile, though my face relays it as a grimace. “Don’t call me that.”

“It’s undeniably a part of who you are,” you breathe, gesturing towards the ancient wooden table in front of us. A single jar sits atop it, trophies from various hunts lurking inside.

“I suppose,” I mumble grimly and reach into the vessel on the tabletop—a human incisor emerges within my pale fingers.

“Body of man?” you ask, a dark brow arched. “They’re weak, spineless creatures—”

“You seem to forget that you are man, as well,” I chirp, gently looping the tooth onto the chain, weaving my cursed magic into it.

“Was,” you snarl, “once, long ago.” I catch a glimpse of long canine teeth in the dim moonlight before you regain composure. A wolfish grin graces your lips.

“The better to blend in,” I say, finishing the knot on the first charm.

“I suppose.” You remove a diamond from your decorated ear, and it materializes in your ghostly palms. You place it on the necklace; it slides beside the pearly tooth, glinting in the shadowy light. “It’ll be deathly beautiful and tragically strong.”

“Able to lure the innocent with ease,” I whisper, securing the precious stone. I feel your cool breath on my neck and shiver.

“You seem to forget that you are a creature of the night, pure and true.”

Chills race up my back as you whistle a quiet melody.

“With the grace and speed of a hawk,” I say, tying on a muddy brown feather.

“Feather of a bird of prey,” you coo, “excellent.” Your eyes dart across the night sky, seeing far more than I ever could. You were once infused with hawk feather—a favorite of yours.

“A bird of intelligence,” I justify, my eyes moving to the recently disturbed dirt pile beside the table. You lay just beneath the surface, in peaceful slumber. No—your body lays there. You are here, with me. I quickly look back to the revenant necklace, my hands shaking once more. I take a deep breath—this is my doing, after all.

“It shall be cunning as a snake,” you hiss, adding iridescent scales to the band.

“And cold blooded?” I ask, my fingers binding the scales.

“A cold blooded killer!” You cackle like a hyena. “Yes! Precisely what we want, love. Our army needs a proper leader.”

I bite my lip as I find myself drawn to the grave again. It’s your fault for dying, after all. But it is my fault for bringing you back all these many times. I have lost a part of you—your compassion, your empathy, your sanity—in the resurrections. I drop my gaze guiltily.

“I’m going to miss you while I’m gone,” you say, wrapping your wispy spirit arms around my waist, your cool head resting on my shoulder. A brush of ice paints across my cheek.

“You’ll be back soon,” I assure. “Only three days—"

“Your magic is getting weaker,” you jeer, tightening your embrace. A numbing pain creeps up my spine.

“Or you’re getting careless,” I spit, struggling out of your grip. “Tossing around a new chance at life like it’s nothing. I—"

—don’t have any idea what it’s like out there,” you say, finishing my sentence with your own. Your words are still venom, but your hold relaxes. “Soldiers falling every day because of those monsters, those—"

“Humans,” I say, finishing your sentence this time. I feel your claws dig into my side, but I press on. “They don’t like to be herded and slaughtered as innocent sheep! And you call them monsters! Look at you—parts of every conceivable being make up your body—"

“Do you not remember what they did to your kind, love?” you sneer, releasing me. “They burnt you at the stakes. Your own mother, turned to ash!”
My fist tightens around the revenant necklace.
You roar with laughter. “Now finish the spell, witch!”
I nod, turning my head to conceal the smirk that spreads across my face. I pull a small, rusted nail from the folds of my cloak and begin fixing it to the chain. “It’ll be smart as a tack, wise beyond belief.”
That earns a snort from you. “Knowledge only complicates things. Makes them question their orders.”
Indeed.
You sneer as you string a dark-as-night chip of stone onto the rope. “It’ll be cold as granite, a heart of stone.”
I hesitate before pulling off the trinket wrapped in my choker. Quickly, I tie the stark white bone onto the revenant necklace. “And fragile as a wishbone—to know humility.”
Your sharp talons dig into my waist again. “What are you doing?!”
“Nothing yet,” I mutter and pluck a butterfly from the air, wings azure, and fashion it into the chain, careful not to crush it. “And a piece of the living, for freewill.”
“Have you gone mad?!” you shout, lunging for the necklace.
Before you can take it away, I wrestle it over your luminescent head and jump back, knocking the both of us to the ground. “Slightly,” I smile, but my lips won’t quite complete the action.
“Foolish girl!” you howl, but the deed is already done. I roll away from your ghostly form as it begins to crack and glow more intensely. I look away and know by your screams that the black magic is working—a new body is forming.
Once the light dies, I turn to you—the new you—and my breath catches. You’re so handsome it hurts, and I look away. My most beautiful creation, and yet—
You are not you. I’m not sure what you even are anymore.
You stand, immobile, watching me, waiting, and I do the same.
You are the leader of our army of revenant warriors, the driving force behind the decimation of mankind. But maybe...
Slowly, I step to the jar on the table, your dead eyes following me, and reach inside. My fingers feel around, prodded and prodded by teeth of all kinds, and find the spool of dingy twine—the backbone of the cursed necklaces I weave.
I turn to you and place the roll into your strong hand. “I gave you wisdom to see the consequences of war, fragility to know humility, and freewill to make the hard decisions.”
You turn the string in your palm. “I could feel the victory of leading my men into war,” you contemplate, your voice smooth as velvet. “Or experience Death’s dark embrace.”
I close my eyes, because it is up to you—and only you.
I feel the rough twine loop around my neck and look to see you do the same. My heart quickens its beat, as though to put on a final show. You flash me a smile—one that is wholly and completely you, back long ago, when you were man—just man. "Death is swallowed up in victory," you whisper and pull the nooses. A smile finally covers my face. A real smile.
“String them up, my love,” I breathe, taking in one last lungful, “for dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.”
I felt his shadow fall over me as he stepped forward to my left. His body walled off the wide, shaded window and the overstuffed, caramel armchairs. Practically speaking, it didn’t make a difference. It wasn’t as though, had he not been there, I would have sat in one of those armchairs or stared out the window. The window displayed nothing other than a gray parking lot and the supermarket across the street, perhaps a car or two turning in. But nonetheless, the view’s disappearance and his appearance threw me off balance. Maybe the table was too small.

It accommodated the smooth, stainless-steel pitchers of half and half, whole milk, and skim milk, as well as the compartments of white sugar, Equal, Splenda, and Sugar in the Raw, and the popsicle sticks stretched thin like the middle-aged women suited up in tight LuluLemon who walked with backs painfully straight and ordered skinny vanilla lattes because that’s what they were—it held all of that comfortably. It even had room for the sophistication of polished glass shakers of nutmeg, vanilla, and chocolate that were nothing more than glorified salt shakers filled with the same ground nutmeg, vanilla, and cocoa powder available at the nearest Wal-Mart, a polished illusion held together solely by the use of fragile glass instead of cheap plastic. But it seemed that for all that it could hold, the table didn’t have space for both of us. The confines pressed me close enough to sense his presence across the too thin, seemingly empty space, close enough to feel his existence grate against mine.

I stared into the swirling depths of murky-brown addiction. Steam sneaked into my nostrils and filled my head with an overwhelming bloom of coffee and chocolate and mornings. How many times had I performed this ritual? The coffee-with-extra-room girl who dumped in ridiculous amounts of cream and Splenda until the coffee was bearable but more cream than coffee, the caramel-frappucino-with-light-base-and-sugar-free-syrup girl who tried so hard to be everyone else with her whipped cream and caramel drizzle, the red-eye girl who added Splenda and cream to the borrowed energy. Regardless of what I ordered or who I was any given day, I’d always been somewhat of an enigma for baristas. Sugar-free syrups and artificial sweeteners—multiple substitutions in one drink—but full-fat with whip and extra room for cream? Their raised eyebrows would question my sanity. I’d smirk mentally. Not dieting, diabetic. Afterwards, without exception, I approached a table much like this one, popped the coffee cup open, and inhaled.

My eyes focused, and I retreated from the hazy past and back into the present. First half and half, until it rose within a centimeter of the rim, then whole milk, until the tense, shining edges clung desperately to the edge of the paper cup. My hands plucked out four Splenda packs and shook the packets up and down in a mockery of a fan. The artificial sweetener settled as quietly and meekly as snow onto only one side of the packet, the pinch of my fingers and gravity walling it off from the other. A quick tear across the top and the microfine artifice drifted into the liquid and melted as it hit the surface. A careful stir with an elongated popsicle stick—the slim wood cutting through the surface without pushing any liquid out, until the cream and coffee blended into a cohesive tan. Tall coffee, in a grande cup, with sugar free mocha, half half and half and half whole milk, four packs of Splenda. Exactly as if I had added sugar. That is, except for the carcinogens.

His arm cut across my concentration as he reached for the Sugar in the Raw; instinct dragged my eyes from the swirling depths to his face. The man to my left was old, leathered skin and weathered eyes, gray hair slipping into white. He wore faded flannel and roughed up jeans—the real kind with holes ripped by the accidents of hard work, not by workers in the factory of some designer. He towered over everyone in the coffee shop. His snap of the wrist threw the unrefined sugar crystals into a pattering swirl against the stiff, recycled paper; I could hear each crystal strike against the paper walls and scrape their way down in a loud, fast half-spiral. I could hear the crystals crash against the bottom of the sachet, rocks falling against pavement. A rip, and the individual sparkling rocks poured into the black coffee, with an acceleration only objects with weight have. He loped out of the store, long, honest strides with the back hunched ever so slightly forward. Black, no cream. Just sugar.
Where am I? What’s going on? I wrapped my pillow around my head, trying to block out the irritating sound of rushing water. Groggy with sleep, I raked my mind, trying to remember where I was. Home? No. Hotel room? Yes. Wisconsin? No. New York. But my thoughts were forgotten as the dark room was flooded with white light.

“Everyone up! It’s 10:30! Our boat’s leaving at 1:00!” My mom’s voice intermingled with the screeching sound of metal on metal as she pushed the hotel room’s heavy window drapes aside.

Of course my bed was the one bathed in sunlight. Reluctantly, I cracked open my eyelids and squinted, only to see my brother sprawled across the other bed, snoring peacefully in sunlight-less bliss. Annoyed, I flipped over and pulled the blankets up over my head.

Then it dawned on me. New York. I was in New York. The Big Apple. The city I had dreamed of visiting. And if I didn’t get up soon, we would miss our boat—our only chance to see the Statue of Liberty.

Hastily, I rolled over to one side, kicked my feet from under the blankets, and sat up on the edge of the bed. My vision went black for a few seconds, and I waited for the room to materialize again. I should really stop getting up so fast, I thought.

I shook my brother, who was still reveling in delightful sleep.

“Let’s go let’s go let’s go!”

“5 more minutes...” he said, definitely still in dream-mode. Clearly, the sound of the shower running had no effect on him. I sighed. Some things will never change.

Forty-five minutes later, I found myself sitting on a plastic, light blue bench as the doors of the train whooshed to a close. While I looked at the glowing train route map, the floor began to gently rock back and forth. A blinking red light was steadily moving towards a solid purple dot. How did people even make these things? I wondered.

A sharp jab in the ribs yanked me out of my thoughts. Flinching, I turned to see my brother chuckling.

“Stop it! That hurt!” I glared at Daniel, who was attempting (and failing) to suppress a laugh.

“I’m warning you ...”

I felt another jab, this time to the shoulder.

“If you poke me one more time...”

A woman in a pinstriped business suit sitting across from us glanced up from her magazine. She looked like a scolding teacher by the way she eyed us over the rim of her glasses. Grinning sheepishly, I nodded apologetically and shot a you’re-gonna-pay-for-this look at my brother.

The train jolted and hushed to a stop. The woman looked up again, but this time, not at me (thankfully). A crackling sound erupted from overhead, and a deep, gravelly voice came through the speaker. “Good afternoon ladies and gents. We’re currently having some technical issues, but we should be all set soon. Thank you for your patience.”

The teacher-business lady began to tap her pointy, black patent heels against the floor of the train and sighed. She was obviously running low on hers.

I whipped out my phone. The glowing screen read 12:00.

“Baba,” I whispered to my dad, bouncing my foot up and down nervously. “We’re gonna be late.”

My dad patted my shoulder reassuringly with his heavy hand. “No worries. The train will start moving again soon. It’s all good.”

Sighing, I turned back in my seat, staring dejectedly at my cell phone.

I was just about to start a game of Angry Birds when the sound of music erupted through the relative quiet of the train car. A lanky middle-aged man with a casually tilted bowler hat perched atop his salt-and-pepper hair, strolled through the train, happily folding a rusty red accordion in and out. Accordions always remind me of bellows, so of course, I instinctively looked around for the fire.

Plopping down in the first empty seat, “Camptown Races” flowed from his instrument as he swiveled left in his chair to play for a short, stout man with sunglasses, a stereotypical tourist shirt (complete with palm trees), and a shiny bald spot. Leaning back, the tourist kicked a sandaled foot over the knee of his other leg and tilted his
head slightly, listening intently, like a hunting dog honing in on the gentle rustling of a squirrel in a nearby tree. Nodding his balding head in approval, the tourist reached into his pockets and pulled out a crinkled five-dollar bill. The accordionist had done his job well.

Being so enraptured by the scene, I failed to realize that my eyes had been fixed for a little too long on the bowler-hatted stranger, who began to stroll in my direction, clutching his pair of musical bellows. Panicking, I looked around frantically for a life preserver. I settled on the travel brochure my dad was holding, and ripping it from his hands, I began to “read,” furrowing my brow for more of an effect. Please don’t come over here. Please don’t.

I felt the beady eyes of the accordionist on me. Blood rushed to my cheeks as I struggled to read the sentence I had been boring a hole through for the past few seconds.

Plan your getaway this summer to New York City, home of the .

The bowler hat in my peripheral vision was getting closer.

Plan your getaway this summer to .

Suddenly, with a shudder, the train started to move again. The bowler hat disappeared and reappeared in a seat a few chairs down from mine. I breathed a sigh of relief. At least he wasn't coming over here anymore.

I had been spared.

The speaker overhead crackled again, and the robotic voice of a woman with a British accent became audible.

“Next stop: South Street.”

My phone read 12:35. I looked over at my mom, who was clutching a metal ceiling handle with both hands, a determined look in her eyes, glittering with spirit. Together, the four of us gravitated towards the doors of the train, anticipating the moment they would roll open. Nothing was going to stop us; we had a boat to catch.

Racing down the streets of Manhattan, an endless stream of apologies flowed from my mouth.

“I . . . pardon me . . . sorry about that.”

Keeping my eyes locked on my mother’s bobbing black shirt weaving in and out of the crowd, I dipped my head down and charged through the moving wall of New Yorkers blocking my path. From behind, the sound of my brother’s pounding footsteps assured me that he had not yet been carried away by the torrential wave of people. Is the Statue of Liberty really worth this public humiliation?

My blue polka dot dress whipped about in the wind created by my pumping arms. Sweat slid down the sides of my face and into my eyes, blinding me.

I forced myself to focus on Mom’s back. I couldn’t believe the pace she had set. This woman, reluctant to even jog around the neighborhood, was now outrunning the whole family, including my dad, the marathoner.

My cramped feet, laced up tight in red-and-white New Balance sneakers, screamed for a break, but I ignored them. Instead, I focused on keeping myself from slamming into complete strangers. Mom’s shirt bobbed across a busy intersection. By the time I got there, a blinking red hand appeared on the walking signal. Digging my heels into the pavement, I screeched to a stop, my brother following suit. Breathing heavily, I bent over with my hands on my knees. I was surprised a puddle of sweat wasn’t forming around me.

It’s all good? Seriously, Dad? What if it’s not? Annoyance bubbled up inside of me. Having to sprint down South Manhattan was certainly not all good.

“Guys, over here!” My mom waved her hand at us from across the street. A nearby woman in a white jacket and a green scarf turned and stared at me. Oh gosh, this is so embarrassing, I thought.

The moment the signal flashed green, I sprinted across the street, darting here and there between the waves of pedestrians.

“Hey kid, watch where ya goin’!” I heard someone yell. I didn’t even bother to apologize. Before I knew it, the four of us were congregated in front of a ticket booth on the dock.

Our faces glistened in the sun as we huffed and puffed. I could feel the heat radiating from my cheeks. Boy, were we a sight.

Panting, Mom struggled to make her voice audible, “Did we miss our boat?”

The cheery, blonde woman inside the booth replied. “Yes, but don’t worry; you can catch the next boat arriving in ten minutes.”

Collapsing on a nearby bench, my shoulders rose up and down as I endeavored to catch my breath. Maybe it was going to be a good day in New York, after all. Exhausted, I turned to my dad and, smiling through my relief, repeated his favorite phrase, “It’s all good.”
Finally, after weeks of anticipation the night was here. The tree stood tall in the living room lit from top to bottom, the wreath hung on the front door, and stockings were over the fireplace, ready for gifts to fill them. A blanket of snow covered the ground, reflecting the shine of the yellow lights strung on the houses of the neighborhood. Excitement filled the air as Christmas Eve had finally come. Only one task remained to make this the best holiday ever: the arrival of Santa Claus. Tim and Samantha were determined to see the man who delivered presents to them for the past five years, and they knew exactly how to do it.

“Mom, can we make cookies for Santa? Please?”

“Oh I suppose,” Mom answered, “but only if we set milk out for him too. It would be rude not to offer something to wash them down.”

“One hour later the snickerdoodles were fresh out of the oven, set on a small table next to the tree accompanied by a cold glass of milk. With much reluctance the kids went to their room and laid down in bed, silently waiting for the trod of reindeer hooves. Minutes turned into hours, and they became discouraged, wondering if Santa would even come this year. Click clack, click clack, click clack. The noise was faint, almost like a figment of imagination, but slowly it grew louder. Soon the sound reached an unmistakable level, and Tim and Samantha sprang out of bed.

“What do you think he has for us?” Tim asked.

“I don’t know, but I bet it’s a big surprise!” Samantha replied.

The children ran downstairs and hid behind the sofa, their gazes fixed on the fireplace, but soon they heard a discouraging sound from above.

“Oh! Ugh!” Santa struggled to fit down the chimney, grunting with effort to slide down. “Oh screw it! I’m finding another way in!” Santa bellowed in his deep voice.

“WHAT?” Samantha exclaimed. “How can he not fit down the chimney? That’s how he gets into houses.”

The footsteps on the roof were audible, and from them Tim realized that Santa was headed toward the front of the house.

“Perfect,” Tim said, “he can just use the front door to get in.”

Crack!

“Whew,” Santa puffed, “that’s the toughest door I ever kicked in.” He walked through the now open doorway into the living room and took a look around. From their hiding spot the kids could see him perfectly. He stood almost seven feet tall and looked to weigh at least six hundred pounds, with a long white beard and rosy cheeks just like they had imagined. Tim and Samantha watched intently, following Santa’s every move. He first admired all the lights in the room, clearly proud that he was so highly celebrated. Then his attention went to the cookies.

“Why do people keep making me these damn things? All they do is give me gas.”

The children were shocked to hear that Old Saint Nick didn’t like cookies and even more surprised that he reached out a reluctant hand and took one. One bite, that’s all it took for Santa to be done with his snack. “Dear Lord, that’s the worst cookie I’ve ever eaten!” he exclaimed.

Tears welled up in the eyes of both children, but they knew that crying would only make things worse. Neither of them could believe what they were hearing from this iconic man who carried the joy of Christmas.
everywhere he went. The kids wanted nothing more than to go back to bed, forget this night ever happened, and get up tomorrow morning excited for their presents. Both of them knew that this was probably like chasing after the wind, but they gave it a shot.

“You know Santa, I’m getting pretty tired,” Tim said. “Can I go back to bed?”

“That’s all you’ve ever been good for, Goggles,” Santa stated. “You’re a lazy little thing, you know, nothing but a waste of space. Oh, oh, let me guess, the cookies were your idea, weren’t they, my little genius?”

“Well, um,” Tim stammered, “you could say that.”

“Oh that tears it; you don’t deserve a normal Christmas!” Santa exclaimed. “You’re coming with me!”

He carried each child in one arm straight through the hole in the house that used to be the door. Reindeer brought the world famous sleigh off the roof, led by a glowing red nose that undoubtedly belonged to Rudolph. With an impressive leap for a man of such stature Santa was in the sleigh and ready to move on with his evening, Tim and Samantha right by his side. Although it had not been an enjoyable night so far, the kids still hoped for an exciting ride from the legendary animals in front of them. Enthusiasm filled the air as the reigns were taken in the white gloves of the master.

“All right, Goggles,” Santa said, “let’s get this show on the road. Yah!”

The reindeer slowly elevated off the ground and soon carried the red sleigh through the crisp December air. No stops were made at the houses of children throughout town, and Tim and Samantha started to get worried. If they didn’t stop anywhere how would other kids get their Christmas presents?

“Hey Santa,” Tim said, “why are we just flying right over all the houses?”

“Well, Four Eyes, if we stopped that would give you and Metal Mouth a chance to get away,” he replied. “So we’re just not going to give any other kids presents. Way to go, you two, you just ruined Christmas for everyone.”

They had never heard anything like this in their lives. Disappointment and shame overcame the children. They both knew there had to be some way to save their favorite holiday, but how? This monster of a man seemed to be determined to ruin everything. As they soared through the night Tim and Samantha both tried to think of ways to preserve Christmas. Samantha realized that they had not once seen a present and hoped that this would be a golden opportunity. If Santa saw a gift he was supposed to deliver there would be no way he could resist getting it to its rightful owner.

“Hey Santa, where do you keep your presents?” Samantha asked.

“Ah, you want to see my sack, huh,” Santa replied. “Well if you must.” Santa unbuttoned his pants, pulled down the zipper, and whipped it out from under his shirt. He now looked to weigh a mere 170 pounds, horribly skinny for his seven foot frame. He stood proudly, holding his sack in an outstretched arm. “Pretty impressive, ain’t it?” Santa asked.

“My goodness, yes,” Tim answered. “It’s the biggest sack I’ve ever seen. You must be one proud man!”

“I certainly am, Goggles,” Santa said. “You know, you kids aren’t too bad. I think I might just take you to my favorite place to go on Christmas Eve. Hey Rudolph! Take us to North Carolina, and step on it! I’m not getting any younger!”

“Why North Carolina?” Samantha asked

“You’ll see,” Santa replied. “We’re going to see the craziest people on Earth.”

Minutes later they were on the East Coast, approaching Oak Island. The area was well lit by Christmas lights, making it a beautiful sight from above. Flashing beams and sirens disrupted the peace of the town, all focused around one house.

“What’s going on down there?” Samantha asked.

“Lord knows what it is this time,” Santa chuckled. “Jenelle’s always up to something new. Being on Teen Mom isn’t even enough to keep that chick out of trouble. I just about bet if she sees me and talks about it rehab will be in her future. Let’s go for it!”

The reindeer landed silently on the snow behind the warzone of a house. From the shouting inside they could tell that Jenelle was locked away in her room, the window slightly cracked.

“Here we go, kids; this should be good,” Santa said. “Ho, ho, ho!” he bellowed.

“Stop calling me that!” Jenelle yelled. “I made a mistake but that doesn’t mean you have to call me names!”

From the inside of the house they heard the voice of Barbara, Jenelle’s mother. “Jenelle is that Kieffah again? He ain’t nothin’ but white trash! If I see you with him again, I’m gonna call the cops!”

“If you call the cops, I’ll sue your ass!” Jenelle shouted back. “And he’s not that bad.”
“Not that bad?” Barbara responded. “All he does is get high! He can go to jail for all I care. I don’t care about Kieffah!”

Santa snickered outside, trying his hardest to control himself. The shadows that were cast onto the yard moved as Jenelle approached the window. It flew open, and out popped the brown haired head that was so famous for chaotic situations. Her jaw dropped when she saw Santa Claus and the reindeer standing in the back yard.

“Mom,” she called, “tell the cops to come around back! Santa’s back here!” Soon they heard dogs barking in the front yard and chatter heading to the back.

“Ah crap, here come the dogs,” Santa said. “We’d better scram.”

He leaped once again into the sleigh and quickly took off, disappearing into the night, but not before wishing Jenelle better luck in rehab than last time. After that extravaganza they accompanied Santa to see the likes of Britney Spears shaving her head, Snooki and Deena in jail, and Tiger Woods being busy with something (or someone) other than his golf game. Tim and Samantha didn’t quite understand, but they joined the nonstop laughter, hoping to somehow free themselves. After many hours of antics and evading the “five-o” it was finally time to go to the North Pole. As they headed north, the air became colder, and their destination closer. Although the rest of the night was a brutal awakening into the life of Santa, they hoped seeing the cheerful elves would make up for it. Hope once again filled the children as they neared their destination. Surely at his home Santa could be civil.

Soon a large factory came into view. Smoke stacks rose out of the enormous grey structure, polluting the air. A towering chain link fence encircled the workshop, topped with razor wire. Bud Light cans, Skoal containers, and empty Marlboro packs littered the plot. Polar Bears ran amuck leaving droppings all over the yard. Guard towers rose up out of the ground surrounding the area with elves manning the cannons perched atop them.

“What do you think of my place?” Santa asked.

“Well, it’s not what I expected it to look like,” Tim replied.

“And just what the hell is that supposed to mean? You kids are so judgmental all the time,” Santa stated.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Tim said, “I just thought that it would look a little nicer here.”

The sleigh landed in silence after that conversation. The reindeer were unhooked and left to roam the frozen tundra, and Santa was ready to go inside. He pushed the large door open, walked in, and let out a big “ho ho ho!” Much to the surprise of the children the elves actually came running to celebrate his return. When questioned about the night, Santa had an elaborate collection of falsehoods about happy children. The worst lie of all though was that Tim and Samantha were admirers of him. They didn’t have a chance to explain to the elves that deception flowed out of their master’s mouth. Santa just rambled until he finally said he must go to see Mrs. Claus, to which she came out of the bedroom. Whistles rose out of the crowd, and Santa hurried over to her with the kids right by his side. Once in the bedroom Samantha had a chance to talk.

“Why did you lie to the elves? That wasn’t very nice of you,” she said.

“Those elves are a bunch of shitheads,” Santa explained. “They never catch on to anything. Nope, I could run this place into the ground and ruin Christmas, and they wouldn’t know the difference.”

“Is that so?” a voice from outside the room called. The doors swung open, and there stood every elf in the workshop. Rather than their usual attire they sported baggy jean shorts and oversized shirts.

“Well, guess what, Twiggy,” one of them said. “We’re about to mess you up!” Panic swept the face of Santa. He had been exposed as a fraud, a figure of false hope. Hundreds of elves stormed the bedroom, furious about what just happened. Soon the chamber was filled by the enraged helpers that were mauling their newfound enemy with squeaky hammers and footballs. The kids escaped and ran outside into the cold. The elves that previously stood in the guard towers were now nowhere to be found, and Tim and Samantha realized the opportunity for escape. They called for Rudolph, and the shiny red nose appeared on the horizon. Seconds later the reindeer stood in front of them.

“Rudolph, we need out of here,” Tim pleaded. “Please, you’re our only hope.”

“Get on,” Rudolph replied. “I’ve wanted to get out of here for ages. That demon of a man ruined Christmas fifty years ago.”

The kids’ jaws dropped at the speaking animal.

“Quit giving me the deer in the headlights look,” Rudolph said. “Get on me, and let’s get the hell away from here.”
With that Tim and Samantha boarded their ride and took off. The journey home was a pleasant one, full of conversation between the new friends. Home arrived quicker than they would have wished, and goodbyes were exchanged. Rudolph thanked the children for making his escape possible and was on his way. They had not thought about it yet, but they really did ruin Christmas.

“Hey Tim,” Samantha said, “do you think anyone will know we’re the reason Santa isn’t around anymore?”

“Nah,” Tim replied, “there’s no way.”

With that they both went to bed for the night. Never again would Santa Claus visit kids around the world, but neither of them felt bad about it. Actually they were comforted in knowing that no longer would anyone be given false hope as was given to them. Tim and Samantha slept soundly that night, knowing they made the world a better place. Morning came early with the shrieks of their mother. Apparently a broken door was enough to scare the pants off of a parent, and she came in to make sure her kids were ok. After waking them, she figured they might as well make use of being up and open their gifts. Tim and Samantha both knew there would probably be nothing under the tree, but it was worth a shot. They went to look and much to their surprise found one small present. Like a flash of lightning the wrapping disappeared, leaving one single piece of paper – a note to the kids. Neither of them could believe the contents.


Dear Goggles and Train Tracks,

Nice try last night. If you want to come see me sometime to apologize for ruining my night send a letter first. And not to the old address. I have a new workshop after what happened last night. The shitheads ruined their right to work in that one, so we built a new one that quite frankly looks depressing. If you absolutely refuse to come I would be glad to make some more home improvements for you or take you on another field trip. With all of these generous options I’m sure we could talk out a solution. Merry Christmas! See you soon!

Your new friend,
Santa Claus
A twinge of pain seared through my back as my body sliced through the water after completing my favorite dive—a back one and one half somersault in the pike position. As I swam up through the shockingly freezing water, every inch of my spine exploded with a new burst of pain with each movement I made. After what seemed to be hours of swimming, I penetrated the surface as a sob broke free from within my chest. I maneuvered myself to the side of the pool, and with a final stretch outwards, I grabbed the cold metal edge. I instantaneously began heaving and shaking as tears streamed down my already wet face.

With what felt like hundreds of judgmental and worried eyes on me, I climbed out of the pool, grasping at my back and stumbling over to the First Aid tent. Without question, the trainer handed me an enormous bag filled with ice. I walked over to where my coach Rachel was perched on the corner of the judges’ platform and sat down next to her, receiving a supportive pat on the back. Filled with regret and disappointment that my rotated spine and chronic back pain were hindering my performance, I watched the other girls continue their meet warm-up as my thoughts began to wander to how I’d pictured this moment.

Three days earlier, when I arrived in North Carolina for the AAU Diving National Championships, everything was exactly how I’d imagined it would be. My lifelong dream was finally becoming a reality. The pool facility was absolutely magnificent, with mile-high ceilings to accommodate the ten-meter platform and three different pools overflowing with cerulean water. When I entered the pool deck, my eyes were instantly met by the overwhelming activity of a diving meet. Muscular girls bounced high on the sea foam green diving boards. Then after countless numbers of flips, they entered the water with virtually no splash. There were boards and platforms along each edge of the pool, and all of the boards were simultaneously in use. The coaches were flawlessly intimidating with their rock-solid stances of feet firmly planted on the ground and arms crossed across their chests. Each and every diver even looked like she belonged in the Olympics. Everything was perfect.

When I received the qualifying score for the national meet earlier in the summer, I could hardly contain the excitement that exploded out of me as soon as I left the meet. The entire summer I felt so motivated to perform my absolute best, and for once I knew that I could succeed. Arriving at the meet encouraged the peak of my nervous excitement. For years, I had visions of being on these boards during a competition. In my daydreams, thousands of watchful eyes criticized my every move as I powered down the board in my approach. Even my dreams at night included visions of my body flying through the air as I demonstrated perfect flipping with crisp twisting and entering the water splash-free. I could only imagine what it would feel like to swim up and hear my scores being announced by the judges.

“Scores for Katherine McKinstry on her front two and one half somersaults are..... eight, seven and one half, eight, seven and one half, and seven!” I’d even dreamed about the feeling of winning one of my events.

But sitting next to Rachel with sobs tearing through my body, both from injury and from disappointment, I felt everything slip away. All my most cherished dreams in the sport now seemed too far off in the distance for me to ever achieve. My injured back possibly wasn’t going to let me compete in the one-meter springboard event. My heart was throbbing and aching in my chest—I wanted this so badly.

My thought snapped back to reality when Rachel interrupted my thoughts. She grabbed my shoulder, shook it to get my attention, and snapped me out of my thoughts.

“Katie! Come on, you know I’ve been in your position. My elbow used to stop me from competing all the time. So tell me what you’re thinking.”

I’d been keeping everything private during my time sitting out of the warm-up, but with Rachel’s support and comforting words, my thoughts spilled out, and I began to ramble.

“Rachel, I understand that you’ve been where I am. I know injuries used to stop you, and I know that feeling too,” I said with annoyance. My expectations for myself created an unstoppable burning desire within me to win. I continued on, hurriedly exclaiming, “Even so, I wanted to completely hit each dive the absolute best I possibly can. I wanted the feeling of receiving congratulations from the other divers, who are all secretly jealous and annoyed that they didn’t end up the winner. Now I might not even be able to compete at all,“ I finished exasperately. I spat out the words “not able to compete” with disgust and anger. I would have died to compete; in fact I even craved first place, but I saw it slipping through my fingers.
“Well, I have good news,” Rachel said calmly as she saw my anger escalating. “I just talked to the trainer, and he doesn’t think it’s dangerous for your back for you to compete. So now you just have to decide if you can make it through the pain, and if you’ll be okay with not finishing in the place you necessarily wanted to going in to this meet. Think it over.”

My confusion sank in as multiple conflicting emotions rushed through me. Excitement from being able to compete flowed, but the threat of a bad performance was chipping away at my positive emotions. I was completely stuck. Yes, technically the trainer cleared me to compete in the meet. It wouldn’t be any more harmful to my back. Even so, the thought of performing badly terrorized me. I didn’t want to face the embarrassment of failure. I felt Rachel’s hand again. I knew she had one more speech, so I looked up at her.

“Okay Katie, here’s my once piece of advice I’d like you to consider. I’m aware that you’re frustrated about the pain that’s affecting your diving. I know not being able to perform to one hundred percent of your ability is disappointing,” she paused, running a hand through her hair absentmindedly. “But at least you made it here. You qualified for nationals, which proves how impressive you are. Any chance to compete is an opportunity of a lifetime, and I think you should take it.”

The entire room seemed to fall silent around me as I pondered Rachel’s words. Of course I wanted to be my absolute best; however, I failed to comprehend that even competing at nationals is an accomplishment on its own. As I considered what she said, I realized my thoughts were completely different from fifteen minutes ago. Before I talked to Rachel, anger, resentment, and disappointment coursed through me as I felt my dreams of gold slipping away. In contrast, I sat on the sidelines, watching the other girls get a chance to compete, no longer craving the win or the attention. My passion for diving had returned, and I wanted nothing else than the opportunity to be in the competition.

A rush of motivation flowed through me, and I swiftly walked back to the end of the line for the diving board. I received supportive hugs and hand-grabs, which reassured me, no matter what the outcome was.

The meet passed by in a blur, and each of the fifty girls completed all 10 of their dives. I was focused on the meet, but during my break between dives, I chatted up the other divers and just soaked in the feeling of the environment I would never forget. When the results were posted afterwards, I didn’t run to see my place like I usually do. I knew I didn’t get first place. I knew I didn’t get fifth place, and maybe I didn’t even get tenth. I still don’t know to this day what my place was. Looking back, I now accredit this moment for my skill to understand that finishing anywhere other than first is acceptable. For once, the scores and comparisons to other girls didn’t matter. I had a stupid grin plastered on my face, and I accepted a hug from Rachel, which got her soaking wet. Rachel and I stood together excitedly talking about how my dives went in the meet. None of them were perfect, but my excitement indicated that each one was the absolute best it possibly could have been, given the circumstances. And that’s all I cared about—being the best I could be without any comparison to anyone else.
I got an eerie feeling when I heard something banging around in my kitchen. My parents had left to go to the lake house to celebrate a friend's engagement. I knew they were going to be drunk, so did they, so they decided to leave for the weekend. I was able to have a couple friends over.

It was only 8:30, and my friends weren't coming until 9:30. They would have called me if they had gotten back from vacation early. I knew it wasn’t them.

I was starting to get really nervous and extremely freaked out. I could hear the heavy, rushing, and pounding footsteps. They were slowly making their way up the stairs. It was a man. I could tell by each slow step he was making. His heavy breathing was getting closer; I could feel it. What do I do?

I had a walk in closet, and I felt that it was smart to go to the very back and call 911. And that is exactly what I did. Before I could even get a sentence on where I was, my closet door flung open. His enormous fist came back and swung at my head.

That’s the last thing I remembered. When I awoke in the back seat of a speeding car, I could hear gravel hitting the side. Tape covered my mouth, and I felt the rope cutting through my wrist as I tried to get myself free. I remember him hitting me, explaining my head pounding and my temples aching.

Where was he taking me? And why aren’t we there yet? We stopper, and he opened the back door.

I could feel his beady eyes looking down at me. “Welcome to your new home, Lucy,” and he put a blindfold over my eyes and threw me over his shoulder.

I could feel the sun blazing down on my legs. Wherever we were it was really hot and clearly the next day. He walked with a slow and steady pace, as he whistled to a tune I had never heard before. He went step by step, his heavy feet hitting the hard ground. He made a sudden stop, took one arm off my back, and it sounded like he was scrounging in his pockets for his keys.

I knew he was nervous because he dropped his keys and bent down to get them. He had trouble putting them in the key hole. Why was he so nervous? And then all of a sudden, I heard the door open, but I was confused. He just stood there. He didn’t make one sudden movement.

His whistling had stopped, and he began to slowly make his way through the door. I heard him slam it closed and turn the locks. How many locks were on the door? Sounded like a good three, and that will be good to know for when I get out of here, wherever here was.

He was slowly walking. I don’t know what was up with him and taking his sweet ole time, but I was getting real sick of it. I didn’t say anything; I was too scared that he would get mad and do something that I just couldn’t have happening. I finally heard another door open, finally, and he slowly set me down on what felt like a bed, a very soft one at that. He took off my blindfold, ripped off the tape, and untied me; all I did was sit there. Some people would say that’s stupid, but I knew better.

“Hi Lucy, I haven’t seen you since you were just a little girl with pink bows in your hair. Well. I’ve seen you, but that would be the last time you ever saw me. I would have to say you were about five.”

I’m 16 now, how am I supposed to remember him. Maybe that’s what he was counting on.

“You turned out to be a very beautiful, young lady,” he stated.

I was getting really scared now. My worst fears were coming true, but I knew it wasn’t over yet.

“I hope you’ll be happy here. Don’t think that you’re cooped up or in jail; I’m just going to keep you in this room for a few days until I finish getting everything ready for you. I want you to be happy. I’ll make sure you have everything you want. I knew when you had that long blonde hair up in a ponytail with that cute little pink bow and those emerald green eyes looking up at me that you were going to be a very bright young lady. And now I have you, and I won’t ever lose you.”

As he was looking at me with those intense eyes, I could only think, “Who is this man? How does he know me? What does he want from me? And why does he have me here?”

He could see that I was scared and really confused. “What’s wrong? I only want you to be happy.”

All I could think about was screaming in his face, but I didn’t say a word, just stood there looking into his blue eyes, which were like deep black holes. So much was going on in my mind that I didn’t know what to do. Everything went black.
When I woke up, he was standing over me. He said “What happened? Are you ok? Do you need anything? Speak! Say something!”

I wanted to tell him to take me home, but I couldn’t say a word. I had a huge lump stuck in my throat. I needed to find out where I was and how long I would be there. Were my parents looking for me? How long had I been gone? All these questions raced through my mind.

I was looking down at my feet, and when I looked up he was gone, and the door was closed. I had just noticed my hands, mouth, and legs were all free. I ran to the window and tried to open it, but it wouldn’t budge.

I had just now noticed the window was locked and nailed down. Outside I looked and could see the beautiful fall leaves cascading to the ground. I wanted to be out there. I wanted to be home. I wanted to be away from here.

He pushed a cart full of my favorite foods like fried chicken, steak, ice cream, icing, orange juice, 7up, Coke, pork chops, and seasoned french fries, chicken noodle soup, potato soup, and that’s just a few.

I was so hungry, and it all smelled so good, but what did he do to it?

I think he knew I was uneasy about it, so he left the cart and walked out without a word for the first time. I wondered what he was thinking. This was the first time he hadn’t said a word, clearly not a good sign.

I pushed away the thought just long enough to eat. I didn’t know when he would give me food next, so I stashed the food that I knew would be good for a couple days and ate as much as I could.

The door slowly creaked open, and he walked in. I continued to eat. All he did was stand in the doorway and watch me. Then he walked backwards and closed the door.

I was confused on why he just stood there and watched me, without moving a muscle. He came back with clothes, but more specifically he had fleece snowman pajama pants, and a pink tank top, the clothes that were sitting on the edge of my bed before he took me. Why did he have them? Was it the exact clothes from my room, or did he go and buy it as a coincidence. I didn’t care either way.

I watched as he walked over to the dresser, once again not saying a word, and set the clothes down. He walked out and shut the door behind him without saying a word. I wasn’t changing. I didn’t know what he had done to the clothes, if he even did anything to them at all. I just continued to eat. It felt like forever since I had put food in my mouth.

About 20 minutes later, he came back in. He just looked at me but not like before. Before, it was a gentle look. This time it was a look of anger. What did I do? What would he do to me?

“Put those clothes on, now!”

I didn’t respond to his request until he began to shout at me. I was startled at first, but I stayed strong. I tried to keep that blank stare on my face, as he looked at me with pure anger.

He could tell that I wasn’t going to respond and that he was frightening me. He stopped and began to apologize and begged me to forgive him. He kept giving me compliments, but he was saying them weirdly.

I just sat staring at him. I didn’t know why I was here. I just really wanted to go home and forget about all of this, but of course I can’t go anywhere. I just kept ignoring him. I didn’t want to hear or listen to this psycho man. What kind of sick person does this to a 16 year old? I started to cry. Why did this have to happen to me? What can I do to get him to take me home?

It hit me: the big bookshelf in the corner, close to the door. He would most likely be coming back soon. I would hide behind the shelf until he came, then sneak out the door while he was looking for me.

I could hear his footsteps coming down the hallway and hid behind the bookshelf. As he opened the door, I darted out. I could see a door ahead of me and was pretty sure it was the front door. I ran and ran. I could hear him making his way out of the door and yelled something. I couldn’t make out what is, but it sounded desperate. I found the front door and tried to open it; it was locked. I turned and analyzed my surroundings, out of the corner of my eye I found the back door. I ran to it; this one was unlocked. I opened the door with him right behind me. It was a deck with a 15 foot drop below me. I couldn’t do anything but jump. I hit the ground with a thud, my ankle twisting painfully, but the adrenaline took over.

I started to run turning right then left. The trees were flying past me. I ran as fast as I could. Looking behind me I saw no one and started to slow down. Then I heard a crack of a limb and started to run again. I was worried that he was right behind me. I thought I saw a shadow, but I could be imagining. Stopping to catch my breath, my ankle flared with pain. I started to feel dizzy, and everything started to blur. I fell and hit my head on a rock. The last thing I remember seeing is another guy leaning over me, but I could tell this wasn’t the same guy.
When one is young, he absorbs the world to form thoughts, opinions, experiences, and to learn to remember which paths harbor sugar and which paths do not. With the wrong experiences, a child can be permanently damaged which makes elementary school such a dangerous place.

The first time I stepped into the room with screens glowing, I felt very excited, since I've always liked computers. Keyboarding was very useful (to this day I am glad that I took it). My heart, however, could not handle the teacher; she was a blind basilisk crawling around the room, waiting for the chance to sniff something, whisk it away and devour it. She did not seem to have too much disdain for those who spoke during her class, and, even if this was the case, this would not have frightened me. What truly terrified me was her continued consumption of the weak.

Nature was never was very fond of one child, Paul. I did not know of most of his hardships at such a young age, but I did observe the small things that always conspired against him. I could not count the number of times that Paul was wrongly accused of some minor crime, and I would agonize over it at home. If a child smacked the heater whilst traveling down the hall at school, you could bet (and win) that Paul would be reprimanded. Paul, the quiet, sweet young boy who accepted the wrongful punishment with silence.

Sitting in the dark, steadily typing, a slender shadow diverted my attention from the monitor to the prowling serpent. My eyes followed her stalking motions and noticed her drift away; I was safe. She closed in on her prey, and the crickets became as quiet. Although I was most likely safe, I could not yet relax, as she had not attacked. Looking around I met nervous eyes. And Paul's.

Paul had always wanted to befriend me. I did not reciprocate. I convinced myself that it was because I was busy building a reputation and could not risk everything to help a single child, but the truth is that I simply do not remember. I do not know which knot I tied.

The serpent struck, lashed out with her tongue. "Are you still on the first stage?" it shrieked. Paul was berated with word after word, but he did not move, did not duck. Paul stared back into my eyes. They were blank, full of the sorrow of one so accustomed to pain as to lack the ability to express it.

"Are you an idiot? Everyone else is already past the first stage. Were you busy talking, or can you just not type? Which is it, spit it out!"

Paul kept staring into my eyes, and his showed the need to have some sort of connection, some sort of friend, someone to rescue him, and someone to understand. Paul needed the friend I would never be. I was terrified of being caught by the serpent, so, with great force, I tore my eyes from Paul and cut the last chord, his last hope for survival. With my free eyes I saw the rest of the class, staring intently at their screens, pretending not to see.

I followed suit and returned my eyes to my own screen. Then I froze.

I was still on the first stage.

Suddenly the lashing sounds stopped, and I cursed inside, wondering why the serpent had to direct her attention away from Paul. I was now terrified for my own life and furious at Paul for not being the victim anymore.

Later, I exited the computer lab with joy, for I had completed the first stage before the serpent had slithered around to my seat. I had survived. Now when I am asked how I learned to type, I tell that it was in running from a serpent. For my survival I was joyous, but my smile flattened when I saw Paul, and Paul saw me. We both diverted our gazes. We both lost a smile. Paul never asked me for friendship again.

And walking down the hall back to class, staring down at my feet, feeling a dark guilt and rage inside of me, I smacked the heater.
Brandishing the Last Roman Emperor

Souls fit in glass thimbles,
Far away in the mountains
Where children stare upwards at night
But do fall asleep.
The moon reveals the soft clink of
One more soul.

A dark invader
Sees himself a painter
Of scarlet on a pillowcase.
The plunder against his thigh is
Warmth in the mountain air,
Organic in the abyss, and
A mute memory madding.

Sighs

One last puff escapes from ice,
Titanic trap, grim device
Which solemn murder plots,
Executes, and, inside, dies.

With no more puffs I give good-byes
To lying grins and smirking eyes.
A fire consumes these frozen sighs,
Their bloody hands and all their lies.

Steeple

The crowd leaves,
Disperses.
Alone in the dark are
Green leather purses.
Full of the emptiness of shallow people
Holding on
Letting go
Of a gone,
gusty
steeple.
Shelby Mills
Mother
Saint Joseph Central High School

Listen.
She whispered while
we caroled by the pond where the swans
lay, melting into
innocent batter and woodchips
wondering
when the love left.

Was it Tuesday?
But you were gone, like always, and the macaroni and orange blob in the refrigerator was starting to house
some nutrients—it was only your forgotten excuse.

Tell me when the love stopped blooming.
Tell me when wisdom drank itself into wine and
kissed me with a smack.
Tell me when the rope that choked
the sugar out of our skulls started to
fray.

Listen.
Time falls from the sky in tear drops;
begging me to run away with them but I
can't because
Why should I?
She was right all along, I shouldn't have stolen
that boy's heart and dangled it in front of his
crooked face like a slab of meat dripping with desire
to scream one more pump of life into
him.
Into me.
Into you.
I hopped on the train to
one more vain and wicked mistake and I
tilted my head back and
roared because chills tickled
my spine and my
throat—like vinegar.

I remember
when the love
left.
It was Tuesday.
And we were everything but swans
who chose to die
by the moss bank
with flasks filled to the filthy brim
of goodbyes and prayers
and tomorrow.
We were lost.
We were together.
We couldn't remember why.
Feathered Holocaust: Summer Heights

Messy.
Like eating the peach.
Like Scott’s “Hot…hot…hot...”

This is it.
This is all.

The change I have felt has rippled from all corners
Pressing against those lying, lazing comfortably with its sharp keel-bone –
Starved, thirsty, arid.

This creature beneath our land has waved and pulsed, was
Calm when the land was gray with no sun and no snow.

And it breaks, its dryness, barrenness scrapes “them” – society.
It scrapes at closed windows,

It grapples during this abeyance of thought.
It swiftly pecks, it picks at the dead meat, standing on it, conquering it.

It minds when people are “dumb in the summer” and slow like syrup –
Eyes do not lock other eyes, like magnets,
Air does not wrap itself around cheeks or
A think hair bundle –

Screens, fluorescent screens, that stir that organ in your brain, send the chemical bounding through,
And discarding sleep. That Macbeth of chemicals.

So it waves. Stunning you with heat like oppression and smells
Old, like pain.

Uncomfortable, inducing squirms, and arresting,
And then those cicadas ring, scream, keening for water, it seems, keening for comfort.
Plump and warrior and perfect.

Stepping outside into the hot hazed screaming crispy world,
And turning round again

Until, like a baby with no object permanence,
It disappears. Warning slammed like a sledgehammer to a forehead,
Missed.

What was that again?

Until eyes dilate correctly and warning signs
Get gold stars.
Rinehart: Halloween and an 18th Birthday (but the present wasn’t for me)

I am testing memories.
Choosing, turning, tasting –

Sitting across from you, wearing your jacket.
My arms are pricked with cold,
Yours are not. Mind over matter, and
You probably blamed it on our shapes.

Sometimes you read Plath’s words and mistake them for your own.
The kind of thing you would say, your identity forgettable and liquid, only to yourself.
The kind of thing that makes me want to change.

Perhaps I knew when I said it, what your response would be.

Of course. Of course I knew.

_Similar, maybe, but you’re lacking. You wouldn’t give yourself the push; you wouldn’t snatch_ The Birthday Present, _let the wrapping fall away. You don’t want that._

Your disease is not imbalanced, like all those other nuts, yours is mysterious and God-blessed and makes you divine.

You glittered. Amused and bitterly clever –

_Don’t you see?_  
_That’s where we’re most similar._

It arrived on your doorstep a short time later.

Three months too late, thousands too early.  
Perhaps I never would have heard you opening it, but  
You were not ready for enormity.

You screamed. The universe  
Slid from your side.
I took an anatomy class my junior year of high school; we studied heartbeats for a day. According to science textbooks, a heart makes a sound of lub-dub, lub-dub. I always thought it was more like bum-bum, bum-bum. But I forgot to factor in the fluid, the blood, what it sounds like from inside the cave of your chest. If there is something wrong with you, your heart murmurs to itself: lub-dub-swish.

I have memories that I am not sure are real. Real places, maybe; real objects. But merged, at one exact moment, to birth a memory? I can never be sure.

We do, after all, create our worlds for ourselves.

Here is the world I create: splintered gray boards and sticky old spider webs. A blue swing. And all that light—thrown on the lush, swishing branches and old boards and into the room upstairs on the left, where it vibrates on the ceiling and paneling. Light skimming over the water, where the time of day seems to control the movement and swelling of the waves. Mornings of slanted light that make everything a curiosity; hot, thirsty noons; squinting nights where lights hover on the water; warm sleep with warm wind through ripped screens.

And that light. Those patches like a kaleidoscope—fractals of the sun on the concrete and slim grass and bark. Patterns that I will never figure out.

When life is not a rhythmless, flat shadow that does not have enough dimension to be routine, but a heartbeat marked by the hope and perception of comfortable impulses.

"anyone lived in a pretty how town
(with up so floating many bells down)"

A memory of mine—but a stagnant one. A place, poised, stilled. A real place, real objects. It gleams with potential.

The potential of renewal. The potential of decay.

Because when you're done with this world...

You always said I was smarter than you. I knew you didn't really think that; genius sunk in unawareness is more attractive than acknowledged intelligence. You said it, and I refuted it, both of us playing unaware. I was used to being told that you were the smartest; you were used to being affirmed. Trouble is, you have a thick wall built especially for affirmation.

I thought about that when you landed yourself in the hospital, when some know-it-all decided that you had something wrong with your heart. You were born with the heart problem, they said; your life was weakening. I thought about that and about choices. About how you were the most calculated decision I'd ever made yet the one that I'd never really been given the chance to make.

Don't you, don't you see that nothing is chosen?

Softly built, pale. Plain, like November and February—blanched eyes, erased behind the hipster glasses. Wintery and blue, a cloudy day, a faint dream, and features utterly unrememberable and unremarkable. They do not fold themselves into my brain enough; I do not know who you are unless I see you. You do not speak, and I have never met your eyes.

It was a suggestion, slipped gently into my mind. Your friendship was a suggestion.

"Do you know her?"

“No.”

“You remind me of her.”

Quiet, convinced of and bathed in my own quirkiness?

“Mmm. I'll get to know her.” Okay.

So I smile at you, the Suggestion pulling at my mind. I expect you not to smile back, because we are alone in the middle of a boxed and tiled hallway and I am bright and you are dim. Unexpectedly, your eyes crinkle slightly, pulling upwards at your lips. You walk past.

“Hey.”

I turn.

“I think we should be friends.”

Okay.
Eyes, Eyes, Eyes. Presence and eyes. Matte irises and heavy lids and liner flicked like the tip of a paintbrush into creases. These eyes are different. Calm, they do not flick; they are not pasted on top of blankness. But it is not their depth. I do not consider them pools. Tossed about words and a flip of the eyelid. Bright and unmistakable and expectant, they sit within the composed face. A stretching smile, a slight inclination of the head, a raise of the eyebrows in mock shock, and then the electricity flows. The eyes are electrified. Tiny currents running from the pupil; tiny pulses outward; a sustained gleam.

The sun grows hotter; the leaves burst prematurely from their waxy casings that crown the end of branches. The ghosts begin to appear, vivid as wax statues erected as tributes to memory.

I touch the walls where my memories lean against them. I watch as she saunters away, carrying a half-grin; I watch as she bends towards me, her eyes lit like lamps. Memories; poised, stilled.

But were you ever really here? The bending of summer into fall; the sweeping of fall into winter. And the hospital. This was new. You were there for six days and ten hours...years. You had that extra swish tacked on to the end of your heartbeat, they said, that dangling modifier, that afterthought. Lub-dub-swish. Somebody had heard it and sounded the alarm. Somebody had heard it loud enough. Gone was the uncertain slosh, the gentle flushing of your heart with that extra liquid. Whispers, murmurs, turned to yelps and shouts. Your own pulse, your own life had ripped against the inside of your chest, it had flooded and spilled over, your ribs a broken dam. It had boomed in the hollowness, a cry sounded in a canyon, ripping its echo through space. Lub-dub-SWISH. And someone had heard it.

I had perceived warm rhythms; I had perceived potential. But that swish, that anomaly, had edged into your pulse and thrown it askew. I hadn’t detected it. Even in empty tiled halls sitting alone with you, even in the silence of the night. I hadn’t.

I can’t believe there was a time when I couldn’t see you. And then you were ungraspable again. I slipped and skittered around your gaze, jolting and jerking, unable to clutch your pale irises. And I realized you were fucked up. Not a bitchy remark made with a hand flip and biting tone. Plain, honest, unembellished: fucked up.

“I’m sorry for being crazy.”

It’s your body; something is wrong with your heart. You can’t help it.

I feel it, I know it, in my heart – Heart, soul

Mind

Being and breathing and feeling
Mind

Heart in soul in Mind mind mind
It’s all in the mind –

Of course it wasn’t your heart. And you didn’t believe in souls. I had already known, I had to have known, I had to have overheard the murmurings of your mind –

It was your mind.

Nothing, nothing at all – nothing chosen...

Don’t be done with this world, oh God, please...

Yes, there was a choice, there was, because you had almost made it. Your murmurings became shouts became trembling fingers reaching for the telephone –

Because when you’re done with this world...

Done with this world...

Done with this world...

Slanted light on a swing and some splintered boards and the smooth water tawny with light. A warm sleep and a warm wake and a hot breakfast and light on the counter. A teal raft and a dark-eyed baby sitting on top of it, wrapped in her father’s hands. Stars smearing their whites onto the sky and a box of worms and fingers clutching the lower lip of a fish. And light in the leaves and patchy on the ground.

Was it real? Any of it?

And you, clutching a book, sans bled ink on the pages, passionless. Or you, throbbing with health, radiating. ...the next is up to you.

“sun moon stars rain.”

“Do I dare...?”

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Orion
Lord of hunters,
King of game.
I look up at the shimmering stars,
The tingling warm glow reflecting off of my eyes,
As if sunlight, fresh from its nap behind the earth,
Was reflected into morning dew,
The prism of light playfully splashing
Shining its glory upon the earth.
Leo.
Prince of honor,
Prowler of earths.
Wears the guise of swelling brightness
To shield his burning glory from our curious gaze.
Yet somehow I see,
The flash of his undoubtedly soft,
Glorious mane,
Through his shimmering,
Pool of a supernova force field.
Cygnus.
The Northern Cross,
The Southern Swan,
Improves all
It loves
Does no wrong
Only knows right-
Falls asleep till dusk’s last light.
Virgo.
Maiden of the sky,
Blesses me with her appearance.
The soft grass,
The swaying trees,
With her I am one with the earth.
Innocence in every way,
Though she never sees the day.
Pisces.
Traveler of seas,
Curious eyes.
Under whom I was born,
Under whom I may die.
Unending, searing love
Shrouds me.
Sagittarius, Scorpions, Serpens.
Creatures of dark matter and gas,
Organisms of light and tiny particles,
Musca, Norma, Octans.
Shaped by some celestial being,
Feel only the universe in their hands,
Perseus, Phoenix, Taurus.
Mold our lives by the soft glow of the moon,
Shaping our habits with tools made of shining photons,
Engraving their names in my soul,
Vulcans, Crater, Cetus.
Too many to name them all,
In the time it takes,
For these blossoms of light
To form a flickering blanket
That gently closes my eyes,
And puts me to sleep.
We may not be knights, but we surely seize the table with our guards up and weapons ready. Nobly, my siblings and I take our stand, making small talk with our enemy and choosing to ignore our vicious past.

I peer around the corner to get a better look. Mom’s face is disappointed, and trust me, I know that look. Dad hangs his head without a trying word and slumps back down the stairs. The man I should be looking up to shows my mom just what a man he is.

And I giggle.

Because I’m only four.

I am so young.

I am so ignorant of what would come.

Everything happens in a flash, and already I am in a new home. Dad’s not here, but that’s okay because I’ll see him next weekend like I always do. In the morning I put on my red overalls and get all ready to go, but Mom tells me the first day of school is next week. I really can’t wait—I’m so excited! My sister doesn’t want to change schools because she says she’ll miss her friends but I told mine that I’d see them soon so it’s okay.

It’s the same ol’ routine every weekend. We drive downtown and pass the huge buildings and the bright lights that flash these big words in giant red bulbs. My sister and I switch from Mom’s car to Dad’s but I don’t like Dad’s car. It’s too small, and the smell of leather makes my head hurt. At his house my sister and I share a room plus a bed, which I think is unfair because I’m old enough for my own. But other than that, weekends at his house are fine.

This new lady has been hanging around and going to dinner with us sometimes, and she seems to pay a lot of attention to my dad. She is so skinny. She has her black hair in a bob above her tiny shoulders, and her fingers are full of knots, her lips pursing like she’s sucked on a lemon. She is nice to me and buys me things, so I think she's perfect.

I’m starting to spend a lot of time at the skinny woman’s house. Sometimes dad is there, but most of the time I don’t know where he is. He tells me they’re just good friends, but I know he has a crush on her. And I must be right ‘cuz he asked her if she would marry him. I guess she likes him too ‘cuz she said yes.

I don’t really know what happened. The skinny woman has always been so nice, and now she tells me “don’t do this” and “don’t do that.” I can’t breathe without getting yelled at for something. So I try to leave her alone, but it’s real hard to live with someone and be scared of ’em, ya know?

The first meeting with her hits me like a wall. I don’t know why she is asking me so many questions.

“How does that make you feel?”

“Dr. Myers, I don’t know. Bad, I guess.”

She nods and writes something down. I wonder what she’s writing about me. Now I will start to see my counselor multiple times a month. I don’t mind though because she gives me candy at the end. She talks a whole lot, and I don’t really understand why I have to tell her everything that happens at my dad’s house.

The skinny woman is changing, and I feel like I have to tip toe around her. Dad’s house isn’t fun anymore, and I don’t understand why I have to come here all the time. What is the point? He leaves my sister and me while he tends to his job, and we are left wondering where he is.

The staircase will soon become our runway as my sister and I and our two friends get ready for our fashion show. My sister dresses me in sparkles and Limited Too. I dig the makeup brush into the eye shadow and sweep a clump of some metally shade over my eyes.

Perfect.

I go first, strutting down the stairs with my hands on my hips, keeping steady. My sister follows with model posture and pace. Lindsay and Megan go after her, but I think we did the best. At the bottom we giggle and decide to show our dad before the next outfit change. We look all over the house for him, but he’s nowhere to be found.

My sister calls our dad, and he reassures us he’ll be home in three minutes; he is picking up dinner. That means he’ll be home when the big hand is on the five.
But he doesn’t come home, and now the big hand has gone all the way around, and from what Mrs. Greer says, that means it’s been a whole hour. The “what if” thoughts are creeping in, so we call Mom because we’re scared. It’s getting dark out, and we tell her we are still alone. She takes matters into her own hands.

“Just hold on,” Mom says.

A while passes before this loud knock comes at the door. My sister and I stand beside one another as we look through the window to see these two people dressed in navy with gold badges. They’re very polite as they make their way into the house, and I lean my head all the way back to see the man’s face. Slightly below my eye level, I see his belt full of tools. I spy a gun and shuffle back. The woman’s face is made of stone, and her hair is pulled tight into a flawless ball. The man takes out his flashlight and starts to look around, shining it on pictures to get a better look. They start to ask questions, and I feel as though I’ve done something wrong. My dad is quickly on the phone and then home.

“We were just picking up dinner,” my father tells the police officer. “We were gone maybe ten minutes.”

I keep my mouth shut as Dad tells a lie that we all know is untrue. I was always taught you never lie to anyone, especially the police. So why is it okay for dad to do it?

“I just don’t get why you like her,” my sister asks me.

“I don’t think she’s very nice anymore, but why wouldn’t I like her?” My sister’s eyes lock on mine as her head tilts, and she realizes that I don’t know. She takes a big breath and as she exhales she says, “Well... she is the reason Mom and Dad got a divorce.”

The confusion floods me, and I stare at my sister with question and fear in my eyes.

“Dad—cheated on Mom with her.” She stutters, “I-I thought you knew that.”

Now I know exactly who this skinny woman is, the one who tore my family apart. But how could I put all the blame on her? My father chose her over my mother, and he chose to see her. I picture them together in my mind and can see myself telling them: I hate you. I hate you both. Don’t ever speak to me again.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” I say into the phone, discussing recess plans with a friend.

“Where do I meet you?” she replies.

“Meet me at—”

Before I can finish, the skinny woman is yelling at me from the top of the stairs.

“Get off the phone!”

“I just need to tell her one thing!” I yell in reply.

She storms down the stairs and rips the phone out of my hand, taking it back up the stairs with her. By now I can’t stop crying because I’m so angry at her. My throat is all clogged, so I run after her as she stomps back up the stairs. I scream up at her, “JUST. ONE. WORD!!”

I feel a flush of regret as she runs at me. Her bony fingers clench my arm and lead me toward the door. She escorts me out of the basement and sits me down with a thud. She storms away, and I am left with the chilling echo of that slammed door.

The ground feels cold against my bare legs. I look around, but it is too dark. All that surrounds me are boxes. Even when I am allowed to return, I’m still wondering why I was put there. Aren’t only cars supposed to go in the garage?

Dear Dad—

I don’t know what you want from me. There’s nothing more I can do. I have put up with this for long enough. I’m done. I’m just so mad all the time, and nothing calms me down. She’s so nasty and hateful, and there is no one to stand up for me. So the anger just builds up in me because I can’t lash out against her. You could at least say something to her. She’s always out of line and thinks I need to be on medication. You don’t; you never have. I remember when I was really young maybe five years ago, I fell asleep on the couch and you carried me to bed. Did you know I was awake? I was. And I pretended to sleep because I loved that you were actually holding me, actually caring for me. Now, that would just be silly to think you could actually care for me like that when you can’t even stand up for your daughters or yourself. So, this will be the last weekend that I will be at your house.

Love,

Sarah
Although I don't want to, I need to put on a smile and go because it's Christmas. Since my dad moved to Indiana, I don't see him very much but he's always in town for the holidays. My sister and our older siblings, who are also in town, make the drive in to spend Christmas night with our dad and the skinny woman. She pretends like she's done no harm. She pretends to be so ignorant.

There is coldness in the air that we can all sense because our dad is acting so strange. We eat dinner, we open presents, and then we all sit down because Dad needs to tell us something. The doctor in my dad comes out as he explains some condition with big words and long meanings. And then his conclusion hits me hard.

"I have cancer."

My heart sinks slowly into an empty pit, and my first reaction is to look at the skinny woman. I try to see even a glimpse of emotion. None. She sits there with a blank smug expression on her face showing no compassion towards my dad.

My older brother, in town for the holidays, is the first to stand. He walks over to my dad and hugs him and pats his back like they are two old friends.

"We're all here for you, you know."

My dad smiles at all of us and pride gleams in his eyes. Then the skinny woman steals the spotlight and dives into a lighter conversation.

I look over to my brother who went from across the room to sitting right beside our dad.

"Is mine bigger?"

"I don't know; it may be."

My brother and dad hold their hands up to each other's with their palms touching, comparing size. I can't help but smile for I've never seen such a connection between them. I realize then that what we had come to be was so much more than this half-dysfunctional family. Through it all we can still lean on one another. And although the skinny woman will never change, that passive man who is so impossible and out of touch is still my dad.

Now is when we choose to ignore our past. It lingers above us but we wave our white flags and retreat. We gather together for a photo of all the kids and give a lazy smile because we've taken so many. Everyone will be going home tomorrow, so all of us kids expect a long goodbye.

My sister steps toward dad, her arms reaching out—

"—Oh—well, I'm parked this way," dad says shooting a sharp wave.

He turns on his heels, not coldly, but blindly as he makes his way to the car.

We siblings pause and stare at each other for a moment. Then we smile and laugh.

Because that's our dad.
Madelaine O'Reilly-Brown  
Of Monster and Mattress  
Clayton High School

I was eight years old when my dad married my stepmother and when we all moved into our new house. While I liked my stepmother very much, I was very opposed to the idea of a new member of my family, in a way that could be described most accurately as righteous indignation. “How dare they?” was a question that often crossed my mind. Our house, which I called my “new house,” was new only in the sense that we were not well acquainted with it; its floors already creaked with age, and it had small rooms. Although I tried to disguise my immediate affection for the place, purely out of a desire to be difficult, I liked our new house right away.

My room faced the alley, which the neighbor girl informed me was frequented by criminals. In fact, she told me that just a few weeks before she had seen, from her own window, a police car chasing someone through its shadowy twists and turns. Despite the lack of my own encounters with unsavory sorts in the alley, I did notice within my first few nights that the street lamps lining it shone enthusiastically right through my window, which took me some getting used.

For me, the most traumatizing factor when it came to moving into the new house had to be my lack of a bed. The one from my old apartment was too big for the significantly smaller space in my new room, so we had to wait several weeks for a new bed to arrive. During that time I slept on an air mattress on the floor of my room. If not exactly comfortable, the set-up did at least fulfill my need for a moody atmosphere which, at an age where I still wore flowered leggings as pants and tried every night to avoid brushing my teeth, I had already begun to cultivate. I considered the whole thing to be wonderfully urban, the way my mom had described living in New York City to me. I imagined myself to be the worldly traveler—always wandering but never lost—shacking up for the night in some empty loft with light from street lamps filtering onto the walls and the sound of cars racing by below.

That’s how I felt for the first few nights, and then I started to get agitated. A moody atmosphere could sustain me for only so long. I wanted a bed. I began to notice how my elbows and knees dug through the shallow cushioning of the air mattress and into the floor, and how ominously the fan buzzed above me, its cords tinkling as they swung back and forth. I noticed how alone I was. I had never been far away from my dad in my one-story apartment, but now he was all the way downstairs, and it was dark—except for the street lamps, which shone through my shutters in bluish bars on my wall. I became convinced beyond all doubt that someone or something, most likely with claws and shape shifting abilities, was going to kill me in the night. I decided to bring this up with my dad.

“There’s nothing, I promise,” he said. “Don’t you remember that a little girl lived in that room before you?”

“Why do you think she moved?” I replied.

I spent what seemed like endless hours curled up on that mattress, trying to look in every direction at once to make sure no creature got to me. I even made sure to sleep against the wall so that nothing could sneak up behind me. Even worse was the fact that every single night my dad and stepmother would leave me in the room with those things! It began to seem more and more like a conspiracy to get rid of me. I stopped complaining to my dad, who was clearly in on the whole thing, and instead decided to arm myself. However, even as I was clearly a victim of a conspiracy created by my parents, my rule-abiding self would not dare to touch even a butter knife, so instead I stole a salad fork from the kitchen to use as my primary defense.

One night, just when I was certain the anticipation of my death was sure to kill me, I heard a noise that surely signaled my demise. Footsteps, not my dad’s quick, heavy ones, but a sound like some light-footed creature tip-toeing up the steps. I snatched my salad fork from under my pillow and clutched it to me; I wasn’t going down without a fight. I imagined the monster lunging at me, with eyes a glaring yellow and teeth like arrow-tips. I clenched my teeth and stared at the door. It opened slowly, a bit of yellow light spilling onto the floor from the hallway. I squinted as my stepmother.


“Oh,” I said, tossing the salad fork under my sheets. What was I supposed to say? I had been seconds from stabbing her eyes out in terror.

“Alright, well you go back to sleep now. Oh, and by the way your dad forgot to tell you that your bed should be arriving tomorrow. Sweet dreams, little bird,” she closed the door softly behind her. I heard her feet padding back downstairs as lightly as she had come, and the sound struck me as quite a bit more comforting than it had been before.
The next day my bed was delivered in a huge cardboard box, and my dad spent the better part of an afternoon hammering all its different parts together. It was a soft, clean white and smelled like sawdust; in other words, perfect. I found I slept much better on my new, more substantial mattress, and my night terrors began to disappear. Within a few weeks they were gone altogether, and, like my memories of my old home, they began to feel like a distant past. I learned to feel at peace, and it seemed that so did the monsters who had plagued me. Perhaps they just needed a bed to sleep under.
Amenta’s puffy eyes remained locked on her hands, limp in her lap as quiet sobs rolled through her body and escaped from her lips. I attempted to supply her with a crumpled box of Kleenex, but she made no move to accept it. Tears fell at a steady pace, staining the skirt of her white dress. Those attending the funeral were instructed to wear white with green accents, and in addition to her white dress, she wore a green silk scarf loosely around her neck. I shifted my weight from one foot to the other, shooting a glance at the other girls in the restroom of the church. We had snuck away from the crowd, vainly searching for a way to best console one another. I saw a grim expression on each face, as Amenta’s sobs reverberated through the white-tiled bathroom, wrenching at my heart.

I looked intently at the four other girls in the bathroom of the church. My cousins Melanie and Megan, sisters, sat on a tiny wicker couch, both their stares trained on the peeling linoleum floor. My sister, Danielle, was perched on the bathroom counter, sitting in between two sinks. She met my gaze in an instance of understanding and emotion. Amenta continued sobbing softly, slumped in a faded pink recliner. I stood awkwardly by it, simultaneously longing to comfort her yet feeling as if I were on the verge of bursting into uncontrollable sobs myself. My sister appeared at my side, worry etched into her beautiful face. I recognized the glimmer of an idea in her eyes.

“Amenta,” she said hesitantly, placing a hand on Amenta’s trembling shoulder, “I think we should all just pray together.”

The whole group, including Amenta, glanced up at Danielle’s concerned face. I looked to Amenta, watching the now silent tears continue to slide down the curves of her cheeks. She had always had a pretty face and perfect caramel skin, with giant dimples that matched Isis’ that I had always been jealous of. It was the first time I had seen her eyes without a mischievous twinkle behind them. Her mouth twitched into something that resembled a smile as she slowly nodded her head.

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Megan and Melanie stood to circle around where Amenta was seated. My initial reaction was an internal groan. I was reluctant to finally close the tiny circle surrounding my broken-hearted cousin. The air stilled as I slipped one arm around the shoulders of Amenta and the other around my sister. Everyone apart from me closed their eyes and bowed their heads. I heard Danielle intake a sharp breath before she spoke, her voice disrupting the silence.

A week earlier, I had been sitting cross-legged on the marble counter in my 70s-styled kitchen when I heard the tentative creak of the garage door. My mother appeared in the doorway, slowly arriving home from the grocery store. To my surprise, she carried no brown paper bags. I leapt off the counter, ready to hassle her for permission to go out with friends later that night.

When my eyes finally focused on her face, I froze. Her eyes were dark, and the corners of her mouth were turned down. I remained still, waiting for an explanation. She merely gazed at me for a long moment.

“What’s going on?” I heard myself murmur.

My mom blinked as if startled by my inquiry and replied, “Isis was killed last night.”

Her eyes were dark, her expression haggard, as she quietly revealed the murder of my 22-year-old cousin. I slowly lowered myself to the floor, afraid that I wouldn’t be able to stand much longer. I struggled to sort the cacophony of emotion to a manageable hum. I was unsuccessful, until finally a welcomed wave of numbness came over me.

My first coherent thoughts were of Amenta, Isis’ sister; the two had been attached at the hip as long as I could remember, despite the fact that Amenta was three years younger.

My mother continued to speak, yet I could hardly focus on the words that fell around me. I closed my eyes, recalling all the times Isis and Amenta had come to my house to play with me and my siblings or gone shopping with an endless group of our cousins. Whenever I saw them, it was never just Isis, or never just Amenta. It was always Isis and Amenta, Amenta and Isis.

“Lord Jesus Christ, help us in our time of need. Let us begin to accept the loss of our beautiful Isis in her union with you in Heaven,” my sister prayed.
Her eyes were shut, her expression suddenly calm. Megan and Melanie resembled this appearance of tranquility. I glanced towards Amenta to see her lips moving rapidly without sound, in her own separate correspondence with God. The constant flow of tears had stopped, and her eyes were closed tightly as she fervently called upon the Lord. I could see that she felt as if God Himself was in the untidy bathroom with us. Though we were physically intertwined, I was aware of the lack of union between me and my cousins. I did not feel relieved or emotionally elevated. Conversely, I was isolated. A growing sense of annoyance crept up on me.

“This is a waste of time and energy,” I thought to myself, “Why do they have to do this? What's it going to do?”

I have never been a fan of prayer. Despite being raised in a devout Christian family, I have never been religious. For as long as I can remember, I have labeled myself as “undefined” in the religion category, and as I've grown, what exactly my spiritual identity entails has evolved. However, until that day I had never been able to fully understand the unyielding passion with which others were able to express their faith, my own family in particular. Consequently, whenever I was forced into the uncomfortable position of religious rituals, like at family dinners, I was always the one absentmindedly staring into space, mouthing the words to an overly-recited prayer with my hands limp in my lap. I would often nod off during long Sunday morning services, half-heartedly trying to remain conscious.

Amenta lifted her head, looking as if she had something profound to divulge. She stared each of us in the eyes, and her expression morphed into one of determination rather than depression. Her expression startled me, not knowing what had stirred her.

“Y'all need to understand something,” she proclaimed firmly. We waited, and a stream of confused thoughts raced through my head. “All morning, I sat through that damn funeral. Each of those people was grieving, and that ain't no problem. The problem is that everybody was doing it alone, by theyself. That's not how I want this to be. That's not how my Isis would have wanted it to be.”

I blinked, stunned by her words. At that moment, I grasped the enormity of what she had said. I felt my palms begin to sweat and the furrowing of my brow as I processed Amenta's words and the change in atmosphere. I began to form an understanding of the purpose of my sister's initial prayer suggestion. I closed my eyes as the meaning behind such an action fully sank in. Amenta's words sprouted from the inkling of revival she attained through her quick prayer. It was not necessarily a divine intervention, but the comfort she drew from the act of praying itself.

People with faith, those who call others to pray during difficult times, are aware of the need for individuals to feel connected. Being stubborn, I had never considered that religion was not truly about the self but about a community. I had considered it but never experienced such an overwhelming need for faith in the human race.

At that point, I saw the meaning in it. The human race was in a consistent search for spirituality because everyone longs to feel connected. We want to stand on solid ground when our lives are deteriorating before our eyes, to sense the pull of a kindred soul when we feel most alone.

“Just listen,” she continued. “I didn't think I could go on without her. But I am, and I will. I stopped crying because I realized that I'm with Jesus, with y'all, and the other 200 family members out there. That's what I need. Y'all also need to do something for me: y'all cherish your sisters, love your sisters, and hold on to them as tight as you can.”

Melanie, Megan, Danielle, and I reacted to her words in the same manner; we cried. We cried a lot. But these new sets of tears were not of grievance or sorrow or regret. We cried because we somehow became aware of an unexpected change in our lives. Melanie and Megan turned and held each other, perpetual apologies and "I love you's" rapidly mending the shreds in their relationship. Danielle embraced me, squeezing my ribs. We shared a long gaze, the light playing off the flecks of radiant gold and bronze in her eyes as they displayed her excitement.

I had felt connected to others before but never out of necessity. Amenta was not aware of the gravity of what she had shared with the small group of young women in the run-down restroom of that church. She had disclosed to me why humans needed faith. One's faith doesn't necessarily have to be in God or a divine power, but in people.

Since the day of the funeral and my personal revelation, I've re-launched my spiritual journey. Though my faith in God has not increased, my faith in humanity in general certainly has; if I observe another soul in need of prayer and comfort, I no longer boast any disdain towards it. The basic necessity for spiritual union between individuals exceeds petty religious differences. The need is always present no matter the person. Everyone
grieves, everyone encounters hardship, and in order to push through these times, individuals must be introspective of their beliefs, as well as the beliefs of others.

I would have never anticipated that I could feel so connected to another person in such a time of loss. I never fully comprehended such a concept until her statement registered in my mind. I interlaced my fingers with my sister’s, and soon enough, the five girls were gripping one another’s hands. We wiped our eyes, fixed our hair, glossed our lips, and strode confidently out the door, on a mission to reveal the secret to the luminous cord that united us in that moment.
The light from her eyes fades away, and the slight whirring of her gears turning fades into silence. She stops in place. Her head hanging looking down on the work table; she leans as if about to fall over. If Annabelle didn’t know better, she’d look like another scrap pile sitting amongst the tools on the engineer’s work bench.

“You’ve killed her.”

The madman looks up at the woman, “Killed her? I’ve only turned her off, dear.”

“With the intention of never turning her on again, that’s killing her!” She tries to push by him and turn the robot back on, but he moves to intervene.

“Legally, I’m as innocent as a child; no one cares for anything non-human. All I have to do is claim that it’s got a glitch; they’ll turn the case over faster than a pancake.” He begins taking off the metal plates covering her control panel.

The woman goes into a rant, letting her emotions fuel her words and actions. “She is a person, Howard. Roberta might not be human, but her emotions still count. You don’t just kill someone because they have asthma, right? A glitch won’t pass as an excuse. I’ll make sure you’re jailed for the rest of your…”

“But she isn’t human; she isn’t a citizen. No one will listen to your claims. I’d have everyone take out their phones: ‘Do you think your cellphone is sentient? Maybe you shouldn’t shove it in your pocket so much, it’s like slavery.’ They’ll laugh at you. No one will take you seriously.”

“She’s passed Turing, she’s sentient enough to be human,” she claims. There’s a flash of electricity as he rewires a few things. “You’re hurting her!” she pleads.

“She can’t feel!” he responds. “Her nerve sensors turn off when she does, there’s no pain! Even then, would you not squish a bug if you saw one, despite what it may feel?” He grips at the air as if grasping an idea, his voice rising with each word.

The woman steps forward while he is gesturing and flips the switch. The light returns, gears click, and the metal plates slide. She’s awake.

“…Ms. Enns? Mr. Capet?” The robot looks down at the rainbow of wires protruding from her stomach. She shakes, and the buzzing of the gears sounds louder. The worry doesn’t show on her face, but her hands move as if to stop bleeding in a wound.

“Her neural networks are only artificial ones, made by men like McCulloch and Pitts, not by a mother or a father. It isn’t even as human as a dog, Annabelle, you’re not listening to me!” Howard continues as if nothing has changed, pulling at wires and moving parts out of his way. Roberta screeches and doubles over. “Now see what you’ve done, you’re the one hurting her. I’m only trying to salvage its parts for something that could be useful.”

“The war can find its own damned metal! She doesn’t need to die for it.”

“My metal, my metal, my metal…” Roberta repeats. Her voice is fading, and the light of her eyes blinks as if she were low on power. She stops trying to fix what’s wrong and lies there, shaking. The words continue to repeat.

“She’s my sister. The war is as good as lost, no matter the difference of a few bullets! There’s no hope, Howard.” There are tears in Ms. Enn’s eyes; she fights to keep them back.

“She isn’t your sister; she’s more your slave! She’s not related by blood; her purpose was to clean your house while your parents worked. It’s as good as a vacuum cleaner!” He begins tearing at the metal with bare hands now, tossing it aside. More of the robot’s innards are exposed. The repeating words fade into silence. The lights are there but very dim.

Annabelle pushes him now and tries to repair what she can. She bends the metal of the chest plate roughly back where it was using some gloves and a vise grip. “But she has emotion, Howard. You can’t ignore that!”

He grabs at her arms and pushes her aside, looking into her eyes. “Only as much as was programmed. She’s made to fake emotions; she doesn’t feel anything. She’s programmed to say that she does. It’s not real, Ann.”
“Let go of me!” She struggles to free herself. “She’s shown far more emotion than she was programmed for.”

“That’s because it has an adaptive interface and machine learning. She’s programmed to learn!”

“What is a human but a creature that learns? Isn’t that what separates us from animals?” She gets free of him and tightens her grasp on the vise grips. “What’s the difference, other than biology? And even then, her systems are made well enough that they’re practically the same as prosthetics.”

He ignores her and begins tearing again at the robot, “Only a program, Annabelle,” he hisses. There’s a loud squeak as the metal bends.

Ms. Enns pushes him away from the table again. Howard fumbles and manages to grab a hammer from the table in the process. “She’s my sister!” Annabelle reminds him.

His arms tense, and he pushes her back with more force this time. She stumbles and swings the vise grips around to hit his head. Howard bends at the waist slightly to avoid the blow and brings up the hammer in return. Annabelle steps back, barely avoiding the swing. A spark flies from the remains of the robot. They both swing again. Gears begin humming again, just enough to drown out the sound of impact. Ms. Enns falls backward, Howard to the side. The gears stop one last time.

Silence falls.
Savannah Phifer
Moving
Mansfield High School

It was night in the countryside of Sweden. A half-moon illuminated the fields, turning the grass bright silver and the tiny drops of dew into little white pearls. This night was unusually warm for spring, and a soft wind blew through the newly budding treetops. The scenery was cut in half for a few seconds by a passenger train. Its windows lit up the surrounding tracks, and beside one of the windows sat a young woman. There was nothing particularly handsome or pretty about her, but she had an air that interested people.

She stared across the silvery fields, her possessions sitting in an IKEA bag next to her. She hated moving, but she had no choice. She just couldn’t stay in the same place for more than a year. Her wandering habits not only annoyed her friends (whom she never talked to again) and her parents (whom she didn’t talk to much anyway), but it annoyed her the most.

She just couldn’t understand it. Why couldn’t she just stay put like a normal person? If she stayed too long in any particular place, she would soon become depressed and would not feel any better until she began to pack her things. Her “things” included a few favorite shirts, a cookbook, two pairs of jeans, a French press, makeup bag, and an old book she picked up at an antique bookstore. The latter was special as it was one of the few things she had recently bought and actually kept.

This young woman was a horrible compulsive buyer. She would furnish her entire apartment with the hopes that if she bought the things she liked it would make her feel at home. None of this ever worked. She still felt empty and lost in her own house. Eventually, she would pack her bag of essentials and leave, selling, giving, or throwing away all that she had bought the previous year, with this one book as the exception.

She was living in a small rural town at the time (the name of which she can no longer remember), and she thought that having a collection of old, original books would make her feel more settled. Not surprisingly, it didn’t, and she sold all of them back except for this one. Its cover was tanned leather, painted blue and green, an illustration of a walrus on the cover. It was from her guess, an encyclopedia of the animal kingdom but it was written in German which she did not speak. Most people would have kept the book for its sheer novelty; some would get rid of it because they could not read it, but not her. Every night she would sit up in bed with her notebook and Swedish/German translator close at hand. She actually enjoyed translating the book. It was one of the few things that kept her entertained.

Her cell phone buzzed in her pocket. She picked it up and read the test message: Where are you? Just got home, and you are gone.

She tapped out her response: I’m leaving, Alex. It doesn’t feel like home to me anymore.

She was quickly answered: You’re leaving me? Why?! What did I do?

Her: Nothing. I’m just leaving, that’s all.

Alex: But you are leaving me too. Don’t I matter to you at all?

Her: Yes, but I want to leave. I told you this would happen.

Alex: Yeah, but I thought you were joking.

She sighed. This always happened. Get into a relationship and they always end up more attached to you than you are to them. They never believe you when you say, “One day, I will just leave for no reason, and nothing you can do will stop me.” She normally couldn’t stand the complications that relationships brought, so she tried not getting involved with people, but Alex was so nice and kind. He was supportive and fun to be with. It was perfect, until it became unbearable. She had begun to feel smothered under his attention, becoming annoyed with his constant care and affection. She had to go. “Besides,” she told herself, “it’s time to move anyway.”

Her: Listen- I am going to start a new life again. I don’t need you weighing me down.

Alex: What? What are you saying, Lena?

Her: I’m getting a new number and am blocking yours. Don’t take it personally.

Alex: How can I not take that personally?

Her: Thank you so much, Alex. I can never replay you for your love. Goodbye.

She ended the conversation and deleted his number from her phone before he had a chance to send one more text. He was gone. For good. She liked that feeling. That feeling of cutting all ties and moving on. If her
new life and apartment didn't suit her this time, she was determined to move out of the country. However, for whatever reason, she had a good feeling about this; she had a really good feeling about this move.

Absentmindedly, she played with her driver's license. It was almost useless because she never drove, but it was strangely reassuring to her. This is who I am. This is who I will always be. It pleased her to know that amongst the crazy turmoil that usually came out of her life she was like the eye of a hurricane. While chaos evolved and encased her, she stood calm and controlled it in the middle of it all. Friends and lovers come and go, towns and cities fade into the back of her memory, but she remained mostly unchanged.

The young woman looked out her window and sighed. She hated moving, but she had passed that part now. Moving is when you disappear from other people's lives. Moving is when you have to deal with all the soppy friends begging you to stay with them. Right now, she was at the part where she started a new life. Where she could make new friends, get a new job, and start over once again. She had already settled her account with her new landlord and was ready to move in.

The silver fields slowly changed, populated now with houses and small towns. Lena Anderson smiled to herself as she looked towards the distant, approaching lights of Stockholm.
One.
Everything is connected,
a spider’s web.
One thing changes,
so does the next.

Two.
Things change
as easy as unbuttoning a shirt.
Without change,
there is no growth.

Three.
We all grow,
seeds in water and earth.
Nothing can stop us,
though obstacles
we overcome.

Four.
Failure to overcome is failure to exist.
Floating through despair,
as shells of men,
causing more chaos for our brothers.

Five.
Chaos balances disadvantages,
burning the unfairness to ash.
Ability to interpret chaos
raises a being above the rest.

Six.
No one is above the rest.
Power and greed deceive.
All are equal.
Careful who you believe.

Seven.
Believe in something.
Carry this thought with passion.
Without substance,
there is nothing.

Eight.
There is no such thing as nothing.
It doesn’t exist.
Even if there is nothing,
it is still something.

Nine.
There is something inside all.
In some it's an evil.
In some it's a light.
And in some I don't know.

Ten.
It's okay not to know.
Braden Rowe
My Life; Forever Changed
Platte City Middle School

It was a cold September morning. September 4th. My cousin’s birthday and the day my life would be changed forever. As a kid you are always told, “You never know what you have until it’s gone.” For me I didn’t think I would have to realize that until I was older, but on that cold September day it hit me.

September 3rd, 2008
I am enjoying a wonderful home-cooked meal with the best dad in the world and my sister. All was well, except for the fact that my dad had just muscled through a knee surgery only a week ago and was still weak, but that didn’t slow him down to make it a good time.

It was getting late. We were exhausted, so we called it a night. My sister was scared to sleep in her own bed, as always, so she crashed in my room. We said our I love yous and went to bed, not knowing what would follow the next morning.

September 4th, 2008
The alarm sounded. It was time to get ready for school. My sister and I were out of bed within seconds. We both look over to see if my dad has woken up yet. He laid there with his breathing mask not where it should be and motionless. Simultaneously we both ran over to see what was wrong. After calling his name several times, he wouldn’t budge.

I quickly make the decision to call the cops. My sister hands me the phone. The operator picks up and says the usual, “911, what’s your emergency?”

I hesitantly reply, “My dad won’t wake up.”

The operator then asks for the address and alerts the paramedics. She transfers me to the paramedics so they can ask me questions. They ask things like, “Do you see any blood?” and “Is anything broken?” Nothing is out of its normal place.

After several minutes the firefighters arrive with two machines. Two men rush up the stairs without saying a word. My sister and I exchange nervous glances. At that time another firefighter comes and asks where my mom is.

I quickly reply, "In Florida getting married. Why?"

"I need to talk to her. Can you please call her?"

I dialed her number and gave him the phone.

I am sitting on the couch and constantly asking the paramedic if my dad is going to be okay. But I get the same answer every time, “I think so.”

After an hour or so my soon to be step-grandparents arrive to get us. They take us to breakfast and say we aren’t going to school today. This worries me.

As they day progresses I get even more scared of what happened. Around five we load up in the car and drive to the airport to pick up my parents who have come back from Florida after canceling their wedding. I was happy to see them but concerned why they were home so early.

My not-so-step-grandparents dropped us off at our house after a long, silent car ride. My parents sat my sister and me on the couch between them. After a few minutes of silence my mom finally said, “We got a call from the firefighter with some bad news. So we got on the next plane we could. An elderly couple gave up their seats for us to come home early.”

We sat in silence for several minutes. I finally broke the silence by asking, “Is everything okay?”

My mom hesitantly replied, “No, your father has… he has passed away.”
I am a casual writer, and from that you can infer that I enjoy writing every so often. If I didn't, you wouldn't be reading this. But, casual writers are not the writers that I'm going to discuss; today I am talking about writers we were all familiar with at one point or another: test writers. You know, those writers that write those ever so interesting questions such as "There was a farm with two apples. Johnny took one apple from the farm. Jimmy took an apple from the farm as well. Carl took two-hundred and forty pears. How many apples are left in the farm?"

I thoroughly enjoyed test questions like these as a child, for when you were having a wonderful day at school (because every day at school was an absolutely wonderful day), it was always the highlight of the day to take a test which you always studied for thoroughly instead of sleeping (as you do with every test, because sleep will never help). But after all these years of test writers creating whatever they want as test questions, such as “You and Karen were eating pie. You ate the square root of ¾’s of the pie and Karen ate ¼ of the pie. How much of the pie is left?” schools are finally cracking down on some serious test writing issues.

School districts in states across America are banning words that may either offend or evoke bad emotions to people of certain religions/cultures/sexes/etc. This is a list of some of these words pulled from Slive.com:
- Alcohol (beer and liquor), tobacco, or drugs
- Birthday celebrations (and birthdays)
- Bodily functions
- Catastrophes/disasters (tsunamis and hurricanes)
- Celebrities
- Computers in the home (acceptable in a school or library setting)
- Crime
- Divorce
- Evolution
- Expensive gifts, vacations, and prizes
- Halloween
- Homelessness
- Homes with swimming pools
- Hunting
- Junk food
- Loss of employment
- Nuclear weapons
- Politics
- Poverty
- Rap Music
- Religious holidays and festivals (including but not limited to Christmas, Yom Kippur, and Ramadan)
- Rock-and-Roll music
- Running away
- Sex
- Slavery
- Television
- Video games
- Vermin
- Weapons

THANK GOODNESS they're finally cracking the whip on these hooligans! I am forever mentally scarred by a question from a standardized test I took in my 6th grade Math class:

“You were having sex with your homeless slave on Christmas in your 24 karat gold indoor swimming pool while listening to Rock 'n Roll music and discussing politics. There was a severe hurricane outside which reminded you of your previous marriages, your handgun collection, and how you ran away from home to become a rapper
and study evolution. It was your homeless slave’s birthday and the day after her Bat Mitzvah. You realized you could lose your job as pastor of your local church for your actions, so you decided to rob an Apple store to get an iPhone. What type of junk food did you eat beforehand when you went hunting?

A: Rats, weasels, and flies.
B: Television
C: Celebrities
D: Pot Brownies“

Good God! I was so shaken, I got it wrong! The answer was B!

But that’s the past, so now we can focus the bright, censored test future of generations to come!! Parents can sleep at night, knowing that we can be assured that we will have test questions without harmful words like this: “Write your Social Security number, your home address, and your and/or your parent’s credit card number on the blank below.”

Well, if you’ll excuse me, I have a lot of work to do. According to American Express, I have made several ridiculous purchases recently.
Jenna Schnelker
Without Borders
Parkway South High

When Borders closed, I felt like an amputee. Somebody had cut off part of me, and it could never be sewn back on. That spacious chain-store was my home away from home, my private sanctuary. It came as a great surprise to everybody that I found refuge among literature. I was an unwilling learner, so adamant in my reluctance that I had to be taken out of class all through first and second grade for extra reading help. Although I loved my Oasis tutor, my encouraging teachers, and supportive parents, it was Borders that won me over.

As I walked through those glass doors for the first time, I was embraced by the ambiance of security and ease. I knew this was a place where I could grow, unlike school. I could roam these shelves and huddle in these corners with an open book in my lap for hours and not feel insignificant. At Borders I was a girl who could devour a book in one sitting, not the girl stuck in the ugliest color reading group and who couldn’t even read those imitation chapter books without a partner. During reading time my teacher would make a big point to stick me on a chair in the corner of the room next to her desk and far away from all the other kids. This not only embarrassed me further but heightened my sense of isolation. However, I was soon to learn I wasn’t alone. There was a whole other world out there that I could relate to, and Borders was the path that led me to it. Every Tuesday night while my sister was at dance class, I could escape that worthless and lonely feeling and dive into different realms full of wizards, chocolate factories, strong-willed orphans, and sparkly vampires.

As years passed, I moved out of the corners and sat confidently in the café, sipping my flavorful caffeine stimulants, inhaling warm snicker-doodles, and flipping page after page of new books. Each turn sent a fresh whiff of ink and crisp paper toward me, causing a safe sensation to spread through my entire body, like when I’d wake up in the night on a road trip and saw my parents in the front seat and felt the road moving smoothly underneath me. My embarrassment at my past struggles was replaced by pride in my earned abilities. Now that my safe haven has been invaded and torn down, I haven’t lost my love for books or my well-placed loathing of every other chain of bookstores. Barnes and Noble would not be so bad if they weren’t such a strong advocate of the Nook. That is one unnatural batch of Kool-Aid I will never drink. I am willing to change and adapt but not when it is senseless and takes meaningful experiences away from people.

Trust me; I am not stuck in the Dark Ages. I can operate a Smart phone, iPad, all the fancy technology out there today, but a Nook is something I refuse to get used to. A kid with a Nook can’t turn it on and smell fresh or musty pages. They can’t walk along the shelves of a bookstore, skimming their fingertips over spines, or gauging how far they’ve come by looking at the side. All of the things that drew me in and aided me in growing to be an avid reader are becoming extinct. In my opinion technology isn’t going to help kids like me. It’s going to make it harder for kids to get off the internet and get out in the real world to learn. The Nook is like a simulation of what books used to be. It’s just not the same.

Borders is never coming back. I accept this, but I don’t accept the fact that future generations of kids like me will never have that wonderful place to turn to. They will never have a place to go where they can feel safe and unpressured. They can’t immerse themselves in stories and books the way that I did because they don’t have the same open and supportive environment. I have been trying to recreate the feeling that I used to get when Borders was still around. I can still wrap myself in books at home, but I’m almost reluctant to get new ones because the memories won’t be as satisfying. I won’t have a friendly conversation with an employee or a comfy sitting spot for when I pick up new books. My friends and family don’t understand this no matter how hard I try to explain, but this doesn’t make me feel alone. I know that the kind of different that I am now, the kind that gets excited when I see a stack of lengthy hard-covers, is a good kind of different. This different is something I should be proud of. Now that it’s officially gone, I’m inspired to provide a place where kids and adults could enjoy what makes them strange: being a book lover.
Writer's Note

Writing spawned my cereal addiction. In the wee days of summer, while the whole world played outside and laughed and suckled popsicles, I slouched at my desk in my beret and bathrobe, typing. And breakfasting. While one hand reined chaos on the sad, bewildered keyboard, the other delved into a box of half-fermented Go-Lean Crunch. I was not a fan of Go-Lean Crunch, personally, finding its texture and flavor abominable. However, disgust could not stay my hand. I needed cereal. After all, cereal enabled eating, eating sparked chewing, chewing aided thinking, and thinking facilitated writing—how could I survive if I couldn't write?

Writing is my spirit, my world—my mirror. Through writing I am able to glimpse reality and able to glimpse myself within it. To me, that precious clarity is worth suffering through an entire roomful of Go-Lean Crunch.

The specific pieces I have prepared for this competition are varied. In them, I sought to play; to experiment with styles, genres, and ideas far from my usual "comfort zone." I wanted to take risks, to be daring. My works here are different for me: in topic and structure, broaching whole new planets. They also are more emotional and expressive. In reading them, I hope my readers feel what I felt. I hope they know pain. I hope they know hope.

I hope also my goals are not overly presumptuous. And, most significantly, I hope that my readers enjoy my work—many dear little granola granules lost their lives in its birth.

My Bones

Birds have hollow skeletons:
empty spaces, yawning black:
light, open, suspended, floating, caverns between the ribs.

I am heavy.

I am dense, hot and loud sticky and swallowed; padlocked box.

Every piece of me is enclosed.

When I am dead the box will melt-- skin, stomach, liver, lungs. My body will open:
marrow bloodless skull immaculate ribcage hollow.

My heart will rot as food for worms.

My bones will be a bird.
I stared at the clock, praying class would end soon. I had only been in here for 15 minutes, yet I expected class to be over. I looked back down at my sewing machine, coming to the realization that I wasn’t very good at Family and Consumer Sciences. I had just messed up my sewing, again.

Slowly I pulled my bag out from under the foot pedal and mustered the courage to ask Mrs. Brauer to borrow her seam ripper again. This was the fourth time I had asked her to borrow it today. My record was twelve, and hopefully it would stay that way.

I walked up to her desk, slowly, not wanting to hear her monotonous voice, as it had become more and more sarcastic every time I returned.

“Hey, Mrs. Brauer,” I muttered. I looked down at the ground, hoping I could do something in the next half of the semester to get my grade back to an A. Asking her repeatedly for her assistance and interrupting her work time constantly probably didn’t help my grade much.

She was typing furiously at her keyboard. When I swallowed and looked up, waiting for a response, there was none.

Eventually, she grumbled, “They’re in the box. Help yourself.”

Her eyes never left her laptop monitor, nor her fingers, the keyboard. I was pleasantly surprised not to hear another remark, but I think it was because she’d lost all hope in me at this point.

I took another seam ripper, got rid of today’s “progress” on my bag, and returned to my sewing machine. I shoved my bag under there, and began to sew again. I hadn’t sown for five minutes before I jammed the machine and my bag again.

“Great,” I said under my breath, hoping nobody would hear me talking to myself.

“Maybe if this would help me at some point in life, I would try harder,” I convinced myself.

I pushed my bag towards the machine, where it was less crumpled, so I could take off the foot pedal and get my bag out. I stood up and carefully removed the foot pedal, holding the machine in place. I bent over to get a closer look, and as I slid my bag out from under the sewing needle, I heard a loud mechanical sound emit from my sewing machine. I then lost feeling in my right index finger, without connecting the two, seemingly irrelevant occurrences.

“ Weird,” I said and yanked on the bag, only to feel resistance. Not on the bag, but my hand. I bent over again and looked at the bag, but I instantly regretted it. The cool steel had plunged into my finger, through my nail, and pulled the yarn in with it.

“Oh crap,” I censored, knowing that what I really thought wasn’t allowed to be said or written for any storytelling in the future.

“Mrs. Brauer!” I called out. My finger had not started hurting yet. I didn’t know when the shock would wear off, but my hand was starting to burn. Blood poured down, staining the bag underneath. That would definitely not help my grade.

“Mrs. Brauer!” I called again, looking at her desperately, but she was with another student. I looked at my hand and decided to get this over with before I could feel the process. I didn’t want to interrupt anyone who needed help; that’d be impolite. Thinking about this after the incident, I realize that I probably needed more help than they did, and I kind of wish I hadn’t been so “polite.”

I reached over with my other arm slowly, and turned the hand wheel, cranking out the needle.

“Ow ow ow ow ow ow ow.”

I hadn’t really felt any pain yet, but if I didn’t hurry, I would definitely start feeling something. By the looks of my bag, and how it had gone from black and white to crimson, I’d be feeling a pretty intense something.

“This isn’t good. This is not good, no.”

There. The needle was out. I could smell the hot blood. It was strong. I don’t think I’ll ever forget the pungent, metallic odor.

I looked back at my hand and pulled it out slowly, realizing that when I stood up, my foot was still on the electric pedal that made the sewing machine go. Oops. I lifted my foot slowly, not wanting to yank the yarn stuck in my finger and still dangling on the needle, as it would only plunge down, pulling on my hand.
Slowly, I pulled out the yarn too, and as I did this, I began to wonder, “What nicknames will I be getting for the rest of my life?” trying to stray to a better topic.

Finally, after what seemed like hours of pulling, the string was out. Blood had run down to my elbow, and my arm was starting to burn. I cupped my good hand under my elbow after raising my bad hand up, and walked towards the teacher. Forget politeness, I was cutting the line she had in front of her desk.

I got to her desk and what began, “Caleb, I have a line; wait your turn,” turned into a stare of disbelief. “Mrs. Brauer, can I go to the nurse please?”

No answer.
She stared, gawking at the sight before her. After a few seconds she stuttered out the sentence: “Y-yes Caleb. You don’t need a pass, go. Jus-just go. Now.”

“Thanks.”
I turned on my heel and walked to the nurse’s office as quickly as I could, with my hand still above my head.
I guess I’m not much of a hands on learner, I thought to myself, turning away from the pain I was sure would ensue. You’ve really got to hand it to me, I continued. I guess you could say I’m not very handy when it comes to sewing.

I began to laugh as I walked down the hall, and eventually that laugh choked into a muffled cry. The pain was there. The shock was gone.
It hit me faster and harder than I was ready for. Tears streamed down my face, and as I did my best not to cry aloud, holding it down and letting out slight winces only hurt me even more so.
I’ve hurt myself a lot in my life. I’ve broken my collarbone, gotten a concussion, been shot with a paintball gun where no man should be shot, but out of all of those, I really had to say: That. Hurt.
I eventually arrived at the nurse’s office, finding that the tears in my eyes stung more than the volcanic blood, seeping down my arm. She quickly asked me what happened, who I was, when it occurred, and a lot of other stuff.
The next few moments were a blur, but I found myself lying on a cot, staring at the ceiling with an ice pack and bandage on my finger, listening to the nurse as she relayed the news to my mother. I was sniveling like a little girl who scraped her knee. I can’t believe how pathetic I am, I thought to myself.

“Hello, Mrs. Seymour?” I heard the nurse say. This would be fun to listen to.
“Hi, I’m the school nurse for Plaza Middle School, I’m afraid your son Caleb has had a little…” she paused, looking for the right word to describe my condition. Eventually, she landed on “accident.” I could only imagine what my mom was thinking.

Great.
“No, no, he’s quite alright now, I believe. Has he been up to date with his tetanus shots?”
Oh boy. I could only imagine the panic attack on the other end of the line as she tried to correct her phrasing.
“No, Mrs. Seymour, he’ll be quite alright, we just had a little accident in his sewing class is all…” Her voice trailed off, and as I stared at the ceiling, I zoned out. When class ended officially, everyone headed straight for the buses, and after I got my stuff, I was then bragging to everyone at how awful I was at sewing.

When I finally got home, I opened the door to my house, still wondering the nicknames I might be getting, and it surprised me that I hadn’t heard any when I saw my mom and dad waiting.
The first thing I heard from my dad was, “Hey, Stitch!”
Brooke Sherman  
Censorship Today  
Blue Springs South High School

Censorship is happening in schools and libraries all around the U.S. Censorship is “the removal, suppression, or restricted circulation of literary, artistic or educational materials—of images, ideas, and information—on the grounds that these are morally or otherwise objectionable in light of standards applies by the censor” (Minor). In a recent study, “Challenges by Reason,” 3,169 books were banned for being sexually explicit. While some people challenge that censorship is fine and should be done to protect their and others children’s minds, others think that censorship is wrong and their children should be allowed to read what the parents decide is best.

Censorship in schools is restricting children from the books that they want to read and enjoy. A school library gives children a chance to explore the world through reading, therefore allowing children their own sense of freedom and choice. Other parents shouldn’t have the right to choose what one’s own children are reading. Cari Rerat, a librarian in Joplin, Missouri, says, “I dictate what my child reads, not what other children read. I don’t know them like I know my own child” (Hadsall). Allowing parents to take books out of the school library is like parenting other children; how would you know what is best for that child if you have never met that certain individual? Many parents are worried about their children’s innocence being lost at such a young age. Having a child brings on a towering amount of responsibility, one of those responsibilities includes being aware of what your child is reading. Other parents have the responsibility of their own children. The question is what parents are supposed to do when their child has a school assignment to read a book, and they do not have a choice.

Censorship is an important point because it is so closely related to the use of education in schools. During the school year children are assigned certain novels to read, especially when they reach middle school and high school. There are so many well-known and gifted authors who write astonishing books meant to be read by the world. For example Louis Lowery, a known author in schools around the world, has had some of her books win the Newberry Medal. These books represent some of the best children’s books ever published. The Giver has been challenged many times over the years; parents argue that the book gives too many ideas about suicide. USA Today stated, “But opponents criticize the book’s failure to clearly explain that suicide is not a solution to life’s problems.” Keeping children from a wide range of books hinders them from the world. The Giver has been in school curriculum for years. The book has been number eleven on the list of most challenged books since the 1900’s (Books). Books allowed into school curriculum are monitored and chosen to give children a sense of life in the real world. An article on Censorship in American Schools stated, “The most common and obvious reason is the fear that students and youths will be exposed to material that they may not be mentally or emotionally ready for.” This leaves the question, how do we know when they are ready?

If the schools wait for one or two children to become mature enough to read the books, then no books would ever be read or taught. If parents are so worried about what their children are reading, they should talk to their children about what is in the books. A worker from USA today said, “The book gives students a way to talk about difficult topics already openly discussed in the media.” Giving your children a chance to read books grants your children to be open about life and the difficult issues that come along with it. Many parents would argue that they do not have enough time in the day to check on what their children are reading. There are useful resources to allow parents to easily view what their children are reading. Rerat stated, “...the library’s website has links to professional reviews by establishes literary critics.” Rerat also commented, “These reviews will tell you what the book is about, for what age group and a lot of times will clue you in on controversial things” (Hadsall). Using these available resources allows you to become interactive in your child’s life.

Censorship in schools is not justifiable. Becoming closer to your children allows you to inform them on how you view certain books. Censorship is a way for parents to get around the awkward issues in life. Mary Brice, a former children’s book buyer stated, “It’s a time [childhood] when their minds are very anxious to be challenged to grow.” Allow your children to grow.

Sources Cited  
Sarah Smith
A True Gift of Love
Platte City Middle School

It took my parents many years to learn that one of God’s greatest gifts is unanswered prayers. Many years before I was born, my parents tried for a long time to have a baby. It was something they both wanted more than anything. After trying to get pregnant for several years, their doctor determined that they were an infertile couple and would need to go through various medical procedures to attempt pregnancy. So their story began….or as they would say, their physical, mental, emotional and financial roller coaster ride started.

After the fifth medical procedure, they had a positive pregnancy and were only to be devastated a week later when they miscarried. After this unbearable outcome, they determined it wasn’t God’s plan for them to have their own child. They decided adopting was the right path.

The 3 year wait for a baby seemed never ending. Finally, a call came from the agency—my parents had been chosen by a birthmother. The baby was due in less than a month. So some aunts, cousins, and friends had a small baby shower to get all the minimal necessities for the newborn baby girl. My parents even bought a special dress to bring the baby home in from the hospital. The adoption agency called, and the baby was born on an early spring morning. My Mom went to the bank to get a cashier’s check and then to a friend’s house to borrow a baby car seat. When she returned there was an express package between the door and storm door—airline tickets. As my Mom went inside the living room she could see the message light was blinking on the phone and started crying because she knew in her heart what had happened. The agency told her the birth mother changed her mind; her parents were going to help her raise the child. It was one of the toughest calls my Mom had to make to my Dad breaking the horrible news.

Back on the adoption waiting list, they decided if and when they were selected again that they would not tell anyone, in case another birth mother changed her mind. Four months later they received another call from the adoption agency—they had been selected again. When they heard the details of this birthmother, it wasn’t a good situation.

Two sisters living in Wichita, Kansas, were pregnant with their 5th and 6th babies, which weren’t due until November and December. The birth mother having her 5th baby was the one who chose my parents. It was a very awkward situation. That evening they discussed the situation and weighed the pros and cons. After agonizing over it for hours, they decided not to accept the offer. It was too big of a risk for them to take. They couldn’t handle being heartbroken again.

A month later my mom called the agency for her monthly check in. They told her that the birthmother in Wichita hadn’t picked another couple because she still wanted them to have her baby. Mom didn’t know what to think. They discussed the situation again, feeling they had been selfish at the time and that maybe this was the baby God wanted them to have.

The very next day, Mom called the agency back and said they wanted to accept the offer for the baby that was due in December. They were excited but scared at the same time because they would have to wait almost 4 months to see how this would end. A few days later they talked to the birth mother on the phone. She was a very nice, sweet and quiet woman. She had 4 girls who were 3, 5, 7 and 9 years old. She told them she thought this baby was going to be a boy because it felt different from when she was pregnant with all her girls. At the end of their conversation she told them not to worry because she wasn’t going to change her mind. She wanted them to have her baby. Dad told her not to worry because they weren’t going to change their mind either. Everyone laughed.

Monday morning, December 21, the agency called my Mom at work and said that the birthmother was going into labor and that I could be born on that day. My mom said a prayer and called my dad. She had to go home as she wouldn’t be able to think about anything else or do any work. The agency called several times during the day to give her updates on the birthmother and how things were going. Then, at 5:15 p.m. they called and said I was born at 5:04 p.m. I was a beautiful, healthy, little girl. Now they had to wait 24 hours to see if the birth mother would sign the contract relinquishing her rights or change her mind.

Tuesday morning the agency called and said my parents should come to Wichita as soon as possible to get the baby. One small problem arose. My dad was out of town on a business trip and wouldn’t be back in Kansas City until late that night. A friend of my mom drove her to Wichita to meet the birthmother and get the baby. It
still wasn’t 100% for sure because all the legal paperwork hadn’t been signed and Dad wouldn’t be in Wichita until around 11:00 p.m. so he couldn’t sign his part until Wednesday morning.

When Mom got to the hospital room she saw the birth mother for the first time. The birth mother was quiet and calm. My mom was overwhelmed with emotions: nervous, scared, excited but comfortable at the same time, content with the feeling that this was the real thing. The birth mother asked my Mom, “Do you want to see your baby?” My mom said definitely and started crying because the birth mother asked if she wanted to see her baby. Me.

When the nurse handed me to my mom, she started trembling and tears continued rolling down her cheeks. Words couldn’t express every emotion she was feeling at that exact moment. She held me in her arms gently and snuggled me next to her fast beating heart, sat in a rocking chair and rocked me for a very long time. All she could do was stare at me in disbelief. She told me she cried for many reasons: thinking about how the birth mother felt watching me hold her newborn baby, about how this would affect the woman’s other daughters, about all that she and my dad had been through, and about my dad not being beside her to embrace their beautiful daughter together for the first time.

Soon the nurses came in and said that it was time for my mom to sign the adoption papers; my dad could sign them first thing the next morning. Mom was beside herself after seeing that the birthmother had already signed her sections of the legal documents. It confirmed she wasn’t dreaming. She grasped the pen and carefully, neatly and slowly signed her name in all areas required. The hard part was having to wait for Dad to sign them to complete the adoption agreement.

Shortly after signing all the documents, the nursing staff released the birth mother from the hospital. She packed up her things, held me and kissed me goodbye. Then she did the same thing to my mom. My mom's friend took us to a special hotel then left to go back to Kansas City. She knew my parents wanted and deserved to have their time alone with me.

It seemed like forever but my dad got to the hotel at almost midnight. All he could do was hold me in his arms and kiss me. My mom said he cried. They both were so happy. At midnight they were both exhausted, and I was asleep in the hotel baby bed. My dad was exhausted from driving so many hours to get there. My parents went to bed, and as soon as they put their heads on their pillows I started to cry. Parenthood began immediately.

They took me back to the hospital Wednesday morning because Dad wanted to meet the birth mother and her 4 girls. They met in the lobby, and everyone visited for a couple of hours. During this time they took lots of pictures, and the 5 year old wanted to hold me all the time.

My parents loaded me up and headed to Kansas City, Kansas to get as close to our home as we were allowed to. The state law prohibited them from taking me out of the state of Kansas to Missouri without proper authorization. The adoption agency had been working on that paperwork since Tuesday when the birth mother signed the legal documents. But, due to it being a holiday week it took a week or longer to get approval. My parents took me from Wichita, Kansas, to Kansas City, Kansas, and we spent Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, Christmas Day, at a Kansas hotel.

My dad’s family lived in Kansas so we could still see them for Christmas, but my mom was devastated and heartbroken that she wouldn't be able to do the same since her family was in Missouri, a half an hour into the state. Then another Christmas miracle happened, my dad received another call from the agency. They’d gotten a temporary permit to take me to Missouri. My mom cried with joy!

On Thursday, Christmas Eve, my creative mom came up with the ideal to wrap me up like a present and surprise everyone Friday morning. Christmas Day we went to my mom's family house first. She carried me in, and Dad carried all of our presents (except for me). Mom yelled for everyone to come and see what they got each other for Christmas. My Grandma yelled back, “Hold on, I've got to check the turkey.”

Everyone gathered around the box, but no one opened it at first. Finally one of my aunts did. I was sound asleep, and everyone thought I was a doll. Then I stretched and moved my hand. That night we went to my dad’s side of the family and did the same thing. One of my uncles is deaf and his wife was using sign language to tell him that we must have got a new puppy. Boy was she wrong. Dad’s oldest brother opened the box right away, and everyone was in shock when they saw me and couldn’t believe how we kept everything a secret for so long. Once they heard the story about our amazingly, unbelievable week, they understood.

It took almost 2 weeks for me to officially move into my new home in Missouri. The finalization of the adoption took place in Wichita 90 days later. I was very sick and Mommy was holding me, waiting for their turn to go into the judge’s chambers. Out of nowhere the birth mother walked up to her. Mom was in shock, handing me
to the birthmother and running to the back of the courthouse to find her lawyer. The birthmother wanted to give me her final goodbye.

When I turn 18 years old, I have the right to contact my birth mother and half-sisters, but as of now, I don’t know what I want to do. I do know that my parents will support my decision 100% if I decide to contact the agency.

My parents are so happy and thankful that God finally answered their prayers in a way they never expected. To them I am a true miracle. And they are the greatest parents in the world. I love them both so much and am so thankful they are mine, all mine!
Writer’s Note:
When I was in the second grade, I realized that I wanted to be a writer. Now, at that time, my main character was always a young girl with a strong desire to get a pet bunny whose parents said no, but somehow, she ended up with one.

I really wanted a bunny.
I wrote and illustrated (before I’d realized that drawing isn’t my strong point) a children’s book about a girl who finally got her very own bunny, which I entered into a writing contest. I honestly don’t even remember how I placed—I just remember the prize. I got to meet a real-life author! I remember thinking, “I can be that creative!”

When I got to shake her hand is when it really sank in—I realized that this is what I want to do, inspire other young kids as I was inspired.

Writing has been a way for me to escape the chaos around me. I can pick up a pen and retreat into whatever fantasy world I choose. I hope that by sharing my work, I can inspire others to get lost inside the same realm that I do. I also hope to inspire others to find the one thing that makes them happy. My creative outlet is writing, and I hope that by sharing my work, others can maybe realize that reading inspires them. The works I have chosen are those that inspire me the most.

“Double Edged Sword” is a poem I wrote after a difficult break-up, which has helped me emotionally and has also won some recognition for the emotional content it holds.

“A Clean Break” is a short story I wrote in a creative writing class. For the assignment, we were told to write a story that tied in a specific quote. My quote was “you can’t leave a footprint that lasts if you’re always walking on tiptoe.” This story has also drawn some attention for the emotional content it holds as it is something a lot of us can relate to but can still not imagine.

I have also included two very different memoirs, “Art Class and Presidents” and “Finding My Fairytale.” The first is about my experiences as a left-handed minority in a right-handed world. The second is a heartfelt analysis of how unpredictable love can be and how unpredictably wonderful it is for me.

The last poem in the collection is called A Single Rose, for which I had the idea long before it was written and has since been dedicated to my best friend.

For me, writing is a way to escape a boring physics lecture, but it is also a way for me to explain my morals and share my outlook on life with the world. I may not seem to be a completely unique person, but through writing, I hope to prove to the world that I am different and deserve to be heard.

Double edged sword

To what do I owe the honor, Dear Knight?
Thou hast thy silver sword—drawn, ready.
Thy suit of armor glimmers in the light—
Shall I fear this?
Shall I fear you?

Thy sword is but a tool,
A threat against my strength—
Stubborn and waiting—
Shall I fight?
Shall I lose?

‘tis not the question,
To win or lose,
The question is deeper than thy sword.
Shall I find it in your words?
Shall I find it in your heart?

How can I search,
When your heart is closed (But you say it not!)
When your words are careful?
Your sword is drawn,
But your look is kind.
Thy silver sword glimmers in the light,
A threat—ready to strike,
And you whisper—I love you.
But is this love?
I fear the worst, and yet, Love?

War breaks out from my question,
Gunpowder and smoke fill my lungs as screams leave them,
And you whisper—I love you,
But I see your sword,
As it glimmers in the fiery light.

This is but a figment of the mind,
And my mind is overrun by yours.
How can I trust YOUR thoughts,
As they swirl around MY head?
And they whisper—I love you.

The fire starts to smolder,
And I can breathe again—
Ready to give you a fresh start,
But I can see your sword—
Ready and waiting.
Emily Stobbe
First Snow
Kirkwood Senior High School

At the first snow of winter Nash tells me his girlfriend, Roxanne, is pregnant. We are standing out near the edge of the backyard by the pine trees, still green and heavy with snow. “These trees are built for colder climates,” I’d said, touching my fingers together and spreading my elbows wide apart to make a triangle. “See, the snow slides right off. Whiff. And the branches don’t break.”

“Thanks for the biology lesson,” he said. Then he tells me.

The first thing I think of is how beautiful Nash looks, like he did when he was eleven and we got Hanukkah photos taken to mail out to relatives. On that day he had a suit with a big wrinkle over the breast pocket, and I positioned myself slightly overlapping him so the photographer wouldn’t catch it, not wanting my brother to look rumpled on the shiny photo paper. Now he wears a red knit scarf over his coat, and his hair, curly, is flecked with snow. His lips are full and slightly open, as if he is waiting to say something important or terrible. Often the most important things to say are also terrible.

“Say something,” he says, kicking some snow so it explodes in a great flurry of flakes.

“Um, Roxanne—told you that?”

“Yeah. She told me last night.”

“What did she say?”

He spits into the snow. “She said something like, ‘Don’t be mad at me, but I think I’m pregnant.’ Then she said she actually knew she was. She said she used up a whole box of tests, and only two said she wasn’t. She said her parents don’t know yet, neither do her friends. Only us two. And you now. I said—”

Nash is thirteen minutes younger than me but four inches taller, and while we used to be closer—wearing matching boy and girl sailor costumes, sitting atop massive pumpkins for photographs at Mackie’s Farm, smoking our first cigarettes together at thirteen—when he’d met Roxanne, he’d become more distant. I was surprised when he asked to take a walk with me, but I put on my snowshoes—dorky large red things—and we set out, me eating snow and him whistling a sad song about a boy going to war, until we reached the fence, and he turned to me.

“Is she keeping it?” I ask him, finally. My voice is quiet.

“I don’t know. I couldn’t ask. I already got her pregnant.”

“I didn’t know you were even having sex,” I say.

He punches me in the shoulder, awkwardly, hard enough that I take a slight step back. “Andrea,” he says, “I think I love her.”

I have never been in love with anyone. I love things deeply, something I’ve worked through in my mind until I feel like I’m chewing old gum. I’ve loved feeling fluid, which happens after I’ve run for a while and my muscles give into the rhythm of it, strain and release, and I feel like the animal I’ve buried inside. I’ve loved being thin. I’ve loved maxi skirts, and sunglasses, and the smell of fire. When I was seven I lit dry leaves to flame and burned my fingertips, and I loved feeling close to death or pretending I was. I love imagining what things will be like, as a caterpillar might love imagining itself with wings.

But I’ve never loved another boy—besides my father or Nash. When Nash met Roxanne, a college student who likes designing furniture in her free time, he stepped into a foreign world, a world of flowers in crinkling cellophane, of phone calls at night, of comforting her while she keened over a dead grandfather, apparently of bodies moving against each other under a sea of blankets.

In the snow, I am watching Nash’s lips turn purple. I loved lording the age difference over him when we were younger, bragging about me being the older sister, gripping his hand so tight he couldn’t tear free when we crossed the street. Some of those sentiments linger. He is my baby brother, in need of protection. I want to hold him. I want to shield him like I did for the Hanukkah portrait so many years ago. Most of all I want to have something important to say to him, something that will make him not so afraid. But I have never been where he is; I have never been pregnant, or the friend of someone pregnant, or in love. Snow begins to fall heavier, thrashed around by the wind before hitting the ground. He wipes at a few stray tears like squashing bugs, and we turn and trudge inside.

A few hours later I drive him to a pancake house. Roxanne is coming there at eight to talk to him, she said over the phone. Our mother already made us spaghetti, but Nash didn’t eat much, so we came early. I tell him I’m
paying. He orders all-you-can-eat pancakes, a separate plate of hash browns, and six strips of bacon. The waiter frowns when he sets down the pitcher of orange juice.

“Wonder what Roxanne’s telling you,” I say. I don’t think it could be good. She’s in college, enrolled to transfer to SCAD Atlanta next August; her father isn’t exactly rich, and she requires physical therapy once a week for something with her femur.

He is quiet, drinking his orange juice and watching me watch him. “I don’t know. She didn’t seem sad on the phone, but she didn’t seem happy either.”

Roxanne rarely smiles, except for at babies.

“I can’t guess what she’ll say,” I say.

“I should know.” He sounds anguished. “I’m her boyfriend. I should know her well enough to know.”

The waiter brings him his food and after that we stop talking, Nash loading his fork with triangles of pancake, dumping blueberry syrup on his bacon and folding the strips into accordions before chewing and swallowing, refilling his cup with orange juice whenever it’s half empty. I remember his face in the snow earlier in the afternoon, the air smelling sugary and metallic all at once, like so many other days when the air smelled like snow and we were young and carving angels in it with our bodies, when Nash wasn’t going to be a father and I wasn’t his sister split apart from him, when the future seemed anything but terrifying. I used to love imagining us together in the womb, suspended in golden amniotic fluid, dark and warm, sharing the sound of our mother’s heartbeat like a chocolate dessert.

It’s nearly 7:30; Roxanne will come in half an hour. Nash puts down his fork and offers me some of the potatoes he hasn’t eaten, and I oblige, using my fingers. “Do you want her to–to keep the baby?” I ask finally.

“You get a say in this too.”

He shakes his head. “I don’t know what I want.”

I remember telling him about the triangular trees in our backyard, the conifers, coming to peaks like shivering green mountains, engineered to support the heavity of a blizzard, to bend but never break. They are strange in their beauty and most beautiful in the winter. I wonder how to become like that, to bear weight and not snap. If I could impart some sort of ancient wisdom on Nash—a wisdom that comes from the veins of trees and the colonies of birds—I would. Instead I finish his potatoes and wipe my hands on his napkin.

When I’m finished I leave money for the bill with him and start outside. It’s sleeting, bits of ice pinging against the cars and windows, sounding like sugar, and wind whipping at a slant. One large gust sends me a few steps to the side, and I walk quicker, cold and wet, to my car. I can feel it as clear as ice knifing against my face, that this is it, the moment where two people are separated at a point too deep to ever rejoin. I sit in the frigidity of my car, trembling from the cold.

Soon Roxanne’s headlights will cut the night air as she pulls into the parking lot, and she will come inside, her hair snowy. They’ll have a booth for two. She’ll tell Nash if she will carry it or not. They’ll probably cry, no matter what she says. Nash will slip further away from me. I can feel it, like the loosening of water in the womb, the flush saying your child isn’t yours anymore but the world’s. I stare at the golden squares of window in the pancake house, waiting for Roxanne to take her seat.
Isla has left for a foreign land in which my heart has no embassy, though I’ve tried to follow. But I cannot speak the ancient language: the lilt, the softness, the lurch, all too much for me. There is no pattern for conjugation or key for pronunciation, but Isla has learned well, and quickly. I know because I saw. I was there on the phone when she mixed egg yolks in a Yale coffee mug to wash her hair with, so it would be shinier for the boys. I was there when she carved a heart into her skin with a kitchen knife.

Falling in love is momentous. It is a mountain, and you are at the top of it, beating your chest and dragging yourself up it and tumbling chin-to-toe all at once. At least that’s how I imagine it, surmounting a time in your life where you loved and were loved but never in love. Suddenly there is someone who can see all the beauty in your eyes, even if your ugliness is set before you like dirty dishes in a sink.

People write books, produce movies, sing songs about what love is like, but they never tell me how to handle being the girl watching her best friend fall in love. I feel sick about it, about my apparent unattractiveness to the male population; I feel happy for her, for seeing my best friend so joyful and feeling so beautiful; I feel angry with her for having boys love her; and I feel ugly inside, for feeling all these things.

Isla fell in love in July. She was fighting with him about organ donation: should she, or shouldn’t she? She’d told me, earlier, that she would give her eyes, her lungs, all her tissues, but her boyfriend didn’t think it was right. She was angry, probably teary, after the fight. He said, “You know I love you, right?”

You know I love you, right? When she called me on the phone later, both bewildered and elated, I could feel a pull at my heart. Isla was no longer mine but the world’s, at the mercy of all its brilliance and pain. As much as I loved her, I couldn’t protect her because I had never lived in the land of In Love, had never seen its pastures or drunk its thinning air, or weathered its storms. For once, I knew nothing.

Or maybe love is far simpler than the books and movies and songs make it seem. Maybe love is taking note of everything wrong with a person and deliberately adoring them anyway. I wouldn’t know.

Romantic love—the synchronization of one heart with another and finding joy in their strangeness—is a beautiful thing to watch. But it hurts to watch it. I stand back like a spectator in a bird sanctuary, viewing the glorious colored feathers and listening to the music until I am heartsick from wishing I had wings.
We used to lie on the dewy grass at dawn, the sky still dark, but the darkness fading. The yard was large, our white fence stretching out towards the pasture and wrapping around the barn. The cows we were supposed to be milking would be lowing in the barnyard, kicking their feet as we procrastinated. It was in the earliest part of the day, as the stars faded, that the crickets sang the loudest around us and waited for the sun.

Danny once told me that if you count all the stars you can see at dawn, that's how many days it will be until you have to tell the one you love goodbye. He said his Grandpa told him that as they walked to the barn when he was five years old. I told him it didn't make any sense.

“It doesn't have to make sense. It means you have to count the stars.”

So I started counting the stars that morning, holding Danny's hand like I had most mornings since I was ten. I had been a boisterous, independent, but lonely child standing in the next pasture, my father having been up all night with a cow in labor and Danny's Grandpa having woken him up to milk. Danny leaned against the fence, thinking he looked so cool. Thinking I liked cowboys. And I did, even at ten years old. He'd invited me over the fence and then tried to help me climb it, and I let him because it seemed like the grown-up thing to do. We sat against the rugged post, and he told me that the stars shine brightest just before the dawn.

“Grandpa told me they seem the brightest now because it feels like the sun is never going to shine. So we think the stars look brighter because we have waited for so long.”

“That doesn't make a whole lot of sense.” I said, looking sideways at Danny's baby-face but turning quickly away so he wouldn’t know I thought he was the handsomest boy I had ever seen.

He chose not to hear me that day because what his Grandpa said made sense to him, and someday, he knew it would make sense to me. He wanted someday to come, even at ten years old. We sat silently, and I knew Danny's Grandpa was watching us from the barn door, but Danny didn't know it. His eyes were fixed on the sky as the first lights of morning came slowly and majestically, the stars fading gracefully away.

He reached for my hand and pointed with it up into the heavens. My heart skipped a beat, but not as many as his. “There's the moon.”

It was becoming the pale, transparent skeleton of its midnight glory, but it was almost more beautiful, hanging in the morning sky as it waited for the sun. Our hands slowly fell back to the ground, but our eyes stayed upwards for fear we would look at each other.

“You will always be able to see the moon,” he said peacefully, "even in the middle of the day. The sun will always rise, Grandpa says, but the moon is always there.”

That was years ago, when we were young and easily swayed, and the fence still had most of its slats. It had been nine years, and we were still young and easily swayed. But my father had sold all our cows, and our pasture was overgrown, so now I came to Danny's pasture and milked his cows. My Mom had finally succumbed to her cancer. Danny's Grandpa had died of a heart attack. There was no one to watch us from the barn door as love grew. Perhaps it was just loneliness running into each other in the dark, waiting for more light to be able to see where to walk next, and finding a friend in the darkest time of night.

We graduated from high school, and our farm was up for rent. I didn't want to tell Danny, but he found out without my knowing. Still, as we lay on the ground, our hands clasped on the wet summer grass, we simply counted stars.

“I thought you looked like Jan Brady the first time I saw you. You know, from the old show,” Danny chuckled, stripping the bark off a twig.

“You looked amazing.” I whispered, smiling as I remembered the image of his lanky, ten-year old body leaning next mine.

“Hmm?”

“Nothing.” I laughed, holding his hand tighter and letting out a sigh. The stars seemed more plentiful this morning, even after years of looking at them. But years go by quickly when you're young. They fly like shooting stars through darkness.

We were shooting stars.

“Find the moon,” Danny whispered, his lips tickling my ear.
“I found it long ago,” I laughed, shooing him away. “If you find it in the night, you can't lose it in the middle of the day.”

Danny sat up quickly and threw the twig as far as he could, towards the old fence. Grandpa had told him that.

His Grandpa had told him to find the moon in the day.

“I'm going to sell the farm, you know.”

“No you're not.” I sat up next to him. “You have no reason to sell it, and we've talked about how you're going to keep it going with your mom.”

“We're selling it. I talked to her.” He didn't say it assuredly, though.

I was quiet, leaning my head sideways on my knees, my long hair falling down towards the ground. Danny fingered it gently like he had dared to finger it when I was ten years old and he thought I didn't see him behind me. I pretended I hadn't as fireworks exploded in my young stomach.

“Why?” I said “Why give up what you worked for all these years? You've lived here your whole life.”

“So have you,” he twirled my hair around his strong fingers.

Danny was young. I was young. Yet we thought we were so far removed from the ten year olds who had been shamelessly lost in each other's voices that first morning. Danny wasn't going to college, but he was going to stay and run the farm with his mother and help put his little brother Luke through college the next year.

I was moving up north with my Dad who had bought a franchise in St. Paul.

Yet, we were beginning to doubt.

The sun began to shine as I looked at Danny's eyes, but they were different from the way they had been so many other times. The sparkle was gone, and it had been replaced by a depth I had not known before. This was the depth I saw in his Grandpa's eyes as we stood up that first morning, when I went and introduced myself to the old man at the barn door and he gazed at me and called me daughter.

Danny was silent now, and I didn't punish him for it. I turned my eyes and stared at the stars, drinking in the peace that hung in the middle of uncertainty. I didn't want to move any more than Danny wanted to see me go.

“What's going to happen to Luke?”

Danny didn't answer. His eyes were thinking thoughts I couldn't read.

“What's going to happen to your Mom? Where are you going to move the two of them if you sell the farm? You can't follow me, and I can't stay here alone.”

Danny didn't say anything.

“Where will you work? Will you go to college, then?”

I asked too many questions just as I had asked too many questions that first morning. We had sat in the barn after we watched the stars, Danny's Grandpa in the loft shoveling hay, Danny trying to teach me how to milk a cow. We had only raised them for meat on my farm.

I asked him how to position my hands, if I was sitting on the stool right, how you strained it, if I could drink it straight out of the pail. He was so patient as I broke the gentle peace of the barn, but not patient enough. He leaned over and kissed me.

I slapped him because that's what I thought you were supposed to do, and I was probably right. But then Danny said that he was sorry as he rubbed his cheek. And I said I was sorry, too, because he had landed in a cow pie. Then he asked if he could kiss me again.

But I said no.

So he didn't.

I was asking too many questions again, and they were harder questions than where to hang up the milking stool. His eyes became heavier with every word I spewed. Slowly and gently, he stretched out his legs, and resting his hand beside mine again, our fingers intertwined.

I stopped talking.

“Do you remember that first summer we met?”

“Oh, I grinned.”

“And do you remember that day my cousins came over, and we all played truth or dare?”

“Yes...”

“Well, I chose truth. Luke asked me who I would marry if I could marry anyone. And I said I would marry the Queen of England because it was the first person that came to my mind.”
I did remember that. I remember that Danny threw a pile of hay at Luke at the end of the question. Then I chose truth, and his cousin asked me who I would marry because they thought it was a pretty clever question. Danny wouldn't look at me, so I blurted out Johnny Depp.

Marriage was like a flower to a ten-year-old. The beauty was so easily trampled if you weren't looking. It would die if you didn't plant it in the right place. It would die if you didn't water it or if you picked it and gave it to someone else. Danny's Grandpa comforted me in the barn that afternoon, telling me I had time.

Grandpa said that there were other boys like Danny, and that the Queen of England was already married. I told him there was no one else like Danny.

"I lied that day," Danny confessed.

"I lied, too," I laughed, pulling his hand into my lap. "No, I really lied," he said. "And I'm taking it back because I swore to Luke after I tackled him in the field and gave him a bloody nose that I would take it back someday."

Someday had come. I knew it before he said anything, and my stomach sank. It sank like lead, because I didn't know what I was going to say if he actually thought someday had come.

"If you'd marry me, then we could stay on the farm together. You wouldn't have to go to Minnesota."

I stared straight ahead, though there was nothing to stare at but the broken fence and a cow who was wandering beyond it. My eyes started smarting. My heart felt like it was racing in circles. I wanted to slap Danny.

I wanted him to kiss me.

The tears began to flow, my body to shake, and I blubbered like a baby who didn't know how to breathe. Danny put his arms around me and held me as I thought of all the years I had waited for this and all the oceans I had crossed in the meantime and all the waves that had covered me and knocked at my lungs.

Danny was patient, but Danny was always patient. So I cried on his shoulder and sloberred all over his farm coat and felt warm when he kissed my forehead. He knew I wasn't crying for him but for my mother's casket. For the Grandpa that had come to be like a father, while my Dad was far away. For the long nights that I thought I wouldn't make it through high school because of all the days I skipped to work on the farm.

I realized I was crying because for nine years I had lain on the grass beside Danny and looked at the stars and knew I was only looking at the stars because Danny had told me to look up. Now I loved them. We had flown like shooting stars through darkness, but the rays began to break against the mountains on the horizon. The crickets became quieter, and Danny's strong hands held my head. We didn't look at the stars because they gave us hope. We didn't look at the stars because they were beautiful. We looked at the stars because it was what brought us together before the days began, after whatever pain the nights had held.

And we would continue to look at the stars.

Danny wouldn't need to help me over the fence anymore because there would be no fence to climb.

"Look." Danny whispered. "Count the stars."

I began to count, but they were fading quickly though they were as plentiful as salt grains, as if God had shaken them out onto the table of Heaven.

"I can't."

Danny smiled like he had smiled when he first invited me over. "Then you never have to say goodbye."
They say the higher you fly, the harder you fall. But I'd rather eventually crash to the ground than never know what it was like to rise above it. They say that when you dream, reality will hit you like a ton of bricks. And they say that when it rains, it pours. But I love the way the rain feels on my skin as it plummets from the sky. I love the rush of wind in my life after the peaceful eye of a storm. I revel in the sense of knowing I have senses at all.

Because they told me I'd be lucky if I lived to see today, and they tell me I'll be lucky if I live to see tomorrow. Mother wept uncontrollably as she looked into my crib the day she finally brought me home as a tiny infant, swallowing the bitter truth the doctors had told her when I was born. I was white as her skin, and I haven't changed much. Not since day one.

I'll always be dying tomorrow. So my life, at three months, was preparing to be a lot of empty days as my coffin was chosen and the service planned and the world waited for me to die. Because the doctors said I would die. They actually said I'd never be born alive, but that didn't work out the way they thought it would.

But, I'm not planning on dying today. Or tomorrow. I guess I'm the lucky one.

"You've held out longer than expected," the priest said, trying to put the optimism in his words that was lacking in his voice.

I wiped the icing off my face. "I know," I replied with childhood innocence. "And I plan to do it again."

My family was not afraid to inform me of my mortality or discuss my death. Among my first words were "goodbye," and Mother took this as an omen that I would be saying goodbye for good. But I had no such plans. I have no such plans.

Father Peter moved into our neighborhood when I was six months old, which made it awfully convenient for him to be at my bedside in a moment's notice. There were a few false alarms over the years, when I would wake up with extremely light breathing and a faint heart-beat, and the priest would bend over me, wiping my sweaty forehead. With my parents, he was waiting.

When Martha turned five, of course Mother prepared her party far in advance. The decorations were pulled out, and the invitations sent while I sat by and watched the scurry. They never asked me to help, and when I tried to, Mother clucked her tongue and pulled the streamers away.

"Rest, dear. It's too hard for you."

Martha looked sideways at me and pulled on Mother's skirt.

"Will she be here for the party?"

She was too young to fully understand my parents' distress, just old enough to know that she always heard them speak of me as if I were something on my way out.

No one spoke of me as if I would be around long enough to do anything. They didn't make future plans for me. Mother didn't even schedule my life into the next week, but always said, "We'll see," as if we were seeing if I would die in the next seven days.

They say death is a part of life. I wonder if someone could tell my family that life is a part of life, too.

I was always schooled at home because the doctor thought I might keel over and die in class, and the teachers wouldn't know what to do if that happened. So I had a tutor, and for special assemblies, they would load me into the car and tote me down to the school building. When I graduated the 4th grade there was a blond-headed boy in the gym who smiled at me.

I smiled back.

I dreamed about him for a week – because I happened to live through it that time – and the next Monday morning there was a pitiful bouquet of flowers on the porch that Mother brought up for me.

In the scrawling hand of a nine-year-old were the words, "Martha told me about you. I'm sorry."
So Patrick had been briefed on my fading existence. I arranged the flowers in a vase, but three days later they were dead, and Mother wept as she threw them in the waste-bin. Dead things make her do that. I never got another flower from Patrick.

I didn't blame Martha. She didn't know. No one knows how much I wanted someone to believe that I could actually live. Patrick is now Martha's beau, and I understand why. Martha's not expected to die tomorrow. Martha will be able to dress herself and walk down an aisle and someday bear children.

They say jealousy is a green-eyed monster that kills. Maybe I'll die from that. Maybe I'll die from jealousy because everyone else is told, "Now there's a person who's going to live to be 100. Let's fill up her life."

It's an odd paradox. Shouldn't the one who's expected not to live as long be the one who's pushed to do more? Not me. Apparently I'm dying tomorrow, so I must be careful with everything I do physically so I don't accidentally die today.

"And keep your blanket on," Father tells me. Heaven forbid I take it off my knees, as if I'll be struck down from a draft coming in an open window. I hate that blanket. I'm going to burn it someday, if I am ever allowed near enough to the fireplace to actually feel the heat.

Fire burns, I was taught at a young age. And I'm burning. There's a dark-haired, mysterious senior named Carson who walks past our house every day. They say keep a hold of your heart, but I've already let mine go, head-over-heels, down a slippery slope. I'm 18, and my friends and relations have no plans for my future. There's no thought of college or work or travel, because there has never been that much planned ahead at any point in my existence.

Remember? "We'll see."

It started raining a moment ago, but I wheeled myself out to the front porch and shut the door behind me, hoping no one was watching. I saw Father Peter trip down his stairs and drive away to mass without noticing me, and I refuse to call out to my siblings to be let inside. I know that the rain is supposedly bad for my health, but I think I'm healthier than the world will believe. Mother would have a heart-attack if she saw me outside right now.

Maybe I'll let her have that heart-attack.

It's the last week of school, and I'm planning to graduate, even though no one else is planning it. I've made a future for myself, but I can't tell a soul because everyone will mock. The doctor told me that on the first day he saw me in my crib, he never expected me to live to take a diploma.

No one has. No one's expected anything from me, but I expect a lot from me. And the next time Carson walks past our house, which should be in twenty minutes on his way home, I'm going to call out. We've been grinning privately at each other for the entire year, and he doesn't know it, and my family doesn't know it, but I have plans. I'm planning on marrying him.

No, not tomorrow. I have to die tomorrow. After that, I'm going to move on with my life, and I'm going to live so people will look at me and say, "Now there's a person who's going to live to be 100."

They say that the higher you fly, the harder you fall. But no one's ever said it to me, because no one has ever expected me to fly.

So I guess I'll never fall.
Katherine Taylor
Poetry Collection
John Burroughs School

Swan Song
April 15th, 1912

Caught on wisps of Arctic air,
A tune spills out across the deck,
Singing of a soft despair,
The scene icy, yet picturesque.

On the ship so brilliantly lit,
In frigid polar night,
Eight men in linen collars sit,
Playing on despite their plight.

And as the play begins to close,
Their souls from body freed,
Those cellos sing out not their woes,
But Nearer, My God, to Thee.

Ad Domum
On a Girl’s 21st Century Sirmio

I reach to Lugano, that lake I call home,
To the house with the winery’s doors and the swing on the crabapple tree,
To wrought iron gates still struggling to keep out what they could never keep in,
We golden haired, green eyed sons of Englishmen,
Yet fair skinned, dark browed daughters of Milanese,
To an airy kitchen where sweet fresh hyacinth mingles with mountain flowers pressed,
To the windmill palms that float lazily on the breeze,
To the maroon doors of the boathouse holding the rowboat
A vessel more ancient than even she—no myself—sixty years before
That skims limpid blue-green water to the abandoned estate
With the crumbling walls and heifers grazing on edelweiss.

Beyond even there, that mountain valley, I surpass and stretch round the whole world
To the black sand shores of the Tasmanian,
To the white sand shores of the Pacific,
To the point where the two seas kiss,
To the city in the land of sheep,
The crunch of the volcano rock trails of Rangitoto,
The paua shell’s rough surface, polished away to reveal the swirling colors of the sea,
The backyard with fruit laden trees and loosed chickens, forever chased,
Sweet little plums hanging on twisted branches, gnarled organic and imperfect,
Over neat rows of a hobbyist’s greenhouses,
New pristine sprouts peeking through the same soft soil, boxed,
Across continents still they forms me.
The air hummed with life, lazy notes of a saxophone drifting over the murmurs of taffeta belles, champagne fizz filling the gardens with light sweet zephyrs, the late summer humidity giving the whole scene a living breath. Laughter echoed through his halls, across his brick patios, from every stone in his walk, bubbling up from every secluded corner. Huge swaths of cream cotton laced with strings of yellow electric bulbs formed tents under which hordes of women twirled and mingled and flirted coyly with leonine men. Starched white waiters twisted their way through the crowd with flutes of mimosa and sangria, silver platters glinting in the low light. It was everything I’d imagined from my bedroom window—all the gaiety and ease that blew across the lake in the faintest of whispers.

Yet, it was only what I’d imagined: faceless couples spinning along with the band, faceless women sipping lemonade in small clusters of his iron-wrought chairs, faceless men roaring with laughter, cigars clenched between their teeth. And there he was in the midst of his great façade, eyes glimmering, asking me with the slightest turn of his lip if it pleased me, a hopeful curiosity burning beneath his brow, tensed stature begging me to join him. In white crisp linen, with golden cufflinks gleaming, he sat, the biggest fake of them all, as if the slightest huff of breath might knock him off his feet like a cheap cardboard display. I was repulsed; I tried to sink behind the familiar folds of my collar. These people, this place—its cloyed excess—it was all too much. Gently I grasped Tom’s coat sleeve and pulled him the tiniest bit closer; he was so…stable. Gatsby seemed to falter for only a moment, but he swept us away quickly to meet more glittering guests.

It was the looseness of it all, I later supposed, the ease with which the girls could flit from one man to another, hummingbirds from flower to flower. And the whispers. I heard the whispers. I heard them talking about his money, about his friends, about him. It seemed awfully unkind to do that to Jay, to come and dance and drink and eat in his home all the while twisting him into what he wasn’t, what he couldn’t be. I glanced at Tom. He was eyeing some curvaceous redhead dipping her toes in the pool with hungry eyes. I could feel the blush rising in my cheeks. How dare he! In front of me? At a West Egg party? Tom and Jay were talking now.

“Perhaps you know that lady.”

I glanced toward the white plum tree to see beneath it something pristine and dazzling amidst the dim glow of the party. The man looked so lovingly into her eyes as he murmured to her so softly, stroked her hair so tenderly. The way his fingers parted her golden tresses was just like...just like Jay used to. I looked at Gatsby again, with his clean linen, and then towards Tom, smiling at the redhead, his hand still on the small of my back. I had a sudden surge of affection towards Jay, his huge fake house, his huge fake life. He’d done it all for me. The platters, the waiters, the booze, the people, the parties themselves, all for me. I was nervous again, stumbling the tiniest bit over my words.

“Daisy,” he said with gentleness I hadn’t heard in months, “may I have a dance?"

We were twirling, my skirt spinning around my hips, reflecting his celery eyes. He held me close, turning my every misstep into the dance itself. Old feelings, no they couldn’t be old feelings, but they weren’t new feelings, just feeling itself took over, and I leaned into him, let him guide me across the floor. We had never stopped really; he was forever looking for me, and here we were happy as could be. Cheeks flushed, he took me in. I could see his eyes drinking it all up. “I’m here! I’m back, Jay!” I wanted to yell, but I could only force out a few barely audible comments on the party.

“You know I’ve always wanted to do this,” he said, “I’ve always wanted to dance with you again like this. The whole time I was away. Promise.”

“Oh, Jay, it really is a lovely dance. And a lovely band. And a lovely house. And truly lovely people. Don’t you just think that director is grand? The way he dotes on his actress? Why if I were an actress I’d die for a director like that.”

“You’d be the best damn actress there is, Daisy. Any director couldn’t help but to fall in love with you,” he whispered, with an edge of roughness to his voice.

The dancing ended and we stole off to Nick’s house. Good cousin that he is, he kept watch for me. I was always procuring new sorts of cousins it seemed. They popped up all the time, really. These sorts of problems crop up when you’ve quite a large family. I’d hardly ever liked one so much as I liked Nick. He was so...quiet.
Sometimes people need quiet people to keep from going crazy and all. The air was heavy with words unspoken and actions never done. We sat for a time in silence, watching the fireflies lazily chase each other across Nick’s lawn. Even in the late summer heat, I felt goose-bumps running up my arms. He noticed them too. Jay slipped off his jacket and put it around my shoulders, and we talked. We reminisced. We remembered. We recollected, laughed, and smiled. And it was like being in love again.

My heart was light as we made our way back up the gentle slope to the party. I was young and beautiful and loved. I was in love. It almost felt like before, only a small difference. It was the slightest twinge, the smallest hint of unease, of dissatisfaction—and when I tried not to think about it, it went away. But as we walked up to the party I saw Tom, and I felt it well up in me, threatening to bubble up through my mouth. I wanted to yell, to scream, to throw one of Jay’s crystal glasses. Tom and that woman. The woman he was looking at. That was the difference. I looked into Gatsby’s eyes. I saw their burning desire—their undying devotion—but I knew that in mine he couldn’t find the same thing, no matter how long he looked. The music pulled us in, and we sat at a table for dinner. Amongst a crowd of laughing, young, careless women, I remembered Tom at Kapiolani and let out the smallest of sighs. I stared out at my men, one in green and the other in white. I couldn’t help but feel that I’d never escape all these façades.
I have always wanted to have a family, but have never had one. About twenty years ago, the government started taking people’s infants that had deformities or special abilities. I doubt the government ever told parents why they were taking their children. Neither I nor the rest of the kids from the lab know who our parents were. We do not have names but numbers. These numbers are tattooed on our forearms. Mine is 253. The reason that I was taken was because I can blend into any natural outdoor environment in the world.

The government takes people’s infant right after birth and tells the parents that their child has died. When a child’s ability did not show up at birth, they would take the child but make it look like a kidnapping. Once the government takes the child, they hand it over to a person who they have specifically picked for us to live with until we are three. At three we are then taken to the lab where we are to be tested and placed into a section of the facility. We have the same nurse until we leave the facility at the age of eighteen.

At the lab we are basically treated like animals. Every day we are injected with a new formula the doctors have created to see how we react to it. Some kids have died because the doctors were not paying close attention to them. Girls and boys have different quarters, but I suspect they are the same. Line after line, row after row of cages that is just tall enough that everyone can stand upright, with barely any space in between bars to put our hands through. Our beds are bolted to the floor in the center of the cage, and two feet of space separates the bed from the other side. Sometimes, I wonder if it is to keep us in or to keep something else out.

There are medical nurses, and then there are security nurses. We call them that because our nurse will help the doctors, and the security nurses will watch our every move. If the doctors catch a “nurse” being sympathetic, we don’t see them again. However, some will still give us an extra slice of bread or something on the doctors’ days off. All the nurses are dressed in blue scrubs, with white face masks covering their nose and mouth. Some of the nurses are so muscular we can’t tell if they are men or women.

Our lives are a continuous cycle. We wake up. Nurses will come down the halls and check on every person. Then we go to the cafeteria, a large auditorium in the middle of the facility, and eat breakfast. Once our group finishes we go to the work room, marching through the double doors in the south east corner. When we are done with our workout, we march back to the cafeteria and up the stairs on the west side to our doctor rooms, which are on the second level. After we are done with the “little” experiments the doctor has planned, most of us are able to go to something like school. To get there we march through the doors on the southwest side of the cafeteria.

Mr. Clack teaches his students to communicate. The people in charge of the facility will allow him to teach some students how to read and write. They are most likely to work for the government on a higher level. Luckily, I’m part of that group, so I don’t have to suffer with the doctors all day.

From the time we are little we learned that talking was bad and only to talk while in school. If someone did talk, the nurses would forcibly grab the student by the arms and drag him to the Silence Room. I’ve only been in there once when I was young, only about six, and I had wanted to ask my nurse what her name was. Before she could reply, one of the other nurses grabbed and dragged me to the Silence Room. The Silence Room is all white with padding on the floors, walls and the ceiling. I couldn’t even see the door unless I watched it shut behind me. The room is completely silent. Even if I tried to talk nothing comes out as if the words were taken from my mouth. Some of my time there I was afraid to think. I thought they would be able to take my thoughts from my mind. By the time they let me out of there, I was on the verge of going crazy.

One day after our workout, we all went to our doctor rooms. I walked into my operation room. I acknowledged my nurse with a nod and hopped up on the examination table. As the nurse leaned in to give me a shot of a sedative, she whispered, “Something is going to happen very soon. When you see the signal, go to the door on the north side of the cafeteria. Once you’re on the other side of the door, follow main hall to the exit door. When you are outside, run to the trees. They’ll hide you.” Before I could ask what she meant, the doctor came in.

The rest of the day seemed as though the doctors were anxious to leave. I kept wondering about what the nurse said. After I was let out from the room, I headed to the school wing. Mr. Clack seemed to be in a cheerful mood. This never happens. Sometimes he is in a good mood but never cheerful. Today he was going to go over yesterday’s math assignment when the emergency bells started to ring. Like we had practiced, we calmly stood
up and got in line. Everything was going fine until we reached the cafeteria. It was in disarray. Kids were running around in the main area, pushing and shoving each other trying to get to other doors. Screaming nurses and doctors were shouting to one another to communicate over the chaos, only making the kids more anxious and worried. Right then I knew that was what the sign the nurse was talking about. I told the kid in front of me to run to the north door and jumped out of line and ran for the door; others followed. I waited for someone to notice us, but no one did. I got to the door, surprised to find it unlocked, but I didn’t take any time to wonder why. Away from the nurses, I ran through the hall, staying to the main hall just like the nurse told me. I came across what looked like a front desk on one side of a waiting room and a set of heavy large doors on the other. I went towards the doors and pushed them open. As I stepped outside the sun beat down on my face for the first time. As my eyes adjusted to the sunlight, I could hear the barking orders of doctors and nurses.

Before I could think, I ran for the tree line. Nearing the forest, men equipped with tranquilizers and stun guns surrounded me. One yelled, “You are surrounded. Raise your hands and get on the ground slowly.” I did as I was told. When I reached the ground I saw the look of surprise on their faces when I became one with the grass. My clothes were still visible to them and could tell that I had not just vanished, but my body had become lumps of grass. Even though this had never happened before, I know that if someone were to touch me I would feel like grass. One man raised his tranquilizer. I rolled as the dart brush across my cheek. Before another was shot, I heard a roar, and coming from the building was a large group of fifty kids and nurses ambushing my assailants. The assailants shot darts at the group, but there were too many to take on. The kids and nurses broke off into groups as they headed for the woods. I tried to follow one group, but I became detached and just started running in one direction, east.

The howling of dogs in the distance spurred me to pick up my pace. The trees started to thin, dogs getting closer, I emerged into a meadow. I stopped, realizing I would be going out into the open, but one howl of a dog kept me running. Then I heard it, a river. Turning towards the sound, I came upon it. It was a fast moving, clear river. I could not tell how deep it was, but I did not have any time to ponder with the dogs at my heels. I started across. Halfway into the river with water up to my chest, the first dog arrived on the bank. Becoming panicky I took the next step and found nothing. Off-balance, the current overtook me, pulling me under the water and carrying me downriver.

I tried to break the surface, but before I could, the current dragged me under. My feet hit the bottom. Pushing up with all my might I broke the surface; my lungs burst, gasping for air. The current had started to settle, and I continued across to the bank. Reaching shore I sat there processing all that happened and wondering what to do next. I stood up and followed the current, knowing that this would be my only water source until I could come across civilization.

All day I was walking in and out of the water to confuse the dogs if they did happen upon my scent. A week had gone by, days mixed together. I only rested when I need to and barely ate anything. I finally saw smoke one evening as the sun was setting. It was a good two miles away, so I decided to play it safe and sleep there until morning to check out where the smoke was coming from.

The next morning I headed over in the direction of the smoke. As I got closer, I could see signs of people who lived in the area. There were dried foot prints from them when they had been near the river and a well-traveled path from the river that lead deeper into the forest. I followed the path for a mile until I came upon the homestead. No one seemed to be there, so I sat amongst the bushes and waited to see what these people were like and to know their comings and goings. A man in his late fifties with dark brown hair streaked with grey, wearing sturdy overalls and cowboy boots, came out from the barn to a bench under an old oak tree that was between the house and the barn. A few minutes later a woman came out with a plate of half cut sandwiches. The woman was roughly the same age as the man and had sandy colored hair and piercing blue eyes. The food reminded me of the last time I had eaten something more than just berries or leaves. After the man finished, he went back into the barn. While the woman remained sitting at the bench staring of into the distance lost in her own thoughts, a half of a sandwich remained on the plate, and the thought of food pulled me from my hiding spot and into the open. She did not notice me at first. I was ten feet from her when she looked in my direction. I stopped, holding my breath. I was tense, ready to run if she was not the friendly person I believed. The woman smiled at me and asked, “Would you like a sandwich?”

“Yes, thank you,” I replied. Becoming a little bit calmer, I walked closer to the table. She smiled, scooted over for me to sit, and gestured to the plate. I sat down beside her and gulped down the sandwich. She just stared at me trying to figure out where I had come from with the nearest town twenty miles away.
“You aren’t from around here are you?”
“No,” I said with a mouth full, swallowing the last of the sandwich.
“So, do you have a name?”
“No.”
“Well, my name’s Peggy. It’s nice to meet you.”
I nodded.
She leaned closer and joked, “Is ‘no’ the only thing you can say?”
“No, it’s just that all your questions require me to answer no.”
“Okay, so where did you come from?”
“I don’t know. Where am I?”
“You are in District 27. You know, I have lived here my entire life and never thought about leavin’. My husband, Herald, and I have been happy here, good land, and decent income.”
So I am up north, I thought to myself, near the Great Lake Superior. That is most likely where this river empties into. I wonder if she knows who I am.
“How long are you going to stay here, sweetie?”
“I do not understand.”
“Well, by the looks of you, you haven’t had a meal in a long time—not to mention sleeping some place other than the ground. How would you like to stay with us for the night? In the morning, if need be, you could go on your way.”
“Okay, sounds good.”
At that moment we did not realize it, but she had just asked me to live with her and her husband. After living with them for two weeks we had gotten over the awkwardness and were now able to understand each other. They knew I was hiding something from my past, but I had never given any reason for them to ask me, until today.
Herald had just gotten back home from going to the city to get the monthly supplies. There were lots of rumors going around about how the Juvenile Prison had been raided. That many of them had escaped and were still at large.
Herald came in and kissed Peggy on the cheek. Then turned to me and asked boldly, “Are you one of those people who came from the Prison?”
Peggy turned to him in shock, “What do you think she is a criminal? All she has done is be a blessing in our lives, helping you outside, me with cleaning the dishes and doing chores. How could you be so one sided?”
“I know what she has done to help us and that she would not do anything to hurt us, but I need to know why she is here.”
“She’s right,” I spoke up. “You deserve to know what has happened to me, but I want to show you something first, if you promise not to freak out.”
Peggy countered, “You don’t have to prove yourself to us. We know who you are; there isn’t anything that could have happened to you in the past could change that.”
“I know,” I said. “But you deserve to know. You have been good and honest to me. Now it is time for me to do the same.”
I went outside and sat down at the base of the oak tree. When they were ready I pressed myself against the tree and the grass. As I started to fade into the background Peggy gasped. Herald took it better than I hoped. He was more intrigued than anything. He moved around so that he would be facing me from the side to see if you could tell I was there beside from the clothes that I wore.
After a few minutes I changed back and told them everythin g from the time I could remember. I could tell from the look in their eyes that they felt sorry for me and that they wish they could have done something for me earlier in my life. By the time I had finished, it was getting dark.
“So what happens now?” I asked.
“Nothing, we just go on the same as always except now we know everything about each other,” Peggy answered. “From now on no more secrets, agreed?”
“Agreed.”
That night was the best of my life. I awoke in the morning felling refreshed and renewed. Light was shining in through my window as I got ready for breakfast. I noticed that the light was moving and crept up to the window to peak through the blinds. A spot light was hitting the house. At least ten cop cars were surrounding half the house,
and three police men were walking up to the house when Herald walked out to the porch. They asked, "Is there someone else in your house?"

"Yes," he replied, "My wife."

"We believe that you are helping assist a wanted person, and we have a warrant to search your home. May we come in?"

He paused, and I knew that he would have to let them in. I ran down the steps and out the back door. I was ten feet away from the house when the helicopter spotted me. I did not stop. I dared not to look back. I just kept running. I knew that I would never be able to have a happy family. I would always be on the run. I stayed in some houses for a few nights to regain my strength. I would never again stay any longer in a house for fear of hurting those I had become too attached to and getting hurt myself.
Lingering Sky

The morning comes
Lighting up this dreary fortress
With an incandescent glow
A fiery tongue
Illuminating the faint paths
As the watchman yawns wearily
And follows the opaque stones
Into a sparkling sky
Where he waits for all eternity
For the love he left behind
Searching for the truth of this bright and softly shimmering sky

Lemon Drop Stars

I sit, huddling in the rain
Waiting for you
Leaning back to embrace the frigid morning air
Ribbons of hair caress me
Wind tickling my face
As the warm color streaks across the sky
And the peace is broken
Taken up to shine in the candy blue
I sit for hours
Never daring to move away
To slight the peace of the sun
Until the wind lifts me up
Blowing me beyond the bone fence
To a place where I can see thee
But an arm is not long enough to reach
And pull you up into the lollypop clouds
And lemon drop stars
Tomorrow is the first day of football tryouts, and school starts in a week. Dang, am I nervous, but also I'm kind of excited. Just about every day since school let out I've run no less than four miles a day and have lifted, squatted, curled, benched, till my muscles could not take another rep.

I started to throw the football a hundred times a day, picking out targets, improving my accuracy. I was done listening to those big-headed idiots.

All I ever heard was, “You're so weak.”
“You suck at football.”
“You suck, just suck at everything.” My whole freshman year—that’s all I heard. But this year? It’s going to be different.

Today is the day. I'm going to go to tryout and blow them away. I just hope we get to hit, because I saw Zach walking into the movie theatre. Zach is my biggest enemy, the school bully. I have gotten so much bigger than him. Zach is pretty much the head jock for our soon to be sophomore class. I mean he is good, but you'd think he was Zeus or someone he talks about himself. I'm gonna knock him right out of his throne, literally.

When I get to tryouts we're pretty much just sitting around waiting on everyone to show up. Zach and his little gang haven't showed up yet. I don't think he saw me the other day, but maybe he did and was so intimidated by me that he moved away. Now that would be awesome—except I would like to give him a proper pounding before he leaves.

“Hey, loser!”

Oh yeah, the second I heard those words I knew who it was and who they were directed to.

“What do you want, Zach!?”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, calm down there Drake ol' boy. I'm just playin' with ya!”

Not only did his smart little remark tick me off, but the smirk on his face made me want to rip him in half. I know I sound like some hot-headed monster, but I'm not. I've never been in a fight. I have never hit anyone.

Tweet!

Coach blew the whistle. “Stretch it out!”

The next four days of tryouts were pretty routine, stretch, run through some drills, split up and do 7 on 7. Then on Friday, the fifth day, our drills and 7 on 7 were cut in half. I knew something was up; we all did. Then came the moment I had been waiting for all week, all summer: the Oklahoma drill.

Only the most painful, brain damaging, bone crunching drill known to man. Zach, of course, being the big star running back was first in line to be ball carrier, but no one wanted to be the tackler. Normally I would be right with everybody, hiding so I didn't get rocked. Not this time, I jumped to the front of the line faster than the speed of light. We got in our ready positions, and coach blew the whistle.

“WHAM!”

We hit. He hit harder than I remembered. We both held our ground and fell when we made contact. He knew then that I meant business, that I was here to play. That wasn't good enough. I wasn't gonna be happy until I completely laid him out and he flew back eight feet.

The lines weren't even, so it took a while for us to get matched back up. He ran right over everyone else he went up against. No one stopped him like I had. The other guys I faced didn't stand a chance and went flying. After the third guy that I just completely decked, everyone stared at me with complete surprise. The look of shock on their faces filled me with pride. I forced myself not to get too cocky because I had just counted out the people in front of me and the people in front of Zach. We would be bearing down on each other in four plays.

Before I knew it I was staring at Zach. We were up.

Tweet! Coach blew the whistle and said to pack up and head in.

“NO! ONE MORE,” I yelled.

Coach turned and looked at me then looked to see who I was up against, trying to figure out why I wanted additional punishment. When he saw it was Zach, an odd look came over his face, questioning, but then realization hit him. Coach knew about Zach and his bullying ways. Most of the teachers did, but none of them did anything about it.

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“Alright, one more. But just one!” That was Coach’s way of telling me that I had just one chance to even out the score with Zach—do it now, or forever hold your peace.

I got in ready position. I was readier than I ever have been. I looked up at my opponent. Then Zach made a mistake he never should have made.

“What's wrong Drakeypoo, haven't been whooped hard enough yet?”

That got me so fired up, so mad. Before coach blew the whistle, the whole world seemed to slow down, and I became focused, determined. It was something I had never experienced before.

Tweet!

I took off. I used every muscle in my body to propel me forward. I was flying at Zach fast and powerfully. He was doing the same towards me, but there was a difference. While he had worked out during the summer, he hadn't worked nearly as hard or nearly as long as I had. I had more strength than he did, and that became obvious when we made contact. He didn't quite fly a full eight feet, but he flew farther than he ever had before. I wish someone had filmed it because I would love to watch the wave of power just rush from my body to his. I wrapped up with perfect form. I lifted him straight up with every ounce of strength I had and landed right on top of him. Triumph.

I got up and walked away. I'm pretty sure I heard Zach groan in pain, but I didn't look back, going straight to the locker room, changing, and heading home. I kept the same look of seriousness on my face until I got home. I walked in.

“Hey, son, how'd tryouts go?” my father asked.

“They were fine,” I replied, still not changing my facial expression. I walked right up the stairs and into my room. I looked up into the mirror and boom...

“WHO! WHOOO YEAH! THAT’S RIGHT! YEAH! AH HAHA! WHOOP WHOOP!”

I jumped around, pumping my fist, moving my body like Mick Jager! I was so excited! I could not wait until we found out who made the team.

Monday I arrived at school and kept an eye out for Zach everywhere I went, but I didn't see him. Maybe he's scared and wimped out. It's nice to think that, but I highly doubt it's true. Sixth period I had geometry. When I walked into class, I heard a bunch of gasps and saw Zach sitting in the back left corner of the room. I guess the news that I laid him out spread fast because I heard some whispers and got some looks. I was so happy. He was in the spot I had been in for years, and now I sat in his throne, basking in my own glory! The moment was ruined, though, because the only seat available was the one right next to him.

We didn't say anything to each other the entire class period. Needless to say it was an uncomfortable silence.

After school the coaches gathered everyone who had tried out for football and announced who made the teams. They announced JV first, and I didn't hear my name. I was so bummed, but the most amazing thing happened. He started to announce varsity.

“Henry George, Carl Green, Tim Klein....Drake Wilson.” I didn't just make it; I made varsity! I've never been more proud. I was so happy I pretty much spaced out until I heard “Zach Lowry.” That just ruined my whole day.

The rest of the week at school wasn't much. Varsity practice was pretty tough, especially when you're nose to nose with Zach Lowry.

Our first game was the third week of school. Zach and I, being sophomores, didn't play that much, but we each got a drive in. Zach had a couple of good runs, and I threw a touchdown pass.

This continued the rest of the season; sometimes we played a little more than others, but nothing big happened. We finished 9-2 and got knocked out in the semifinals of the playoffs. By the end of the season Zach and I had earned each other's respect. We weren't exactly buddy-buddy, but I didn't need to challenge him to grid iron duel anymore. He apologized for being a dick; I apologized for completely mauling him, and we actually talked some on the field. One day a bunch of his buddies were talking crap, and he stepped in and told them to knock it off, that I was cool. We each held our own and proved to each other and the team we were worthy. I stood my ground, and it paid off. Triumph indeed!
My fingers were freezing, and my legs were covered in goose bumps. If I would have known I would still be standing out here in the dark at ten o'clock, I would have been sure to dress warmer. Yellowstone National Park had always been one of my favorite places in the world, and on August 1, 2012, I got to witness something that most visitors couldn’t even imagine.

At the age of seven, I decided that when I was in college I would spend a summer working in Yellowstone. I wanted to be a geyser gazier, spending full days in the park awaiting a rare and beautiful geyser to erupt. Each year, when my family would discuss where we were going on vacation, my vote was always in favor of Yellowstone. Ten years later, I had my chance. I had four days to take in as much as possible and, hopefully, learn enough to come back and explore on my own in the future.

On the first day in the park, we walked all the way to the far end of the upper geyser basin, which is where Old Faithful is located. Near the end of the basin, a group of visitors were sitting on the benches waiting for a geyser to erupt. Out of curiosity, we asked them what geyser they were waiting for. A man with glasses and a floppy hat told us that he was watching for an event cycle of Fan and Mortar, a geyser whose eruptions shoots water over one hundred and fifty feet in the air from eleven different vents, making it an impressive display compared to Old Faithful that plays to an average height of one hundred and thirty feet from a single vent. He told us it had erupted four days prior so it was now in the window for another eruption any day. They were just waiting for the signs.

We thanked him for his time and continued on our way down the boardwalk. My family had only three more days in the park, and we couldn’t afford to wait for a geyser which might not erupt in the near future, despite the fact we all wanted to witness it erupt. However, we couldn’t resist walking down to the geyser while we were hiking in the basin and asking the geyser gazier if there was any new activity. Occasionally, one would say there was a false eruption, but usually we would hear that nothing new had happened in the past few hours.

After two days in the park, we started to become friends with a few of the gazers. We learned their names, where they were from, and what they did to make a living. The man with the glasses and floppy hat, Steve, became our closest friend. He was a special education teacher for elementary students in Idaho and spent his summers in the park. During our whole trip, he had been sitting and waiting for the geyser to erupt, even sleeping on the benches by himself for sixteen hours, only to be disappointed when nothing changed.

It was on the seventh day with no eruptions that Steve told us he was discouraged that the geyser had gone back into dormancy, a period of time when a geyser does not erupt. Fan and Mortar was known for being active for a few months and then becoming dormant for months up to years at a time. It had only erupted eight times in 2012, and he was worried that was all it had for this year. Nevertheless, he had promised to watch for the beginning of an event cycle, and he was going to stay for his shift. From where he was sitting, he could watch another geyser called Riverside erupt in the next hour, so he believed it wasn’t a complete waste of time.

We sat and talked to Steve as we waited to watch Riverside’s eruption before we called it a night and headed back to our room, when Steve’s radio went off saying that Beehive Indicator was going off. From previous experience, we knew that the Indicator preceded major eruptions of the geyser Beehive, which is among the largest cone-style geysers in the world.

We started to run. Down the path we went, crossing over the boardwalk, passing the active Grotto and Rocket geysers as we went. My heart was beating quickly, my breaths short and tight because of the high altitude, but I pushed forward knowing we had only about ten minutes from the time Beehive Indicator started to when the eruption began. Miraculously, in eight minutes we were there.

Within a few seconds of arriving, the eruption began shooting water high over our heads and spraying over the boardwalk onto some of those who were watching. The younger kids were giggling and running through the spray as the sun was setting behind them. It was a breathtaking scene.
After a few minutes, the water levels began to lower, and the spray became less and less. We were discussing going back to the hotel room when we heard the radio of the geyser gazer standing next to us say, "Fan and Mortar event cycle has begun; there is no activity in any vent. Mortar is silent." I looked at my dad wide-eyed.

To most, this would sound like a bad sign, but we knew otherwise. An eruption of Fan and Mortar started with Mortar stopping all activity opposed to its almost constant splashing. If this wasn't a false alarm, we had anywhere from ten to forty-five minutes to rush back over a mile away to where we had just come. My mother decided to call it a night since she was already freezing cold; all of us were dressed in shorts and T-shirts since the day had been rather warm, but due to the setting sun, the temperature was rapidly decreasing.

It made no matter to me, considering this was possibly a once in a lifetime chance. After hearing about how magnificent the eruption was, I wasn't about to miss out. So once again, I started running. It took us longer to get back since the air was colder and burned our throats as we ran, but we made it in about ten minutes and even saw the end of the Riverside geyser eruption. Now all of our attention was turned to the main attraction, Fan and Mortar.

The sun had faded below the horizon and was replaced by the moon. I shivered as the light breeze swept off the bitter cold river towards us. My legs were ice; my fingers, numb. I attempted to stay warm, jumping up and down, rubbing my bare skin to create some friction as I watched the water in the geyser's vent begin to churn.

The water bubbled and sloshed around, I could hear better than I could see what was happening. Some of the gazers would shine lights on the vents to get a better view of the activity from time to time, but other than that, we had the light of the full moon. Tara, the geyser gazer in charge of this event, called for everyone to step back.

We all jumped up from our seats and ran back towards the path, waiting only a few seconds for the water to explode from the ground at every angle. Every direction I turned, I saw water rushing high into the air, making a curtain of water. I stood with my jaw dropped.

The wind blew the mist across the boardwalk, and, as the moonlight shown through, I witnessed my first double moon-bow, similar to a rainbow except the colors are due to the light of the moon. My brother grabbed my arm, "Look, Sierra! Do you see it? The moon-bow! It’s so bright!"

I beamed at him, never having seen him so excited, "Yes, Levi. I can see it!"

We moved around watching the eruption from every angle, even moving back down to the benches once the water levels began to die down. The full moon gave us plenty of light to see the eruption just as well as we could in the daytime. Once I had watched for about fifteen minutes, I called my mom to let her know that we were watching the eruption and would head back when it was over. She was excited that we had finally been able to see what we had been waiting for.

The eruption lasted about an hour, peaking after about ten minutes into the eruption. As we walked back, we discussed the beauty of such raw power and how alive the earth truly is. We waved at the geyser gazers, who had ridden their bikes, as they shot past us, thanking them once again for helping us to witness such a special event.

I will never forget that night and the pureness of the beauty I witnessed. This trip rekindled my dream to spend a summer working in Yellowstone and learning more about these precious natural features. Maybe one day my dream will come true, and I will once again get to see Fan and Mortar in all its majesty.
Sierra Woods  
Genetically Modified Foods: Labeling in America  
Puxico High School

Since the discussion of creating genetically modified (GM) foods began, the controversy concerning these foods has not ceased. While GM foods offer several potential benefits, many see these foods as a health risk and believe they have a right to know what they are eating. Some countries, such as Europe, have mandated labeling laws on GM products; however, America, as well as many other countries, has not. Americans have the right to know what is in their food, a process which can be achieved through the mandatory labeling of genetically modified foods.

After first hearing about all the opportunities that genetically modified foods offered, many farmers and government officials were on board with the new development. Farmers were said to benefit from the crops, and GM crops were intended to provide consumers with a healthier lifestyle by adding more nutrients, such as vitamins and protein (Harris 31-32). These crops would also become pest, herbicide, and disease resistant in addition to increasing their yield (Harris 31-32). GM companies gave farmers hope for a better future in agriculture as they promised stronger plants and healthier farm animals. They planned to achieve this by using various genetic engineering methods, including increasing hormones in cows for milk production (Harris 10; Pence 80). Genetically modified foods were also envisioned to improve the genetics of plants and animals to create desired characteristics (Harris 10).

However, these intentions did not all follow as planned for farmers economically. While placing a pesticide gene inside the plant to create a new plant variety was more cost efficient than marketing a new pesticide, certain plant varieties did not increase in yield but dropped significantly (Rees 7). In a study conducted shortly following its release, genetically modified, herbicide-resistant soy beans showed that it produced six to eleven percent less soy beans than its non-genetically modified alternative (Rees 51). This led farmers to question if all the intentions of genetically modified foods were going to be executed in the future or fall short like the yield in GM soy beans.

In order to understand the health standpoint of genetic modification, the basic science behind the genetic engineering process must be understood. Genetic engineering is based on the idea that genes are isolated units, when in reality they are complex, interconnected networks that are broken down into DNA nucleotides (Fedoroff 155; Rees 4). During genetic engineering, genes known as transgenes are added to the DNA of an animal or plant, called a recipient genome, to produce a certain trait (Rees 8). Many of these are plant lectins or a type of plant protein that is generally altered through genetic engineering (Rees 3). Several scientists, including Malcolm Walker, the chairman and chief executive of Iceland Foods, found this process worrisome. Walker described genetic engineering as a process that is "messing with the building blocks of life" (Rees 9).

When genetic engineering corporations presented the idea of genetic modification, health improvements were among the incentives of genetically modified foods. An increase in nutrients because of the added genes would help people around the world. Some companies that produce genetically modified foods, such as Golden Rice, stretched as far as saying that their product could end world-wide issues, including hunger, mal-nutrition, and Vitamin A deficiency (Ronald and Adamchak 94). Genetically modified organisms have already aided in the development of insulin for Type I diabetes that has now saved many lives, showing that this process does have advantages (Harris 11-12). Also, the creation of "edible vaccinations" may be the solution to end allergic reactions (Harris 6). These vaccinations would be injected into fruits and vegetables and would activate when they are consumed. This is a future objective of the use of genetic engineering since there are still many undiscovered aspects that concern food allergies (Ruse and Castle 213).

Aside from those listed above, GM foods provide even more benefits, including: new ingredients, food safety improvements, and environmental benefits (Harris 31-32). Unfortunately, many of these benefits are also followed with concerns. Long-term effects on crops and the environment, damage on ecosystems, humans becoming antibiotic resistant, and lack of labeling all pose concerns on the health of the planet and those who live on it (Harris 11-12). While the environment seems to reap both benefits and concerns, scientists have begun to worry about how GM foods are affecting the ecosystems near GM crop fields. Pesticides are no longer just on the plants growing the food, but are injected into the plant itself. Through genetic engineering, foods are altered by the addition of a protein that acts as a pesticide (Harris 21). The potential issue lies in the addition of traits that
make plants weed and insect resistant. Scientists are concerned that these modified plants will eventually make
the pests themselves resistant to these traits (Rees 13). In addition, pesticides of all kinds are known to harm
people; therefore, consumers should be informed that they are eating a product that is filled with a pesticide.
Even though genetic engineering uses the building block of life to create a pesticide, it is unknown if these
products are as different from conventional pesticides as genetic engineering companies claim (Ronald
and Adamchak 87).

Health safety is one of the major components of the GM debate. Consumers believe that because of the
potential health risk that they should be informed of which products contain the foods that pose health risks. The
deinition of risk according to David Ropeik, Director of Risk Communication at the Harvard Center of Risk
Analysis, is “the probability that exposure to a hazard will lead to a negative consequence” (Ronald and Adamchak
99). According to this deinition, people take daily risks without much thought, such as driving when a crash could
occur, or using electricity that could cause a spark and ignite a fire. These actions can lead to negative
consequences as well; however, it is common knowledge that these activities have certain risk factors. Without
labeling, consumers are putting their health at risk when buying GM products that are not labeled without being
aware that there is any risk at all.

Health risks associated with GM foods include: toxicity, the emergence of new pathogens, higher risk of non-
Hodgkin’s lymphoma, higher herbicide exposures, and inadequate safety studies (Harris 40–41). In the past twenty
years, thirty new diseases have been discovered and old diseases that were thought to be cured have started to
reappear around the world. Geneticists have also found that many of these disease are now antibiotic resistant
and have linked this resistance to a process that is uncommon in nature, horizontal gene transfer (Pence 90–91).
Horizontal gene transfer is the basis of genetic engineering and occurs when genes are crossed between different,
unrelated species (Pence 90–91). Dr. Michael Antoniou, reader in molecular genetics at Kings College in London,
believes that gene functions can be disrupted and mutations of DNA can occur from GM foods (Rees 4, 46–47).

In April 2000, the National Academy of Science advised the United States government to test the pesticides
properly, to identify allergy-causing proteins and avoid their use, to conduct animal tests on GM foods, and to
require mandatory labeling on these products (Harris 11–12). However, not all of these precautions were followed.
After these products were released, four separate studies on the effects of GM foods showed unexplained
differences on the linings of several rats’ abdomens (Rees 15). Two cases on humans showed major safety
concerns as well (Harris 39). One contamination killed thirty-seven people and hospitalized over 1,500 more;
another case occurred from a Brazilian nut gene that was intended to improve soy protein led to allergic reactions
in several consumers (Harris 39).

Despite these concerns, the Institute of Food Technologists concluded that these foods are safe to eat (Harris
30). Many Food and Drug Administration [FDA] ofiicials, however, do not agree with the lack of testing and
regulations (Harris 22). Before a new food product of any kind is sold to the public, it must undergo an evaluation
from the FDA. The FDA does not evaluate the use of different methods placed into effect when evaluating its food
products, but rather just the characteristics of the food (Ruse and Castle 139). Insurance companies use this
reason to claim that the FDA has not properly regulated GM foods, and many companies refuse to insure these
products, or alternatively, they make the coverage limited and expensive (Rees 83).

The FDA classifies foods that contain a protein that acts as a pesticide, a pesticide rather than a food product.
This means that the “pesticide” does not fall into the FDA regulatory category but, instead, under the categories
covered by the Environmental Protection Agency (Harris 21). Although these foods are categorized as pesticides,
they were allowed on the shelves of grocery stores across the country unlabeled. The FDA does not have any
labeling regulations speciic to GM foods; however, the FDA does require any food that contains an allergen to be
labeled (Harris 22). A food that normally would not contain an allergen, but is labeled to have one, is the only
evidence of GM foods on product labels in America. This lack of labeling leaves Americans without a clue about
whether the food they are placing in their carts at a grocery store is genetically modied or not.

The concern for genetically modied foods and their risk has led some consumers to buy organic products.
The United States Department of Agriculture does not allow genetically engineered seeds to fall under the
National Organic Program; therefore, no genetically modied foods can be labeled as organic (Ronald
and Adamchak x). This is not the only difference between organic foods and conventionally farmed products. Organic
farming is based on the principle of living organisms and does not use any synthetic fertilizers; this achieves the
goal of organic farming: consumer health. Conventional farming uses several variations on pesticides as well as
synthetic fertilizers to maximize crop yield and is based on high yields and producing inexpensive foods (Ronald
and Adamchak 13). These synthetic fertilizers use fossil fuels and are petroleum-based, meaning our non-renewable resources are being used to keep insects off crops. Organic farmers provide only the necessary nutrients and allow nature to control the rest (Ronald and Adamchak 16).

Nevertheless, organic labels do not provide nearly enough information for consumers to cut GM foods out of their diets if they wish to do so. Seventy to seventy-five percent of groceries may contain GM ingredients, but because no labeling laws have been established, consumers do not have the knowledge of which products truly contain GM materials (Rees 17). Some religious leaders qualify this as a violation of their right to freedom of religion. Several different religions believe the process of genetic engineering is against the ways of God. People of the Jewish religion worry that genes of non-Kosher foods will be placed into food staples without their knowledge; hence, they will be breaking their religious beliefs by eating certain GM foods. The FDA reacted to this claim by stating that thousands of genes go into making a plant and the addition of one more gene, regardless of its origin, does not change that it is a plant (Harris 73).

Certain laws are protecting GM foods from receiving labels that might lead consumers to stop buying certain products. GM foods that are classified as pesticides are protected from labeling under the Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act which prevents the FDA from releasing pesticide information of any nature on food labels. However, if the product is considered a pesticide by the FDA rather than a food, such as Monsanto's New Leaf potatoes, should the label state that the product is a pesticide? No matter the answer to this question, these products go unlabeled despite the fact that the Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act which prevents labeling these products was passed prior to the creation of GM foods; thus, this act was not made to address issues that are associated with GM foods (Harris 22).

Many companies have begun to take a stand against GM foods by refusing to sell products that contain GM ingredients. McDonald's, Burger King, McCain's, and Pringles do not buy GM potatoes to create their French fries and potato chips (Rees 10). Frito-Lay and Heinz have also voiced that they want GM crops to be removed from the market, for they do not want to accidentally use these crops to make their own products (Rees 10). Gerber promised to become genetic engineering free and use only organic foods to make their baby food (Harris 39). Several supermarket chains, including Trader Joe's, Wild Oats, and Whole Foods, have removed GM ingredients from their brand lines (Rees 10). Kroger-brand milk proudly places a label stating that they do not feed their cows extra hormones to increase milk production. In addition, United States grain elevator owners have started to demand separation of GM crops from non-GM crops (Rees 12). Although these companies do give consumers a limited selection of GM free products, they do not nearly solve the genetic engineering problem.

From the beginning, the awareness of GM foods has been an issue for government officials who are trying to mandate labeling laws. Pew Initiative on Food and Biotechnology did a survey in January 2001, over thirty years after the first genetically engineered organism was created in 1970, on the amount of United States consumers who were aware that many foods that were sold in grocery stores were genetically modified. The survey showed only twenty percent knew what they were eating (Harris 6). Without the consumers knowing what the issue is, preventative measures cannot be put into place.

Several solutions to the labeling of GM foods have been addressed. Since labeling was never required, regulators argue that instating labeling laws now would confuse consumers more than help them make informed choices. Jim Holt, New York Times Magazine writer, cited a survey conducted on the basic scientific literacy of adult Americans. This knowledge would allow a person to understand the basics of genetic engineering. Less than ten percent of those who were surveyed reached this level. This survey showed that the option of voting on the safety of GM foods, which was attempted by California, was not a proper solution (Ronald and Adamchak 81).

Another presented solution is to label every product on the market either "Genetically Modified" or "Does not contain genetically modified foods." These labels, however, would not allow consumers to make an informed decision any more easily than if labeling was nonexistent. Labeling every product on the market would also raise the cost of all groceries (Ruse and Castle 144). This would not be beneficial to those who do not have an opinion on genetically engineered foods and would require them to still pay the extra price for labels that they do not even address while shopping.

Possibly the best solution that has been offered thus far is the simplest. Eli Kintisch, New Republic writer, believes that even simply labeling foods "GM free" or "non-GM" could be a possible solution to avoid confusing labels, though it would slightly raise the cost for these foods (Harris 76). This is a price consumers may have to pay to keep from risking their health. Some companies argue that they do not know if a product contains GM ingredients because they purchase both GM and non-GM foods in their factories (Harris 77). In this case, these
products would not be eligible for GM free labels since regulators can neither prove nor disprove food origins and cannot detect DNA or proteins that have come from another organism (Ruse and Castle 144). This possible solution will still leave GM products on the market as a cheaper option compared to their non-GM equivalents for those who are willing to eat GM foods despite their risks.

While this solution does not go into the details of the exact origin of a gene in foods that are genetically modified, it does give shoppers the option to avoid genetically modified foods entirely. Those who worried about their religious beliefs being damaged because of GM foods would now be able to purchase products they knew did not contain genetically engineered ingredients. Vegetarians and vegans, who do not want to eat foods that contain genes from an animal, could avoid these genetically modified products entirely. Consumers who want to avoid the health risk associated with the unknowns of GM foods would have that option as well without affecting consumers who wanted to purchase foods that contained genetically modified ingredients.

With the risk associated with genetically modified foods, Americans should be given the opportunity to be informed of what they are truly purchasing. By labeling products "GM free" or "non-GM," American consumers would know that the products they are about to eat are free of the risks that genetically modified foods hold. These labeling laws are the best solution for Americans as consumers head into a future that will contain even more genetically modified foods.
I sat in my dark corner, 
watching from afar as your brow 
furrowed deeply in rhythmic meditation. 
You couldn’t see me, 
but I took note of how your eyes 
clamped shut and small lines 
fanned out at their corners as though 
you were experiencing pain. 
Your lips were pursed as though 
they had sipped a sweet poison. 
Sweat slithered between the cracks in your 
countenance as though 
Backbreaking labor robbed your strength. 
Your shoulders bunched high 
beneath your ears as though 
you were in recoil from agony. 
You would have everyone believe 
that you were tortured on the shallow 
surface of your expression. 
I understood you perfectly as your 
fingers glided and stomped across the keys, 
kissed and crashed on the ivory, 
dynamics of your song swinging 
with the excited turbulence in your soul. 
Listening to the language we shared, 
Watching from afar, 
I sat in my dark corner.
In the summer when I turned nine years old, I rode an airplane to the home of my ancestors. After landing in the airport, my mother ushered me, still dazed and half awake, towards the shuttle bus terminal. Inside the bus, my father shoveled and bustled through passengers and suitcases and plopped me down in an open seat, only to leave immediately to help my sister onto the shuttle. A second later, a complete stranger slid into the chair next to mine.

Once everyone was packed inside, either sharing the scarce seating or standing while clutching handrails, the bus groaned to life and chugged out of the airport. There was a small yellow notice sign on the back of the chair in front of me. I searched my brain, struggling to remember the little that I was taught in Chinese school. But those neat, cuboidal characters printed on the banner teased and taunted me, prankishly hiding away their pronunciations and meanings. I gave up. Instead, I pulled out the copy of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* I had started reading on the long plane ride and cracked open the pages.

Lulled by the rocking of the bus, I was just about to slip into a dream about whitewashing a fence when a small voice asked in fluent Chinese, “Where are you from?” I jerked my head up. Sitting in the chair in front of me was a young girl with a pale, round face, smiling pleasantly at me.

I blinked a couple times, in silence. Should I tell her that I was born and raised in the United States? That my friends, home, and life were all in a small Midwestern town? Would she believe me if I did?

“I’m from Sichuan,” I replied back in Mandarin. I recalled that the hometowns of my mother and father were in that province.

“Oh, really?” her eyes looked at mine quizzically. “You don’t have an accent though.”

I blinked some more. “Well, uh...I grew up here in Beijing.” Yes, that’s it. Inside, my heart sighed and congratulated me on a quick save. The Chinese that I had learned to speak was *pu tong hua*, “standard language,” which was the most common dialect used in the capital city.

“Ah, I see.” Now she nodded, seeming satisfied. “I’m from around these parts too. I go to school in Chengdu where my uncle lives, but I’ve come back to visit for the summer.”

I gaped incredulously as she continued to chatter along. This girl had somehow bought my story that I was just like her, a Chinese citizen who had never left the country, much less lived in another nation. And stranger yet, she had looked at me without a guarded stare or stiff expression, even before I had said a word.

Abruptly, the bus screeched to a stop, and the crowds began diffusing out the doors, waddling with their fat coats and bags like sheep wedging their way out of a pen. I managed to wave goodbye to my new friend as she disappeared among the bleating herd of travelers. Stepping outside, I was nearly knocked flat by the poignant stink of durian fruit mingled with the fishy aroma of a nearby seafood restaurant, proudly displaying its prison tanks of fish awaiting execution. A myriad of gold-painted cats swung their paws in greeting at me through the dingy glass windows of old storefronts. In the distance, construction drills perpetually clamored and honking horns incessantly shrieked. A stifling hot blast of wind slapped my cheek, clogging my lungs with the hazy, sallow air and coating my tongue with the oppressively thick dust. Yet this surge of loud sensations also brought a flood of memories of riding bicycle-cabs and eating sweet red bean popsicles during my first trip to here years ago. I inhaled deeply.

My father called my name, and I found him standing next to the public restrooms. “You need a bathroom break?”

Oh, no. It suddenly came back to me what I remembered about bathrooms in China. Tentatively, I peeked into the women’s side and then instinctively pinched my nose. The “stalls”, built of waist-high brick walls, were entirely void of doors; the “toilets” were actually holes in the floor, all connected to an underground trough; and, not surprisingly, neither a roll of toilet paper nor a bottle of hand soap was in sight. With so many women swarming and buzzing around in the tight space, there was obviously no room in their hive left for the luxury of privacy. The smell alone was repulsive enough to make the slightest of any finicky inkling of urgency to “wash up” dissipate instantaneously—even for a nine-year old kid—and I gratefully skipped outside to join my parents.

As we started walking to find our rental apartment, lugging our suitcases behind, I recognized snatches of America that I had not noticed in my last visit: people lined outside a KFC brimming fuller than its chicken buckets;
a blond-haired, blue-eyed model staring alluringly from a poster while drinking a new brand of bottled green tea; a vendor, dressed in a straw hat and sandals, talking to the ladies in front of his wooden cart filled with counterfeit Coach and Louis Vuitton handbags.

My marvel at these sights ceased when we stopped at a vast intersection. On the other side of the six wide traffic lanes, the shape of an illuminated red hand turned into a walking man. Without hesitation, the colossal mob of people began storming thunderously over the endless crosswalk as one cohesive mass, like a single amoeba crawling via pseudopodia. A mighty formation of cars, buses, taxis, and motorcycles halted behind the battle line, poised menacingly as our army charged across the open field. From within, I was being suffocated. Sweaty bodies pressed against me on all sides. I gasped for air, but jackets and purses covered my face. I frantically spun my head around, seeing nothing but nearly identical yellow skin, dark hair, and thin eyes all about me. The sound of their foreign clucking howled in my ears; they made bizarre expressions and waved their hands around. Yet somehow, their faces only reminded me of my own. I was simply another one of them in the crowd. I stumbled on my feet, helplessly allowing the sea of men and women to drag me along.

After a lifetime, the ocean surf hit the shore of the sidewalk, coughing me up and exploding back into hundreds of individual droplets. A couple of blocks later, we finally reached the gates leading to our apartment complex. Inside, the tall, weathered buildings bordered a large pond hugged by willow trees. Four old men sat on tree stumps around a stone table, playing the board game mahjong with green tile pieces. Young couples meandered along a dirt path encircling the lake. In the center, a curved bridge linked the path to a lonely, quiet island. The whisper of a refreshing breeze gently ruffled the pink water lilies drifting in ripples of cool turquoise water. I was transported to a tranquil haven, a bird’s nest planted in the midst of the turbulent urban chaos.

Night was falling, and after several flights of stairs and a jingling of the keys, we got inside our cramped apartment. Although I had to share a bed with my sister that night, I was eternally grateful for an air-conditioned room and the tiny morsel of solitude that darkness had to offer.